Adventures in Dimension Hopping

by mad_fairy

Summary

An alternate reality version of Harry Potter and Tom Riddle go dimension hopping because they're bored and end up in the Buffy-verse. They meet Spike and wackiness ensues.

Watch as the LA gang and the Sunnydale gang deal with demonic uprisings, vampiric commandos, random species changes, plotting lawyers, plotting Watchers, interpersonal relationships and demons from their pasts, all while Spike, with his two 'nephews' in tow travels the world, has adventures and finds himself. Hold on tightly; it's going to be a wild ride.

Notes

This is a side story to a longer work which needs extensive editing before being posted. It works as a stand alone. All you need to know is stuff happened, Harry is different, Tom
Riddle because of reasons ended up healing his soul and found himself the age he was when he made his first horcrux. They made a deal with Wolfram and Hart to move the wizards to a new dimension to escape muggles by using the Key. Tom Riddle studied the key and made his own and now he and Harry are on a road trip because they're bored.

Enjoy!
Let's go on an adventure. I'm bored.

It was a normal day at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry Potter, 5th year student at the school, was on his way back to his dorm after his morning workout when he stumbled across someone unexpected.

"Tom?" he questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"I was bored."

"Bored." Harry scoffed as he moved to walk past him. "And so, instead of I don't know, reading a book or finding someone to play a game of chess or something, you decided to come here?"

"Pretty much. " Tom agreed as he pushed himself off the wall he was leaning against and followed him.

"I don't think you're allowed in the dorm."

"Like that's ever stopped me before. Think of who you're talking to."

"Point. So…why'd you come here? I have class in like, two hours. I was going to get cleaned up and head down to breakfast."

"No, actually, you're going to come dimension hopping with me."

"I am?"

"Yep. Look what I've got."

Harry glanced over and saw Tom twirling a long chain with a small hourglass enclosed in a series of loops on the end.

"A time turner? Where'd you get that?"

"I made it. I used to sneak yours out to study while we were travelling here before."

"I don't know why I'm surprised. I had meant to study it myself, but I got so caught up in training the others and fighting the war it sort of slipped my mind."

"You need to learn to keep your priorities straight."

"Babity-Rabbity" Harry told the Fat Lady as they approached. The portrait opened one eye blearily and swung open. He and Tom stepped through. As it began to swing shut he could hear the Fat Lady calling out "Wait…he's not a Gryffindor student!"

"You just like making my life difficult don't you? You realize she's probably running off to wail to Dumbledore right now, don't you? The moment we reappear he's going to call me to his office, offer me candy and pull his disappointed grandpa act on me. I hate that."

"So obliviate him. Really, do you need me to do everything?" Tom scoffed. He took in the Gryffindor common room and shuddered.

"So much red and gold. It's no wonder Gryffindors aren't known for their academic prowess--no one could possibly concentrate in this place."
"You get used to it." Harry muttered before starting up the steps to the dorm. Tom followed him up, and sprawled across the empty bed, while Harry gathered his things to go shower.

When he returned, his trunk showed signs of having been gone through, there was a pile of empty chocolate frog wrappers scattered across the bed, and Tom was reading "The Art of War". Harry sighed in annoyance and opened his trunk to straighten out his things. He glanced over at Seamus when he rolled over and had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Curious, he tip-toed over to the rest of his roommates one by one and saw they all were sporting drawn-on glasses and moustaches.

"Wow, you really are bored aren't you? You're like a hyperactive five-year-old."

Tom just stuck his tongue out, finished the frog he was eating and kept reading.

Harry dumped out his belt pouch onto the bed and began sorting through it, putting some things away in his trunk while removing others from it to take with him.

Tom watched his packing with interest. "You don't have to bring your tent. I have a better one."

"It's not one of those wizarding monstrosities with towers and a moat and pennants flying that would be out of place even in a fairy tale is it?"

"No, it's a collapsible log cabin."

"Why a log cabin? Wouldn't a tent make more sense?"

"It offers more protection from wild animal incursions. It's always such a pain when bears come along, trying to tear into the tent while looking for food and end up falling into the void between the inside and outside. Bears are surprisingly noisy when they're scared and hungry. You end up having to listen to them while they're tumbling around in there, and it's very annoying."

Harry just stared at him and then went back to packing.

"What are those?" Tom wondered, pointing to a stack of oblong papers with seals scrawled along one side.

"Exploding tags. It's like a portable bomb that you can stick somewhere and set off at a distance. You never know when it could come in handy."

"You used those on the Fire Nation fleet." Tom realized.

"Yes, they will be very handy."

Tom's fingers twitched slightly as though he'd like to steal them away for a bit, break them down and learn all their secrets, but he kept himself in check. He could always swipe a few of them once they were travelling.

Harry packed the last of his stuff into his pouch and stood. "Did you pack food?"

"Yes, the cabin is fully stocked."

"Okay…time turners roll back your personal timeline. We haven't been in the same location any time recently; will we be able to use the thing on both of us?"

"I may have tweaked it a bit." Tom admitted as he looped the chain over both their necks. "The theory seems sound. I'm sure it will work as expected."
"We're using an experimental time-turner?"

"Indeed." Tom said cheerfully as he set the hourglass spinning.

Day and night rose and fell outside the window, and around them the other occupants of the tower flickered into being and disappeared at intervals.

When he'd judged that a month or so had been rolled back, and the dorm empty, Tom brought the flickering hourglass to a stop, and then tucked it away safely in one of his pockets.

Harry cocked his head towards the stairs and then pulled out his invisibility cloak, throwing it over both of them just in time for the door to open.

Neville wandered into the room and then into the bathroom. When he returned a few moments later, he started to undo his tie, obviously preparing to change, but then he hesitated and looked around the room warily. Seeing nothing, he started to undo his tie a second time and then shivered and looked around again. Nervously biting his lip, he hurried back out of the room and downstairs.

"I remember this day. Neville came down and said there was someone in here watching him. He got himself all worked up and convinced Dean had just died and was preparing to come back as a ghost, because he wasn't anywhere to be seen. A few minutes later Fred Weasley came downstairs and asked if we were having a kinky photo shoot in the dorm because he saw flashing lights coming out from under the door, though he said he didn't see anyone when he peeked inside."

A shriek outside the window drew his attention. Hedwig hovered just outside looking pissed-off and indignant.

"Hedwig didn't show up for a while either. I thought she'd found a mate and was off having little Hedwigs somewhere. I guess I know better now."

He opened the window. Hedwig alighted on his shoulder, dug in her claws a bit and whapped him in the head with one wing as though to chastise him for nearly leaving her behind.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't know I was going anywhere until about a half-hour ago." Harry apologized. 

"I guess we'd best get this show on the road."

Tom spun the dials and waited for them to settle, and then for the large button to reveal itself. After a thirty second wait, the bottom of the device split apart, revealing an emerald button that was glowing. Tom pressed it and a beam of light shot out, creating a knot of glowing space in midair that began to rotate and then formed a glowing oval.

"After you."

Hedwig flew through first, Harry leapt in right after, senses alert and prepared for anything. Tom sauntered through gracefully, a smile on his face. No matter what happened now, at least he wouldn't be bored.

Once all of them were through, the glowing oval collapsed and disappeared.

Fred Weasley peeked his head in the door and looked around, a confused look on his face, before shrugging and shutting the door once more.

The first thing Harry was aware of upon exiting the portal was that he was falling down a long tunnel. Hedwig shrieked and began flying upwards. He couldn't see the bottom, but he'd already fallen quite a ways in just the few seconds since his arrival, and he was beginning to get a very
bad feeling about it. "Glad I can fly." he muttered as he began transforming into his animagus form. It took some doing to slow his downward momentum, and he could feel the strain in his wings as he began to ascend, but eventually he was able to escape the pull that seemed to be coming from further down below. He and Tom flew the last few feet and emerged with a shriek of triumph, before settling on the nearby ground to recover.

"I almost wasn't sure we were going to make it. It almost felt like It was trying to suck us back in."

"I know. I don't know what this place is but I can't say I like the feel of it overmuch." Harry agreed as he raised his wand to cast a light so he could take a look around. "We seem to be in a construction site, in what will eventually be the basement. Weird. Why is there an evil hole in the middle of a construction site?"

"You've got me. I really don't like the readings I'm getting from this thing. This hole seems to be a tear in space and time and there's dark energy seeping out of it. Who knows where we might have ended up if we'd kept falling."

"They must have unearthed this thing while digging or something. This looks like a muggle construction site. We shouldn't leave an evil hole in the space-time continuum just lying around for hapless muggles to fall into."

"True. I suppose we could block it off so no one falls in and then make it a secret."

"Who'll be the secret keeper though? And do we really need to go so far? We could just cover it and slap a notice-me-not and a basic muggle repelling ward around it...maybe an intent ward too--keep away evil-minded sorts who want to use the dark energy for destructive purposes. A hole like this doesn't just get here by itself. I'd prefer not to have some idiot unleashing Armageddon while we're here."

They both squinted as a bright light shone down on them from above. Shading his eyes as best he could, Harry could dimly make out a middle-aged man in a security guard's uniform.

"Hey! What're you kids doing down there."

"How annoying." Tom muttered, stunning the man. As the guard began falling forward, Tom cushioned the ground below him. The guard landed with a thump and lay still.

"Why don't you work on blocking off the hole. I'll set up the wards."

"Okay." Harry shrugged. He made the floor where they were about two inches lower and used the material he'd gathered to make a large plug-like cap for the hole. Upon checking, it was obvious that whatever dark energy was seeping out was still flowing, the cap not hindering it in the least, but it didn't seem harmful, just dark. If nothing else, at least no one could fall in from here on out.

Tom finished his own preparations, ennervated the guard.

"Wha...what did you do to me?" the man asked fearfully.

"Just kept you from wandering into a hole in the space time continuum by accident. Don't worry about it. In a few minutes you won't even remember this. Obliviate."

"Are we done here?"

"Yes, we are."
"Great. Let's find somewhere more interesting to go. Walk or fly?"

"Eh, let's fly for a while. Just until we get the lay of the land. It's dark out; we shouldn't be seen by too many people."

The three of them flew off. The guard blinked and looked around in confusion, wondering what had brought him down there. He noted several scuffed footprints in the soft earth around him and scowled. "Damn kids. I wish they'd find someplace else to have their drunken parties. At least they didn't leave a mess behind this time."

After taking a quick circuit overhead to see the lay of the land, they regrouped in the woods near to where they'd landed to set up Tom's log cabin. It was nighttime, and though there seemed to be some people out and about, they all seemed to be lurking around the edges of cemeteries, of which the town had an unusual number, given that the whole town was, from what they could see, about a dozen blocks in each direction.

"I think we need more information before exploring."

"Can't you just conjure a map or something?"

"Actually, that's not a bad idea." Tom mused pointing his wand at the kitchen table and flicking it. A large cardboard tube appeared.

"Sweet. I think you managed to snag the official land survey from the city planners' office or something." Harry chuckled as he unrolled the layered map inside.

"What's that you're looking at now?"

"It seems to be underground tunnels…there's more of them than there are streets above ground, by the look of it, and unless I'm reading this thing wrong they're pretty sizeable tunnels at that…what's more, several of them lead off to what looks to be most every business in the area, several large crypts in the center of the various cemeteries, and a couple of mansions, though not all of them. The tunnels intersect at points with the sewer tunnels. It looks like there used to be a bunch more over here at the edge of town… under "Sunnydale University" if I'm not mistaken, but they seem to have all been filled in or closed off. There was one leading into the high school as well… that seems to be where we arrived at. Curioser and curioser."

"Lots of underground tunnels, crypts, an abundance of cemeteries--about half the footage of the town seems to be taken up by them--two large hospitals, a very large morgue…make that two… lots of Catholic churches. I'm guessing we've landed in some sort of vampire town."

"Well, that's annoying, but no big deal, right?"

"We can't count on that. The vampires here might be considerably different from the ones we know. Given the sheer number of places catering to the dead, we should take that as a given and react accordingly. In fact…" Tom concentrated a moment and tapped the map sharply.

"Feeding grounds?"

"I guess. These are where all the vampires are gathered right now, here, here and here…and then there are random ones scattered in ones and twos along the edges of town…and this fellow way out here. He's either the guy in charge, he's an extreme loner or he's an outcast. Given the number of vampires roaming around, we might want to stay put for now and do our initial tour come morning when they won't be out and about. I'd like a chance to learn the lay of the land in peace.
before we have to start dodging undead bloodsuckers."

"Works for me. I'll start some food while you beef up the wards?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Sir, we might have a problem."

Holland Manners sighed and glowered at the flunky that had just arrived. He had been hoping to make it home at some point. Ah well, such was life when you worked for Wolfram and Hart. He settled back into his chair and waved his hand tiredly.

"One of our scans just picked up the Key's energy signature. Happily, it's in Sunnydale not in Eastern Europe where the Beast was last sighted, but if we picked it up, chances are she or one of her minions did as well."

Holland sighed and reached for his phone, and put in an irate call to his secretary.

"I need a trans-dimensional call. Put me through to the head of special projects in new acquisition London."

"Yes sir. One moment please."

The phone rang four times before it was picked up.

"Special projects. This is Rupert speaking."

"Rupert, Holland Manners, home office special projects. We have a bit of a problem here. Were you or were you not instructed to retrieve the Key once the wizards settled in their new home?"

"Well, yes of course we were. They're a troublesome lot. No one wants them gadding about willy-nilly."

"We just got residual energy readings from the Key. Here. Just a short hop from the home office. Where the Beast is residing for the moment. Is any of this ringing any bells?"

"That's impossible. I have the Key right here. We formed it into a paperweight. I'm looking at it right now."

"If you're looking at it then why do we have Key readings here? Tell me that."

"I don't know. Maybe someone else has figured out how to make one?"

"The Key is as old as creation. It was flitting around with the Old Ones back in their heyday. It isn't something any random schmuck can just make." Holland snapped.

"Well, obviously someone did or they managed something with a similar enough function that it's giving off similar readings. The fact remains that the Key is here on my desk. It hasn't been replaced, or lost, and was retrieved from the wizards as soon as they landed in their new homeworld. I don't know what else to tell you."

"Regardless of what you say, someone somewhere screwed up, and I'll be damned if it's my head that's going to roll for it." Holland snarled before slamming down the phone.

He huffed and leaned back once more, only to notice the flunky was still there, and they were
clutching their cell phone and looking nervous

"Yes?" Holland asked, his voice icy.

"Um, sir? The Hellmouth seems to have disappeared."

"Come again?"

"We have someone on site while the construction of the new high school is in progress. He reports any time anyone tries getting in near the location. We send someone out to poke at it each time a disturbance is reported."

"I know all this. I'm the one who set it up."

"Right you are sir. Um…the on site team is still getting readings on the hellmouth energy…and um…they can't find it."

"Damn it. I guess I'd best contact the Senior Partners." he finished in a whisper. He needed to get himself together. It had been his bright idea to send the Key elsewhere--the Beast, while somewhat troublesome, was better than the alternative by far. Why leave things up to chance? On his advice, the Key was given to a wizard who was dissatisfied with where he was. Their seers had seen him make use of it on a small scale, and take his people to another world, leaving the one he was in currently ripe for the plucking. The plan had been given the go ahead and the wizards had vamoosed within the year. Now, for some reason, the Key was back and within the Beast's reach again. Damnation.

He chuckled to himself at how apropos his bit of mental cussing was. He was already damned--he knew it, he didn't particularly care. He'd made his deal long ago and had been quite satisfied with the results--he just didn't want to deal with the literal embodiment of his deal for a few more decades…or centuries if he could manage it. He needed to be sure it was made very clear that the New Acquisitions office had screwed up--the Senior Partners were very unforgiving of mistakes, and they let you know it for eternity.

"Full English breakfast. Interesting choice for dinner." Tom noted as he sat down to eat after setting wards around the cabin.

"It was morning, early morning at that, where we started off. I was all set to head down to breakfast when you showed up. I don't care if it's nighttime here, I wanted my brekkie and that's that."

Tom made no further comment, he just dug in. He had forgone his own breakfast that morning in order to arrive early enough to catch Harry before the castle stirred. He didn't quite realize how hungry he was until the plate of food was shoved under his nose.

"This sucks. Why'd it have to be nighttime? My days and nights are going to be all screwed up now…not to mention we're going to waste half a day at least of our vacation time. Wouldn't it be better to go exploring right away? If this is a vampire town, all the interesting stuff probably happens at night. From what we saw of the city, the human parts are pretty mundane--unless you want to while away the hours we're here hanging out at the coffee shop or browsing the art gallery."

Tom mused as he cleaned off his plate.

"You're probably right, but I don't like the idea of heading out into the unknown--we have no idea
what this world's vampires are capable of, and seeing as they're bred for hunting in darkness, they'll have some advantages over us."

"Only if we're completely oblivious to the world around us. We can apparate or fly in a pinch, behead them from a distance with a good cutting spell, or we can throw up a bit of sunlight, which should stop them in their tracks, on the off chance we do indeed get surrounded and overwhelmed."

Tom sighed and pushed his plate away. Harry sent both their plates and the pan he'd used to the sink to wash themselves with a flick of his wand.

"Alright. I suppose it couldn't hurt to look around. If anything happens though, we'll do the rest of our scouting during the day until we have a better handle on the ins and outs of this universe."

"Aye aye, Cap'n" Harry said while giving a jaunty salute. He spent a few minutes prepping before they headed out.

"Why the stakes and the sword? You have a wand."

"Doesn't hurt to be prepared." Harry explained while stashing the stakes for easy reach while remaining unobtrusive and strapping the sword to his back after putting a notice-me-not charm on it. He offered one of the stakes to Tom, who rolled his eyes and stashed it in his pocket. Harry hit them both with the nifty charm Daphne and Tracy had taught him which made it appear to others that you were dressed in boring muggle clothing.

"You look like a college English professor."

"You look like a librarian… a stodgy one."

"I guess we're good to go then. Where's Nagini?"

"She's slithering around the area. I'm sure she'll join us when we leave."

"Hedwig too. Alright, let's go."

The night outside was alive with the sound of buzzing insects. Harry could smell the sea--there was a beach and dock not too far from the town center. He put all his senses on high alert--he had no intentions of being anything’s dinner, or worse, becoming a blood-sucking fiend.

A fifteen minute jaunt through the woods took them back to the site of their arrival, from there they set off towards the town proper--which lay through a graveyard, as did most locations in the town. The vampires seemed to have hedged their bets when it came to making sure there was plenty of prey likely to come wandering by at any given time.

The graveyard was rather creepy--large, old trees, giant mausoleums and aged angel statue grave markers, interspersed with the more usual headstones. The whole place had a feeling of age, though given the number of new graves, newly dug graves that weren't yet filled, and the recent dates on the nearest markers, it was a rather jumping place.

Something jangled against Harry's senses and he did a slow sweep of the grounds trying to pinpoint it. There, in the deep shadows between a couple of large trees, there were a couple of teenagers.

"Master, I smell blood…lots of it. That, and dead things." Nagini hissed as she peeked out of the grass nearby. The wind shifted and Harry realized he could smell it to, though he probably wouldn't have noticed had Nagini not called attention to it--faint, metallic, and coming from where he'd spotted the teens.
"I think they're vampires and they're waiting for a friend to rise." Harry hissed quietly. "Should we just circle around or should we try to get them to attack so we'll have some idea of what we're dealing with?"

"Let's wander past them and see what they do. If they start licking their chops and try to pounce on us, we'll take them out. Ready?"

"Let's do it."

They set off at an easy saunter across the grounds on a path that would take them past the teen vamps. It was a little disconcerting actually; they could actually feel the weight of their regard the moment they homed in on them—a prickle down the back of the neck that sent their primitive hindbrains into overdrive and told them 'run, you fools!'.

The vamps held a whispered conference and then two of the three that were waiting moved to intercept them, while the last stayed near the grave to wait for their friend.

"Yo! Robe dudes, what's going on?" The vamp in the lead asked curiously. He looked to be about high school age, and was even wearing a letterman's jacket. His friend was casually dressed in a t-shirt and jeans.

"You'll have to be more specific than that. What do you mean?"

"You know, man. Are you setting up an apocalypse? Need some help gathering virgin sacrifices—heh, good luck in this town…you know."

"We're just here on vacation. No apocalypses…none that we know of, anyway."

"Oh. Vacation, huh? Well, if you change your mind and you're in need of some muscle, look us up. The place has been kind of dead, heh, get it? Dead? We could use some excitement. You can leave word with Willy that you want Dane and his boys."

"Willy, huh? We'll keep that in mind."

"Dudes! Josh is waking up!"

"Whoa, gotta go."

The two teens hurried off, making it back across to the grave in an eyeblink. A pale arm emerged from underground, then another, and then the newly born vampire struggled into the night. The three teens cheered, and handed the newly born vampire the bucket of blood they'd brought along. The new vamp drank it down in short order amidst cries of 'chug, chug, chug!'. Josh the vampire belched loudly when he was finished to the cheers of his buddies. Harry and Tom watched the spectacle for a while and then kept walking.

As they neared the town center there were more people about, cars driving, restaurants, coffee bars and even what sounded like a nightclub open for business. Tom nudged him suddenly and gestured subtly with his head. When Harry turned to look he saw a…thing that looked like a pale Jabba the hut crossed with a shar pei…with really large ears that stuck out sideways from it's pallid, bald head. He was bopping along, drinking from a giant slurpee, without a care in the world. There was a shark man in a fancy suit lurking in an alleyway while his goons—lizard men with horns—roughed up a guy. There were more vampires, though they tended to lurk in the shadows and watch the pedestrians with hungry eyes.
"There's no secrecy in this world at all." Tom mused with astonishment. "All these things lurking around in plain sight and none of the muggles seems to notice or care. I wonder what happened differently that allowed this world to evolve this way?"

"Well, it's overrun by demons not wizards and magical creatures...though they could be here too, I guess. Also, I'm not so sure there's no secrecy, I think it's just more subtle than what we had. Most of the folks don't notice them, but occasionally when one does they look puzzled for a bit and then shake their head like they're seeing things and then they go about their business."

"An automatic obliviate?"

"More like an automatic notice-me-not combined with these-are-not-the-droids-you're-looking-for."

"I wonder how pervasive it is, and how well does it hold up to repeated exposure? Does it work if you see something on the telly or in print?"

"I haven't the foggiest. I wonder if it's powered by that weird dark energy leaking out of that hole? Maybe that's where all the demons came from and the energy from their homeworld is acting as camouflage so they can hunt in peace?"

"Could be. This bears more investigation. We both know the system we had in the old world was rather untenable over the long term once the muggles got technological. It would be nice to have a back-up plan in place should we have need of it in the new world."

"Hopefully that day will be a long way off, if it ever happens. The Magic Box--opening soon. I wonder is it our kind of magic, hokey new-agey stuff, or is it just a fanciful name?"

"Let's find out."

The two slipped down the alley, where a quick flick of a wand got them passed the locked door. "This doesn't look like a magic store, it looks like a dojo or a gym."

"Let's see what's up front."

The front half was a store, one that had obviously just been remodeled, given the new plaster and paint smell everywhere. Most of the displays were still empty, but there were boxes of merchandise waiting to be unpacked out on the floor, and more piled in the stockroom.

"Excellent. Let's take a look around, shall we?"

"There a loft with more boxes. Why don't you start up there? That's probably the advanced stuff. Oh, here, take a couple of these." Harry dug around for a bit and withdrew two blank journals. "Copies last longer if they're not made completely from scratch."

"Good point. Alright, see you in a few."

The five demons currently taking part in the weekly kitten poker tournament glanced up when the door to the bar opened and four vampires swaggered in like they owned the place.

The one in the lead, one of the Vinny the Shark's muscle boys, slapped some money on the bar. "Give me a bottle of whiskey and four extra-bloody Marys. We're having ourselves a celebration tonight. Everyone, this is Josh, and it's his birthday."
The newly risen vamp smiled bashfully at the room.

"Josh? Bloody hell, a vampire named Josh--Barbie and Ken'll be along any day now. You're going to have to change that, newbie, or folks'll be coming out of the woodwork to kick your arse." The blonde vampire at the poker table grumbled.

"It's short for Joshua, it's like biblical and stuff." Josh objected.

"You're a vampire, biblical is not a recommendation."

"Oh. How about Armageddon? That would be badass."

The blonde looked him up and down and snorted. "Don't get too attached lads, this one isn't going to last long." he scoffed. "And no, Armageddon is a terrible choice, unless you've the rep to back it. There's plenty of vamps out there that just go around looking for vamps to fight to prove how manly they are. You give yourself a name like Armageddon and they'll be coming out in droves to fight you."

"Oh…how about Spike? It's tough, but understated."

"I'm Spike. I'm a hundred and twenty and I've killed Slayers. Try again."

"Axe…Lance…Warhammer. Warhammer, I like it."

"What are you, a dwarven warrior in a D&D game?"

"Alright then, Axe. I'll be Axe from now on." Josh grumbled, sounding sulky. Spike rolled his eyes and anted up, tossing another kitten into the pot.

"So…why kittens?" the newly dubbed Axe asked curiously.

"They're delicious" grumbled one of the demons at the table--a large fellow who seemed made of nothing but rolls of fat, big ears and sharp teeth.

"Damn straight they are, and said delicious kitties are coming home with me. Read them and weep, boys."

One by one the other players threw in their cards, while the winner pulled forth a sack to scoop the kittens into.

Spike settled back into his chair and tossed back a shot before pulling out a cigarette and lighting up. "So, anything interesting going on around ol' SunnyHell these days? I've been a bit out of the loop."

"You could be back in the loop if you just stopped killing your own kind, you know." the pudgy demon said disinterestedly.

"Gotta get my dose of violence in somehow, since those damn soldier boys did me."

"Yeah, yeah, we've heard it all before. I don't get why you haven't just stuck an icepick up your nose and swooshed it around a bit. I mean, you're dead, it isn't like you use your brain for anything. I bet a few good swishes and that chip of yours would come dribbling out in no time."

"The very fact that it goes off and I feel it in my whole body makes me hesitant to trust that supposition. It would be just my luck I'd either accidentally off myself or I'd spend the rest of my days sitting in a corner and drooling. No thank you."
"I've got news." Dane spoke up. "There's a couple of robe guys in town. One of them had a sword."

"Oh? What kind of robes were they wearing?"

"They looked like Halloween wizard robes."

"Nu-uh, I saw them up close, they were real nice, fancy you know? Not one of those cheap things you see in the costume shops."

"Any sort of mystical symbols?"

"No, just some embroidery. The one guy had snakes the other had squiggles all" he tangled his fingers together to demonstrate.

"What, like knotwork or something?"

"Yeah, like that."

"What did they look like? Any idea who they're with? Any mystical days of power coming up soon?"

"Well, they're English or something, the one guy was a little taller than me, the other was shorter, dark hair, the one with the sword has these really green eyes, like whoa, you know? Oh, and he had a faint scar on his head. It kinda looked like a lightning bolt."

Spike snorted. "Who's he think he is? Harry Potter? What about the other guy?"

"Dark eyes, no scars I could see, had a pet snake, great big thing. Who's Harry Potter? Is he a famous wizard?"

"Don't you read?"

"No."

"Kids these days. He's a fictional kid wizard that goes to a magic school and fights all sorts of beasties because of a prophecy and a cowardly, manipulative old man. It's in the kids' section if you're interested."

"You read kids books?"

"One of the kiddies at the college was reading it, back before I got chipped. I nicked it after I ate her to while away the daylight with. I got the rest of them later. Did these robe guys of yours say anything about what they were doing in town?"

"They said they're on vacation, they just didn't want anyone messing with them is all. They said they didn't know about any upcoming apocalypses, but they also said they'll keep me and the boys in mind if they end up looking for muscle later, so even if they've got nothing going right now, it might change."

"Good to know."

"Oh…oh no! T-the vampire we were supposed to come get has already risen and might have killed people by now. Xander!" Willow wailed.
"What? I had to work late, which meant I had my evening shower and my dinner late, and then my car wouldn't start. Give me a break. You all could have left without me."

"N-no we couldn't... you're part of the team! And also, Buffy isn't here and Riley was a no show, so we needed the extra staking power."

"What I don't understand is why we all keep getting roped into doing the Slayer's job for her."

"We don't! We're friends and friends help each other. Besides, it's our town too."

"She's right." Tara spoke up, and then ducked her head when everyone looked at her. "It's not really fair to put all the burden on one person. I'm sure even Slayers need a night off once in awhile."

"Buffy isn't taking a night off either, she's patrolling the other side of town because there's been a lot of activity there. All we were supposed to do was come get this guy as he was trying to crawl out of the ground and we couldn't even manage that."

"Oh well." Anya shrugged. "Nothing we can do about it now. Can we go home now? I need orgasms."

"Ahn, remember we talked about this?" Xander said through the strained smile that he'd forced onto his face. "Too much sharing is a no-no."

"Why? I'm only telling the truth. I really don't understand why humans insist on being lied to. It seems counterproductive if you ask me."

"It's just the way it is, Ahn, please."

"I guess we are done here, she was right about that much." Willow said, feeling guilty. "I hope this guy doesn't go on a rampage or something."

"There's a bucket that had blood in it. Someone was waiting for him, and made sure he got fed. I'm sure it'll be fine. If he's out and about after, Buffy will probably come across him sooner or later." Tara tried to console her.

"I guess. We should probably go check in with Giles and tell him we're a big bunch of losers who couldn't even stop a vampire from rising."

"These things happen, Wills, get over it."

The foursome started for the exit.

"What's with Riley anyway? Where's he keep disappearing to? He was all mission-guy before, doing all the patrols with Buffy and now he's vanishing all the time and not showing up to help out."

"Well... that chip thing the Initiative put in him to give him super powers got taken out, remember? He's not quite as sturdy as he used to be."

"Uh, hello? None of us have super powers, and we've been doing this the whole time without them. It's not really an excuse."

Willow bit her lip and looked around nervously as though afraid someone would overhear what she was going to say next.

"I think Buffy and Riley might be having problems. She said he's been kinda clingy since his chip
thing got taken out, and he's been getting all bristly about stuff. He tried sparring with her and she was holding back even more than she usually does and so he noticed and tried to get her to fight him for real, but she hit him once and he just you know, crumpled and then got all macho about it and told her he was fine and she keeps trying to keep him from going on patrols because she thinks he's all delicate now and he doesn't like that either...I'm kinda worried about them, actually."

Xander had been listening with concern, but he saw two guys coming towards them through the cemetery. They were wearing tweed jackets of all things, complete with patches on the elbows, and looked kind of stuffy. They were also either not Sunnydale natives, or they wouldn't be so unconcerned while walking through a graveyard at night, or they were vampires--a possibility given their fashion impairment--and geez, he was sounding like Cordelia in his head now--or they were Watchers--who else wore tweed in California but the G-man and his ilk?

"Incoming."

"I don't think they're vampires." Tara said quietly.

"They're certainly pale enough to be." Anya disagreed as she tightened her grip on her stake.

"One of them is reading though. He's very talented to be able to walk and read at the same time. I tried it before, but I kept bumping into things."

"They could be watchers, I suppose. Kind of young though."

"Oh! Maybe they're students at the Watcher's Academy!"

As the two approached, they were able to hear part of their conversation.

"...completely different from what we do. If we can harness this when we go home it will completely revolutionize magic...possibly."

"Surely you don't intend to widely disseminate this if it does. If you're correct about the power differentials..."

"Of course not. It will completely change my life."

"And mine. Just keeping you honest."

As they came abreast of them, the shorter one with glasses smiled in a friendly manner, even as he absently tugged at his friend to keep him from tripping over a rock in his path.

"Good evening. Lovely weather, isn't it? It's a bit hot for my taste, but what are you going to do?"

"Hot? It's October."

"I was in...northern Scotland just this morning. Believe me, it's hot."

"Scotland? Is that where the Watcher's Academy is?" Willow blurted out excitedly. She wilted when the two tweedy Englishmen just stared at her in polite bewilderment.


"Ixnay on the atcher-way" Xander muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"Pig Latin isn't a very effective secret code. You'd have been better off trying actual Latin...of
course we both know actual Latin, so it wouldn't have helped much. You could have tried Cantonese, I don't know that."

"I do." Tom objected.

"Oh, nevermind."

"Aha! You are Watchers! Who else would learn Latin in this day and age!" Willow said triumphantly.

"Doctors, lawyers, botanists…many scientific disciplines, actually. Bits and pieces anyway. I know it was offered at the local comprehensive where I grew up."

"Catholic mass was in Latin until just a few decades ago." Tom added.

"Oh. Yeah. I guess."

"So, what's a Watcher? You never said."

"Watchers are a group of uptight English men that run an organization to support the Slayer. They do research, keep an ear to the ground about demon activity, that sort of thing." Anya shrugged.

"The Slayer?"

"The vampire slayer. One girl in all the world, called by mystical forces and given the power to fight vampires…you know."

"Yeah, she's a friend of ours." Xander bragged.

"Really? Then why are the four of you lurking around in a graveyard in the middle of the night clutching desperately at medieval weaponry and various pieces of wood?" Tom wondered.

"You're fans, aren't you? You lurk around and hope you'll meet her. You picked a bad place for it—the vampire that was here already rose earlier this evening."

"Yeah, we kind of realized…did you take care of it? And we do so know Buffy, we've been friends for years! We've helped her out a lot, and helped avert several apocalypses and everything." Willow defended.

"Sure." Tom said skeptically. "And there wasn't anything to really take care of—his friends were waiting with a bucket of pig's blood. We saw them at a bar earlier, celebrating his birthday."

"Oh, by the way…do any of you happen to want a kitten? One of them escaped the poker tournament. I didn't want to leave it to get eaten, but she was eyeing up Hedwig earlier and licking her chops while doing so. She's too tiny to do much now, but that won't always be the case."

A reproachful screech drew everyone's attention to the tree overhead, where a beautiful snowy owl was watching the proceedings.

"I didn't say I thought she could actually catch you, just that she was likely to want to keep trying." Harry tutted, before holding up a tiny, bedraggled little kitten for inspection. Tara took the kitten and she and Willow cooed and petted it.

"We should name her Miss Kitty Fantastico."

"That's perfect. Oh, so cute!"
"Uh, ladies, if we can stop the kitty-love-fest for a moment? These guys saw a vampire rise and not only didn't stop it, they hung out with it at a bar later!"

"We weren't really hanging out with him, we just chatted for a bit, and I don't know why you're complaining--he has friends, and a job already lined up and everything. His friends all work as enforcers for some guy named Vinny. Vinny doesn't hire hunting vamps, because they draw too much attention and it gets in the way of business. See? No problem."

"Yes, Josh seemed rather harmless for a blood-sucking vampire." Tom agreed.

"Axe. He's changing his name remember? Once he's done at the fire house."

"Axe? Firehouse?" Xander squeaked nervously.

"Where else is he going to get an axe this time of night? Other than from one of you lot, that is." he added, eyeing the large battle axe Tara was holding.

"Oh! Oh this is bad! We need to find Buffy before all the firemen are slaughtered!"

Without further ado, three of the four teens ran off. The fourth pouted and crossed her arms. "Great, now I have to wait even longer for my orgasms." she griped before stomping after them.

Harry and Tom watched them go and then turned to one another.

"Interesting people in this town."

"Alright, who exactly sent all of you off running towards a non-existent massacre?" Buffy growled once they'd all regrouped after leaving the firehouse.

"W-well, we were right about there being an attack."

"A strangely non-lethal one, considering that vampires were involved."

"Vampires don't attack firemen as a rule." Anya sighed, while rolling her eyes.

"Why not? And why did you not see fit to mention this earlier? You know, before we ran across town and roused everyone for a big fight!"

"Those guys told you they weren't hunters."

"They said they were heading off to attack the firemen!"

"Nooo, they said the one guy was looking for an axe, which is hardly the same thing."

"Why don't they attack firemen?" Tara wondered curiously.

"They're highly flammable. They don't see it as being in their best interest."

"W-well, they stole their gear and their firetruck, which amounts to the same thing." Willow pointed out. "So even the non-hunting vamps are big jerks."

"Non-hunting vamp. Psh. Vampires are killers, end of story...even these so-called 'nice vamps' will probably be responsible for massive deaths and property damage --the firemen might still be alive, but they can't exactly do their jobs without equipment."

"Um...guys?"
"It just goes to show you, really. Vampires are a plague on humanity."

"Guys?"

"I don't care if they say they don't hunt, they're probably lying."

"Guys!"

"The only one we can trust to not actually be hunting is Spike, and that lasts only as long as his chip does. The moment it's either gone or stops working, he's dust."

"Would you stupid people stop staring at Buffy and look at the damned tv!" Anya huffed, exasperated.

The Scoobies glared at Anya reproachfully, while Tara looked at the television. "Um, isn't that S-Spike? I thought he was a vampire?"

"Is he dressed like a fireman?"

"Did that guy in the background just go gameface? He did! He's a vampire too!"

"Shh! They're interviewing Spike. Be quiet." Giles snapped as he raised the sound.

"Yeah, the whole district went down before we were able to control the fire, but it's out now, and that's what matters. Just doing our part to keep ol' SunnyHell safe."

"Any idea what started the fire?"

"It looks like some teenagers were down this way having themselves a party, complete with a cozy little fire. I guess the party got wild, or a fight started--long story short, a bottle of whisky seems to have spilled near the fire and caused it to spread. The warehouses here have been abandoned for some time now--lots of leaves and trash blown inside, lots of dry wood making up the warehouses themselves. For those of you at home, take this as a lesson--poor fire safety and alcohol don't mix."

"A good lesson for everyone to remember--after all, it only takes a single match to start a fire. This is Sheila Benson, channel 5 evening news."

"Thank you Sheila. In other news tonight…"

"Okay…color me confused. Spike and those other vamps went off and beat up all the firemen so they could take over as the firemen?"

"B-but…Spike's chip!"

"He must have gotten it out somehow. Well, looks the William-the-Bloody-annoying has finally outlived his usefulness."

"Even if he did get his chip out, which we don't know for sure, he didn't kill anyone--he stopped a fire in the old warehouse district."

"Buffy…I think this situation requires further investigation." Giles cautioned.

"Xander, are we ready to go yet?"

"Yes, Ahn, we're ready to go." Xander sighed.
Xander and Anya were halfway home when they saw something odd.

"Huh. I didn't know he could fly." Anya commented idly "Seems sort of odd to do so on his back, I mean, how does he see where he's going?"

"What?"

"Spike. He seems to be flying."

Xander stared where she was pointing to and saw Spike, along with the two tweedy English guys they'd met earlier. Spike was still dressed as a fireman. The shorter of the two tweed-guys was holding a stick upright in his hand and marching along looking irate, while his friend was still somehow walking and reading at the same time.

"I don't think he's flying, Ahn, I think he's being kidnapped…how the little tweed guy is managing it, I don't know, but Spike doesn't look like the one in control there."

Spike contorted and managed to twist until he was hovering face down over the shorter English guy. When he did so he looked around wildly for something that would help him. He saw Xander and Anya watching the spectacle and called out to them desperately.

"MONKEY BOY! DEMON GIRL! TELL THE SLAYER I'M BEING KIDNAPPED BY HARRY POTTER!" It seemed he was trying to say more, but although his mouth was moving they couldn't hear anything else. The strange trio soon disappeared into the distance, heading towards the direction of the old Sunnydale High School.

"Huh. Well that's not something you see every day."

"Tell me we are not trekking all the way back to Giles' house." Anya complained.

"Eh, it's just Spike. He'll keep. I'll give Buffy a call when we get home, you know, just to give her a head's up. I wonder what the junior Watchers want with Dead Boy jr. though. I mean, yeah, maybe he used to be a player, but now he's just annoying and impotent. Though, come to think of it, he wasn't very effective even when he wasn't chipped."

"He did kill two Slayers."

"Buffy's kicked his ass so many times it isn't even that fun to watch anymore. Whatever. Let's get home."

"Riley! I thought you weren't feeling well?" Buffy cooed to her boyfriend when he arrived in Giles' living room.

"I was feeling a bit off earlier, but I feel better now, so I figured I'd come see if there was anything still to do tonight, and to walk you home if there's not."

"You're such a sweetie. I already patrolled the latest hot spots tonight."

"We went to get the new vamp due to rise tonight, but we got there too late. We did get a new kitten though. Isn't she adorable?"

"Cute as a button." Riley laughed as said kitty tried to stalk and pounce a small rubber ball the
girls had been rolling back and forth to entertain it.

"Seems like a quiet night. Are you ready to head home?"

Giles phone rang and he moved to answer it.

"Yeah, let me just get my coat."

"Joyce?"

Buffy halted in putting her coat on as she heard her mother's name.

"Kidnapped?"

"Giles? What's going on? Is mom alright?"

Giles held up a hand while he continued listening. "I see, that is quite odd. Well, thank you for telling me, Joyce. We shall certainly see what we can do."

Buffy was practically vibrating with worry and curiosity by the time Giles turned to face the rest of them.

"Giles? My mom?"

"Is fine. She called to tell us about a strange message Xander left on the answering machine."

"Oh my god! Xander's been kidnapped!"

"No. Spike has been kidnapped. Xander and Anya simply witnessed it while they were on their way home."

"Oh. No biggie then." Buffy shrugged, much to Riley's apparent delight.

"Buffy, do be more serious. We do not know why Spike was kidnapped. There are rituals that require vampire sacrifice, and do not forget that Spike is of the line of the Master, and thus might be useful in an attempt to resurrect him--something that, as you may recall, has already been tried once before. There is also the fact that, with the master gone, it is quite possible that Spike could be considered the leader of the Order of Aurelius and someone might be trying to get control of him in order to call the Order to their command. The point is, we just don't know, and until we do we should probably at least pretend to be concerned about it." Giles chided, before continuing. "According to Joyce, Xander said the kidnappers were the two 'tweed guys' you all met earlier, and Spike shouted to Xander and Anya that he was being kidnapped by 'Harry Potter'."

"Harry Potter…that sounds vaguely familiar for some reason."

"Same here" Tara nodded in agreement with Willow "though I'm not sure where I heard it."

"It does sound familiar." Rile agreed as well "Sorry. I can't remember where I heard it though, or in what context."

"So it's someone famous then? We should have a mention of them in one of the books then."

"No, I don't think so" Giles disagreed "The name doesn't ring a bell with me. You all attend or attended the same college. Could that be the connection?"

"Why would someone from the college want Spike? The initiative left town!"
"Maybe someone from the college heard about what was going on and wanted a pet vampire?" Buffy suggested.

"I'll start checking the college registry for any Harry Potters."

"Good. In the meantime, Buffy, you should swing by and take a peek at the hellmouth just in case. Xander said that's the direction they were headed."

Buffy huffed in annoyance, finished putting on her coat and started for the door.

"Fine, but afterwards I'm going home. Spike can just stay kidnapped for a while."

Spike huffed irritably from his spot hanging in the corner of the surprisingly cozy kitchen in the log cabin that seemed to have just appeared out of nowhere. It certainly hadn't been there four days ago when he last passed by this way.

He watched with some alarm as the huge python that had traveled with them came slithering up to settle nearby.

"Could you call off your bloody snake?"

The bookish bloke hissed at the snake who hissed back and then went back to watching him.

"Nagini's just curious. She's never met a dead thing that walked before. Now, do you mind? I'm trying to read here."

"Oh, excuse me! You're the ones that bloody well kidnapped me! If you don't want to hear me talking, maybe you should just let me go."

"No, Harry wants to talk to you first. So do I, for that matter. You've heard of him…have you heard of Lord Voldemort?"

"Yeah, he's the boy-hero's arch nemesis. He made himself immortal in a stupid way and dies equally stupidly from a disarming charm in the middle of the ruins of Hogwarts."

"A disarming charm?"

"Yeah, turns out boy hero was the master of the elder wand that Lord Thingy tried using to throw a death curse at him and so the spell just reversed to kill him instead. He essentially offed himself. Bloody stupid way to end the book, if you ask me. And what was up with him just being all "Oh, don't worry about leaving me on a bloody doorstep and plotting my death my whole life" when he met bloody Dumbledore in the afterlife? He didn't even punch him in the nose! He could have done at least that much. Instead he goes and names his second son after the man and bloody Snape who treated him like dirt his whole life. Albus Severus. How'd you like to be stuck with a name like that, eh?"

"Who, Voldemort?"

"No, Harry Potter. All that was left of Voldemort was a flayed baby in the afterlife. Potter wanted to go take care of it and try to help it but the old man told him to just leave it there to suffer for eternity, and even gets pissy because he keeps getting distracted from him blabbing on about how great he is. Turns out that since boy-hero had united the deathly hallows he became master of death—which apparently just means you can pick your time to die or something. He just wakes up, Neville Longbottom takes out the snake…bloody big python named Nagini…" he trailed off as he
eyed the snake sitting below him. "then he gets killed by his own death curse. Like I said, bloody stupid. There was an epilogue, nineteen years later. Hero boy is a sad shell of his former self, Head Auror, married Ginny Weasley--while I get that she's supposed to be a delicious little spitfire of a redhead, I still think there was love potions involved. His little sidekicks, Granger and Weasley get married--though why a smart girl like that wanted to be with a brain dead moron like that guy I still don't understand. They all have children and he's consoling his second son that's about to start Hogwarts that it'll be fine if he gets into Slytherin as the 'bravest man he knew' was one--Snape apparently, but that he could argue with the hat and go to Gryffindor like he did. He should have gone to bloody Slytherin--that lot was obvious minion material. It probably would have greatly improved his quality of life if he had some minions that answered to him instead of to the old man."

Harry wandered into the kitchen moments later. He had changed out of the robes he'd been wearing earlier and was now clad in loose, comfortable pants and a loose t-shirt.

"Anything in particular you want for dinner?" he asked as he headed towards the cabinets to take stock of what supplies he had to work with. "How's steak and kidney pie sound?"

"Sounds good."

"I haven't had that in an age. I don't suppose you could spare a bit for ol' Spike?"

"You're a vampire."

"Why does everyone always say that? I know! So what? It means I can't get occasionally bored and want something different? I used to be human--it's something of a shock to go from having a wide array of foods to eat to only having one."

"Do you eat regular food a lot?"

"No, not a lot--it really doesn't do anything for me, after all, and my taste buds aren't quite what they used to be. It used to drive the others crazy--they were offended by a vampire eating regular food. Honestly, in the beginning I used to do it mostly to annoy them, but as time went on, I found it was a nice change of pace every once in a while. Spicy buffalo wings, the Bronze has this thing called a bloomin' onion--it's completely brilliant. When I was kipping with the Watcher last year I got used to having blood and Weetabix for brekkie--gave it some texture. I was still adjusting to the bloody chip in my 'ead, and I was having trouble getting used to drinking blood but not having anything to bite on, you know?"

"You were living with the Watcher? Is there more than one kind? And what chip?"

"The Slayer's Watcher. I went to them for help after I escaped those soldier boys. They put a chip in my head! I can't bite humans, can't even think about so much as nudging a bloody human in the arm without getting crippled by pain...can't defend myself against bloody humans either, even if they don't have stupid little sticks and magic and think they're fictional characters from children's books." he grumbled.

Harry glanced at Tom and shrugged, busying himself with heating up some food. Tom pulled his wand and began scanning.

"Huh. You do have a chip in your head."

"You can see it? Can you take it out?"

"No. I'd like to be able to sleep at night without having to fend off a hungry vampire, and we're not done talking to you yet."
Spike scowled at him and then sighed. "Could you at least let me down? It's kind of annoying hanging upside down like this."

Tom shrugged and let him fall to the floor with a thump after warning Nagini to move back.

Spike righted himself and then scowled as everything that had been in his pockets that had fallen out and gotten stuck in the shoulders of his fireman's gear tumbled out and to the ground. After gathering everything up and stripping out of his fireman's gear, leaving him clad in jeans, t-shirt, boots and a long leather duster, he took a seat at the table, made himself comfy and lit up a cigarette, then smirked at Tom as though daring him to complain. Tom arched an eyebrow, summoned an empty butterbeer bottle and tapped the opening with his wand, before levitating it to settle on the table near where Spike was sitting. Spike was both bemused and annoyed when all the smoke began gently funneling itself into the bottle and stayed there.

Harry came over with a steaming steak and kidney pie, a stack of dishes, and three steaming bowls of vegetables floating along behind him. Everything danced over and settled itself down on the table.

"Cheers, mate." Spike said as an empty plate settled in front of him. Harry handed out the cutlery and began dishing out servings for everyone.

"Why does he get some?"

"Just because we kidnapped him doesn't mean we have to be bad hosts."

"I don't suppose you have any blood?"

"Plenty, but I'd like to keep it where it is."

"I can make do with pig's blood if there's nothing else."

Harry summoned a cup from the cabinet and set it down in front of Tom, who looked irritated.

"My conjuring is a little iffy unless I have a definite target. It would be my luck I'd leave some poor schmuck passed out on the sidewalk from sudden blood loss."

Tom looked grumpy, but he pointed his wand into the cup and conjured a cupful of pig's blood, and then charmed it to refill as needed. Harry feeling impish, charmed the cup bright yellow and put a happy face with fangs and a blood on the corner of its mouth under the words "Bite Me" on it, before handing it to the hungry vampire.

"I should get kidnapped more often." Spike commented as he took a sip and then dug into his food.

Joyce was rather surprised to see an out-of-breath Riley on her doorstep.

"Mrs. Summers, hi"

"I've told you before, call me Joyce."

"Joyce, sorry…is Buffy here? I was supposed to meet her."

"No, she's not. As far as I know she's out checking in to Spike's kidnapping. It's so sad…right when he just started a new job too. Did you see him on the news earlier?"
"Who? Spike?"

"Yes, he's a fireman now. He helped put out a big fire in the old warehouse district. It seems the whole thing burned down before they were able to put it out. Can you imagine if a fire that size had spread?"

Riley was momentarily flummoxed at the idea of a vampire becoming a fireman, but he was more distracted by a sudden realization.

"Wait a minute... I was just with Buffy helping her look into the Spike thing and something weird happened. I was suddenly convinced I was late to meet her even though she was right there. She ran off in the opposite direction..."

"That does sound strange. I hope Buffy's alright. Maybe I should call Mr. Giles..."

"Yes, you should do that. I'm going to go look for Buffy."

Joyce waved as Riley retreated and hurried over to the phone. After explaining what had just happened, to which Giles sighed in annoyance, Joyce continued.

"I'm going to go hop in my car and see if I can find Buffy. Goodness knows where she might have run off to."

"Yes, you do that, though I wouldn't worry overmuch. By the sound of it, it was a distraction to keep them away from the area they were investigating, but not harmful by any means. Even so, I suppose I should take a look around as well. This whole business does just seem to get more complicated. I had thought to have an early night tonight. My new shop is supposed to be opening soon. I need to go in and finish setting everything up before the grand opening."

"That's right, Buffy mentioned you'd bought a business. Good luck with that."

"Thank you. If you should happen to stumble across Buffy before I do, do give me a call, would you? I'll have my cell on me. You have the number, correct?"

"Yes, I do. Take care."

"Yourself as well."

"Giles! Something weird happened!" Buffy complained while stomping her foot and waving her arms in agitation. "I went running off, convinced I was late to meet Riley at his place, even though he was right there with me!"

"So I've heard. Riley went to your house. Your mother is out looking for you now. Get in."

Still grumbling, Buffy climbed into Giles' midlife-crisis-mobile and settled in for a good sulk.

"I didn't even want to go looking for stupid Spike, and now this. This is going to take all night."

"Hopefully not, I do have to finish getting the shop in order."

They started down the road and saw Joyce a few blocks up, scanning the streets for her daughter. Luckily there wasn't much traffic out and they were able to pull up alongside one another to share news.
"Buffy! Good, I'm glad you're alright."

"I wasn't hurt, just made to think I had an appointment I didn't."

"Will you be coming home now?"

"Giles and I are going to go check someplace real quick to see if we can find Spike. I'll be home right after, mom."

"I'll drive her myself." Giles promised.

Joyce nodded amiably. "Alright, well I guess I'll see you in the morning. I'm probably going to turn in."

"See you. Sorry to drag you out like this."

"Don't be silly, Buffy. I often wish I could do more to help you--this time I could, even if it didn't amount to much."

"It still means a lot that you tried, mom."

Joyce gave them a last smile and headed home, while Giles turned towards the location of the hellmouth.

"Alright, how close did you get to the hellmouth?"

"We were inside the construction site, I'm not sure exactly how close we were though--I can't remember exactly where it would have been in relation to the new building site, but I don't think we were that far away. Then I just suddenly panicked because I remembered I had to meet Riley and it seemed really important to leave immediately so I could meet him…the rest you know."

Giles pulled up a short distance from the construction site and they both got out.

"Alright, I guess start walking slowly towards the area of the hellmouth. We should be able to map out the dimensions of the distraction spell that way."

"If I suddenly feel I have to run off again, are you going to be able to catch me or stop me?"

"Ah, yes. New plan. I will walk slowly towards the direction of the hellmouth."

"Good plan."

It took some doing, and Buffy had to retrieve Giles to keep him from running off, but they did eventually find the edges.

"It seems to only encompass the area right around the hellmouth itself. There doesn't seem to be any light show, nor any surge of mystical energies gushing forth, which makes me think no ritual has been performed already. I guess all that's left is to take a peek at the hellmouth itself and ascertain whether anyone is in there performing a ritual right now. Climb up on one of those girders and take a peek, would you?"

Buffy glowered at him and then stomped off to start climbing. "Spike owes me. Big time."

Unfortunately, when she edged onto the girder that overlooked the hellmouth, Buffy suddenly
remembered she had somewhere else to be. Giles saw a blonde blur fly by overhead as she leapt from the girder and hit the ground running.

"BUFFY! WE'RE HERE TO FIND SPIKE, REMEMBER?" Giles shouted after her swiftly retreating form.

Buffy slowed as his words penetrated and clenched her fists. "ARGH! WHEN I FIND WHOEVER DID THIS THEY'RE GOING TO FEEL THE WRATH OF MY STOMPY BOOTS!"

Giles sighed. "Yes, quite." Buffy scowled and joined him by the car.

"Did you see anything in the brief glimpse you got of the place?"

"A solid dirt floor, no hole. No one was in there."

"Strange. If someone is just keeping people away while they cap it, there should be a seal and sigils… well, at the very least, it seems we don't have to worry about any rituals. I hadn't thought it likely, to be honest. It's the wrong time of year for rituals involving vampire sacrifice. Had it been this summer it would have been completely different. One does like to be sure."

"Great. Wonderful. Can we go home now?"

"Yes. We can regroup tomorrow afternoon at the Magic Box and compare notes. Willow should have had ample time to do her searches by then. Tell her to bring her computer with her, we can try to narrow down whatever she might have found, and I can tap the rest of you as free labor while you're there."

Buffy just looked at him.

"What? I have a deadline to meet…and I had thought the place would make a better center of operations than my living room in any case. I keep expecting rumors to start flying again. I had quite enough of that while you were all in high school. I daresay it's part of the reason I warmed up to Jenny so quickly--not the only reason, but it was a small part of it."

"Rumors?"

"You're an adult now Buffy--a grown man, close association with a few teenagers that are otherwise social outcasts…do the math."

"Oh! EWWW!"

"Quite. Xander's not even my type."

Buffy gave him a dirty look, but then got distracted by something she saw just past Giles' shoulder.

"Didn't they mention seeing a snowy owl with those guys earlier?"

"I believe so, yes. Why?"

"Look."

The snowy owl who had been watching the two of them took off when she felt their regard.

"We should probably follow it as best we can while we have the chance. Get in."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The search for Spike. A trip to L.A.

"Ah, Willow, Tara, come in. The others are here already. There's a table over there where you can set up. We'll get started in a bit, there's still some setting up to do before the grand opening."

"Do you need some help?" Tara offered immediately.

"If you'd be so kind…there are some books there that still need to be put on their shelves. Two or three of each title, I suppose. Those remaining can stay in their boxes and be returned to the store room."

"I can help too." Willow offered.

Giles eyed her a moment, hesitant given her tendency to try to do magic while not knowing what she was doing, usually with catastrophic results.

"There are some herbs that need to be set up in the room back there. Just empty everything onto the shelves, they're already labeled for easy reference."

"I'm your girl."

"Hey, G man, I just finished putting in the last of the training equipment. Is there anything else needs doing?"

"Um…if you could assist Tara by returning the boxes to the store room as she finishes with them, that would be helpful. I'm going to finish stocking the counter…and then we might actually be done."

Everyone split up to their assigned tasks. By the time Buffy and Riley arrived an hour later, the place was looking ready for business.

"Looks good, Watcher-mine. Are you ready for the grand opening?"

"As I'll ever be, I suppose. You'll all be stopping by, I hope?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Xander assured him.

"We brought munchies." Riley showed them, as he held up the coffee cups he was toting.

"And I have the doughnuts. " Buffy added.

Everyone took their places around the table Giles had set up in the shop for just such a purpose after grabbing their coffee and doughnuts. Willow took the corner nearest the electrical socket so she could run her computer. Buffy took the lead while they waited for it to boot up.

"Riley and I went to visit the hellmouth, but something weird happened" Buffy explained, detailing her and Riley's failed scouting mission, and her and Giles' slightly more effective second
trip out there. "That's when we saw the snowy owl you guys mentioned. We followed it and it took us to the old warehouse district. You should see the place--that fire must have been something else. The whole area is nothing but a black, sooty stain on the ground now. There's nothing left."

"Weird. So, what? You two think Spike's kidnapping has something to do with the warehouse fire?"

"That's just it, we don't know. There didn't seem to be any ritual at the hellmouth, but it's been covered over and magicked up so no one can easily get close to it. The warehouse district burned down, and Spike helped put out the fire, kept it from spreading and taking out parts of the town, and we were later led back there by the snowy owl that was with those two guys that kidnapped Spike. That's all we've got. We don't know if any of it is connected."

"Willow? Any luck on finding Harry Potter?"

"Not so far. I searched all through the current students, staff, faculty and alumni records for Sunnydale U, but so far there's only been one hit--and that guy died back in 1957--natural causes, not mystical--Gehrig's disease. He does seem to really be dead--he was cremated and just had a memorial service."

"There's no crematory in town."

"His family made the arrangements. The memorial and all was held in LA, not here."

"Well, that young fellow could be a descendant, or perhaps he actually faked his death and the cremation in another town was to throw people off track."

"It's not the same guy. There was a picture of him in the paper." Willow disagreed. She tapped a few keys and turned her computer so everyone could see. The black and white photo was of an older man with obvious Asian heritage.

"Given his name, I wasn't expecting that."

"His parents were an English man and a Chinese woman. He said he faced discrimination elsewhere for his heritage, and found Sunnydale to be a very accepting place."

"Alright...it does seem unlikely he faked his death. What else have we got? The warehouse district. See if you can find out who owns them. Perhaps we might find a connection there. Anything else?"

"Northern Scotland. They said that's where they'd been earlier in the day, and that it was too hot here." Anya offered.

"Maybe we should be searching magic sites not university ones. There's magic around the hellmouth, and that snowy owl is obviously a familiar." Tara offered.

"A familiar?" Riley questioned.

"An animal companion of a witch, wizard or sorcerer. They gain extra powers, or at least extra intelligence just from hanging around a magic user, depending on who you ask. It's thought by some that a witch or wizard can use their familiar's eyes to see through so they can spy on people from a distance, and that they help the witch or wizard do magic. That's the theory anyway."

"So, the snowy owl last night might have just been leading us on a wild goose chase?" Buffy
growled. "Meaning all our speculation about the stupid warehouse district might be nothing?"

"Too bad you didn't say that a few minutes ago. I just finished hacking into the city records. Ah! Here we go…" Willow got an odd look on her face and then started typing some more and clicking through screens.

"Um…wow…this is really unexpected. Geez, he was really busy that year…but no…no…all this happened before that, but he still used that name."

"Wills? Want to share with the rest of the class?" Xander prompted.

"The uh, warehouse district is owned by Angelus Aurelius…so is the Bronze, all the cemeteries in town, the butcher shops, Willy's Bar…Angel seems to own half of Sunnydale, actually."

"What? No. It must be someone else with an oddly similar name--His name is ANGEL, no last name."

"He inherited from his mother Darla Aurelius, according to this, except it happened the year before you came to Sunnydale, and before Darla was actually dusted. "Darla Aurelius" gained most of these places the same year the Master was supposed to have been trapped by that earthquake."

"That doesn't even make any sense. They're vampires! They don't own property or businesses. It's just a weird coincidence."

"No, actually in this instance it makes perfect sense. The Master was trapped. In the immediate aftermath they may have made long term plans for their collective security, and for the Master in particular until they could empower his release. In fact…" Giles trailed off before hurrying to his office in the back to retrieve one of his Watcher journals.

He flipped through, rereading different sections and nodding to himself.

"Giles?" Buffy asked impatiently. Giles sighed and removed his glasses to start cleaning them.

"Several things that had puzzled us before now make much more sense in retrospect. We were never able to track the Order of Aurelius. They were usually not to be found in the usual spots one finds vampires. If they own property and are willing to lay low at times to keep from drawing too much attention to themselves so that they can do their rituals and such in peace, that could be why. Also, we've been under the impression for years that Darla had very expensive tastes and Angel did not…and yet, considering his penchant for designer clothing, expensive leather coats, moving into a mansion once the opportunity to move out of Spike and Drusilla's lair presented itself, it seems Angel has expensive tastes also, and yet during his travels with Darla over the decades they made a habit of going to expensive parties, living in lavish houses, wearing fashionable clothing…and yet there was rarely if ever a trail of bodies leading to any of these things. It made it difficult to track them when it was just the two of them. The reason we thought it was only Darla is because whenever they would part ways, which they did every few years so that Darla could return to the Master's side briefly, Angelus would hole up somewhere and stop living his lavish lifestyle for the duration of her absence. If Darla was the one with access to the Order's money though, it makes far more sense. He wasn't able to live a lavish lifestyle in plain sight while she was gone, because he hadn't the funds to do so. He had to live like any other vampire while she was gone--find a hole somewhere and go hunting where no one was likely to notice too many missing people: the slums, the docks. It all makes much more sense now."

"No it doesn't. He was running around town here, and didn't seem too worried about this big theft you all think he committed."
"Like you were saying earlier, they're vampires. They probably didn't dip into that stuff too often--why would they? They'd just hole up somewhere and steal what they wanted. Maybe they didn't notice." Xander spoke up.

"It still doesn't make sense to me. This Order was all over town when Buffy and Angel arrived, and Angel had a soul and was helping Buffy. Why weren't they all hunting him for being a traitor or something?"

"I would imagine Darla was protecting him."

"What! That's ridiculous!" Buffy scoffed.

"No, it really isn't; she was old enough, high ranked enough, as well as being the Master's favorite according to our information, that she could have ordered a hands off policy on Angel in the hopes that she could one day find the means to get rid of his soul and have him return to her. He did try to return to her once after he received his soul."

"That's a lie." Buffygrowled. "He was disgusted by what he was, the things he had done…there's no way he would have returned to the one who made him what he was."

"And yet he did." Giles asserted, his eyes cold. "He traveled from Romania to China following the trail of Darla, Spike and Drusilla for two years, and reunited with the three of them for a number of days before they all parted ways again, this time for good. Even with his cursed soul he wanted to return to what he was, and attempted to do just that--unfortunately for him the curse wouldn't allow him the peace to do so."

"You're wrong, he wouldn't do that. He despised Darla, and he killed her to protect me."

"Well, when we find Spike, you can ask him. I'm sure the answer will be illuminating. Ask him who was with him in China during the Boxer Rebellion where he killed his first Slayer."

"Hey, Wills, how's the searching going?" Xander interrupted. The more they talked about Angel and the more Buffy defended him, the more Riley's face was starting to look like a thundercloud.

"Um, well, let's see…oh! I've got a hit on Harry Potter northern Scotland! Let's see…Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, located in northern Scotland!"

"Hogwarts?" Xander snorted. "Oh, that's an attractive name for a school. Come to the school of pigs with skin disease!"

"There's actually a species of plant call hogwort. Perhaps it's supposed to be a botanical reference." Giles suggested. "I don't recall ever hearing of such a school before…" he trailed off as he went to fetch his directory of known magical training facilities and covens.

"So…Harry Potter is a student there or what?"

"I guess…hold on." Willow murmured as she began clicking through the list of hits.

"Okay…weird…I just stumbled across a discussion board where they're arguing about the headmaster of this Hogwarts school and whether he's a manipulative jerk that abuses orphans and brainwashes them, or if he's a great man and a hero…wow. Let's see what else… Here. Harry Potter was a student from 1991-1997, he apparently skipped his last year of school because he was fighting a dark lord…um…what else?"

"Sounds like Buffy. Weird that he's kidnapping folks now, even if just evil chipped vampires."
"How about that--get the complete set of Harry Potter books." Tara pointed.

"He's an author? He seems pretty young to have written a complete set of anything."

"He's not the author, he's the main character. It's a set of children's books. Join Harry Potter and friends on their adventures through Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry as they make friends, battle trolls, basilisks, and other beasties and work to protect the wizarding world from the evil of the Dark Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

Giles huffed in annoyance. "Spike was making a pop culture reference, and left us searching for a person that doesn't even exist."

"Pretty apt one, actually…spiky black hair, green eyes, glasses, scar on his head, and he even had a wand when we saw Spike being kidnapped. There's even a white owl." Xander pointed out as he peered over Willow and Tara's shoulders.

"M-maybe someone did the Halloween spell? Or the superstar spell, or something like it? Maybe that guy really thinks he is Harry Potter?" Willow suggested. "Although…given what I'm seeing on some of these fan forums, the guy we met was nothing like the character, beyond sort of looking alike. Harry Potter from the books seems to have been abused, starved and mistreated most of his life, and only seems to be competent as a wizard if his life is in danger. The guy we met was healthy, sort of buff, in a trim swimmer sort of way, friendly, and he was wearing clothes that fit him. He's also not quite old enough. Harry Potter should be about 22 or so now, if he were real. The guy we saw was sixteen, seventeen tops."

"If it's the Halloween spell, he would look like school aged Harry Potter, wouldn't he?"

"Who was the other guy then?"

"What do you mean?"

"The guy with him. Who's he supposed to be?" Anya wondered.

"Maybe another character from the books…I don't know who though. Harry Potter's best friends are Ron Weasley, a tall gangly red-headed boy, and Hermione Granger, a girl with buck teeth and bushy brown hair…he didn't sound Irish, so he's not Seamus Finnegan, who was blond anyway, or Neville Longbottom, who's pudgy and has a round face like a moon, the last guy in his dorm at school is Dean Thomas, who's black, so it's not him either…and it's not Draco Malfoy who's blond and pointy, or Voldemort, who looks like a giant snake man with red eyes…he's also not Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster, who has long white hair and a long white beard. I have no clue."

"Maybe the other guy cast the spell on the one who thinks he's Harry Potter?"

"I'd still like to know where kidnapping Spike comes in--from the little I'm seeing here, character Harry Potter wouldn't do that." Willow added.

"So in other words, we're right back where we started then?" Buffy summarized.

"Pretty much, yeah."

"So what do we do now?"

"We could head back towards the hellmouth and look around the surrounding area and see if we stumble across anything else weird"
"Or we can just ignore it and wait to see if Spike turns up again."

"I vote for that one."

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to give Angel a call and tell him off for not seeing to his responsibilities. He bloody well knew Spike was chipped and mooching off me, constantly complaining about starving to death. Since he seems to be rolling in money, he can bloody well reimburse me for all the blood I had to purchase for him while he's at it."

Giles' office door shut with a snap behind him and a few moments later they could hear him talking, though none of them could make out what he was saying.

"Geez, G-man's really peeved, isn't he?"

"Sounds like it."

"Come on everyone. We're going to go look around the hellmouth and see if we find anything. I want answers." Buffy growled.

"Why do we all have to come?" Anya griped as she climbed out of her seat.

"Because if there's more wonky magic we need enough people to keep us all from running off, and maybe Wills or Tara can figure out some spell to get us past all of it. Now come on, time's wasting."

"YES YOU BLOODY WELL WILL, BLOODY CHEAPSKEAT, OR I'LL PERSONALLY SEE YOU SERVED YOUR BOLLOCKS ON A PLATTER! DO WE UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER?"

"Sheesh, let's get going, G-man really is peeved."

"No kidding."

"I'm bored."

"So you've said."

"You don't even have a bloody telly. I'm missing my shows."

Tom sighed and conjured a television and then poked at the plug for a bit until the thing turned on, before turning back to the book he was reading "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets." He had finished "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" just an hour or so ago. Harry had opted to skip the early volumes, since he was certain he already knew most of what happened during them thanks to his run-in with his counterpart the last time they'd traveled like this, and so had opted to start with book 4 --"Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" and work from there. The books got longer the further into the series--Harry was only 3/4 ths of the way through his while he was already on his second.

He settled back to read again, certain there'd be no further interruptions by the hyperactive vampire they'd captured. It was still daylight outside, so sadly they couldn't kick him out without him bursting into flames--Harry had put his foot down about that, much to Spike's apparent relief.

"Got any beer?"
Harry flicked his wand absently, still engrossed in his book and a six pack of Budweiser appeared next to the chair Spike was ensconced in. Spike grinned and popped one open.

"Cheers mate. You blokes are alright."

Tom sighed and went back to his own book. No good could come of a drunken, hyperactive vampire at close quarters, but if it kept him quiet for the moment, he wasn't inclined to object. He glanced over as Nagini came oozing through an open window and made her way to him.

"Master, there are people outside in the woods. The flying one's ruse didn't work as planned it seems."

"No matter. There are wards up to keep them away from us. If you go back out, stay within the ward line. If there are a lot of them, one of them might get in a lucky shot before you were able to avoid them all."

"I would bite them before they could. Have some faith in me, master."

"I do, my dear, but even idiots get lucky once in awhile."

"I hope they leave soon. They're very noisy."

"I'm sure they will once they feel they've looked around enough."

"I don't understand why so many search for this one. He is noisy as well, and he smells funny."

"He's sort of amusing once one gets over that part of things."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Yes? Where are the others?" Giles asked curiously as Riley returned to the shop.

"I need a net or something to pull Buffy away from the edge of the weirdness. At first, the same thing happened that did before--we all started to run off thinking we had appointments, and so Willow tried to do a spell"

"Oh bloody hell."

"It's alright. No one was hurt or anything. Everyone just got hit with a backlash, even those of us too far back to be affected. We were going crazy trying to remember an appointment we knew we had, but none of us could remember what it was. We spent some time running around trying to remember, and then figured it out after we ended up regrouping. While we were gone they either added something else, or the thing just tries different tacks if you keep trying, I don't know. This time we all ran off convinced we were secretly demons and our lair was up ahead and we needed to flee before Buffy slayed us. We all snapped out of it after we'd run off a bit, but Buffy just curled up in a ball right at the edge of the weirdness. None of us can get close enough to drag her off, and she's too lost in her own inner conflict to pay attention to us. Willow and Xander are keeping an eye on her while Tara and Anya gather rocks. We figure after we get Buffy away she's going to be pissed. We're hoping chucking rocks at the weird zone will make her feel better, and possible flush out our prey while we're at it."

"Bloody hell. The net's back in the training room. Let me get my keys. We can take my car."
Spike glanced over as the giant bloody snake came back in and started hissing at Curly for a bit. Curly huffed in annoyance and set aside his book. "This is getting bloody annoying. We're damned lucky we never had such persistent muggles back home. Bloody wankers. Obviously, if one puts up wards to keep people away, it means you don't want to be bothered. Chucking rocks, honestly. How much more cave man can one get?! Stay put, you two, I'm going to move our location before the local welcoming committee starts chucking large rocks at us."

Nagini curled up into Curly's seat, and then Stormcloud started hissing to the thing as well.

"Oi, I thought you said your scar had no more soul pieces in it. I think you missed one. You're not supposed to be a bloody parslemouth."

"Dumbledore was just talking out his ass after making assumptions, which even he probably realized were wrong. He told me outright that one could learn to understand it but not speak it unless born with the gift. Both my parents were parslemouths, something I found out because I bucked the old man's control and his information blackout early and never let it take hold again. Lucky thing too. The life he had all planned out for me was utterly craptastic from beginning to end and make no mistake--and let's not even go into what happens to poor Tom under this stupid plan. Eternal suffering. Bloody bastard. I'm so going to punch the man in the nose when I see him again."

"Good. Shoulda done it in the books too, at least once."

"And to think, when I met my counterpart who was actually living this crap life, I thought it couldn't get any worse than what he'd already told me about. I really thought things could only get better from there. Shows what I know, and I've only just started book five!"

"Okay, that's better. I'll tell you, nightfall can't come quickly enough." Tom announced as he reentered the cabin.

"I thought you said we were going to move?"

"We did. We're now on the far side of the construction site, still in the woods. Hopefully that will hold the welcoming committee until you can leave safely. That Slayer girl is getting entirely too eager to kill us both. I'm not sure I want to stick around here much longer."

"Why? It isn't like we couldn't just stop her in her tracks if she gets in our way."

"It's the principle of things. We're supposed to be on vacation. I'd rather not spend it looking over my shoulder for an angry little girl with a stake."

"Where should we go then? Spike, do you know anyplace interesting?"

"Oh sure, I've been all over. Let's see…Prague was nice…at least it was until that mob nearly killed Drusilla. I'm still not sure what happened there. She's a true seer--she doesn't usually get caught off guard by stuff like that. China was pretty nice, though I haven't been there since 1900 or so…hmmm…"

Angel pulled into Sunnydale in a foul mood. It really burned him to have to be parting with any part of his nest egg, but what was he going to do? He'd been a little wary of Giles ever since the man had come at him, Dru and Spike in the factory, set the place on fire and started whaling on him with a flaming baseball bat. The man hadn't seemed to care if he lived or died, so long as he got to bash his skull in and end him before he did. Had Buffy not drug him out of there, fearing
for the man's life, he had no doubts he'd be dust right now. No, angry Giles wasn't something he wanted on his tail if he could possibly avoid it. Angry Buffy was no better, but at least he could usually manage to sweet talk her--Giles, not so much.

So, giving in to the inevitable, he had hopped in his car as soon as it got dark and set off for the hellmouth. On the way, he'd had two hours to stew in his annoyance. It was so unfair--a century since they parted ways, if one didn't count that interlude in Sunnydale a few years back, and he was still making trouble for him. Why did they even care if he starved to death or not? The Scoobies and Giles hated Spike. He'd have to find the boy before he left town to let him know how very, very annoyed he was about all this, and make sure he understood he wasn't doing this because he liked him in any way, shape or form--he was just making sure he was less of a burden for Buffy and the others. It wasn't his problem if he starved to death because of the chip in his brain, so why was everyone acting like it was?

Okay…he had brought the captured Nazi sub with the plans for the original Initiative to America and handed it over to the government. How weird was it that Spike had actually been one of their first captures? He had to wonder what would have happened to him had he not let him go before the sub reached the shore. Okay, so maybe it was slightly his fault he had a chip in his brain, but only slightly. Spike would have been in a cage being experimented on long since if he hadn't of rescued him, which should totally balance that out. Okay…it was maybe sort of his fault he was a vampire. He'd made Dru a vampire, and Dru had made Spike a vampire…but Darla had made him a vampire and the Master had made her…so really, it was all the Master's fault, when you got right down to it.

Okay…looked at like that, maybe Giles was justified in saying some of the Order's funds should be used to help Spike, but he'd stolen it fair and square. It wasn't his fault Spike didn't plan for the future--if he had, they wouldn't be in this mess, now would they? Alright, maybe that was unfair. He doubted Spike had expected to be captured and chipped any more than he'd expected to have soul stuffed into him, but he'd gotten by, hadn't he? Not always well--he remembered quite a few periods he'd rather forget--eating rats, living like a smelly bum for years at a time. Spike had it easy, really. Okay, maybe not. Even at his worst, he could still defend himself against humans. There'd been a few times he'd almost had to, others where he'd avoided the issue by playing dead. He doubted Spike could play dead even if his life depended on it. He got bored too easy, he was always in motion, always talking, walking, singing, eating, drinking, smoking. Making a nuisance of himself wherever he went. That was Spike for you.

Angel sighed as he pulled up in front of Buffy's house. Deep, deep, deep, deep inside, he could admit that maybe he didn't really want to see Spike dust…or grey and skeletal from not being able to feed regularly. Spike would rather be dust than meet that fate--he was terrified of ending up like that, actually. Few people knew it, but he was afraid of mummies. He'd probably listened to too many tales about weird Egyptian curses while he was human, that's all he could figure. Fine. If he had to set up an allowance for stupid Spike to keep him from ending up as a mummy, so be it. Oh, and can't forget stupid Giles. Well, he had a check for him. He could choke on it. He reflexively glanced around, half afraid Giles would hear his uncharitable thoughts and pop out at him wielding a flaming baseball bat, but the street was clear and the night quiet.

He got out and sighed as he made his way to Buffy's door. This was going to be fun. Buffy's mother had never liked him. She probably wasn't going to be too thrilled seeing him there. Oh well. If Giles wanted his blood money he'd have to get it from Joyce. He wasn't going to Giles' place if he could help it. The man kept stockpiles of weapons everywhere in close reach. Well, so did Buffy, but her mom wasn't likely to go hauling any of them out. At least…he sure hoped not. He mustered up his best harmless smile and rang the doorbell.
"Hellooo! Psh, trust Peaches to find the biggest place around to kip in. Bloody ponce."

"Angel Investigations…how can I…Spike!"

"Cordelia! You look fabulous! Have you lost weight? Not that you needed to of course, but still. Darling, LA is definitely your town."

"Oh, well, thanks….HEY! Don't try to sweet talk me, evil dead!"

"Oh, come on cheerleader, relax. I just stopped in to say hi to old gramps. Me friends here are from out of town. I'm showing them the sights."

Cordelia finally took her eyes off Spike enough to notice the two tweedy guys standing behind him. They looked like Jr. Watchers, in fact one wore glasses, and the other had his nose stuck in a book. The one with glasses was looking around in interest, and seemed quite at ease in the company of an evil vampire. When Spike mentioned friends, he glanced over and smiled. "Hello. Cordelia, was it? Spike's told us all about you. It's nice to finally be able to put a face to the stories, though I must say you're even lovelier than he said you were. Are you a model by chance?"

Cordelia preened in spite of her best efforts not to. "I have done some modeling here and there, nothing big…'ve even done a bit of acting."

"Really? What were you in? Anything I might have heard of?"

"Not likely, it was a small one act play by a local writer. It had a very short run. It still counts."

"Indeed, it does. Pardon me, I'm being very rude, aren't I? I'm Harry, this is Tom. It's very nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Cordelia smiled back, at least she did until she realized book-guy was kind of giving her this look.

"Don't get too attached to Stormcloud, here. He's taken. I should know. I was trapped by the sun listening to them shagging like rabbits most of the day."

The two tweeds gave him a look, and the one with glasses, Harry blushed. It was sort of cute. That was always the way though, wasn't it? All the cute ones were either taken or gay…and he was both, as was his friend. That just left Spike, and no. Just no. Buffy might be all into the vampire love, it didn't mean she was.

"Cordelia, did you move the Codex Magica? I wanted to cross index this entry here…oh. Pardon me. Wait…You're William the Bloody."

"I go by Spike these days. Watcher-lite, right? What's your name then?"

"Wesley Wyndham-Price." he answered as he began edging towards the weapons.

"Do stop creeping, Mr. Wyndham-Price. Spike is unable to attack humans, and I'm not of a mind to allow you to attack him when he cannot fight back, especially as he's supposed to be acting as our guide while in your fair city here."

"Yeah, what Stormcloud said." Spike agreed cheerfully as he sauntered deeper into the lobby. "So where's Peaches, anyway? I figured I'd best peek in and let him know I'm in town. I don't want him showing up later all avenger-like and ruining our fun."

"I'm not actually sure where he is. He just left a note saying he had an errand to run and he'd be
back later."

"Figures. Well, when he comes by let him know I was here and tell him not to come bugging us unless he's willing to join the party. Soul-boy's a real killjoy when he wants to be."

"Not so fast. Just where all are you planning to go? And how did you end up playing tour guide to a couple of humans anyway?"

"We're his great-great-great-great-great-nephews." Tom offered.

"Yes, we came to town to find our famous uncle. We don't know anyone else in America, and well, what is family for but to mooch houseroom from when in a foreign country?"

"You're both his nephews? I thought you were dating."

"We are, to both. We're distant cousins. Something like fourth cousins twice removed, I believe. We met through the boarding school we both attended. Our different branches of the family had quite lost touch over the years. You know how it goes. It's all been very exciting so far. I can't wait to tell everyone. They'll be so jealous."

"Well, that's what they get for not coming along. Their loss." Tom chimed in.

"See? Just taking my little nephews off for a bit of sight-seeing in the big city."

"Sounds like fun. We were just going to have a movie night."

"Yeah? What're you watching?"

"The Usual Suspects. I've heard it's really good. Hey? Do you want to join us?"

Wesley shot her an alarmed look, but then subsided. It was probably better for all involved to keep Spike and his...nephews...contained. He'd heard too many stories about the sort of chaos William the Bloody left in his wake without even trying very hard.

"Yes, do join us. Movies are always more fun with a crowd. Just through here, if you're interested."

"What do you think, boys? Take in a movie before we see the sights?"

"I haven't been to a cinema in years. Why not." Tom agreed, tucking his book away.

When they were all settled, Spike sprawled out, taking up half the couch by himself.

"We need popcorn. A movie's not the same without it."

Harry shrugged and flicked his wand twice, and handed a large tub of popcorn to Cordelia, and the other to Spike.

"You little blokes are the best nephew a guy could ask for."

"Why, thank you uncle Spike."

"B-but...how?"

"What can I say, luv, I come from a talented family. Shh. The movie's starting."
Joyce eyed the awkwardly shifting vampire in front of her, let out a shaky breath and stepped back to allow him entry.

"I'm sure Buffy will be back soon." she said neutrally, but with a clear warning in her eyes-- try anything funny, my daughter will hunt you down and kill you.

"You don't have to worry about me, you know. I have my soul still."

Joyce just gave him a look that said she was rather unimpressed with this knowledge.

"I was just about to get some coffee. Would you like some?"

"I don't really… ah, sure."

Joyce nodded and led the way into the kitchen, where the coffee pot had just finished filling.

Joyce pulled two mugs and filled them, sliding one to Angel across the counter, while she took a seat on the far side and toyed nervously with her cup.

"So…what brings you here? Buffy has a new boyfriend, you realize."

"I actually know about him. Soldier, right? We've met." Angel replied, clearly uncomfortable with the subject matter.

"She's in college and doing well. He's a nice boy and I think he'll be good for her. If you cared about her, you'd want what was best…"

"I'm not here about Buffy, or to mess up her life." Angel interjected, posture tense. "I just wanted to drop a couple of things off--for Giles and for Spike."

"Well, I understand leaving something for Spike here, but Mr. Giles doesn't live that far from here…"

"What do you mean you understand leaving something for Spike here? You don't let him in the house, do you?" Angel spluttered. "He's a vampire!"

Joyce just looked at him.

"I'm different! I have a soul!"

"Spike has been in my house twice. The first time, he was here to help Buffy go after you. The second time was after he broke up with his girlfriend. The poor boy was so broken up about it…" she sighed. "Both times he was a perfect gentlemen, if a bit rough around the edges. He's never threatened me, or so much as raised a hand against me. You, on the other hand stalked my daughter, menaced her and her friends…and the whole time she was with you she seemed to be crying."

"I…that wasn't my fault. I lost my soul and…the point is"

"Spike's never had one, correct?"

"Well, no. I'm the only one. There are prophecies about me."

"How lovely for you. The point is, he's been less of a threat to my family than you've been in the time I've known you both. Now, I've been told he has a microchip in his head that would keep him from hurting me even if he wanted to…but I've never actually gotten the impression that he
wanted to." Joyce replied firmly, not giving an inch.

"You can't trust him!"

"But I'm supposed to trust you? Out of the two of you, you're the one who's betrayed that trust that was extended to you. He hasn't."

"But he's…!"

"Enough. Leave whatever it is. I'll see he gets it as soon as he's found."

Angel, glowering and unhappy paused as he was dropping the two envelopes in his hand to the counter.

"What do you mean found?"

"He was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped? Who'd kidnap him? He's useless and annoying to boot." Angel snorted. He stopped when he realized he wasn't winning any points with Joyce, and in fact she seemed to dislike him even more than she had when he'd first arrived.

"It's just…Come on. It's Spike." he explained, willing her to understand. "Who cares, right? He's a nobody and a nothing. The world would probably be a better place without him."

"And yet, I've been told the world might not even be here had he not helped my daughter." Joyce pointed out, her voice flat. She took the two envelopes and moved towards the door. "I think you'd better go."

Angel wanted to protest, to plead his case, to make her see that letting Spike into her life was a bad idea and no good could come of it. So far though, he just seemed to be making things worse, and she now had the same expression Buffy used to get on her face when she'd made up her mind about something and wouldn't be moved.

"It might be best if you didn't mention I was here to Buffy."

"I wasn't intending to." Joyce assured him. "Goodbye, Angel."

Angel ducked his head at the finality in her voice and left the house, flinching just a bit at the sound of the door shutting gently, but firmly, behind him.

"That was pretty good. The gimp was pretty crafty, wasn't he?" Spike said admiringly as he stretched.

"Yeah. I can't believe he was Kaiser Soje all along."

"Really? I figured it out."

"So did I."

"What? How? He was hidden in plain sight!"

"There were clues there if you looked for them. The key is not getting sucked in by the unreliable narrators. It's hard to do sometimes; I wouldn't feel bad about it."
Cordelia just huffed in annoyance as she rose to rewind the tape. "Anyone want to watch anoth...AAAAHHH!"

Wesley and the others all jumped when Cordelia suddenly screamed and clutched at her head. Wesley scrambled to get out of his seat and catch her, but Spike was already there, carrying her to the couch and murmuring soothing nonsense to her. Once he had her laid out he laid his hand across her forehead.

"Cordelia?"

Still cringing from the pain and with tears in her eyes Cordelia struggled to speak. "MacArthur Park...near the water...demon...after the children!"

"Oh dear..." Wesley fretted as he fetched some water and painkillers for her. "Angel still hasn't returned."

"Since when are you a seer, cheerleader? I don't remember hearing about this."

Cordelia swallowed down the painkillers with the ease of long practice, hands shaking.

"Doyle...gave them to me before he died."

"Who's Doyle? Oh wait...he the Irish bloke was here before?"

Cordelia just closed her eyes to rest and didn't answer.

"Spike...I don't suppose..."

"What? Just spit it out."

"I don't suppose you'd help me subdue the demon? It's just, Angel isn't here and"

"Yeah, alright." Spike agreed easily. "You boys want to come with?"

"I will." Harry volunteered, voice cheerful.

Wesley looked rather alarmed. "I really don't think that's a good...Where did that come from?" he gasped, eyeing the sword that Harry had just apparently pulled from his back.

"I had it under a charm so it would go unnoticed. Didn't want the cops pulling me over."

"Do...do you actually know how to use it?"

"Yeah. I'm an acknowledged sword master. No worries."

"Truly? At your age?"

"Can we save the twenty questions and find your demon already?" Spike interjected impatiently.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"I'll stay with Cordelia. Have fun." Tom offered. "Pick up dinner on the way back, would you? The popcorn wasn't quite enough."

"Sure. Preferences?"

"Chinese would be nice, or Thai or Indian. Whatever you can manage."
Harry nodded and he and Spike set off, Wesley scrambling to grab some weapons and catch up.

"Wha!" Xander squeaked in fright as a presence suddenly loomed up beside him. "You! What are you doing here? And make some noise, would you? You need a bell or something."

Angel just stood there stoically and without expression. Xander rolled his eyes and got the rest of the way out of his car.

"Buffster is still taken, bub. Go back to L.A."

"So I've heard." Angel agreed. He suddenly realized Joyce had never actually said Riley's name, just that Buffy's boyfriend was a nice boy. A cold chill traveled down his spine as a sudden, horrible thought occurred to him.

"She's still with that soldier…Riley, right?"

"Yeppers. Riley who battles demons and is human and who Buffy is very happy with." Xander replied pointedly.

"Oh. Good." Angel nodded. "For a horrible moment I thought…it would explain why he was hanging out with her mom, but that's crazy, right? Buffy would never…"

Xander just raised an eyebrow and waited for Angel to elaborate.

"You should tell Buffy that Spike has been hanging out with her mother. It's really not safe. Not only is he a soulless evil demon that delights in carnage, he's been fighting demons and might accidentally…or on purpose…lead demons back to Buffy's house. Her mother could be in danger. She should really have a talk with her about letting the wrong sort into the house. It's not a good idea."

"Dead Boy jr. has been bothering Joyce? Well, I'll put a stop to that. Now, if we could only get you to go away. What are you doing here, Dead Boy?"

"I came to drop something off. Buffy's mother mentioned Spike had been kidnapped. I decided to find him, laugh at him for being kidnapped by a bunch of humans, and kick his ass."

"How do you know it was humans?"

"Spike's an idiot and a loser and he's never been too bright…but he can hold his own against most things out there. Not me, of course…but most other things."

"Buffy's already been looking for him and has been making us look for him too. There's been no sign of him. We think it was a couple of wizards."

"Why has Buffy been looking for him?"

"Giles' made her. He's worried he might be being used in an attempt to raise the Master or something."

"Hmm. Yes, that is a concern… Of course, Buffy's already beaten the Master once."

"Even so, random kidnappings usually equals Hellmouthy badness."

"I'll take a look around. If he's in town I'll find him. I should give him an extra ass kicking for
annoying Buffy while I'm here." Angel huffed, sounding terribly put-upon.

"Eh, he's probably been dusted by now. Good riddance."

Angel found himself frowning at the boy in annoyance. Personally, he didn't care if Spike lived or died either, but it galled him to have a useless waste of space like Xander Harris sounding so gleeful at the prospect. Spike was still his, even if he didn't particularly want him. His soul twinged at him warningly--Spike was a demon, soulless, a threat to humanity. He should glory in his destruction. "Spike has been rendered harmless. He's been helping the Slayer." he thought back irritably.

"Having a senior moment there, Dead Boy? Maybe it's time to quit the mortal coil and all that." Xander interrupted cheerfully. Angel just glowered at him and vanished into the night.

Xander watched him go and then scowled as he realized Angel was going to be lurking around town, and probably never let Buffy know he was here. She was going to find out, and the rest of them were going to have to listen to her bitching about it, just like happened last time he pulled this. Well, not this time.

He headed inside and called the Magic Box. Buffy would be reporting in there at some point, might even be there now.

"Hello, Magic Box."

"Ahn. Great, it's me. Hey, when Buffy shows up tell her I just saw Angel wandering around town, would you?"

"Alright. Buffy? Angel is wandering around town. Xander just saw him." He could hear Buffy asking a million questions in the background.

"Tell her I don't know why he's here, and I don't care." he interrupted. Anya cut off the flow of questions to pass on his message. He heard stomping feet and the bell on the door jingle in the background before Anya spoke again. "I think she's gone to look for him."

"Great. Hopefully she keeps her angst to herself and remembers she has a boyfriend." Xander sighed. "Why the hell can't Dead Boy stay in his own town?"

Cordelia was better, but still not 100% when a surprisingly cheerful Wesley returned, Spike and his nephew in tow, all of them carrying bags that smelled heavenly.

"Wow…we have food?" she said with glee. "Real food?"

"We got paid too. Not by the people we saved. Spike apparently knows a guy that buys dead demons. He split the proceeds with us. He even got a catalogue for us. The next time Angel kills something in it, we can have the fellow buy the corpse from us!"

"Really? That's great! We might start making regular profits then! Why hasn't he been doing this all along? Wait…what do the parts get used for?"

"Mostly food for other demons. That thing we did tonight is something of a delicacy in some circles. You don't find many of them in these parts. This is only the second I've ever come across, actually." Spike answered as he began upacking the bag he had with him, which seemed to have beer and nothing else. He held up one of the bottles towards her questioningly. She debated a moment and then held out her hand. It might make her head feel better.
Wesley and Harry unpacked cartons of food and handed them out. Spike took a healthy swig of his beer and then stripped off his coat and his shirt to start prodding at his ribs.

"There's blood in the fridge." Cordelia offered when she spotted the multi-colored bruise splattered across his side. Spike looked at her in surprise and gratitude, like it was a huge deal to be offered something to eat after helping out. An oddly bashful grin overtook his face. Cordelia felt a flutter in her stomach. Okay, so she could totally understand why Buffy was into the vampire love.

"Ta, luv."

"No problemo," she replied, aiming for casual. Spike eyed her a moment and then a rather wicked grin replaced the bashful one, and damn if it wasn't just as striking though in a very different way.

"Go get your blood." She grumbled at him. He smirked and sauntered away like the cock of the walk. She found her eyes following him in spite of her best effort not to, and tore her gaze away as soon as she realized what she was doing. She sat up slowly, mindful of her aching head, and took the food offered with a smile of thanks for Wesley.

Angel followed his nose around town and found traces of Spike's scent in a demon bar on the edge of town. He approached the bartender and spoke with him briefly. He directed him to the back room where a couple of demons were playing kitten poker.

"I'm looking for Spike."

One saggy demon looked at him worriedly. "Angelus, right? You're not here to kill him or anything, are you?"

"It's Angel." When the demon didn't look any less worried he unbent enough to reassure it. "I'm just looking for him. I won't kill him unless he does something to deserve it."

The demon eyed him and weighed his sincerity. "I haven't seen him for a couple of days. We were supposed to watch the Doctor Who marathon yesterday."

"He didn't show up for book club either." another demon grunted.

"None of you know where he's at then?"

"No. He's missing. I hope the Slayer didn't kill him."

"If she did, it was his own fault for trusting her. He really should just get himself an ice pick and be done with it."

Angel tensed, wondering if that was a threat against Buffy he heard, but he relaxed a moment later as the other demon answered.

"You know he's not going to do that. He's afraid of ending up a vegetable. If you think it's such a great idea, why don't you do it?"

"It doesn't bother me. I've no interest in humans."

"You're chipped as well?" Angel hazarded a guess.

"We all are. We managed to escape after Spike did. Good thing too. From what we heard, all the
ones that didn't get chopped up and used for parts." the saggy demon squeaked nervously.

Angel nodded and left without another word.

"Spike was right. He does have a big forehead and his hair does stick straight up." The other demons just nodded and went on with their game.

Angel sniffed the air when he got outside, looking for other traces. There. It was faint, but it was definitely Spike. It was a little worrisome how old all the traces he could find were. Spike was in many ways a creature of habit. The places he frequented should have traces of him everywhere, but instead all he was finding were faint scent trails days old at least. His search led him to a crypt in the center of a cemetery on the far edge of town. He pushed his way inside and found a bare room, but for a battered chair and television tucked away in the corner. That's all there was--no bed, no pillows or blankets, no chest of clothing. Just a chair, a television and an empty bottle of whiskey. Angel shuddered at the thought of living in a place like this--he tended towards Spartan himself, but he always had a bed, and clean sheets, and plenty of blood cooling nearby. Did he just wear the same clothes day after day? How could he live like this?

He wandered around a bit and found a trap door. Assuming he must be living under ground, he went down but found signs of excavation, but no secret lair like he'd hoped to. He was apparently living in the empty crypt above.

He could still remember how infuriated he and the others had been when Spike had enraged that mob to chase them and they'd ended up hiding out in a coal mine for the night. Just the one night, and they'd all been fit to be tied. He couldn't imagine living like this all the time--not by choice, and while sane anyway. Of course, Spike's sanity had always been questionable…

Irritated and uneasy he stalked out and then stopped short just outside.

"Angel. Funny running into you here."

"Buffy."

He had to forcibly push down the petulant fury that wanted to burst out. She looked good--healthy, happy. That was what he wanted for her--why he'd left and why he stayed away. He should be happy that she was happy, but he mostly just wanted to find her soldier boy and punch him a few times.

"I take it you're looking for Spike?"

Angel just nodded and put his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out for her. It wouldn't end well, it was best to just remove temptation.

"We've been all over town the last two days. There's no sign of him anywhere. We thought we'd found him yesterday, but when we got through the weirdness there was nothing there but an impression on the ground like there'd been a tent or something set up and a few footprints."

"Show me?"

Buffy just nodded and they fell into step together.

"How'd you hear? Did Cordy have a vision or something? He's not going to set off an apocalypse, is he?" Buffy sighed, sounding resigned.
"No. Your mother told me, actually."

"You went to see my mom?"

"Just to drop something off. That's why I'm in town. Where's soldier boy?"

"He hadn't shown up for patrol yet when I heard you were in town. I probably should have waited for him."

"I'm glad you didn't. It's good to see you."

Buffy stopped and turned to look at him, an ocean of pain and longing in her eyes. "It good to see you too." she whispered, before making herself look away and continue walking. "I… I shouldn't have come."

"Buffy…"

"Buffy!"

The moment was shattered when an irate Riley came striding across the grounds, his normally cheerful, open face grim, jaw clenched. He came to a stop just behind her, eyes on Angel, and every inch of him radiating hostility.

"What's he doing here?"

Buffy sighed quietly and reached up to push at the center of his chest until he backed up some. His jaw, if anything, clenched tighter.

"He had to drop something off in town and now he's looking for Spike."

Riley's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Why?"

"He's like his vampire grandson or something. It's a thing."

Riley's lips twisted in bitterness. "So…what? You two split up and you got custody of the kid?"

"Something like that." Buffy agreed dryly. Riley was still vibrating with hostility. Buffy sighed again, quietly, and tugged at his arm. "Why don't we do our patrol? I'm sure Angel can do his search without us."

Some, but not all of the stiffness started to leak from Riley's frame, though he didn't take his eyes off Angel, who was eyeing him with a similar level of dislike.

"You'll let us know if you need help?"

Angel broke his stare-down to smile down at her, a tiny part of him exulting inside when Riley started vibrating again. "Sure. Take care, Buffy. It really was good to see you again."

Buffy's eyes softened and the smile she seemed to reserve just for him stole across her face. "You too."

Their moment was shattered when Riley hustled her out of there, casting hateful looks over his shoulder as they went.

Angel forced himself to relax. "I really don't like that guy." he growled before continuing on.
He prowled the length and breadth of the town, and never found anything more than a few faint traces, days old. He checked the time and realized he'd best be going if he wanted to get home before the night was over.

"Where the hell could he be? Who would want to take him and why?"

A sudden, terrible thought occurred to him. Wolfram and Hart. It made perfect sense. They took him, probably another of their stupid schemes to get him. They probably offered to remove his chip if he'd go after him. He needed to get home. Cordelia and Wes would know better than to trust him, but he was dangerous enough that the thought of them facing him without himself there to help them left him sick and uneasy.

The ride home seemed to take forever. He had to take a moment to calm himself before stepping out to head into the hotel. He didn't want to rush inside in game face, especially not while wearing his leather pants. He'd never be able to convince them he still had his soul if he did that.

"I'm home…Spike?"

"No, Cordelia, remember? Do I look like a bleach-blonde Billy Idol wannabe?"

"No. I mean, I smell him."

"Spike left already."

"I was just in Sunnydale. He was kidnapped. I was wandering all over town trying to find him. I found where he'd been staying, but there was no scent trail leading away…no car tracks…but now you're saying he was here? Why was he here? Where all did he go? You didn't let him wander around did you?"

"Angel, be quiet. What do you mean he was kidnapped? He's here with his great-great, I dunno a whole bunch of greats nephews. They looked him up and now he's taking them sight seeing. He stopped in so you'd know he was in town and not go looking for him unless you wanted to hang out and not be a killjoy."

"Nephews? He was an only child."

"Apparently he had a half sister that he didn't know about until years later. His nephews met at boarding school, compared their extensive family trees, realized they were related and had a famous vampire uncle and so they came to visit. They're wizards or something, they had magic wands and everything. They don't look anything like him though…well, I guess it is distant enough they wouldn't. One of them has curly hair and always seems to have his nose stuck in a book, the other wears glasses and has crazy hair that goes every which way. I thought they were jr. Watchers at first--they were wearing tweed and talk like Wesley."

"Spike had curly hair and wore glasses when he was human. So that's who kidnapped him? It makes sense I guess--a couple of humans with sticks in their hands try to approach. He probably thought they were going to stake him and tried running off, so they captured him to talk to him. Buffy's going to be pissed. She's been running all over Sunnydale looking for him."

"Why? I never got the impression she was overly fond of bleach boy."

"They didn't know who took him or why, and the hellmouth disappeared around the same time. They just wanted to be sure he wasn't going to be used to start an apocalypse or anything. It kind of comes with the world-saving territory, unfortunately. She's probably going to stake him when
he rolls back into town. Maybe I should offer to drive him home so I can watch. You didn't let him wander around did you? Tell me you didn't."

"As if. I live here now. I'm not going to let bleach boy wander around poking through my stuff. They were all right in front of us the entire time. We watched a movie. It was fun. Spike's actually pretty funny when he gets going."

"Yeah, he's a real laugh riot." Angel harrumphed.

"And then I had a vision."

"You had a vision? While I was out of town? What is it? Where?"

"Oh, it's all taken care of. Spike and Wesley took care of it. Spike even got us paid for it. He's knows a guy that buys dead demons as food for other demons. He got us a catalog. You know that thing you took care of last week? We could have gotten a lot of money for it. Thanks to Spike we might actually be able to get paid for my visions from now on. We got take out after, watched another movie. He massaged my head. Took the last of my headache away. He said he had experience because of Drusilla."

"You had a vision while I was out of town and Spike took care of it." Angel repeated.

"Hello. People don't stop needing help just because you decide to flit off to Sunnydale."

"And movies? Take out? You're what, hang out buddies now? He's evil! He doesn't have a soul!"

"He has a chip. Same diff. He's a lot more sociable than you are. He eats food, talks. He even tells jokes and makes fun of the tv."

"Spike is an evil vampire. He is not an acceptable person to be hanging out with! He's not even a person, he's a thing!"

"He's a person." Cordelia disagreed. "He's funny, and got us paid and he's really sweet with his nephews. Geez. Take a chill pill."

"Did you forget he tortured me?"

"From what he said you spent several months torturing him when you went evil. I mean, seriously, what's up with that? Isn't he like your family or something?"

"Spike is an annoyance and a waste of space. He's no family of mine." Angel growled before heading towards the kitchen. "I'm gonna grab something to eat."

Angel got out his favorite cup and grabbed a bag of blood from the fridge. As soon as the package was open, he knew something was wrong. It looked like blood, it had the color and the consistency of blood…but it smelled like ketchup. There was a note under where he'd retrieved it from.

You're going to need fries with that.

"CORDELIA! I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU DIDN'T LET HIM WANDER AROUND!"

"You bellowed?"

"Smell this!"
“Um, no thanks.”

“I'm serious, smell it.”

Cordelia leaned forward and cautiously sniffed the bag.

“Mmm… Big Mac. You know what? Now I'm hungry. Give me some money.”

“What… big… NO! It's ketchup. It smells like ketchup.”

“It does not. It smells like a Big Mac.”

“Look at this! He did something. Read it.”

“You're going to need fries with that. Good idea. Big Mac, fries and a big fattening soda. Oh, that sounds so good. Money. I need to eat. I'm glad there's that all night drive thru nearby.”

Angel glowered at her and she stared him down. Finally he dug out his wallet, which she snatched and gleefully took a twenty from.

“I would just heat it up if I were you. It's obviously blood, they just did some kind of trick.”

“No. It smells all wrong.”

“It's blood, eat it. I'll be back once I've gotten mine.”

After she flounced off, Angel stared helplessly at the bag of blood, sighed and dumped it into his mug and popped it into the microwave. The smell of hot ketchup filled the room. When the thing beeped, he took it out, set it on the table and sat down in front of it. He couldn't quite bring himself to drink it.

And he thought he didn't want to see Spike dust? He'd changed his mind.

He was still staring at it twenty minutes later when Wesley wandered in.

“Fish and chips? I haven't had that in years…” Wesley said with a smile as he entered the kitchen. He looked around hopefully, but then his face fell as he saw nothing in sight but Angel and a cup of blood.

“Oh. No one saved any for me. Well, no matter… I can get my own dinner.”

“There are no fish and chips, there never was. The room smells like ketchup.”

“No, my sense of smell might not be as keen as yours, though at the moment I'm doubting that, but I certainly know fish and chips when I smell them. There used to be a stand a short jaunt from the Watcher's Academy when I was a boy that sold the most delightful fish and chips. My father scorned such plebian fare, but then he was always a bit of a curmudgeon. I used to slip out between classes any time I got a chance.”

“I have returned!” Cordelia announced grandly. “Don't worry Wes, I've got you covered too.”

“We have food? Excellent. I am a bit peckish.”

Cordelia laid out everything—Big Mac, fries and a Coke for herself, Filet of fish, fries and a coffee for Wes. She even shoved a large fries at Angel who just stared at her with bewilderment.

“Ew, it's gone all cold. I thought you were hungry.” She huffed as she swiped his cup and popped
it back into the microwave. When it beeped she slid it back into place in front of Angel and took her own seat, alongside Wes who was already devouring his sandwich. "Not quite, but close enough. This is really good. My thanks, Cordelia."

"No problemo. He, brood-boy, eat. The note said you'd need fries with it, and I thought, huh, maybe it's a clue or something. So? Get munching."

Angel glowered unhappily at the fries and his hot ketchup, then sighed and grabbed one of the fries and dunked it.

As he sat there munching thoughtfully, his hair turned bleached-blonde and slicked back --the same hairdo Spike had been sporting earlier.

Wesley and Cordelia slanted a glance at one another and then bent back over their respective dinners.

"You know…it's not half bad." Angel mused as he grabbed another.

Lilah Morgan broke off her report when Holland's secretary came in and bent to whisper in his ear. Holland sighed, closed his eyes and rubbed them. Lilah leaned in a bit, hoping to catch some of their conversation. Anything that got Holland Manners, head of Special Projects, so discombobulated was likely to be something good to know about before it bit her in the ass.

"And they have no idea where they've gone to?"

"No sir. The Slayer and her team are still searching the town trying to apprehend them."

"The Slayer is? What did they do to piss her off in so short a time?"

"They seem to have kidnapped a vampire named Spike, and now all three of them have vanished from Sunnydale to parts unknown."

"Has there been anymore reports of Key energy?"

"No sir."

"How very curious. Have someone fetch Darla and bring her here. Perhaps she can shed some light on things."

"I can do that, if you'd like." Lilah was quick to offer.

"Bring Lindsey as well. We might as well get everyone up to speed at the same time. What about Angel? Has he returned?"

"Yes sir. He was seen by the persuasion team in Sunnydale also looking for the vampire Spike, before leaving town once more. He was then seen entering LA two hours later."

"Really? That's curious as well. Hopefully our guest can enlighten us."

Lilah hurried down to the suite that had been set aside for their 'guest' for the duration of her stay. It had been felt it was better to keep her close by--she wasn't reacting well to her returned humanity, though how much of that was real and how much an act she still didn't know. Darla was the sort of woman she'd never gotten on well with--petite and fragile looking, all breathy
voice and fluttering lashes. She'd made a four hundred year career out of making weakness a strength, when all she would have really needed to do was just crush her opposition into submission whenever she felt like it. She'd been an old vampire, as well as a first-generation child of the Master, making her one of the stronger vampires out there even without the added strength she'd gotten from her age, and yet she'd preferred to flutter and simper her way through life.

She knocked perfunctorily on the door and stepped inside, prompting Lindsey and Darla to turn and look at her. She had to admit to some reluctant admiration for the other woman; she had poor little Lindsey wrapped around her finger and tied in knots already, and she hadn't even had to work that hard to make it happen.

"Holland wants to see us."

"I see. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"No, all of us. He's hoping you can give us some insight into a vampire named Spike" she addressed Darla directly.

"Spike? He's here? You might want to batten down the hatches. There'll likely be a riot before too long; there usually is when he's in town." Darla chuckled reminiscently.

"As far as we know he's not in LA--his car is still in Sunnydale and he wasn't seen leaving town. The problem is that he seems to have disappeared, along with some other persons of interest a team was sent to Sunnydale for."

"Oh joy. And here I had hoped my days of trying to keep Spike contained were long over. I guess Grandmummy's job is never over." she added with a bit of snark.

"I dunno, looks kind of posh to be anyplace fun." Spike said doubtfully.

"I was listening in to some of the crowd as they were heading in. It's a gladiatorial arena. There are some captured demons that are going to battle each other for their freedom."

"That doesn't sound too bad. How're we supposed to get in though? All the security here is human. I can't exactly beat them up to get us past."

"Leave that to us."

"We should change our glamour first."

"Hmm, good point."

"What glamour?"

"You see us wearing robes, right? Most humans see us wearing tweed and looking like a couple of English professors."

"Yeah? That's kind of neat."

Tom tweaked the spell to show them wearing fancy tuxedos and then grabbed a flier from a nearby trash can, tore it into three strips and tapped it with his wand.

"Ready? Let's go."
Tom strode off with the bearing of a king and handed the torn flier to the man at the door.

"These seem to be in order. Oh, you seem to be in the VIP box. I hadn't realized those seats had been sold. Gregor will show you the way, and refreshments will be provided. Do enjoy the show."

Tom nodded and swept off without a word. Harry and Spike just followed his lead. They were led to a fancy box overlooking a large arena, carpeted, with comfortable seats. There was a fully stocked bar, and food was even brought to them when requested—thick, juicy steaks with all the trimmings. Once they were settled the help left them alone. The house lights went down and the announcer came out to start the show.

"Well, according to Angel, Spike's not anywhere in town, and his friends haven't seen him lately."

"He has friends?"

"So we still don't know why he was taken or what those wizards wanted?"

"It is all rather confusing, isn't it? We usually have some idea of what's going on by this point of things."

Giles cell phone rang and he moved aside to answer it, while the rest of them gathered at the table to complain.

"There doesn't seem to be anything hellmouthy going on. I say we just call off the search and let our fake wizards do whatever they want. It's just Spike. I mean, come on, I think I speak for all of us when I say we'll be glad to see the end of him."

"Xander! That's a terrible thing to say. H-he hasn't even been bothering us much lately. He's just been off doing his own thing since he moved out of your basement, becoming a fireman and trying to make a new life for himself. He's been kidnapped! H-he might be getting tortured."

"You know what? I hope he is. It's the least of what he deserves. You're with me, right man?"

"All the way. The only good hostile is a dead hostile. That was the Initiative's mistake, trying to control them and make something useful from them." Riley agreed cheerfully.

Tara was slowly hunching into herself, and her face was now almost completely hidden by her hair.

"I'm going to stop hanging around all you people if you keep talking like this." Anya griped. "Have you all forgotten I was a demon for 1100 years? And I'll have you know there are many demons that are harmless even by your snooty standards, who just keep to themselves and mind their own business. Do you want all of them dead too? For what? Existing?"

"Ahn, we've been over this before. You're human now. It's different. You have a soul, you can care about people and do the right thing."

"I don't really see what's different. The only difference in me is that I don't have my powers anymore. I'm no different than Spike in that respect. Are you going to start lining up to kill me next?"

"You're human!"

"So? It's not like humans have the market on being good. I've lived a long time. I've met lots of
humans that did evil things, demons that did good things. Even vampires aren't really evil as such, they just see humans as their primary food source. I'm sure from the point of view of cows, pigs, chickens, and a whole lot of other things, humans are evil if that's your criteria."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard! Vampires kill humans, they're evil. End of story."

"Not all of them do. Some choose to just live quietly and stay out of the way, now that there's such things as refrigeration. Going vegetarian wasn't really an option before electricity and refrigerators, you know, though even before then there were always bite-houses."

Riley twitched slightly and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Bite houses?"

"Yeah. You've been fighting vampires for how long and you don't know about those? Geez. Basically bite-houses are usually abandoned houses or warehouses where the most pathetic vampires ever made gather in groups. Humans pay them to bite them. Some consider it a rush. These vampires are half-starved, weak, and even with that, they usually can't muster up the gumption to just attack a human outright...though they're usually so weak, a reasonably strong human could probably fight them off without too much trouble. There are occasional fatalities, but those are usually the human's fault. They get addicted, keep going back, then they start going too often and eventually die from the constant ongoing blood loss."

"That's sick. What kind of twisted, pathetic freak would do something like that?" Xander scoffed.

Anya eyed Riley's tense stance and the long sleeved shirt that was pushed down to his wrists thoughtfully.

"You'd be surprised."

"I'm bored. This fight is dragging on too long. If I was down there, I could have ended things by now. I could kick both their asses."

"So why don't you?" Tom sighed.

"You know what? I think I will."

"Good. Wait, what?"

Spike downed a large swig of whiskey, then there was a crackle as his game face emerged. He climbed onto the ledge separating the box from the arena.

"YOU BLOKES SUCK. LET OL' SPIKE SHOW YOU HOW IT'S DONE!" Then, with a cackle of glee, he leapt down into the arena and attacked.

"We should have known he was going to do that."

"Yes, we really should have."

"Think he has a chance to win?"

"Well, he thinks he does. I guess we'll find out."

"Alright, you watch, just in case we need to make a quick getaway. I'm going to go rob the place."
"Come again?"

"What? They're all filthy rich and they spend their time watching caged demons fight each other. Look at those things. They've lost the will to live. It would serve them right to get robbed for partaking in such barbaric pastimes."

"We're here watching too."

"Yes, but we didn't know the things would be collared slaves without the will to live. It's completely different."

"Whatever. Just don't get caught."

"Do give me some credit."

"Oh, look at that. Spike's already taken out one of them. Can you make out what they're saying?"

"No. Oh, the other must have just told him how they're being kept here against their will."

"Think he'll try to free him?"

"Maybe."

"Or not. Did he just swallow the remote control keeping the demons pinned?"

"Yes. Yes he did."

"See that, old boy? You want out of this place, you gotta rip that thingy out of my bloody corpse. Let's see if that'll get your fighting spirit roused. Yeah! That's more like it. Come at me! Let's make this one for the ages!" Spike crowed as the demon came charging in.

"I'm going to go take a walk around. Meet me outside when Spike either finishes or gets killed."

"Gotcha."

"So, what's Giles doing anyway? Who's he talking to?"

"I don't know. I've been sitting here same as you."

"Those are Watcher journals he's looking through. Is there some apocalyptic brouhaha a-brewing that we don't know about?"

"Giles?" Buffy's sharp voice cut across the babble and drew Giles' attention away from his phone call and his research in surprise.

"Just a moment, I'm a little busy at the moment. Oh…right. We can call off the hunt for Spike. He's in L.A. The whole kidnapping bit was just a misunderstanding it seems."

"What?! Giles, explain now."

"In a moment." Giles said absently as he went back to his book. "Still there? Sorry about that. Yes, I think I might have a possibility. Cecily Addams. She may well have survived the massacre, she was never accounted for at least. From information gathered at the time, it seems she rejected him quite forcefully the night he was turned, the rest of the partygoers indulged in having fun at
his expense…and one of the victims seems to have given him the idea for their method of death. Given the circumstances, one would have expected her to be the first, or to have gotten 'extra attention' as it were. That's how these things usually work. Instead, she seems to have escaped altogether. She has an aristocratic background. If she was somehow in the know, she may have realized what was happening and why and passed down the story. If she knew of their relation but he didn't, it would explain the purported strength of her rejection. I suppose it could be possible, though why they would want to seek him out given the story surrounding his birth I don't know—that's if they're telling the truth and don't have some nefarious purpose for all of this."

"Giles." Buffy repeated impatiently. She crossed her arms when Giles waved her off so he could listen to the phone.

"I guess it does seem to fit all the known facts…well, not why one of them seems to be a fictional character. Never mind. We still don't know anything of consequence except that Spike is currently undead and as well as can be expected."

Giles listened for a few more minutes and then burst out laughing delightedly. The Scoobies all stared--none of them had ever seen Giles carry on like that.

"Yes, you as well. Do give my best to Cordelia. Goodbye."

Giles hung up and wiped at his eyes, still chuckling a bit, though he sobered when he caught Buffy glaring baleful death at him.

"Oh, right. Spike is currently in L.A. sightseeing. The two that kidnapped him seem to be his many-greats nephews from a previously unknown to us half-sister. The three of them stopped in to say hello to Angel while they were there, though Angel was out of town at the moment. That was Wesley."

"THAT JERK! WE'VE BEEN RUNNING AROUND FOR THE LAST THREE DAYS LOOK FOR HIS STUPID SELF! I AM SO GOING TO STAKE HIM WHEN I SEE HIM AGAIN!" Buffy growled. She was beyond peeved. She had not only spent hours wandering around the stupid enchantments, she'd also been sent all over town thinking she had appointments, and had seriously considered whether or not she should stake herself for being secretly a demon.

"I'll be right there with you. Big jerk. See, didn't I say we shouldn't have bothered?" Xander agreed huffily.

"I doubt he realizes we've been looking for him all this time. None of us have ever given him any real reason to think we would be. What's more, you Xander, and Anya, witnessed the 'kidnapping', and he even called to you for help. In your own words you said you just watched him be carried off and then continued on your way unconcerned. We don't know exactly when they left for L.A.. It might have been that very evening. If it was, he wasn't around to hear word that we were looking for him."

"He still needs to be punished for…being annoying…and being Spike."

"So what was so funny anyway?" Willow interjected before Buffy could get rolling.

"Oh, that" Giles chuckled. "Spike and his nephews decided to play a prank on Angel while they were there. He now has Spike's hairdo and the scar on his eyebrow, and it says "Spike Rules" on the back of his head."

Xander and Riley joined Giles in laughing. Anya and Tara snorted. Willow covered her mouth to
"WHOOOHOO! DIDN'T I TELL YOU THE ROLLER DERBY SOUNDED LIKE FUN!"

Harry didn't have the breath to spare to answer him; he was too busy dodging certain death. It was a demon roller derby, and many of the demons participating seemed to be taking exception to he and Tom taking part. The demons were for the most part very large, very scaly, and had horns, armor and long claws. It was taking all his concentration to stay on his feet and in one piece.

"Help me clostheline this guy!" Spike yelled. "He keeps getting in our way!"

Harry grabbed the outstretched hand Spike offered and sped up to keep pace with the manic vampire. "Crouch on three. One two…three!"

They crouched and hit the demon in the back of the knees. He fell over backwards with a yell and landed with a crash. Behind them they could hear pained yells and thuds as the skaters behind began crashing into the fallen demon.

"YOU BASTARDS! THAT WAS MY WIFE!" an equally large demon bellowed angrily, before holding out his hands. Two fireballs formed, one in each hand and he began chucking them one after another. Harry used some conjured wind to knock those that came to close aside, Tom pulled his wand, made himself fireproof and kept skating. Spike cackled and taunted the demon for his bad aim. Several of the skaters went down, felled by fireballs, while some of the others landed in the audience, most of which had alcohol. As the audience members began jumping up, many spilled their drinks, which caused the fire to start spreading.

"Maybe we should leave. It's starting to get smoky in here and the fire is spreading."

"So put on a bubblehead charm. We have half the contestants down! We can't stop now!"

"Angel, slow down! Your clothes are fine. It's probably just a trick. I tried to grab the pile of clothes when I saw it, but it just turned into a pile of mice that all giggled and ran away. Your clothes are probably still in the closet or something and you just couldn't see them!"

There was no answer on the other end of the phone, just heavy breathing and a constant mutter of 'Spike' 'kill' 'grr'.

Cordelia frowned worriedly and urged Wes to speed up and try to catch up to Angel's car.

"Angel. You can't kill Spike's nephews. They're human. You're a good vampire, remember?" she tried another tack. She got the same answer.

"Do you even know where he's at? We sure don't. Are you just going to drive around L.A. like a crazy person all night? It's a big city. How do you even know where to find him?"

"Just look for the biggest fire. He'll be there."

"Fire? What?"

"A-ha!"

"Angel?"
Wes glanced at her questioningly.

"I don't know. He said something about fire and then went a-ha! And hung up."

There was a squeal of tires. Up ahead, Angel skidded to a stop in the middle of the street and climbed out of his car to go marching towards an inferno.

Wesley hurriedly pulled up nearby. The place was awash in gawkers, police cars and fire trucks.

"Get Angel's car and move it somewhere out of the way. I'll be right behind you."

Cordelia nodded and hopped out, hurrying over to Angel's car. He'd left it running, left the keys in the ignition and the door wide open.

"Geez. Note to self. If you want to make Angel go completely crazy, let him think you messed with his clothes."

By the time they both found somewhere to park, Angel had concluded his investigation and was back on the sidewalk casting around for where to go next.

"It's an ice rink. How the heck did an ice rink catch on fire?"

"Because there was a demon roller derby down underneath it that caught on fire first. All I can smell is charred demon and smoke. I have no idea where he went next... there. He always gets hungry and wants a drink after he's had his fun. There's a bar right in eyesight, and I just saw a demon go in. That's where he's at now."

Angel used his vampire speed to get halfway to his destination before they'd even noticed he'd moved.

"Angel! Wait! You don't even know if they were here! Slow down!"

"It's alright. Caritas. I've heard of the place. It's neutral territory for demons and is under a sanctuary spell. No violence within its walls. The host is a demon seer that is said to be able to read your destiny if you sing for him. Angel won't be able to attack anyone in the time it takes us to get over there."

"Thank goodness for small favors. I really don't want to have to call Buffy and ask her to come hunt down Angel for going on a murderous rampage because he can't deal with pranks."

The demon who had just entered the bar was now leaving at high speed, nearly bowling over Angel in the process.

"Looks like more trouble."

"You don't really think they had anything to do with that fire and everything, do you? Spike's nephews seemed really nice, and he's chipped. How much trouble could they really cause? They've only been out of our sight for about fifteen hours, tops."

"Well, from what I've been told, they didn't truly become the Scourge of Europe until Spike joined them. Angelus was mostly known for the sheer cruelty and psychological torture he would inflict on his victims--over a period of months or years--before killing them. Drusilla the Mad Seer is a perfect case in point. She wasn't the only one he did it to either. There was at least one other childe sired by Angelus who had undergone similar treatment"
"Penn. Yeah. He was here a while back. Angel didn't say much about him except that he was a failed masterpiece."

"Exactly. It was the quality of his evil that made him stand out, but otherwise he, Darla and Drusilla tended to lay low, tried not to draw too much attention to themselves, and had been known to flee human vampire hunters on numerous occasions. When Spike joined them that changed. In fact, when I was sent to Sunnydale I was asked to investigate why the town was still standing when it was known he had been there for some time just the year previous."

"I know Angel tried to scare us all with all his 'you don't understand, he's dangerous, he'll kill you all and just won't stop. Later we all just chalked it up to him being family and he didn't want to see him dusted. You mean it's true?"

"Perhaps not in the way you're thinking. It wasn't so much that he was performing large massacres on a regular basis, it was more the sheer level of chaos that seemed to erupt wherever he was. Unlike the rest of them, if he heard there were vampire hunters in town he'd seek them out to fight them. He'd find the seediest most dangerous bars in town and start fights with everyone inside. Most vampires flee the Slayer, and when one does manage to best one, they're usually part of a group that simply overwhelms the girl with sheer numbers. He sought them out and fought them one on one. He killed two, one in 1900 one in 1977, but he's also fought all the ones in between at least once--all the ones he crossed paths with, that is. In fact, Nikki Wood, the New York Slayer in the 1970's he fought early on in the decade and then left town for a few years. Word is, though I don't know that I believe it, that he left to return when her son was older. She had him with her when they fought the first time, he was two and she hid him behind a trash can when Spike attacked. It's said when he realized the child was hers he lectured her about taking her little boy out in the dark where all the 'big nasties roamed', and left town that night to try again later when her son wasn't there and was a bit older and wouldn't be left quite so vulnerable by her demise. It's ridiculous of course. Vampires don't care about things like that."

They reached Caritas and stepped inside. The place was almost completely empty, though it looked like a stampede had gone through there earlier: tables were knocked askew, chairs were overturned. A green-skinned demon with red horns and a loud red suit was laying unconscious on the bar with a wet cloth on his forehead, while another guy, likely the bartender, fanned him with a paper.

"I'll be right back." Angel told them as he pushed past them "I've got to find that demon that hurried out of here and ask him some questions."

"Angel…what?!

"Um, hello. What happened here tonight?" Wesley asked the bartender curiously as he approached. Cordelia sighed and followed after him "and is the Host alright?"

"You've got me. Some guys were up singing on stage and the Host says "Kwoortots" or something, then this one demon that everything else in here is afraid of jumps up and screams "Kwoortots? It's coming here?" and then runs off like his tail was on fire. Anyway, seeing that the biggest bad of the bunch was scared stiff, the rest panicked and fled too. That's all I know."

"Who or what is this kwoortots?"

"Got me. Most of them didn't seem to, they were just reacting to the fact that Timmy was scared. That last guy that came in seemed to know too. He got scared and ran off when I told him the story. Your friend just went to find him. He might know more."
"I see. What's wrong with the host anyway?"

"Mystical overload? I don't know. He's a seer. I guess it was too much for him whatever it was. Do either of you know demon first aid by any chance?"

Cordelia eyed the green demon a moment and then slapped him as hard as she could in the cheek while shouting "SNAP OUT OF IT!"

"Cordelia!"
"Whoa, lady, what the hell!"

The Host gasped and flailed and then sat up before rubbing his cheek and looking around in confusion.

"What…where…the place is empty? Where is everyone?"

"You seem to have fallen unconscious after having a vision. Do you remember any of it? Who was singing?"

"Who? Let me see…blonde vampire, cheekbones, long leather coat…two human boys in robes, one of them had a sword. They were singing 'Revolution' by the Beatles…they sounded pretty good too…at least until I had my vision. The Qu'artoth. It's…incomprehensible. Everything and nothing, order and chaos, heaven and hell, up and down, matter and void, life and death, and everything in between all at the same time. It bends the laws of reality at whim, or makes new ones if it feels like it…I could only grasp the totality of it for a second and it was too much for me to take in. I don't know anything more. It could be as vast as a galaxy or the size of a pinhole, it could be here, coming here, used to be here--I don't know."

"Do you have any sense how Spike and the others are involved with this Qu'artoth? Are they going to try summoning it? Is someone else and they're going to use them as sacrifices? Do you have any idea at all?"

"No. Nothing, just that it's in their destiny somehow. That's all I got. There might have been more to the vision, but with me going briefly kablooey, it might not have come through."

the Host sighed.

Angel limped into the club. His leg was obviously paining him, and his nose appeared to be broken.

"Angel! My word! What happened to you?"

"That demon I chased" he mumbled, obviously embarrassed.

"Him? But…his species isn't known for being violent or particularly strong."

"I caught him as asked him what this coortot thing was"

"Qu'artoth"

"Whatever. He freaked out and ripped out the fire hydrant and started beating me with it. I think my nose is broken. Give me a bloody Mary, heavy on the bloody. O negative if you’ve got it."

The bartender nodded and got to work.

"I'll have a Seabreeze while you're at it, sweetcheeks."

"Well, what do we do now? We still don't know enough to even know what, if anything, we're
supposed to do next, or how Spike and the others are involved. Are we supposed to protect them or stop them? And, if there's a possible apocalypse in the offing, why didn't we get any sort of heads up about it before Spike and the others came to town?"

Cordelia blanched and tensed up. The Host turned to look at her puzzled and then his eyes widened in alarm.

"You might want to grab…!"

Cordelia screamed and grabbed her head. Wesley and Angel both lunged for her, but it was hard to hold on to her.

"I smell blood…Cordelia!"

"Good lord, what's happening to her?"

They eased her down to the ground, but she was convulsing and blood was beginning to seep from her eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

"It's killing her!"

"Cordelia!"

The Host and the bartender who were watching the girl's suffering with horror both jumped in fright when the door of the club slammed open and Spike swaggered into the place, dripping bits of blood and fur and looking well-pleased with himself. The two robed young men followed after him.

"Hold still. Let me clean you up."

"Don't go pointing any wood…blood? Bloody hell, what happened to Cheerleader?"

"Cordelia?"

The three of them hurried over and the two boys in robes (or tweed depending on if you were demon or human) pushed their way in close and started waving their wands over her.

"What the hell happened to her? She was fine earlier. Get out of the way, would you? She needs help."

The one with glasses pulled a small trunk out of nowhere and handed it to the taller one who opened it, revealing row after row of vials filled with different colored liquids and various sized jars filled with creams and lotions. While he dug through the collection the one with glasses continued scanning over Cordelia's head and looked disturbed by what he found.

"There's something trying to push its way into her head and its tearing her brain apart. Tom, there should be a small vial in the drawer. Put a few drops on her tongue it might help things."

Tom tapped the front of the trunk and a drawer appeared where none had been before. There were only a few things in there--the small vial he pulled out, and another with what looked to have a bit of liquid fire in it.

Tom dropped some of the pearly liquid into her mouth, while Harry pointed his wand at the top of her head and said "EPISKY" with great conviction. They sat a waited a moment for whatever they'd done to take effect, while the rest wrung their hands and waited for a verdict. They started
waving their wands over her again and relaxed.

"That seems to have done it, but it was a very near thing. Answers. What happened to her?"

"She was having a vision."

"I've met seers before. While their powers can sometimes make their lives difficult, I don't recall ever seeing that they tore the seer's brain apart. She's very lucky we arrived when we did. A few more like that and she'd probably have lived the rest of her life as a vegetable."

"What? I mean, I knew they gave her headaches but…"

"They have been getting harder on her, we've both seen that." Wesley pointed out. "But you say it was killing her? Why would the Powers that Be kill their messenger?"

"Maybe she wasn't intended to be their messenger, she just happened to be the only one nearby when the last seer died? I don't know."

"This would be Doyle? The demon guy, right? Irish bloke?"

"The last seer was a demon?"

"Half. He was half Brachen demon."

"And Cordelia somehow ended up with his powers when he died?"

"Maybe that's the problem then. She's completely human. If the powers are intended for a demon, even a half demon, they're slowly killing her."

"Oh god. What can we do? Can we ask the powers to take them back?"

Tom glanced at the Host thoughtfully, then at Cordelia while Angel and Wesley fretted over how to help their friend. Harry caught his glance and his eyes widened. "There should be some in the second level."

Tom nodded and lifted out the top tray of vials and then glanced at the Host.

"Could you spare a hair to save a lady's life?"

The Host wrung his hands and nodded. "Sure. To save the life of a fellow seer, sure." he agreed before plucking out one of his hairs and handing it over.

Tom poured out a measure of polyjuice into a cup and dropped the hair in. The thick gloopy sludge turned to a scintillating rainbow of colors.

Harry ennervated Cordelia who groaned weakly and looked around confused.

"Wha…"

"Shh. Just relax. Drink this. It's medicine, it'll help you feel better."

Cordelia made a face as she drank, but she finished the whole cup. Her eyes fluttered closed once more and her face twisted into a pained grimace. Angel and Wesley blanched and looked ready to shout in dismay, but Spike and Harry's glares kept them quiet.

"Hurts…” Cordelia whispered.
"Only for a second and then you'll be all better. Just relax now. It's all over. Go back to sleep. You should be all better when you wake."

"Not getting better" Cordelia whispered as she drifted off once more.

"You should now." Harry disagreed as he smoothed down her hair.

"Is there somewhere we can make her comfortable for the next hour or so?"

"Sure. My office." the Host offered while staring at Cordelia in astonishment. Harry conjured a stretcher beneath her and carried her to the office, while Tom stood to deal with Cordelia's friends.

"She's green! She's got horns! She's going to kill you when she wakes up. I hope you realize this!"

"You made Cordelia a demon!"

"Oh relax. Would you rather the girl died? And she's only half demon…well, maybe a bit more or a bit less than half. The mixture can vary slightly depending on how divergent the two species are. It should be enough to keep her brain from tearing itself apart."

"What was that you gave her?"

"Polyjuice potion. It's meant for human to human transformations. It gives you the appearance of whoever's hair or nail clippings you used, wears off in an hour. It takes a month to brew and it's a pain in the neck to make. We were lucky Harry had some on hand, really. It was discovered by accident that if you use it for anything other than human to human that the strange DNA gets "stuck" as it were, which allowed us to quickly and easily make her half or whatever demon in a flash. In an hour, when the potion wears off the changes will be complete and get frozen into her form. At that point, we can work on her to return her human appearance. We'll have to wait for her to have another vision to see how efficacious the changes are, but even if it's not a perfect solution, it should at the very least protect her somewhat from the ravages of the gift until another solution can be found. I don't think you fully appreciate just how damaged her brain was. She had several lesions that were getting larger, and the last vision ruptured something. Had we not arrived when we did, your Miss Chase would be in very grave condition indeed."

Lilah sighed and leaned back in her seat, before grinning wryly at Lindsey and Darla.

"Well, the preliminary reports are in. Your boy Spike actually does seem to be in town. In the first night he was out and about, he killed all the demons in a gladiatorial contest. The audience thought a fast one was being pulled on them. The owner had all of them killed so he could skip town. Many of them were our clients. We can make it work for us, but it's going to be a bitch to set up." she set the report aside after making some notes on it and dropped it in her out box. "After that, he went to a demon roller derby. The end result was a fire that took out both it and the ice skating rink above it. Hundreds of demons at the very least died there." she made some more notes and set it aside. "Then he went to Caritas, a nightclub that's been accorded as neutral territory for demons. He and his companions sang a Beatles song. The seer, Lorne fell unconscious after muttering 'the kwoortot', Timmaeus the Destructor panicked and fled, which started a panic among the lesser demons in the audience. A Pacifis demon that also panicked upon hearing this term later beat Angel with a fire hydrant torn from the ground for questioning him about it."

Darla laughed incredulously. "He beat him? Was he hurt? They're not even dangerous!"
"Broken nose and mangled leg at the least. He was forced to limp back to Caritas to recover."

"What is this 'kwoortot'?"

"We're still waiting for Holland to get back from questioning the Senior Partners. We'll tell you when we know."

The door opened and an unfamiliar man walked in.

"Hello. I'm Sidney Wong, new head of Special Projects. I'm afraid Holland Manners has ceased to exist. You'll probably forget about him in a few hours. It will be like I've always been here. Now, as to your current difficulties. The Quor'toth is apparently an extremely dangerous demon dimension. The Senior Partners believed it was safely ensconced in a locked universe far, far away and are not happy that it might be opening here. I suggest you get to work making sure it doesn't happen."

"Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"That's all I was told. The Senior Partners want results, so I suggest you get moving."

Lilah and Lindsey exchanged a sickly glance and smiled weakly at their boss.

"We'll get right on that." Lindsey assured him.

"Great. And I'm stuck here as a stupid, weak human. Thanks for nothing." Darla griped.

"Alright. Cordelia looks like herself again, mostly. The changes seem to be extensive enough that, in theory at least, she should deal with her next vision much better."

"What do you mean mostly?"

"The changes are slight--there's a bit of color around her eyes, a faint scale shimmer around her hairline and she has lighter streaks in her hair, but otherwise she looks like herself. She seems to be recovering nicely. Lorne is talking to her now about what sort of things she might expect now that she's a member of his species."

"Great. Where to next? I'm bored." Spike cheered as he hopped off the bar.

"Wait, Lorne? That's the Host, I take it?"

"Krevalornswath of the Deathwok Clan."

"Not so fast, Spike. You're not going anywhere." Angel warned as he grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Says you. There's hours of nighttime left!"

"I think you've caused enough chaos in town for one night. We still don't know what this Qu'arto'toth thing is. You're not leaving my sight until it's dealt with."

"You don't even know what it is or what it has to do with me. Besides, you are not the boss of me. Unless you put a ring on my finger, big boy, you don't get to make the rules for my life." Spike scoffed before twisting out of his hold.
"Spike, it's going to be daylight in just a few hours. Last I checked, you weren't sunproof."

"I could have been if you and Bitchy hadn't of stolen my ring!"

"And if you won't think of your own safety, at least think of your nephews. Do you know for certain you could protect them from whatever is coming?" Angel tried another tack.

"Eh, me boys will be fine. They're made of stern stuff, just like their ol' uncle."

"Spike, for once in your life, be reasonable."

Tom yawned a bit and stretched. "I don't care if we turn in for the night. We did have a rather full evening, all things considered."

Cordelia and Lorne came out of his office talking quietly. Cordelia hugged Lorne in thanks and moved to join the rest of them.

"Hey. So...what's the what?"

"We're going home." Angel announced, grabbing hold of Spike once more. "And we're going to have a few guests for the evening."

"Gee, do you think we have the room?" Cordelia joked. Her face fell a little when, after a cursory glance at her to take in the changes and a discreet sniff in her direction, Angel seemed to avoid looking at her. She was able to smile again when Wesley impulsively hugged her.

"I'm glad you're alright. You really scared us all. You should have told us how bad it was."

"There was nothing to be done, and I wanted to help. It was my choice. People need help, and if I could see that they got that help, a few headaches were a small price to pay."

"You really have become quite an extraordinary woman."

"What do you mean 'have become'? I'll have you know, Queen C has always been extraordinary, and don't you forget it!"

"Ah, consider me duly chastened."

"Oi, is there a place open that sells video game consoles?"

"How would I know?" Angel grumped as he marched Spike towards the door.

"We should stop and get one. If I'm going to be stuck in your stupid hotel all day, I don't want to be bored. And really, Peaches, a hotel? All for little old you? And here I thought the bloody mansion was pretentious. Shows what I know."

"We needed the space."

"For what? A convention of hungry children from darkest Africa? Are you even listening to yourself?"

"Shut up, Spike."

"Well, goodnight. It was nice meeting both of you. Maybe we'll stop by again sometime." Harry said cheerfully, waving goodbye to the bartender and Lorne.

"No offense, sweetie, but I hope it's not for a good long while. I'm not sure how much more
"Excitement I can take."

"I'm about ready to turn in. How about you?"

"It has been a rather long night. How do you feel?"

"Surprisingly good considering just before that last vision hit I was all 'oh God I'm gonna die'."

"You seem distracted."

"I am. I can hear so much…snatches of conversation down the block, footsteps on the pavement, all the cars and radios and people…and everything looks different. I'll be glad to get back to the hotel. It's kind of hard to take. I don't know how Lorne stands it…although, I guess it must be like this for Angel too, huh? Maybe there's a reason he needs to go off and sit someplace dark and brood for hours. It's kind of overwhelming."

"I'm sure you'll adjust in time. It's all new right now. Even though human senses are considerably weaker than most demons', the human mind still takes in a truly astonishing amount of information, but our brains filter most of it out as unimportant. As you adjust I'm sure the extra stuff you're taking in will undergo a similar shuffle."

"I hope so. I mean, it's kind of cool, but it's too much. Ah, there's the hotel. Good. Nice, big, empty and quiet. I could use that."

Once the car was parked, Cordelia hurried towards the hotel. Its looming bulk seemed like a sanctuary from the noise and bustle of the city.

"I wonder where the others have gotten to? They should have beaten us back here, I would think."

"Maybe Angel needed gas. I don't know. Ah, quiet!"

Cordelia strode into the lobby and stopped, wincing and covering her ears.

"Cordelia?"

"Shh…there's a horrible noise coming from the walls…the whole hotel really. God."

"Can you pinpoint it? Is it the electrical lines?"

"No. Lorne had electricity. I can hear it here too…no… There. There's a spot right there that's making a really annoying noise. She continued walking. There too. There… there… Wes, there's something weird here. There are little spots of noise scattered evenly throughout the whole hotel. I won't be able to sleep here with all this noise. What am I going to do?"

"Well…for the moment, go sit in the garden. Try to meditate or something to filter out the extra noise. When the others get back we'll take a look at the places you've already pointed out and see what it is and if it can be gotten rid of."

Angel and the others didn't show up for another hour. Wesley went out to meet them and saw Spike unloading a box and bag from the trunk.

"Where've you all been?"
"Lenny's all night electronics. It's run by a demon." Tom explained.

Wesley peeked and saw it was a game console. Spike looked like Christmas had come early and was practically bouncing off the walls in his eagerness to get inside.

"We might have a problem." Wesley stopped them. "Cordelia's hearing has improved significantly. She can hear something in the walls making a high pitched noise that bothers her. She said whatever it is it's all throughout the hotel. She's in the garden now. I told her we'd look around and see if we could figure out what it was and if we could get rid of it or turn it off."

Spike pouted and clutched at his new game console in disappointment.

"Weird. I don't hear anything." Angel said as he stood in the lobby looking around. "Where is it coming from?"

"Here, she said." Wesley pointed.

Tom raised his wand and scanned, then flicked it and held out his hand. Harry took something small from his hand and held it up.

"Someone has you under surveillance, it looks like. We can probably find and remove the rest, though whoever is watching you is definitely going to notice if their whole system disappears."

"Wolfram and Hart. That damned Sidney Wong is really working my last nerve." Angel growled.

"Who?"

"Sidney Wong. He's head of Special projects at Wolfram and Hart."

Tom opened his mouth to say something, but Harry nudged him and held up the bug. Tom pursed his lips and nodded.

"We'll be back." With that Tom began scanning the lobby, while Harry started upstairs to search for more cameras.

"While the boys are working, let's play Super Mega-death Massacre III. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

"Super Mega-Death Massacre III? The things demons come up with!" Wesley complained.

"Psh. Shows what you know. Humans made this. Demons don't have the corner on aggressive tendencies, I'll have you know."

Angel scowled, dithered there in the lobby for a bit, and then followed them. Spike and his nephews were really getting on his nerves. They kept stepping in and taking care of things before he had a chance to do anything. The powers sent a vision while he was out of town! While he was being hit in the face by a fire hydrant torn out of the ground by the weakest demon in town, Spike had been down the block killing the strongest one.

He was the champion. He had a soul. There were prophecies.

He was the one people depended on to fix things. Him. Not Spike, not his stupid nephews. Him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Some demon-slaying, some bonding, Spike and Angel storm Wolfram and Hart.

Chapter Notes

If there's anything you like, or anything you don't -- please comment! Feedback helps me improve, and it's nice to hear what people think about what they're reading.

Anyway, without further ado...

"Cordelia?"
"Over here, Wes."
"What are you doing?"
"Look."
"Spike's nephews? How long have they been at it?"
"Not sure. Awhile. I guess kung fu runs in the family."
"I believe that's tai chi, actually...though I suppose the point would still stand. I've seen Angel performing tai chi on a number of occasions, though always alone."
"It's kind of mesmerizing."
"Well, yes, martial arts done right..."
"That too. No, I meant their auras. They're like two halves of a whole. They're complete in themselves, but together they're greater than the sum of their parts. They balance each other. Not to sound cheezy or something, but I have to wonder if they're soulmates--real ones, not over the top, shmoopy 'our love is eternal' the way Angel and Buffy used to be. They're so content just to be in each other's presence, like that's all they really need. It's beautiful."
"I take it this is one of your new attributes?"
"Yep. Aura reading. I'm going to meet with Lorne in a few days to do some tests to see what all sorts of goodies I got from my little demon transplant, and he's going to help me refine any of them that need it, although if there's more like the aura thing, I might actually just be able to figure it out for myself. I seem to be doing alright so far."
"Have you tried reading anyone else's aura?"
"A little last night, but I was kind of overwhelmed by how different everything was. It was kind of distracting. Right now, you're just alive with curiosity. You're just itchy to write stuff down on go into a geeky orgasm of research, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't have put it like that, but, perhaps just a bit."

"Spike has been the most interesting so far, not just himself, but how he effects the people around him. He has to be bipolar, or something. I don't think it should be possible to change emotional states the way he does. He was just flickering through the spectrum--happy, annoyed, gleeful, bored, irritated, back to happy, just on and on. Angel, well, there's a lot more going on beneath the surface than any of us has ever been aware of, but it's slower, and his colors are darker, muddier I guess? It's hard to explain. When's he's with Spike it changes. Everything starts flickering like a Christmas tree. Mostly negative, but not completely. I think he might be jonesing for Spike--just a little, but it's definitely there, which is sort of shocking. I mean, I thought Angel was straight."

"It's long been known that vampires tend to blur the lines on sexuality. Even with humans, research shows that sexuality is more of a continuum than a strict polar either or. Vampires tend to have a primary orientation, just like a human does, but they seem to be less worried about crossing the lines. I suppose it makes sense. In humans sexuality is primarily tied to procreation. That isn't true for vampires. Vampire procreation is a singular process that allows males and females equally to sire children. By that measure, Angel is indeed straight, but perhaps isn't adverse to being slightly bent now and again. If there is indeed any such history between them, I'm afraid neither I nor the Watchers council knows about it. You said Angel might have erm, feelings, for Spike. Is there anything on Spike's side?"

"It's hard to tell, because he just seems to feel so much all the time…but yeah, maybe a little. It's weird. The two of them are like oil and water and they seem to drive each other up the wall…but then there will be these little surges of…I don't know, affection? That just seem to pop up suddenly out of nowhere…I was watching them and trying to figure out what set them off. I don't know if it was just familiarity, or if something either of them said or did caused it, but. Yeah. Annoyance, anger, annoyance, annoyance. Boom. Affection. Annoyance, annoyance, annoyance. Even watching them half the night while reading their auras, I still don't understand their relationship. I think about the only thing I really learned is that vampires are much more complicated than I ever realized. There's a lot more to them than just bloodlust and a will to destruction. That kind of worries me. I mean, it was easy before. Vampires evil. End of story. Except for Angel, because he has a soul. What if my upgrade makes me useless because I can see them as sort of people with feelings? What am I going to do?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. If that ends up happening, we'll deal with it. I do hope you will never be so impaired however that you won't adequately defend yourself should you be attacked by one."

"No…self-preservation will triumph. I know that much. I might feel guilty though, which sucks."

Spike came ambling down not long afterwards, sleepy, disheveled, shirtless and barefoot. It was remarkable, Wesley thought, how big a change it made. Normally, Spike with his severely slicked back hair, long leather duster and stompy boots projected an air of menace and mayhem. He looked every inch the dangerous, deadly master vampire. Looking at him now, he looked almost cuddly. He must have showered before going to bed last night. His hair, freed from its usual confinement had fluffed somewhat and even showed a hint of curl in places, though it wasn't long enough to do more than that. Without his usual costume, it was more apparent that the vampire was of shorter than average stature, slightly built, though rather impressively muscled considering
he had been an effete Romantic poet when he was alive.

"Spike. I'm rather surprised to see you awake. It's still daylight out, you know."

"Yeah, what of it? If I sleep all day I'll miss all me shows." he mumbled sleepily before stumbling towards the kitchen. He emerged a short time later with a rather nauseating concoction in a bowl--breakfast cereal and blood, with a cup of blood as a chaser. He stumbled towards the tv, flicked through the stations and settled himself on the couch. From the look of it he had no intentions of moving any time soon.

The boys finished their practice and came wandering inside shortly afterwards. Tom headed upstairs to clean up, Harry leaned over the back of the couch near Spike.

"Hey, when you're done here, I have an experiment I want you to take part in."

"What kind of experiment?"

"Well, I was thinking about your chip and your problem with defending yourself against humans. I was considering a way you might get around that."

"You boys gonna take my chip out?"

"No. Sorry. Not going to happen. We both know the first thing you'd do is eat us both and turn us so we can't leave."

"Find my company so tiresome do you?"

"No. But neither of us wants to be a vampire, and then there's also the little fact that our magic is in our souls and our blood. Making us vampires would make us lose the first and change the second. It's just not happening. End of story."

"Typical. So what's this grand plan of yours?"

"Well, tai chi, bagua and related schools are all about defense--not being where an attack will be, redirecting an opponent's own force against them. It requires a different mindset than martial disciplines that rely on strong attacks. I know this guy, he's a monk. He's only like fourteen or so, he grew up in the temple. His people were all pacifist vegetarians. The fighting style they had relied a lot on evasion. There were 35 levels of defensive maneuvers before you were shown the few offensive moves they had, and you had the option to opt out of that part, in keeping with the whole pacifism thing. He's all about the non-violence, but he's one of the most dangerous people I know. If we could work with the chip's limits, it might solve your self-defense problem in a way that isn't going to have Angel, the Slayer or any of their minions hunting you down to stake you. What do you think?"

"You want to turn me into some namby-pamby vegetarian pacifist? I'm a bloody vampire, in case you've forgotten!"

"So, will you try it?"

Spike glowered and slumped down in his seat to finish his breakfast. "Yeah, alright. I'll try your little experiment. I'm not turning into no pacifist poof though. I'm still the big bad!"

"The baddest." Harry agreed dryly.

"Go away now. My show's on."
"Cordelia?"

"Oh, hey Harry. Say, you guys want breakfast? I think we have eggs…okay, we have two eggs and some slimy bacon. Nevermind. Ugh. The hazards of living with a guy who doesn't need to eat."

"I notice the blood supply is topped off."

"Yeah, it is isn't it?"

"Is there a market or something nearby?"

"Well, yeah. It doesn't really matter though, even though we sort of got paid last night, it wasn't really a lot after it was split three ways. We have utility bills that need paying, and we got dinner last night…"

"Oh, don't worry, I can cover it. I made a mint betting on Spike last night."

"You're a guest here. It doesn't seem right making you feed everyone."

"Don't worry about it. I'm independently wealthy. What I've got in my pockets now I won't even miss."

"In that case, let's get shopping. Wes! We need your car!"

"You bellowed?"

"Yeah, come on. We're hitting the market and getting some food in around here."

"Oh? Did we come into more money?"

"No, but our new best friend here likes to gamble and he's independently wealthy."

"Oh, how marvelous. I wish Angel had friends like you."

Tom was returning from upstairs when the three of them headed out.

"We're going food shopping. Wanna come with?"

"Not particularly."

"Okay. Anything in particular you want?"

"Chocolate and something spicy for dinner."

"Oi! I want some beer, some Weetabix and some spicy buffalo wings!" Spike called out from his place in front of the tv.

"Will do."

As Wesley pulled out into traffic, Cordelia turned around in her seat. "Did you want to talk to me about something earlier? I just realized I kind of sidetracked you with the whole food issue."
"Yes, actually. I was just wondering if you wanted to test out your reflexes and such. Though it doesn't really show on the surface your physiology has changed significantly. From what Lorne said his people aren't much stronger than humans but there might still be some noticeable differences in your strength and reflexes from what they were before. It would probably be in your best interests to test your limits now while you have the leisure to do so. I'm going to be working with Spike later on improving his defensive capabilities anyway."

"Improving his defensive capabilities?"

"Well, he's completely helpless against humans now. I know the general consensus seems to be that this is all good and proper, but I must say it leaves a very bad taste in my mouth. I suppose none of you think it's such a big deal—after all, how likely is it that random humans would just be attacking him, right? The thing is, back where he's living, it happens quite regularly, and is done so quite gleefully by people who know full well that he's completely unable to defend himself let alone fight back. It simply doesn't sit well with me at all. My parents died when I was very young. I was raised by my mother's sister and her husband. My mother and her sister were at odds before she died, and she greatly resented being stuck with me. The whole time I was growing up, my cousin Dudley and his friends used to beat me up quite regularly, and I used to get in trouble at home for defending myself in any way. It just hits too close to home for me, and I can't say I like it at all."

"Okay…I can see where you're coming from, but the difference there is that you were a little kid with evil relatives. He's a gleefully unrepentant evil vampire that murdered his way across the world for over a century."

"True, but consider that for a moment. He's a vampire. He was being a vampire, doing what they do, and now he's being forced to not eat humans—that's fine, there are alternatives, after all, and it seems to take considerable effort to make a vampire switch tracks so to speak. All things considered, Spike is doing very well. He's not been chipped all that long, and he's been adapting quite well to his changed circumstances and doing the best he can. From what Spike has told us, Angel took a whole lot longer to make even the initial adaptation, and even a hundred years later he still has difficulties."

"It's completely different! Spike has a microchip in his brain…"

"Which lashes him with pain whenever he tries to act on his nature. Angel has a soul that lashes him with pain whenever he tries to act on his nature." Harry interrupted. "From a certain point of view they're completely the same, but Angel gets a pass on things that Spike doesn't get, and he's not helpless to defend himself. The Slayer has been coming by his crypt near daily just to tell him he's disgusting and useless and to break his nose. Her boyfriend, who's one of the soldier boys that captured and chipped him does the same and taunts him over the fact that he just has to take it. He's even brought fake stakes with him to stake him with so he can laugh when he tries to ward him off and gets his brain zapped for his trouble. The Slayer's friend Xander doesn't seem to be coming by to visit, but he takes especial delight in rubbing how powerless he is in his face whenever he sees him. Spike apparently tried to commit suicide soon after he was first chipped, mostly because of him. He discovered he could fight demons and was able to channel some of his angst into that. Knowing he could defend himself from the denizens of the hellmouth at least gave him the confidence to head out on his own to try to make a life for himself. For all the Slayer and her friends went to great lengths to let him know how very repugnant they found him they do seem to go to a great deal of trouble to remind him they're there."

"Well, okay that's a bit over the top…but you can't compare them. Angel helps people because it's the right thing to do"

"He's obviously well fed, and lives in a hotel that he apparently owns. Spike helped out in
Sunnydale for money when he could, because he still needs to eat. Apparently the Slayer used to help Angel battle vampires trying to rob blood shipments to the hospital, and then would let him take the whole shipment. They would regularly shake down some bar in town, and because the bartender knew Angel was under the Slayer's protection, he used to just take it when he'd rob him of blood too. Spike can't get away with that. All the demons in town know the Slayer seems to despise him with a particular fervor, so there's none of them that are the least bit worried about going after him, humans in town know he's helpless against them. If he wants to eat, he has to buy blood, which means he needs money, and the only place he can regularly get it is from Giles, though not often. He can't really get a job either—even if he didn't have issues with his species and his chip, the Slayer would never allow it, and would likely make a spectacle of him, beating him down in view of whatever demons hired him, telling him how utterly foul and disgusting he is, and knowing he just has to take it or he just ends up helping her hurt him. Yeah, don't even get me started. I'm going to try an experiment later to see if I can at least help him defend himself."

Angel woke feeling off-kilter and out of sorts. He'd been dreaming of Darla. It was odd. He hadn't thought about her in years. They'd been apart for a hundred years before he staked her. It hadn't actually been the simple thing he'd made it out to Buffy, though he'd been careful to not let her see that. She had a very black and white view of the world and would never have understood.

Darla had been his universe from the moment he'd seen her in the alley that night--a fine lady the likes of which had never before deigned to look his way, coyly glancing over her shoulder, awash in the moonlight. Her face had been the first thing he'd seen when he'd crawled from his grave after being reborn. She'd been his heaven and his hell for a hundred and fifty years.

In the first terrible days after he'd been cursed with his soul, he'd fled to her for comfort in the hopes that she could make it all better, but she'd driven him from her sight. Most of his happy memories over the last two and a half centuries featured her rather prominently. The long decades after their parting had been an endless miasma of pain and loneliness.

Buffy had been his salvation really. It was like having Darla back--but one who was souled like himself, who didn't look at him like he was tainted…and she'd been so young and innocent. Darla had been a jaded courtesan for a century plus before he'd ever met her. She'd been the one with the experience and the power, and she'd seen him through all his first stumbling steps in his new life, before he'd found his footing and had crafted a new identity for himself. Buffy knew only what he chose to show her, and she'd looked at him like he was her god. It had been nice to be on the opposite side of that particular equation. It had all been perfect, until it had all exploded rather spectacularly in his face. The memory of that night was still one he would cherish for a long time to come.

Spike might have killed two Slayers, but he was the only vampire in history who had ever gotten a Slayer to surrender her very self to him with complete and utter abandon.

It really had been a perfect moment. Buffy had been completely innocent, he'd been her first everything. He'd marked her down to her very soul in their time together. No matter how long she lived, no matter how many lovers came after him, no one would ever displace him from the center of her universe.

He sat up and licked his lips thoughtfully. His dream had been so vivid, he could almost swear he could smell Darla's scent lingering in the room and on his lips.

It was probably Spike's fault. Having him around brought the past too much to the forefront of his mind. It was always awkward and painful having him around. Spike had seen him at his worst and his best and everything in between, and had never been shy about rubbing his face in it. He'd
always been strangely possessive of him, even from the first time he'd met him--an awkward, callow youth, more an eager puppy than anything. He'd had no idea what he'd end up becoming just a few years down the road--his defiant, vicious, vulnerable boy.

He'd never lost his soft, gooey center. It didn't matter how much bravado he'd piled on top, it had always been all too obvious that the awkward puppy was still there underneath--something the rest of them had used to their advantage over and over again, and yet even with that he'd never quite lost it. It was still there even now, and he could still push his buttons like he always could...but he'd grown harder over the years. Cynical and bitter where he used to be optimistic and sweet, but still himself. It was strange, really, how sad it made him that they'd succeeded in making him do that. Spike...William... He'd never grown into a full blown obsession the way Drusilla had, but he'd been one nonetheless. The one he'd never been able to break, who kept coming back and daring him to do his worst--which naturally, he'd done quite cheerfully--and then spitting in his eye afterwards and refusing to let him win. He coveted him for the very reasons he hated him, the very reasons he drove him insane.

No, having Spike around for any length of time was never easy, and he usually tried driving him away so he'd never realize that there was a part of him that wanted him to stay, that had missed him terribly over the century they'd been apart. When he'd grabbed Xander by the neck to pose as 'food' and drug him into the high school when Spike had first rolled into town... it had been because he'd wanted to see him. The smile on his face had been genuine, even if his soul had been twinging at him in warning the whole time. He'd seen through it--finally at an age where he could sense the soul and realize what it meant. He'd just been a baby vamp the last two times he'd seen him since he'd gotten it. He hadn't known, and had been perfectly trusting in his presence. Even in demon face, he'd looked so hurt and betrayed...

Spike probably knew. He usually did know the most inconvenient things.

As he made his way down the stairs, he took note of several things that he'd noticed but not paid much attention to earlier; the hotel smelled like spices and cooked meat, tea, blood and the fizzy smell of soft drinks. He could hear people moving, interspersed with pained grunts from Spike, which was usually followed by a lot of cursing, followed by voices raised in encouragement.

The scene in the lobby was an odd one. Cordelia was off to the side, finishing a plateful of food... which seemed to have been topped off with a bit of blood. Gunn was there as well, eating and looking rather surly while watching the show in the center of the lobby. Half-full and empty plates (one of which seemed to have also been sprinkled with blood--considerably more than was on Cordelia's), lay scattered about, as did cups filled with drinks.

Harry, Tom and Wesley stood around Spike in the open part of the lobby, taking turns lunging at him with wooden rods--unsharpened, but still--or throwing punches at him. Spike was dancing among them, diverting blows, spinning out of the way, defending as best he could, though there were still many missteps. Spike diverted a blow from Wesley, winced and let out a pained yell. The three humans backed off and let him recenter himself. Spike nodded to show he was ready and they surged inward again.

Angel sidled up to Cordelia, glanced at her blood-covered dinner which she was quite happily shoveling down with every evidence of enjoyment, gave a pained grimace and looked away.

"What's with you? Geez. Hypocrite much? In case you've forgotten, brood boy, you're a vampire who drinks blood. Stop looking at me like I'm weird."

"You have to admit it's kind of freaky. I mean, shit, I'm away one day and there's another
"bloodsucker on the team who's supposedly good too"

"I'm still evil." Spike disagreed as he spun away from Tom's punch and redirected Wesley's lunge. "And me and m' nephews are just visiting."

"And now you're a bloodsucker too"

"I'm part demon to protect me from my visions."

"It's my fault. You were human, and now because you were helping me…"

"Oh get over yourself. It was my choice, you didn't make me do anything, and I'm still me."

Cordelia huffed in return.

"You're a demon."

"So are you. Get over it."

"Bloodsucker's got a point though." Gunn grumbled.

Angel put his hands in his pockets and began brooding, but he wasn't able to work up the proper mindset with Spike flailing around every few minutes while the other circled him and tried poking him with their sticks.

"What's going on anyway?"

"They're helping Spike develop a defensive strategy for humans. As you can see it's not going well. Well, that's not completely true. It's gotten a lot better in the time they've been working on it. It's possible with a few more sessions they might work out a useable strategy. You know, at first I was just like 'oh, you've got a chip. Boo hoo, cry me a river."

"I'm still feeling that way." Gunn interjected.

Cordelia glanced at him and sighed, before turning back to Angel "You know, after sitting here watching all this… That thing is a really nasty piece of work. He can't even bump into a human by accident without it punishing him. Forget thwaping someone on the arm to get their attention… outright trying to attack, he can't even think about it. He said he once got zapped for picking up a toy gun. After seeing this, and hearing what Harry told us about how he's being treated in Sunnydale… Those initiative guys are evil. They captured Oz, you know. They had to rescue him. He's not the only human either--do you remember that guy Ethan Rayne? According to Spike they captured him too. I mean, yeah, no big loss. That guy was trouble… I don't know if he was evil so much as just a big annoying jerk, but he's human. Also, the initiative made some kind of uber demon and Buffy had to do a ritual with the others to call on the power of the First Slayer to fight it. I think they're bad news, like big time."

"Yeah. Should've just dusted him and been done with it." Gunn agreed. "Forget all this chip in the brain bull."

Angel got a cold shiver down his spine, and he found himself feeling desperately relieved that Riley Finn didn't know where he lived. He had no doubt in his mind that if he thought he could get away with it without Buffy finding out, he and his commando buddies would have been kicking in his door and shoving a chip in his brain the first chance they got. It was too horrible to contemplate. That was bad enough, but he really didn't like the sound of this thing they'd built that Buffy had to do a ritual to fight.
"What do you mean, she had to call on the first slayer? The power passes down, and she's pretty strong. Stronger than most. She said she felt stronger after Xander revived her after she faced the master. She technically died. A new slayer was called, but she might have gotten a double dose or something. She wasn't always as strong as she is now. A normal slayer is usually enough to take care of whatever she comes across. It's pretty rare they come across something they simply can't deal with one on one, though they might sometimes die in the process… I don't like the thought of humans just making something too strong for a slayer, especially one who's stronger than most slayers are already…and now they're capturing mages, human ones, on top of whatever all they were already doing? No, I really don't like the sound of this at all."

"She was all matrix-y. It was pretty wild, actually. She was like, hovering in mid-air and messing with time and what have you. She had a weird echo-y voice when she talked too." Spike commented. "That Adam thing was bad news. His power was unreal, and he just talked and you wanted to follow him. He was kind of inspiring. I was initially helping him 'cause he promised to get me chip out. I always planned to take him out after…looking back, I doubt I would have stood any chance against him, even with help. Even Buffy, all powered up like she was had to actually fight him. She wasn't able to just kill him. I switched sides and helped out when I realized he wanted the Slayer and her friends for parts so he'd have enough human parts to go with the demon parts the initiative collected. He was planning on making an army of things like himself. He thought he was the next step in evolution or something. I didn't fancy becoming spare parts, and he wasn't gonna take out me chip anyway, so I ended up helping the Slayer's crew." Spike commented tiredly.

He waved the three humans off and rubbed his head with a grimace.

"I think that's more'n enough for one day. I feel like me head's gonna split in two." He shuffled tiredly towards the kitchen. Angel was rather alarmed to see his one arm was twitching minutely and he seemed less coordinated than usual.

Angel followed him and found him trying to open a blood bag. His hands were still twitching too much to hold on to it properly.

"Damn it." The words were said quietly and with terrible resignation as he dropped the blood and then just sighed and slumped against the counter and started rubbing his head. It must be bad if he was letting down his guard like this--it was something he usually tried very hard not to do around him.

Spike nearly jumped out of his skin when Angel was suddenly right behind him, and immediately straightened and tried to project his usual bravado.

"Get your own, Peaches, this is mine."

"Sit down. I'll get it."

"I can get me own blood, I don't need a bloody nursemaid."

"Spike."

Spike found himself flinching ever so slightly in spite of his best effort not to. Angelus only ever used that voice when he absolutely, positively would brook no disobedience at that moment. He'd always used it sparingly, because it never stopped him for long, so he only trotted it out when he needed him to be quiet and still for a short time--usually because there was a mob chasing them and he wanted all his attention for getting away and not arguing with him.
He felt like absolute bollocks, and really didn’t have the energy to spare to fight him on it at the moment. It grated terribly to do so, but he went and sat quietly at the table and laid his head down. The cool marble felt kind of nice.

The smell of cooking blood filled the room, along with the buzz of the microwave. Spike lifted his head when a full mug was set down beside his head.

Spike straightened and his nostrils flared in interest. "You put something in that? It smells divine."

Angel twitched slightly and glared at him. "Just drink it." he growled, before stalking out of the kitchen.

Spike eyed his retreating back thoughtfully and sniffed at the cup again. He'd put some of his own blood in the mixture. He drank it down and licked his lips thoughtfully. Even in such a small amount, family blood was a bit of a rush. He could feel his headache disappearing already, and his arms weren't twitching anymore. He grabbed a slice of bread to mop up every last drop from the bottom of the cup so none of it would go to waste. It was unlikely Peaches would offer him such a treat again.

Harry glanced up from the video game he and Tom were playing when Spike returned.

"Are you alright? We shouldn't have pushed it for so long."

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it, Stormcloud. It was a good idea."

"Why won't this thing just die already?" Tom complained as he pushed buttons for all he was worth.

"Shoot him between the eyes on that dark spot. That's the only way to kill him. Ahhh, too late."

"Stupid unkillable monsters."

"Does anyone want to take over?"

"Give it here, Curly."

"Um, well, I suppose I could give it a go." Wesley offered a moment later.

Tom and Harry took seats on the couch, while Wesley and Spike took their places on the floor in front of the television.

"Hey, brood boy, what's with you?" Cordelia asked Angel curiously. He'd been strangely quiet, even for him, since he'd woken up.

"The Qu'artoath. What if the Initiative is what's going to call it or unleash it? All we know at this point is that it's old, scary and powerful, and that Spike is involved somehow. If the Initiative is building super demons and they're capturing mages as well...what if it's them?"

"That's...actually a good question. What if it is them? Are they still in Sunnydale?"

"No. The facility there got filled in and paved over after the whole Adam thing. Most of the soldier boys left town. Captain Cardboard stuck around to be with the Slayer, but I know he's got some way to get in touch with them. He had some kind of chip too. They were pumping him full of demon essence or something to power him up. The thing malfunctioned or something and his
heart started racing. Slayer was afraid it was going to up and explode. Given the way it was pumping, it might well have. I found out there was an initiative doctor in town and tried to get him to take me chip out. He just pretended to, stupid wanker. Harm wasn't much help. She really does kind of suck at the whole evil vampire thing."

"Harm?"

"Harmony. Friend of yours, isn't she?"

"Harmony? Harmony's a vampire?"

"Yeah. Didn't you know? It happened during graduation from what she told me."

"But…no…I saw her after that. She was just at home, hanging out and I told her I was going to L. A. for a new start!"

"Apparently she just went home to live, until she ate the maid one day. Her mum threw her out, because apparently it's hard to find good help. Silly bint knew absolutely nothing."

"So she was a vampire the last time I saw her and I didn't even notice? And neither did she? How is that even possible?"

Angel, Spike and Wesley just looked at her.

"Okay…she wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. So she woke up as a vampire and just went home and just continued on like nothing happened?"

"Yeah. Her mum knew, from what she told me, and thought they could just pretend it didn't happen. Too icky to think about, apparently. She didn't want to eat humans, didn't know she could just buy blood somewhere, so she wasn't eating until she just snapped and ate the maid. Her mum put her foot down then and told her she had to leave before she ate one of them. Told her she could keep her credit card for a year till she found her feet. I actually met her when I broke into the local motel chain to get myself a telly. She followed me home and the rest is history as they say."

"Harmony is a vampire and you were dating her?"

"You were dating Harmony. You really know how to pick them don't you?" Angel snickered. He stopped abruptly when he was hit in the face with a pillow.

"Hey, watch it, mister. Harmony was a friend of mine."

"If we could get back on topic…the Initiative?" Wesley prompted.

"AHHH!"

Everyone froze and looked at Cordelia worriedly as she received a vision. She slowly straightened and the coiled tension in her shoulders unknotted.

"Wow… I have a slight headache but…" she trailed off and smiled before laughing delightedly. "It worked! I'm alright!"

The rest of them cheered in relief and even Angel unbent enough to hug her, though he scowled when Spike not only hugged her but lifted her off her feet to spin her around as well.

She was breathless with laughter when he set her back on her feet, though she looked at Angel
questioningly when she realized he was looking constipated and unhappy.

"The vision?" Angel prompted.

"Oh, right...demon some facility somewhere...water. It's got humans under its control. Details are sketchy."

"Looks like this is where I step in. What do you remember?" Wesley asked as he led her away towards the office. Tom wandered after them. He had no interest in going out to battle demons, he'd leave that to Harry. Research he could do. Angel hurried after them. He wasn't letting one of Spike's stupid nephews take over again.

Harry went to the bathroom to get changed. Robes were fine, he'd gotten more comfortable in wearing them all the time, but they did tend to get in the way when you were trying to kick things. Gunn eyed Spike suspiciously and went to see how the research was going. Spike flipped him off once his back was turned and flopped down on the couch, laid back and closed his eyes.

"Did it look like this?" Wesley asked, holding up a book with a drawing of a demon.

"No. More mushy and moldy. I think it was growing right out of a wall."

Angel yawned. He'd not been sleeping well the last few nights. He sat down in the chair in the corner.

"Mush monster's not going anywhere. It's the place we have to find. Its disciples are human. They're fighting each other. I think the fight's over how to fittingly worship it."

"This is why personally I rarely go to church." Angel pointed out.

The others gathered around the books ignored him.

"So did I." Darla whispered as she sauntered through the room and settled on his lap to start kissing him. "God, I missed you. My beautiful dear boy."

"Fizzwad!" Angel shouted as he came awake with an abrupt jerk.

"Bloody hell!"

"Did you say something?"

"Peaches! If you're going to bloody well wank off, keep me out of it!" Spike called from the lobby.

The humans looked between the two of them confused.

"We know where we're going yet?" Angel demanded, ignoring Spike.

Cordelia eyed him a moment. "It felt sacred, in a twisted demonic way, underground, like a big tank or something. Full of pillars."

"Like a water tank?"

"Could be."

"St. Brigid's. It's in Fremont. A convent built on native burial grounds. It's cursed. They had eight
murders in two years before the whole thing burned to the ground, which is nothing compared to what happened to Our Lady of Lochenbee…” he shifted uncomfortably a moment under their looks “I have a thing for convents. Anyway, the state bought St. Brigid's and built a water tank there.” he concluded before grabbing some weapons. "Let's go."

The whole group, including Tom, much to his annoyance, crept down a long stone stairway and emerged in an underground room full of pillars. A dozen or more robed and hooded acolytes, half in red, half in black, were battling each other. Behind them, growing out of the wall was their leader–huge and hideous.

"Man, you do not pay me enough for this." Gunn whispered. "It's like my uncle Theo always told me--never buy a dull plow, and never get in the middle of a religious war."

"Do you really have an uncle Theo?"

"No, but it's still good advice."

"Thrall demon?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"So kill the big ugly and his groupies should un-thrall and go away." Spike scoffed. "Come on, Stormcloud."

"Spike!" Angel growled.

"Harry." Tom warned.

Spike and Harry weren't listening, they both whooped and charged out into the melee. Spike weaved and dodged the acolytes as best he could, heading straight for the demon. Harry kept his sword sheathed, not wanting to hurt the enthralled humans or kill them if he could help it. He watched his back, kicking and punching for all he was worth.

"INTRUDERS! GET THEM!"

The others cursed and charged out as well--except for Tom, who stayed where he was and hit the closest acolytes with a stupefy if they tried coming towards him.

Gunn battled his way through some of the acolytes, only to get accosted by a big bruiser, which Angel tore off him and began punching in the face. "Watch my back, man" he told him as he started towards the demon to help Spike, but Angel was oblivious "Or just keep beating on that big guy."

Gunn finished the demon with his new axe, which he was really learning to love, and the acolytes stopped fighting and dropped to the ground. The rest relaxed…except for Angel, who was still punching the big guy.

"ANGELUS, ENOUGH ALREADY!" Spike huffed, grabbing him by the shoulder. "I thought you were supposed to be a bloody white hat these days."

Angel dropped the guy he'd been beating, shook himself and started for the exit.

When they got outside, the others stayed back just a bit, watching Angel warily. Angel fished his keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Cordelia.

"Take the car back to the hotel… I just need…” he said before hurrying off at a fast walk down the street.
"I'll follow him. Something weird's going on." Spike told the others before hurrying after him.

"So…the whole teamwork thing is a thing of the past, is it?"

"He hasn't been sleeping well for a while. He's off his game."

"I didn't know it was a game."

"He probably just needs to be alone for a while or something."

"Whatever." Gunn muttered before turning to Harry. "So…my man. You're one hella crazy white boy. You wanna come help me patrol my 'hood? We got ourselves a vamp problem thereabouts."

"Sure." Harry shrugged. "Sounds like fun."

"Hella crazy." Gunn repeated with a laugh.

Angel stumbled down the street, lost in his own mind, getting lost in the crowd all around. There was a fair or something going on--the street was alive with throngs of people, food vendors, balloons. He careened into a giant hot dog and stood staring for a moment, but it was just a guy in a costume who flipped him off and continued on his way. He hadn't gotten enough sleep for the last few days and it was catching up to him. He was being haunted by his past--Darla in his dreams, Spike in his waking life.

The faintest scent caught his attention and he stiffened before turning in a slow circle to find it. His whole attention zeroed in on a petite blonde walking in the distance. The hair and the clothes were different, but it was her, he knew it was her.

He began scrambling through the crowd, buffeted one way and then another, but she remained just out of reach, oblivious to him. A gang of laughing kids sped past, hindering movement, while fireworks sounded overhead. He no longer knew if he was awake or asleep. He lost sight of her and could feel the desperation welling up inside as he pushed his way through the crowd, still searching. He hurried to the last place he saw her and turned in a slow circle, but she was gone.

"Oi! Mate! Was that bloody Darla I just saw? I thought you staked her? What's going on?"

"Spike? Wait…you saw her too?"

"Hard to miss. Bit of a change for 'er though--suburban housewife? Her?" Spike cackled in amusement.

"But you saw her too? Smelled her?"

"Course I did, just said so, didn't I?"

Angel grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him in close to shake him. "What happened earlier? What did you see?"

"Darla wandering around your bloody office and then sucking your face off while cooing about how much she missed her dear boy. If she's still your number one wank fantasy why the bloody hell did you stake her?"

"I did it to protect Buffy. I hadn't thought of her in years. She's haunting me."
"Looked too alive and kicking to be haunting you, mate."

"Come on, Spike. We gotta go see about a girl."

Spike lit up a cigarette, shrugged and fell into step with him.

"Now I have to wonder, is it the Initiative that's going to be the problem or Wolfram and Hart?"
Angel mused as they started across the city at a quick pace.

"Who's Wolfram and Hart?"

"They're an evil law firm with demon connections. I've been running afoul of them since I've been in L.A., stopping some of their schemes. They think I'm going to be important in some apocalypse they're hoping for, but the prophecies say it's unclear which side the vampire with a soul will be working for. They've been messing with me to try to get me on their side. I know about them… No. Messing with me is one thing. They've got their own apocalypse planned. They're not going to try bringing on another. Looks like the Initiative might still be the better choice."

"Yeah, them. Look, the only thing I really know about their operations now is that that fellow Rayne got taken to Nevada or some place. I don't know where, just that they have a facility there and said he'd be 'rehabilitated', whatever that means. He was apparently in town to warn Giles that the Initiative were upsetting the balance, mentioned 314--that was the bint running the place's office. She had a secret lab behind it or something where that bloke Adam was being built. He killed her when he woke up. In fact…maybe he turned Giles into a Fyarl demon in hopes he'd get captured and have a chance to scope things out, and give the Slayer reason to storm the place if he got captured. Or he might of just been making trouble. Hard to tell with Chaos magicians."

"Nevada. It's a start, but it still gives us a whole state to cover, most of which is open desert."

"Um, hello, Captain Forehead. Area 51! That's in Nevada isn't it? Oi, They're supposed to have the Ark of the Covenant there. We gotta grab that while we're looking around. It's supposed to let you talk to god. I've got some questions I want answered."

"Spike…if such a thing were actually there, it's a holy artifact. You wouldn't even be able to get anywhere near it. In fact, if it's there and that's the initiative's facility, it could pose a significant problem."

"Nah. It's probably in a box like the true cross was. No problem. I managed to steal that. Twice, in fact."

"You did not steal the true cross!" Angel sputtered.

"Sure I did. You weren't there. It was during WWII. I broke into the Vatican and found it in a storeroom covered in dust and stole it. I heard a few weeks later there was a reward for its return. I returned it. I even got to meet the pope. I wanted to bite him to see if I got superpowers, but there were too many crosses around, too many priests. I found out later they had some kind of ritual to wipe out all the vampires on earth and needed the true cross for it. I stole it again, after I'd gathered up all the stray vamps in town and made them build catapults. We nearly burned Rome to the ground, only no one noticed since it was being bombed at the time by the allied forces. I ended up burning the cross so they couldn't do their ritual. It was kind of a pain having it in me living room. All the minions kept dying, and if I handled the box it was in for too long me hands caught on fire. In fact, the bucket I dunked them in to put the fire out turned into holy water. I kicked it over when one of the minions was annoying me and his feet just disappeared when the water hit them."
It was like the Wizard of Oz..."I'm melting!" Weirdest thing, really. I should totally have been canonized for that. I bet I'm the only vampire in history that's ever made holy water."

Angel just stared at him in bemused astonishment.

"All the vamps in town ended up dying anyway. It turns out the smoke from the true cross burning makes you go 'poof'. I got burned too, but I got away before it was fatal. I escaped town by pretending to be a monk. I even delivered a baby. Some silly bint went into labor while everything was going on, and since I was a monk at the time, I realized it would draw too much attention to me if I just left her there. I bullied some strapping lads with a cart to haul us out of town away from the bombs and the cross smoke. Kid was born when we reached the city limits. She wanted to name it after me, but it was a girl, so I told her to name her Anne after me mum, and then I told them I had to go rescue more folks so I could get away. I went to Spain after that, ended up getting captured by those bloody Nazis and their fake free virgin blood party."

"Where was Dru during all this?"

"She wandered off while we were building the catapults, said she had somewhere to be and to say hi to daddy and her new baby brother. I forgot to tell you that, didn't I? Oh well, Dru said hi. Better late than never, right? She found me after I got back to Europe, asked if I'd had fun and wondered where the burning baby fishes were that was supposed to be swimming 'round my head. She was real disappointed. She wanted to play with them. Eh, that's Dru for you."

"Burning… She foretold you being chipped. She just didn't understand what it was she saw. That sub and the information it contained likely led to the Initiative…the Nazis were planning on making vampire super soldiers to send out into the field but they never got anywhere with it before the Americans stole the idea. It seems to have taken the Americans the last fifty years before they had something they thought worked well enough to unroll the program." Angel mused.

Thoughts of Dru and her occasionally startling seer gift made him think of Darla, especially as she'd been so much on his mind lately.

"There was some kind of ritual earlier this summer by Wolfram and Hart that involved the sacrifice of several vampires."

"Right time of year for a resurrection ritual."

"They resurrected Darla. She's human. They've got her at Wolfram and Hart to use against me in some way."

"How'd you even think of all this, or get it from burning baby fishes?"

"The night you were turned, Darla, Dru and I were walking down the street, and Dru was complaining about being lonely… She told Darla she was going to be her mummy someday. We dismissed it at the time as just more of Dru's babble. It wasn't, it was a prophecy. Darla's alive and at Wolfram and Hart and Dru's probably on her way right now to turn her. She probably knew the moment Darla was resurrected."

"Wow, family reunion. You know, those two would be a great help if we do go storm the initiative."

"We'll worry about that later. For now, we need to go get Darla before they do whatever it is they're planning."
"I CAN WALK, YOU GREAT LUMBERING OX! PUT ME DOWN!"

A woman's shriek and Spike's laughter were all they could hear as they pulled up outside the hotel.

"I shoulda known! Man, I can't believe I was stupid enough to actually buy all that bull about him bein' a good vampire. That's it. Tall and broody's getting staked." Gunn said disgustedly.

Angel was looking rather put-upon, as the blonde woman he had thrown over one shoulder was kicking, punching and flailing for all she was worth. Spike was hyper and laughing himself silly. "I'm not sure what's going on, but she doesn't look like she's about to become dinner." Harry pointed out. "Why don't we find out who she is first? I know the others said they do detective work sometimes. Maybe she's a runaway or something?"

Gunn still grabbed a stake before hopping out to follow him inside.

Inside, Cordelia, Wesley and Tom were eyeing the two vampires and their flailing human captive with bemusement (Tom) or horror (Wesley and Cordelia)

"We're not going to let you eat her!" Cordelia shouted, holding up a cross, while Wesley held up a crossbow.

"Relax, minions. She's not dinner, she's grandmum!"

"Don't call me that!" the woman shouted.

"Great-grandmum."

"That's no better!"

"I saw Darla walking down the street earlier. I thought I was hallucinating, but Spike saw her too. That resurrection a few months ago. She's what they brought back. Once I realized I'd really seen her and it wasn't a hallucination, Spike and I went off to storm Wolfram and Hart to get her. They can't use her in whatever schemes they've got going if they don't have her."

"Oh it was great! I went in the front door to set off their vampire alarms so they wouldn't notice Peaches going in from the roof after he climbed up the side of the building. I told them me car was impounded and I needed their kind of help getting it out, chatted up the receptionist, that sort of thing, while I waited for the signal. When I got the call, I was going to jump out through the window so I leapt over the lawyer bint's head. They've got bloody strong windows in that place, so I pretended I had a squirrel trapped in me pants and that I shook it out under her desk. I told them it was probably rabid and I needed to go to the hospital because I was bleeding out even though I just fed. You should have seen the looks on their faces. When I left everyone was staring at her desk and she was climbed up on her chair and calling for security and animal control."

There was a ringing silence in the room as Spike finished his story. Even Darla had stopped flailing so she could stare at him.

Harry snorted, and then he and Tom broke down laughing. The rest of them followed soon after.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A peek at what's going on at Wolfram and Hart after Spike and the boys' 'night of fun' and Darla's kidnapping. Also: enter Drusilla.

Sidney Wong sighed and put in a call to his secretary. "Send Lilah Morgan in."

Lilah arrived a few minutes later and looked at her boss expectantly.

"I've just gotten word. The Beast just landed at LAX four hours ago." he began without preamble, handing over the report he'd been reading.

"A whole flight of crazy people, plus a missing male passenger…and an extra female passenger who never got on the plane?"

"She's imprisoned in a human. All the crazies have been taken to a quarantine facility. They need to be killed. Once fed on they start to become demons and will help stabilize the Beast and allow her to stay out of her prison longer. See to it."

"I'll get right on it."

"Good. Send in Lindsey if you see him."

Lindsey appeared several minutes later. He was looking rather the worse for wear.

"Still haven't quite recovered from being beaten to unconsciousness with your own fake arm?"

Lindsey twitched and tried to smile, though it came out as a pained grimace.

"I'll be fine."

"He's the one who lost you that arm in the first place, isn't he?"

Lindsey's face went blank and cold.

"I will see him pay for that, and this is now two I owe him."

"The senior partners are not happy that our plans with Darla have all fallen through after we went to such trouble to bring her back."

"I'll get her back."

"You will forget about her for the moment. Where are we are our Quor'toth problem?"

"We haven't found anything more than what we were already told, and none of the mystics or demons we've consulted seem to know anything helpful either. We're still working on it."

"Work harder."
"Sir. If I could just point a few things out? Maybe you shouldn't poo-pooh the idea of taking Darla back so quickly. From what we've learned so far, the Quor'toth thing, whatever it may be, has something to do with Spike. Spike is now teamed up with Angel, and together they stole Darla right out from under our noses. Cordelia Chase, who is a tall, dark haired seer who happens to be quite sane, unlike Drusilla, the fourth member of the Scourge of Europe, has recently undergone a transformation of unknown type which allowed her to completely remove our surveillance. It has to mean something that the Scourge of Europe seems to be reforming at a time when our information and ability to track them is sketchy at best. What if Angel knows what the Quor'toth is and is going to unleash it? He tried starting an apocalypse the last time he was with his 'family'. There's supposed to be a prophecy about him being important in an apocalypse of some sort right? What if this is it? Personally, I think we should just storm the place, round the lot of them up and get our answers."

Sidney sat back and considered the matter for several long moments.

"Make it so."

Lindsey smiled as his eyes lit with triumph. They needed Angel alive, or undead as the case may be. Nothing said he needed both his arms…

Back at the Hyperion hotel, Cordelia grunted and clutched at her head. Wesley dropped his crossbow and moved to hover nearby. He knew the 'demon transplant' seemed to be working, but he'd been frightened enough by her nearly dying that he was still worried.

Angel let Darla drop to the floor, though he kept a tight grip on her arm.

Darla's eyes narrowed at Cordelia and Wesley and she turned to Angel, lip curled.

"So…you found replacements for everyone, did you?" she asked. "Yet the rest of the originals are still running around, while me you staked in the back."

"You're talking nonsense." Angel growled, before hauling Darla with him further into the hotel.

"Angel, we've got a problem. We've got time, a few hours at least, but Wolfram and Hart is planning retaliation. If we don't all get out of here, we're all dead except for you. You'll be left lying in a pool of blood missing your arms."

"My my my. Little Lindsey's got more bite than I realized. I'm almost impressed. I bet you wish now you hadn't taken the time to beat him about the head with his fake arm, huh?" Darla cooed before throwing back her head and laughing.

"Okay, that's my signal to duck out. I ain't letting no lawyer dudes a chance at me. I got peeps depending on me." Gunn said nervously.

"Probably for the best. We'll be in touch when the coast is clear." Angel agreed. "The rest of you, start packing."

Darla was still laughing, though she cut off abruptly when Cordelia was suddenly in her face.

"That includes you too, blondie. Oh, Lindsey doesn't intend it, but it happens anyway. I'd behave if I were you."

Cordelia stalked off, leaving a subdued and much more cooperative Darla in her wake.
The stars were singing to her again. It was very distracting.

"You're being very wicked, confusing me like this. I shan't listen. I want to see my family again."

They were very persistent and sang to her about all the lovely destruction she needed to help with first. She could hear the pained grunts of a human fighting for his life nearby, the sound of vampires meeting their end like a cymbal crash in a grand symphony. It was all so very lovely that she was moved in spite of herself and began to dance. The stars crooned to her and began to twinkle as though they were dancing with her.

When she opened her eyes again, there was a man watching her as though entranced. The stars whispered again and she wagged her finger at him sternly.

"You've been very naughty. Electricity lies, and so do you."

The man raised his stake threateningly, but he seemed dazed.

"Very naughty indeed. He thinks he's cheese he does, and lets all the little rats nibble, nibble, nibble before he sets the trap, but he let them nibble too long and the cheese is almost gone."

"Who are you?" Riley gasped.

"Shhh. Look into my eyes." she crooned as she began to sway. Riley's eyes glazed over and he swayed with her.

"You want to be a good little soldier boy, don't you my pet? Good little soldiers send bad little witches to bed without any supper." she whispered softly. Riley nodded, his eyes still glazed.

"What a good boy he is."

Riley stumbled off in a daze with only one thought on his mind. Complete the mission. That's what soldiers did.

Darla scowled at the television and tossed the video game controller aside with a huff. "Stupid unkillable monsters."

"I win again. I had no idea I was so bloody good at this."

Darla rolled her eyes, but she found herself smiling, much to her surprise.

"So, what's the deal Spike? What are you doing with soul boy?"

"I was in town sightseeing with my nephews. I was hijacked. He thinks I'm going to bring on an apocalypse."

"You? That's even more ridiculous than the idea of Angelus bringing on an apocalypse."
"He tried once. Him and Dru. I ended up teaming up with the Slayer to stop him."

"What? When was this?"

"The year after you met your end, luv. Dru got injured by a mob in Prague. I took her to the Hellmouth hoping it would perk her up some. He lost his soul a few months later. I was in a wheelchair. Wouldn't help me heal, wouldn't let Dru help me either. The two of them took the Judge out for a walk, a few months later he tried to unleash Acathla. He almost succeeded. I think I can guess what's been going through that pretty little head of yours, luv. You're waiting for Dru to come make you yourself again and you're hoping you can get into soul boy's pants and help him lose the soul, right? I don't think it'll work."

Darla narrowed her eyes at him.

"Excuse me? You think some little girl..."

"Darla, luv, listen to me. It isn't shagging, it's a moment of happiness. He's too conflicted about our shared past to find that with you, especially if you're a vampire again. His demon would be rejoicing, but his soul won't be. Slayer managed it for several reasons, I'm guessing. One, she was a virgin when he took her. We both know how Angelus liked his virgins, don't we? Two, she was a slayer. I killed two, but he's the only one who ever managed to bed one. Three, he fancied himself in love with the chit. Banging 'er made the soul and the demon happy. Through no fault of your own, you won't be able to manage the same, I don't think."

Darla stared at him with wounded eyes, and he rubbed her arm lightly in commiseration. He took her hand then and laced their fingers together before giving it a light squeeze.

"What's more, I don't think you really want to go there, whatever you might think. All these long years living with a soul, spent mostly alone…it hurt him. He's not the same guy he was, back in the day. Me and Dru were both happy to have him back, at first. He wasn't the same. You told me once that it takes as long as it does to turn because we end up discarding bits and pieces of ourselves during the process, right? Think about it, luv. He's got his soul back. This last hundred years he's been going through that process, shoving parts of himself back and forth trying to find some kind of balance he can live with. When the soul goes by-by, it takes half of him with it. What's left is a sad parody of the demon he used to be, one who's mad, has all Angelus' worst qualities and none of his better ones. All the parts of him you loved will go with the soul, should you manage it, and then he's going to be off trying to destroy the bloody world again, because he's crazy."

Darla glared at him when he said the forbidden 'L' word. Spike just rolled his eyes at her and gave her a 'who are you trying to kid' look in return.

"Sorry, sorry. I forgot how squeamish the both of you were about the bloody labels. I was there, remember? You loved each other, though you'd both rather be dusted than admit it. It's not a crime, you know."

Darla huffed but didn't argue further.

"So what are you suggesting? That I stay like this?"

"You want your boy back, right? He's right there, waiting for you. Keep in mind, luv, it was Angel, soul boy himself, that ran off to snatch you away from the lawyers. You're both all soul-having now, right? That was the only reason you two broke up. If you're eager to get back to killing and drinking blood, that's one thing. If your whole reason is him though, going backwards isn't going to do it."
"I can't believe William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers is advising me to stay human."

"We're none of us what we were, eh? Well, Dru's still the same--batty as ever. Angelus has a soul, I've got a bloody chip in my head, you're human… The Whirlwind is gone." his voice grew rough as he voiced the truth they all knew but had all been denying for the last hundred years.

Their eyes met, and she could see the same feeling of loss that she knew was probably in her own face as they both finally acknowledged there was really no going back. His voice dropped to a pained whisper as he continued.

"It's a lonely existence, wandering eternity all on your lonesome."

Darla thought back to the years after she'd left Spike and Dru, and gone back to the Master. There had been blood and mayhem aplenty, but something had been missing. She looked back at Spike and found him staring at her with soft eyes and a small smile.

"Have I mentioned how very bloody wonderful it is to see you again? We missed you, you know."

Darla smiled at him. This is what had been missing. Angelus had his moods and obsessions, Dru had her spells when she was more mad than usual and more than half feral, Spike was impulsive and worked at being annoying…it had never been perfect, but they were a family.

It had never been the same after Angelus was gone, but they'd still been a family even then. She'd lov…cared…about all three of them, though in different ways.

Spike--rude, rash, impulsive, still a child really, not even past his first century, had done his best to rise to the occasion and be the man of the house once Angelus was gone. For the most part, he'd succeeded, though all three of them had remained aware of the Angelus-shaped hole in their lives.

That had been the reason she'd eventually left them and gone back to her sire. She'd hoped she'd be able to put it aside and forget him if she wasn't constantly reminded. It had worked, for the most part…but Spike was right in that it was a lonely existence.

In Sunnydale she'd had blood aplenty, been surrounded by kin, bathed in the mystic energy of the hellmouth. For most demons, it would have seemed an ideal existence. Having no one to truly share it with took most of the shine off things.

By the sound of it, she'd missed Spike and Dru's return by mere months. How different would things have been if… She pushed that train of thought aside impatiently. What-ifs helped no one. She was here now, and it wasn't ideal but it was more than she'd had before. She'd never been one to let opportunity slip away if she could help it.

While lost in thought, her free hand had risen to stroke lightly at Spike's cheek, her knuckles to graze across his forehead, over the top of his head to cup at the back of his neck, where she gave a little tug and pulled him forward to kiss him gently on the lips, chaste as a nun.

And there it was, the little-boy smile that said he was perfectly content and happy to just be there with her, holding her hand and nothing else. Spike was probably the only man in her entire life that had ever looked at her that way. Angelus used to look at her like she was the center of his universe, once upon a time, but there'd always been the sense that he was undressing her with his eyes while doing so, the same with every other man she'd ever met.

She pushed away her ridiculous musings when Spike's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and the blue flashed with mischief.
He leaned forward and nuzzled lightly at her neck while he whispered, low enough that her human ears almost couldn't catch his words, even though he was so close.

"Your boy is watching us from the balcony, luv. He smells like musk, frustration, and jealous rage…with a happy heaping of lust, of course. He always did like to watch, didn't he?"

Darla smiled, slow and lazy like a well-fed cat and leaned forward to suck his earlobe into her mouth.

She could feel Spike's amused chuckle more than hear it. "You always were a ball-breaking bitch, weren't you, luv?"

She let out a breathy gasp as she was suddenly lifted and found herself straddling him, her demure little skirt pushed up around her thighs, with Spike's cool fingers trailing lightly up her legs beneath it. She leaned in to kiss him and almost forgot that Angelus was watching them from above, and his human pets were just on the other side of the room as his talented fingers went to work. He'd barely had to touch her before she came with a shuddering gasp that he swallowed in her kiss, devouring her mouth as he did so.

She leaned their foreheads together as she caught her breath and came back to herself, while Spike ran a soothing hand down her back. When she leaned back to look at him, he raised his wet fingers to show her, and stuck them in his mouth, licking them clean, before leaning in to kiss her again, making her taste herself on his lips, before leaning his forehead against hers and tugging lightly at her hair to make her turn her head. Knowing what he wanted, she gazed up at the mezzanine, still sprawled, languid and sated on Spike's lap. She could just make out Angel in the shadowed recess of the doorway, his eyes glowing yellow, before he stepped back and vanished.

"Where is everyone?"

"Angel is apparently still packing his clothes. He really doesn't want them getting messed up. Wesley is concentrating on their books and such. Cordelia is helping--she's apparently not too worried about her clothes because her coloring has changed just enough that she needs a whole new wardrobe. Spike and Darla are playing video games. I packed up all the food and the blood you just bought and put it away in the cabin. What took you so long?"

"I found Spike's car, but it was a mess. There was no way anyone was going to want to ride around in it. I scrubbed it down inside and out and took the black paint off the windows."

"Um…we're in a very sunny place and two of the folks travelling with us are vampires that apparently burst into flame in the sun."

"I just magicked up the windows to keep out harmful sun rays. I should probably do the other's cars while we're waiting…"

"I'll do it. I'm getting bored waiting around like this. They should have just gone with our idea and hopped in the cabin and let us just pop everyone to Nevada."

"Look at is this way. If we decide to go our separate ways at some point, it's best everyone has their own transportation. I wouldn't have just left all of them wandering around in the desert, you know."

"Maybe we should go ahead and look around for this secret base. It's going to take time for all of them to get themselves situated, and it's going to take hours and hours for them to get anywhere travelling the muggle way. We have a name, Ethan Rayne. That should be enough to get us
started. Do our phones work in this world?"

"You know, I don't know. I haven't actually tried it. I didn't really have anyone to call." Harry realized as he dug it out. He went into the office and borrowed Angel's phone to call himself. His phone rang. He tested Tom's as well, and was able to call him too.

"You're going to need to unpack the blood and food if we head off on our own."

"How annoying."

"Just, I don't know, make a refrigerator chest or something. We'll just transfer everything over and stuff it in Spike's trunk."

"Fine. Hold on."

A brief conversation with Wesley revealed that there were a couple of large footlockers in the basement that would be perfect for their needs. Harry went and fetched one while Tom headed out to the garden to set up the cabin so they could retrieve everything from within.

Wesley and Cordelia watched Harry return several minutes later with several trunks and head out to the yard.

"What are they up to, anyway?"

"They're Spike's nephews, and far too much like him in spite of being souled and human. I almost shudder to think, really."

"Yeah. Probably best not to ask. Alright, this last bunch should do it. Is there still room in your trunk?"

"No. I'm afraid we'll have to fill the back seat with what's left. Thank goodness Spike has a car as well or we wouldn't have room to fit everyone."

Angel came down laden with bags and marched out to his car to start packing everything away. He was becoming hyper-aware of the time. No retaliation had come for Darla's abduction yet, but it was just a matter of time. Wolfram and Hart could call up enough firepower at a moment's notice that he wasn't too sure about their chances, even forewarned that it was coming. Cordelia was now part demon, but not a particularly strong or deadly one. Spike was deadly in a fight, but he was crippled versus humans. Wesley would do his best, but he was only human, as were Spike's nephews and Darla herself, which left only him--and while he was probably the most dangerous vampire in the world, he was only one guy. They needed to leave, the sooner the better.

He slowed to a halt next to Spike and his nephews. Spike was looking rather morose. He mastered himself with difficulty--he smelled like sex and Darla. He wasn't sure if he wanted to rip his head off or bend him over the nearest flat surface.

"What's going on?"

"We decided not to go with you. You're all headed to Sunnydale, and well, we've already been there done that. We're going to go to Nevada instead, and see if we can find that Initiative base you all mentioned and snoop around."

"We made these for you to take with you. The large one here has all the food from the kitchen. It'll
preserve it while it's in there, so you don't have to worry about it going bad or anything. These
two small trunks have blood in them, one for each of you. The right side will keep the blood fresh.
There's a cup in the left side. If you just dump blood in it, it'll heat it up for you. I gave Spike my
cellphone. He has Harry's number. We can regroup another time if you all still think attacking the
place is a good idea."

The two boys twisted and were suddenly gone. The crack of displaced air from their
disappearance was almost deafening.

Spike sighed and kicked the footlocker moodily, while the rest slowly gathered to stare at the
place the two boys had just been.

"Are they demons?" Darla asked, sounding startled.

"Nah, human…well, mostly. They've got a bit of Naga in 'em and some other stuff from way
back. Just enough to make them interesting, not enough to keep me chip from going off, more's
the pity."

"Spike, they already told you they didn't want to be vampires." Cordelia reminded him.

"A guy can dream, can't he?"

"Wow. You must really like those two. You always said you'd never met anyone you liked
enough to keep around forever." Darla commented.

"There was one, but it didn't work out so well. I never bothered after that." Spike sighed, before
grabbing his trunk.

"I don't know that I have room for this…” Wesley fretted.

Spike sighed and dropped the smaller trunk back on top, and stooped to grab the large one. Angel
snatched his so Spike couldn't hoard all the blood. He didn't even make a crack about him being
too fat already or anything. Darla watched him go with what looked to be concern.

"Who'd he turn? I don't remember anyone."

"I don't know. He never mentioned it."

"Lilah! Are you done with the damned black-ops guys yet?" Lindsey demanded with a growl as
he stormed into her office. He could feel time slipping away from him—if he didn't move soon
Darla would be out of his reach…and so would that bastard Angel.

"No. They're still out. I'm supposed to get a call when the mission's complete."

"How long does it take to mow down a building full of crazies that are locked down in
quarantine?"

"That's already done. No, the problem is the Beast's crusty-faced minions were spotted all over
town, and more pockets of crazies kept erupting almost as quickly as our boys were getting rid of
them. They're hunting both now. If we can remove enough of her anchors she'll be too weakened
to try climbing out of her prison for a while and we'll be able to focus on other things."

"I need them! We're supposed to be getting a handle on this damned Quor'oth thing, and the only
folks that might conceivably know what's going on are out of our reach. If we don't move soon
events might get too far ahead of us, and what do we do then? The Senior Partners are expecting answers and results!"

"We both know you're more worried your little girlfriend hopping into bed with our friendly neighborhood brooding vampire the first chance she got."

"Damn it, Lilah, I'm being serious here!"

"So am I."

The phone rang. Lilah answered it while Lindsey stared at her intently, hoping it was good news.

"Whoopsie. Looks like it's too late. The watcher we detailed to the hotel after our surveillance net went down just reported that Angel, Darla, Spike and Angel's two minions have all packed their cars and taken off to parts unknown. I guess you'll have to wait until we know where they're headed."

Lindsey snarled and slammed his fist into her desk. Lilah just raised an eyebrow, straightened the papers she was working on and went back to work.

"Hmm…it'll be daylight in just a few hours…Angel's bedtime. Looks like you missed your chance to get in there first. Ah well, them's the breaks."

Lindsey glowered at her and stormed from the office.

It wasn't until he was halfway back to his own office that he realized--Lilah was getting updates that should have been going to him. He was in charge of the Angel/Spike/Quor'toth thing, she was in charge of keeping Glory somewhat contained until they tracked the source of the key energy and convinced it to go away. He was off his game and it was going to cost him if he didn't get hold of himself. He headed for the break room instead of directly back to his office, got himself some coffee, drank it slowly and made himself calm down. If he was going to get back on top of things he couldn't be storming around the office and flailing ineffectually at everything…and he had to stop letting Lilah get under his skin like she was.

When he was done he headed for the men's room, cleaned himself up a bit and made himself more presentable and headed for his office at a sedate pace.

"Sally, you can stop diverting updates to Lilah. I've got it. Are the files on the Scourge of Europe still in my office?"

"So, you got whatever was wrong with your medication straightened out?"

Lindsey forced himself to smile and stay relaxed. "Yeah, it's all out of my system now. It seems I was allergic or something."

"Oh, good. You do seem more clearheaded. Those files should still be in there."

"Excellent. Any further updates on Angel's location, be sure to send them through, also let me know when the black-ops team is operational again."

"Do you have orders for them?"

"Not at the moment. Just keep it to status reports for now."
"Okay."

Sally waited till Lindsey was in his office and then debated with herself for a moment before calling Lilah Morgan.

"Mr. McDonald said he's okay to receive his updates again. Is that alright?"

"Yes, it should be fine, he seems to be clearheaded again." Lilah assured her.

They chatted a moment longer and Lilah hung up with a smile. She'd already arranged for no further updates to be routed through dear little Sally, they'd be going directly to her own Rebecca. Little Lindsey had dropped the ball on this one, letting Darla lead him around by the nose to such a degree that he just let everything else drop. Oh well. His fumble was her touchdown. She put the finishing touches on her work, and headed off to see Sidney and update him on what all had been happening while Lindsey was weeping over the approaching dawn.

Spike perked up as they approached the outer limits of Sunnydale. They'd put up a new sign since the last time he'd arrived. He grinned to himself and rammed the sign, knocking it down, then continued on, laughing.

His mirth didn't last long; he was back in Sunnyhell.

"Why am I here? I should have headed right to Nevada instead of coming back here. I could be hanging out with the boys right now, scoping out the Initiative; instead, I'm back here, in my own personal hell on earth. Nothing good has ever happened to me here--I lost Dru, I lost the Ring of Amara, I got chipped, I lived in the Watcher's bathtub, the Whelp's manky basement... even when I got me own place, I was constantly plagued by the Slayer and her stupid boy-toy."

Spike slammed on the brakes and came to a sudden stop, sending Angel and Wesley screeching to a halt behind him.

He was still lost in his contemplations when Angel suddenly loomed up beside his window and pounded on it, looking annoyed and pissed off. He climbed out of the car and twisted out of the way when Angel tried to grab him to slam him into it. Psh. Did he really think he didn't see that coming? It was Peaches usual response when he was annoyed with him--look constipated and slam him into the nearest flat surface.

"Spike, what the hell! We almost crashed into you! Why'd you stop?"

"Why am I here?"

Angel stared at him a moment and his hands started to raise already poised to strangle him.

"You're having an existential crises? Now? We don't have time for this!"

"No, Peaches, why am I here? In Sunnydale, my own personal hell. Nothing good happens to me in this town. No one needs me here to gather forces or make plans or whatever the hell it is we're here for. Why did I come all the way here when I could have hopped on the interstate and been most of the way to Nevada already? My boys are there. I like them, and more importantly they like me. These last few days are the happiest I've been in a very long time. So why the bloody hell am I here instead of there with them? Tell me that!"
"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Of course it bloody well matters! This town is like a black hole of…badness. If I go back there I might never be able to escape! Bugger this! I'm going to bloody Nevada while I still have a chance!"

He started walking away from his car, towards the center of town. He came to a sudden stop and stood there for a long moment, before turning back and resolutely marching back to his car.

"Oh no you don't, Sunnyhell. I'm bloody well sick of this. Soldier boys trying to control me, Slayer beating me down. This town is killing me. I'm getting out while I still have a chance."

"Spike…"


Spike began muttering under his breath as he reached the car and climbed back inside. He executed a sharp U-turn around Angel, still chanting under his breath as he floored the gas pedal and starting tearing off back the way they'd just come. He screeched to a halt at the city limits, and then the car began lurching – stopping and starting as though he were fighting with himself. He finally passed the city limits and floored it again. He was soon out of sight, leaving no sign of his passing but a sizeable dust cloud that was slowly settling back down to earth.

Lindsey sat back and rubbed his neck, then glanced at his phone. He would have thought he'd have gotten some kind of update from someone by now…

He sat up straight and cursed.

"Lilah. Bloody bitch. She must have arranged to have everything routed to her secretary bypassing Sally…damn it!"

He hurried from the room and looked around, wondering who to go to first. He was probably going to have to make the rounds of the whole damned building to collect everything that was supposed to be coming to him…

He saw Lilah at the end of the hall and started after her. She turned and he sped his steps to catch up. By the time he reached the end of the hall she was already at the elevator. He watched to see where it stopped and then started for the stairs, running the two flights down.

He hurried down the hall, glancing in the offices he passed then finally saw her in the library. He eased the door open and slipped down the stacks till he got close enough to overhear her conversation.

"…so just approach as though you're still a member of the Watcher's Council and address these points. It will save us a lot of trouble in the long run if we can get them to cover it rather than using our manpower to do it. I'd prefer to have the black-ops team on standby in case they're needed for this Quar'toth thing, should it prove necessary."

"Certainly, Miss Morgan. I'll get right on it."

Lindsey ducked behind the stacks as she passed and smiled grimly. He still had to fix her earlier machinations, but that could wait. He'd just been handed a golden opportunity to steal the wind from her sails and get some of his own back before it was too late.

"Hello, is this Rupert Giles? Rutherford Sirk, Watcher's Council. Yes, I suppose that's true. You
know how it is, old man. Politics brings down the best of organizations, unfortunately. Indeed. Hmm? Ah yes. There's a Hell Goddess headed your way. Do settle down, old man. She's imprisoned in a human... ah, well there's the rub. Yes, isn't it always the way. She can conceivably escape to some extent. She steals people's sanity. Over time, those so afflicted become crusty-faced demon minions. They serve to anchor and stabilize her. If they're eliminated she won't have the strength to re-emerge for some time... Mr. Giles, I'm afraid there's more. Yes, quite. It occurred to some of us that we don't know what will happen should a vampire bite and turn one of the crazies. Yes, you see where I'm going with this. We're not sure how large she is in her unbound form. If she should get a connection to the Hellmouth, we fear it might allow her to escape altogether. You can see why this is something we don't want to chance. Yes, quite. I'm afraid there's more. Yes, I do apologize, but do keep in mind that I'm just the messenger. A busload of humans killed by a vampire that has just ended up in the Sunnydale morgue. Yes, forty. The Slayer is gone? The Hellmouth is her charge, man, where on earth did she bugger off to? Initiative? What's that then? Did you? I must not have gotten that memo. Mmmhm, I see. Mystics? And they've taken her friend captive. Just yourself left. Well, that is a pickle, isn't it? Faith? Ah, the other Slayer. I didn’t know the chit's name. I stopped bothering after there were three in the first six months I was with the council. She's currently incarcerated? Hmm. I hadn't heard that. Seems a waste, even if we've got a spare. If she was proving a problem she should have been eliminated so a new one would be called. We have procedures for a reason. Is that wise? If she's gone rogue, it might be better to leave her where she is, or even just send in an assassin. The new Slayer won't be worth much, but she'll still be better than nothing. Mmmhm. I will, of course, bow to your superior insight into the matter. If you think it worth the risk, I will see if I can arrange for her to be removed from the detention center. No promises, of course. While we can arrange matters, it isn't always as expediently as we might like, I'm sad to say. Very well. Let me see what I can arrange. If I can't get the other one released, I'll see if I can scrape together a team for backup for you until your girl returns. How bothersome. This is why we don't want them forming attachments. Say what you will, you must admit it's damned inconvenient at a time like this. I'll be in touch."

Lindsey slipped out and appeared beside him as he hung up the phone.

"So, the hellmouth has been left unguarded, has it?" he asked as he snatched the list of 'talking points' Lilah had left behind. "And the watcher wants the extra Slayer retrieved for backup? Did you get a name?"

"Faith Lehane. She's here in L.A. conveniently enough."

"Oh, right. I remember her. Who was this friend that was taken?"

"Willow Rosenberg. She was taken captive by something called the Initiative. It's apparently a government military demon-hunting group. They were responsible for giving a behavioral modification chip to William the Bloody, and they've been gathering up mystics and incarcerating them in a facility in Nevada. This Willow is the second they know about. The other is a fellow named Ethan Rayne, chaos magician. The Slayer's group had several run-ins with him over the years. He got unlucky the last time he was in town, and he was carted away by this initiative to be rehabilitated, whatever that means."

Lindsey nodded and noted the extra information on the sheet.

"Good, good. I'll see about getting the Slayer released," he offered, before handing him his card. "I'll be in touch."

There was a spring in his step as he started back upstairs. This was just what he needed to get back in the game.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

LA gang arrives in Sunnydale. Buffy, Xander and Willow have car trouble. The gang mounts a rescue effort to save Willow. Darla gets kidnapped.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone who left kudos. If there's anything you particularly like, or even anything you hate, please leave comments. Feedback helps a lot. Anyway, on to the story!

"Welcome to the Magic Box. Please look around and then spend lots of money. Wait. I know you. And you. Oh, Cordelia. I'm dating Xander now. You can't have him or his penis back. I'm currently using it. Well, not at this moment, though I look forward to spending several hours of quality time with it once he returns."

"Anya. I believe we've talked about this." Giles sighed tiredly as he came out of the back. He stopped dead, eyed Cordelia, then Wesley, before turning to Angel. He whipped off his glasses and began cleaning them rather methodically while staring Angel in the eye.

"Angel. Fancy seeing you in town. What brings you?" he asked, his voice and gaze cold. His eyes zeroed in on the tiny blonde next to him and his already cold gaze turned arctic. "And Darla. Funny, last I heard you'd been dusted."

"It's kind of a long story. Maybe you should call the others so I don't have to repeat it."

"Buffy isn't here, neither are Xander or Tara. Willow was captured by the Initiative last night."

"Willow was…how? Why?"

"Yeah, what does Buffy's boyfriend have to say for himself?"

"Riley's missing. Buffy and the others headed out a few hours ago to try to get Willow back."

"They know where the facility is? They think the three of them will be enough?"

"No, we have no idea where the place is beyond Nevada. The three of them were quite adamant about doing something, and none were inclined to listen when I pointed out that we have no idea where to even begin looking, so they left. I figured they could wander around a few days and try to get it out of their system. I've been putting in calls to see if I could get more information, or possible help from the Watcher's council to effect Willow's release, but I've yet to hear anything positive on that front. I did however receive a troubling call from a council member just before you all arrived. He seems to be as out of the loop on things as I seem to be, but his information was as valuable as it is troubling. There's a hell goddess headed this way who steals people's
sanity and turns them into her demon minions. There is a busload of dead people that were just dumped on our doorstep that are going to rise soon. Excuse me if I'm in no mood to play around." Giles snapped.

"This hell goddess, is she named Qu'artoth by any chance?"

"No. My contact referred to her as the Beast."

"Wow. This is so much worse than we were expecting."

"We should have called ahead."

"I don't know where to go. Do we stay here and help out or do we head to Nevada?"

"What brought you here in the first place if not Willow's abduction, a vampire massacre or a hell goddess? And what or who is Kuwartoth?"

"That's just it, we don't know."

"Maybe you should start at the beginning."

"Maybe you should all stop the vampires from rising before you have story time. A busload is a lot of vamps when there's no slayer in town." Anya interrupted.

Giles nodded. "You are correct. We need to focus on the immediate before anything else. I'll get the holy water. Wesley, come. I have an extra priest's collar."

"Priest?"

"People tend to object to just anyone wandering around the morgue. We can't behead the bodies or run them through or it will bring official attention that we can ill afford given all the catastrophes that seem to be piling up. Priests performing last rights may be allowed where no others are, and such a cover will allow the holy water to go unremarked. Angel, you and Cordelia wander the area directly around the morgue. Some may already have risen. We'll join you as soon as we've investigated the morgue itself. Let's go."

"How much longer is this going to take? Anything could have happened to her by now!" Buffy burst out impatiently.

Xander glanced at Tara who choked off a sob and scurried towards the bathroom. She hadn't been taking Willow's abduction well, and she seemed to be getting worse the closer they got to the border of Nevada.

Buffy looked briefly chagrined when Tara ran off, but her impatience soon got the better of her and she began pacing once more.

"It takes as long as it takes."

"Stupid car!" Buffy growled.

"I told you I had trouble getting it started the other day. I never got the chance to take it in to have it looked at--I was either at work or running around looking for bleach boy. I just hope whatever's wrong isn't going to be too expensive. I don't know about you, but I didn't bring that much money with me. I have a credit card for emergencies, but I was hoping it wouldn't be needed. We also
should have eaten before we left. I didn't have much appetite from worrying about what might be happening to Willow, but it's been a few hours now, and my stomach doesn't seem to care that I'm sick with worry."

Buffy growled and paced some more, and then nudged Xander to get his attention. The mechanic was heading out. Xander hurried to meet him. Buffy strode out front to stare out over the desert. The wait was excruciating. She needed to be doing something. Every moment they were stuck there was another moment that something terrible could be happening to Willow. Worry for Riley was also eating her alive. After Willow was grabbed, they all realized they hadn't seen Riley at all the previous day. They didn't know if he'd been grabbed as well, if he'd been killed or turned…or, as Anya had suggested in a particularly uncharitable moment, he had been the one to have her grabbed to cover up the fact he was cheating on her with vampire whores and being an arsonist in his off time.

Their leave-taking from Sunnydale hadn't been a pleasant one. Giles had urged them to stay put and let him make some calls, but they'd all been too worried and impatient to listen. Xander and Anya had argued over her comments about Riley, as had she and Anya…and then Tara in a truly uncharacteristic burst of fury had unloaded on all of them and cursed the initiative for meddling in things they didn't understand and had basically accused Riley of turning traitor as well. She'd just crumpled into herself and started sobbing afterwards, so Buffy had been able to contain her initial urge to pound both their faces in, but it had been a near thing.

Willow was her rock. Having her gone left her feeling like the ground was crumbling beneath her feet. Riley's disappearance brought back memories of Angel's trip to the dark side--his sudden vanishing act, along with Anya's accusations had left her reeling. Their heedless flight from Sunnydale had left them stranded miles from anywhere at a crappy gas station. She didn't know what to think or how to feel or what to believe and all this waiting gave her too much time to think.

"Is it too much to ask? Just once, it would be nice to have someone swoop in an save the day that isn't me." She could feel her eyes filling with tears. Willow and Riley both at once was too much. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

"Um, Buffster?"

She blinked the tears out of her eyes and turned to face Xander.

"Bad news. He doesn't have the part we need. We can call a tow truck to take us to the next town, where hopefully they will. We can hope a truck or kindly motorist passes by and that we can hitch a ride, or we can hang out here and wait till morning when his supplier comes by. Those are our options."

"We don't have time for this."

"Well, barring a miracle, those are our choices Buff."

"What's going on?"

Tara had returned, her face blotchy from crying. She sank down onto the curb in despair when Xander finished laying out the dire straits they were in. Buffy could feel herself crumbling and she didn't know how to stop it.

"We're in the middle of nowhere! How likely is it that someone is even going to pass by this way? We'll have to be towed. Again. The last town we passed was at least an hour behind us and then we still have to hope there's a garage open that has the part we need, and then we'll have to make
up all the lost travel time!"

"I know, Buff! What else can we do? Hope someone's just going to swoop by in the nick of time who just happens to be going the same place we are? How likely is that?"

"Um, guys? Someone's coming."

Buffy and Xander turned to look and saw a black dot followed by a billowing cloud of road dust.

"Hey, if this guy needs gas, maybe we'll get lucky and he'll be our knight in shining armor." Buffy joked.

"Are we ever that lucky?"

"First time for everything, right?"

They watched with little hope as the black dot slowly grew closer. Hope grew as the dot resolved into a large black car that began slowing as it approached and then tore into the gas station in a cloud of dust and a squeal of tires.

Hope turned to angry despair as Buffy realized she recognized the car, and it was the last person on the face of the earth that she wanted to see.

"SPIKE!" Tara and Xander both yelled as the peroxide blonde exited his car in a swirl of dark leather and cigarette smoke--Tara with joy, Xander with furious aggravation.

"Bloody hell. I just can't seem to get away from you lot, can I?"

"Stormcloud, we're at the bird-shaped rock. Where to next? Uh huh, uh huh…alright, got you."

Xander and Buffy sat forward so they could see better out the front.

"Where are we? Where are we going? This doesn't look like a military base. We're supposed to be finding Willow! Take us to where she's being kept right now!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Slayer, or you can get out and start walking. If you can't keep your bloody head on, I'm striking you from this mission."

Buffy sputtered indignantly. "I'm the Slayer!"

"What of it? It means nothing out here, girlie. The Initiative base in Sunnyhell was small potatoes, and you lot had inside help. This place is on a whole different level. You're completely out of your depth. You go stomping around declaring you're the Slayer and expecting everyone to just fall in line, the only thing you're going to do is get yourself stupidly killed and the rest of us with you."

"Willow has been captured by the Initiative! I realize that doesn't mean anything to you--you're nothing but an evil, soulless, disgusting …AH!"

Buffy slammed into the seat as Spike suddenly jammed on the breaks.

"Get out."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Slayer. Get the bloody hell out of my car, you annoying, self-righteous bitch."
You can bloody well stay out here until the others arrive in a few hours. I have had enough. I have gone above and beyond just by listening to your non-stop whining the last few hours."

Xander punched Spike in the back of the head.

"Suck it up, blood boy. You seem to have forgotten that you don't make the rules here."

"The hell I don't. My car, my bloody rules. Both of you, out!"

"Tch. Make us." Buffy taunted "Or are you feeling too impotent to do anything?"

"That is IT!" Spike growled as he stormed out of the car to the sound of Buffy and Xander laughing.

They continued laughing and even smirked when he ripped the back door open. Xander got out, menace and vicious satisfaction in every line of his body. The last few hours, worrying and not being able to do anything about it had been hell. He was sick to his stomach, frustrated and pissed off-- and Spike's stupid face made a perfect, tempting target. It wouldn't help Willow, but it would make him feel better. Buffy seemed to agree as she was right behind him with her slay-face on.

Tara climbed out as well, yelling for them to stop, but they were beyond listening. Xander lunged, fist cocked and ready, the other reaching to grab hold of his shirt, but Spike slipped away like oil and his punch swung right past his face, sending him stumbling off balance. Buffy dove in right behind him, smiling and confident, but she had no more luck landing a hit than he had, and even ended up tripping over him. Xander jumped up from the ground and Buffy found her feet and they spun back maneuvering Spike between them--blood sport monkey in the middle. The damned vamp kept dancing around them, turning them in circles and positioning them so they ended up hitting each other rather than him. A glancing blow from Buffy sent Xander reeling to crash into the side of the car.

Buffy let out a primal scream "You see what you did? You monster? I've had it! You've outlived your usefulness!" She obviously meant business because a stake appeared in her hand.

Xander straightened slowly, stifling a whimper as best he could. He was pretty sure his ribs were broken. He straightened nonetheless. If dead boy jr. was going to be dusted, he wanted to watch.

Buffy lunged and the stake was ripped from her hand to go flying passed all of them, only to land with a thunk in the hand of a familiar tweed-clad person.

"What happened?"

"Spike got his chip out. He surprised us."
"He danced circles around you both and let you beat up each other." Angel disagreed.

"He's evil."

"Less evil than you, it seems."

The blood drained from Buffy's face, though her pallor lasted but a moment before a look of cold fury over took it.

"Excuse me?" You could almost see the icicles dripping off her voice.

"Thing about Spike, something that really infuriated us all back in the day, is that Spike has always had a weird code of honor. He was still a vampire, of course, I'm not trying to assert that he was some paragon of goodness. He wasn't. None of us were--but there are shades of grey in there. He doesn't like unfair fights. He used to rile up whole barrooms worth of people--hardened, muscled dockworkers and the like, deep in their cups--because he knew he was more than a match for an ordinary human. Groups of vampire hunters came to town, he'd seek them out. Slayers, well, he's the only vampire I've ever known to run towards them. He killed his first slayer when he was twenty. I don't think you fully appreciate what kind of a feat that was. I'm approaching two hundred and fifty and you, Buffy, are a whole lot stronger than I am. I'm a good deal stronger than Spike, even now when he's approaching 120. While he could torture someone if he felt it necessary, he never really had the stomach for it, something Angelus used to take great delight in punishing him for. Angelus did like torture. A lot. I think you can fill in the blanks. The point is, he never had the stomach or the desire to torment someone helpless to fight back. You two are human. You're supposed to have souls. You're supposed to be better than that. Right now, I'm not seeing it. I can't believe I'm actually going to say this…I love you, Buffy, I do…but Spike is family. He's not your toy and he's not your punching bag."

Buffy's face was completely white by the time he was done. Xander looked torn between fury and illness. They both stared at his retreating back aghast.

"Angel! You can't just leave us here!"

Angel grimaced at Buffy's despairing shriek. Wesley and Cordelia hovered uncertainly outside the second car. Angel only drove a short distance further on and got back out. Wes and Cordelia exchanged a look and got back in their car and followed, pulling in beside him. Spike ducked his head out of a cave a bit further down.

"Thought I heard you lot. Took you long enough."

"Well, excuse us for having to stop a mass rising of vampires before we left."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch. Come on. We have a plan, we need to have ourselves a meeting and get all the details worked out."

"Do they need to be in on it?" Angel wondered, tilting his head to indicate Xander and Buffy.

"Prolly best, but keep your girl reined in. I'm in no mood for either of them."

"I may not be able to do anything, but as I've started to discover, Stormcloud's got a bad temper, and Curly's a bit on the unforgiving side. Neither of them is best pleased with those two right now."

Tom rolled out a large paper with a pencil sketched map on it.
"Alright. We're about here right now, a good fifty miles from the base."

"Why are we so far away? If we just get closer we could be getting Willow out right now instead of…"

Tom talked over her, not missing a beat, as though the sound of her voice was insignificant background noise. "This here is the start of the ten mile perimeter outside the gate. No unauthorized entry beyond this point. It is a kill on sight zone. It doesn't matter if you're a couple of drunken teenagers out for a joyride, or an elderly hippy high on peyote, stumbling your way through a vision quest. If you are in this zone and you are not supposed to be there, you are killed. No warnings, no apologies, no need to explain. End of story. Authorized persons coming to visit stop at this point and wait for armed escorts to approach. They surround your car or cars with jeeps full of soldiers with machine guns that are trained on all passengers at all times. Any attempts to deviate from the assigned speed and direction is met with instant retaliation. This here is the outermost gate. At this point, authorized personnel are made to disembark, your identification is checked, you are patted down for weapons and your vehicles are searched. If you pass this checkpoint you are allowed to proceed with your armed escort to this point here, which is the parking lot. It is thirty miles from the nearest facility. You are not allowed to drive your own vehicles on base except from the first checkpoint to the parking lot. Once you've been loaded up onto the jeeps to be taken further, you come to the first security checkpoint. Visitors enter this room one at a time, are checked for weapons and such again while being scanned for temperature and heartbeat readings by fellows in a separate room watching by video from ten miles away. If they see anything they don't like, they have several remote options to take down everyone in the room--both visitor and security personnel, just in case the soldiers were being either traitorous or interfered with. Best case scenario, you're knocked out and taken elsewhere to a secure lockup where you are stripped and wake up in a cell to begin interrogation. Worst case scenario, everything in the room dies, and the remains are burned to ash. There is evidence of at least one such fire in the room in the past. If we can make it that far, we're doing good, but we're not home free. The parts of the base that one can see above ground are the size of a good-sized city. There is more, a lot more, down below ground. We're not sure how extensive. One cannot simply wander around. There is a kill zone around each building. Hallways are set up so that the soldiers at either end have long clear avenues to get a shot in--nothing to hide behind, no cover. There are doors, but they're locked. Inside many of these rooms are groups of soldiers ready to spill out at a moment's notice to kill everything moving in their area. These hallways are divided every fifty feet or so by locked door, which require a different passcode for each side. An armed guard keeps a gun trained on you while the guard on the other side of the door enters the passcode. He returns the favor while you're heading the other way. Only one door is allowed to be unlocked at a time. Only one individual or group of visitors is allowed to be in a given corridor at the same time. If there are multiple groups visiting at the same time they are taken by elaborate routes through the locked hallways and destruction zones so that they never meet in passing, so that they never go the same way twice, and so that there is only ever one group or individual for those manning the security cameras for that particular section have to watch. If you deviate from your assigned instructions or set off any warning bells, you are allowed to be killed instantly, no warning."

By this point the others were quite pale indeed.

"Oh kiddies. We haven't even begun. We haven't covered the roaming bands of attack dogs, the snipers hidden in plain view, the underground caches of soldiers that can erupt from right under your feet, or the instant response chopper teams with machine guns, or the sniper towers, or the heat-seeking missile response team. There are about twenty mass graves in this sector here which are filled with hundreds of demons each. They either get attacked a lot or they go through their 'guests' at an alarming rate. Our best guess is a little of both."

Tara started shaking. "It's hopeless. There's no way we can even get close enough"
"Nah, it's alright. We've got a plan."

"Not making me feel better. We know what your plans are like."

"No, you know what happens when I get bored and scrap my plans."

"It's a pretty good plan. So long as everyone reads their procedure manuals tonight, embraces their persona and gives an oscar-worthy performance tomorrow, we estimate we've at least a 50% chance of getting both in and out alive."

"For a place like this, those are pretty good odds."

"But how? They'll kill us before we even get near the gate!"

"Simple. They're expecting us."

"Come again."

"Guess what darlings? You've just been recruited to be part of a U.N. inspection team."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Like anyone would believe you work for the U.N.!

"Um, Buffy?" Angel sighed. "He did. He was also in the French foreign legion. Demon division."

Buffy was so appalled she simply sunk back in her seat in shock. Xander started choking on his coke and had to be pounded on the back.

"I have experience in this sort of thing. What's more, I called a guy I know, so if they call for confirmation on the members of the inspection team, a brief dossier on each of you as well as myself will be faxed over."

"That reminds me. We need a picture of each of you. Hedwig is going to fly the film to the guy so there will be photos attached to your records if anyone does call for them. Angel, why don't we start with you?"

"Speaking of which, here are the identities we've compiled for each of you. You need to be these people when we go in there, so learn them well. Tara luv, you're going to be the resident bleeding heart. Your name is Bethany Lovegood. You specialize in anthropology and folklore. You were added to the team because of politicking of various sorts and chosen to provide a balance to my and Wesley's more conservative views. Here are your details, should anyone ask, and a list of points for passionate rants about peace, love and togetherness. Oh, we've also included a few petitions for you to whip out should you need a distraction. We can go over all that in more depth later. Cordelia. Your name is Amanda Bentworth-Campbell. You are wealthy and important, and you know it. Whelp, you are U. N. captain James Falstaff. Use your soldier knowledge, remember your rank. Your ribs were injured during a run in with a hostile subterranean, which if the opportunity presents itself you are to brag about having ended all on your lonesome under controlled conditions."

Angel returned from his picture, Tara, Cordelia and then Xander followed.

"Peaches, you are Nigel Chester Fowl, Ches to your friends. You are the only son and heir of reclusive Irish billionaire tycoon Artemis Fowl. You are on the team because your daddy is so damned rich that he can just do that. You and Miss Bentworth-Campbell are essentially taking a very expensive trip to the zoo. Slayer, you are Agatha Prewitt. You attended a very exclusive women's college on scholarship, and worked very hard until achieving your Ph.D. Your area of
expertise is Indo-Persian Sanskrit poetry of the 14th century in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are approximately twelve such poems in existence worldwide. They were all written by the same fellow. You are the world's leading expert. Of course, it's a completely useless field of study. You're highly educated, ambitious, and were sure with your advanced degree that you were going places. Instead, you're essentially the secretary of the team, and my assistant. Feel free to make faces at my back and be pissed off, just keep in mind that for the length of our tour, I'm your boss, and you don't want to alienate me. Smile and be helpful when I address you. Expect me to constantly get your name wrong, and perhaps make pithy comments about your field of expertise. Remember you are not the Slayer. You cannot react as a trained fighter. If a sudden demon attack happens, you MUST react as a civilian for whom such an event would be something of a novelty. You must let the commando guys do all the work. You cannot leave any dents or craters or other signs of your strength."

He handed her a sheet with her profile and waved her off to get her picture taken.

"Watcher, you are Reginald Travers. You're the extra guy on the team. You ended up being added because Britain wanted an extra bit of leverage and you were chosen to be that. You have important connections, but are as of yet of little personal consequence. You're highly educated, traditional and conservative to balance out Bethany Lovegood's very liberal views, and provide extra official ballast to the mission to counteract the presence of two --Ches and Amanda--who are really only there because of wealth and relatives. I am Sir William Pratt. I am the most senior member and leader of our little expedition. I will do the talking. I am Agatha's direct superior as she is my assistant, something neither of us is too pleased with, I am higher ranked than Reginald and Bethany. I have no direct authority over Captain Falstaff, but as the head of the expedition I still technically outrank him except in direct military matters. I have no authority over Ches and Amanda, but I've known both since they were children, and I'm friendly with both their rich daddies, so they know to only push so far and no further. They were slightly spooked by the hostile subterranean killed under controlled conditions by Captain Falstaff. They're mostly outraged that they were nearly brutally murdered by the incompetence of everyone who isn't them. In reality, they are most of the reason that Captain Falstaff was injured as badly as he was, as they believe rules apply to other people, and thus ended up getting him injured when he had to intervene, and didn't listen well when he was trying to save them."

"We all look different." Cordelia commented as he finished speaking.

"A bit necessary, unless you want there to be a good chance that, even if we escape should something go wrong, we all end up with commandos storming our places and capturing the lot of us. What we're doing right now is highly illegal, remember. Plausible deniability, and it will help you stay in character. You are not Cordelia Chase right now. You are Amanda Bentworth-Campbell, and the photos we just took will agree if they're sent for. I already have an official file with the U.N., and the French Foreign Legion has been keeping my records updated, so I shouldn't have to worry about that."

"You don't look any different. What if one of us slips and calls you Spike?"

"Tomorrow I'll be Sir William Pratt, but I would suggest you not slip. Work really hard at it in fact. If you don't think you can do it, back out now and save us the trouble of dying stupidly. Just keep that in mind. Our lives, and Red's depend on how well we perform. Unlike Super Mega-Death Massacre III there is no reset button. We get it right or we're out of the game. We have until twilight tomorrow to get ourselves into character, so I suggest everyone practice very diligently."

"Actually, everyone should start right now. The first test is going to be before we even get to the base. Reclusive Irish billionaire tycoon Artemis Fowl has a private plane currently in the nearest airport. Ches here gets to go on the missions he does because of little things like that. We've
arranged a short flight around the area tomorrow afternoon that will have everyone landing at the airport just after sunset. We had the pilot fudge his records a bit and slipped in a note that it's a private flight arriving from New Zealand, so they won't think it odd that your days and nights are mixed up. We liberated two humvees and marked them up to look like U.N. transports. Tom and I will be driving said humvees to meet all of you on the tarmac. Captain Falstaff will tell us we don't have clearance and to 'run off for now', and will help cement the idea that you're a college boy who was fast-tracked to officer and are in the U.N. military because you couldn't cut it in the real military. This is fairly important as it will help lower their guard and make them overlook minor missteps you might make. Given the makeup of the group, I suppose "Reginald" and "Agatha" should be the two drivers…"

"I don't know how to drive. I've only done it once and I was really bad at it." Buffy admitted in a small voice.

"We can work that in. When you exit the plane just head for the lead humvee as though fully expecting and intending to drive."

"I'll make sure I get off the plane first." Angel agreed.

Buffy looked confused. Angel didn't bother elaborating as it would help her react naturally when the time came.

"Everyone needs to pack a bag for a trip, they'll be expecting luggage of some sort. We also need to put together briefcases…"

"We need to tweak you two so you appear normal on their heat-readings, make you sun temporarily sunproof just in case, and give you reflections."

"So much to do, so little time."

Tom and Harry, disguised as two young U.S. army privates, a blonde and a redhead, stood at ease while staring straight ahead—which Xander had made them practice the night before. They could feel the bored stares of the guys in the escort jeeps while they waited. Wesley--Reginald, that is--came out first. He blinked and looked around in interest, nearly dropped his briefcase, and had to be nudged out of the way by Tara--"Bethany", who smiled sweetly, helped him gather up what he was holding and followed after. "Captain Falstaff" came next, grinned a bit and sauntered out. Tom and Harry snapped into rigid salutes, as did the fellows waiting by the jeep. He eyed the various soldiers, and then seemed to remember they were stuck like that until he did something. He saluted back carelessly. "At ease, boys."

Tom and Harry fell back into their at ease stances and stared straight ahead as the "Captain" looked around, nodded amiably to the waiting jeeps.

"You know, I don't think you two are cleared for where we're going. Eh, just run off for now. We'll call if we need you again. Dismissed."

"Yes sir!"

The sergeant in charge of the convoy stifled a sigh at the clueless captain, and watched as the boys--a couple greenhorns straight out of bootcamp by the looks of it, gave each other a discreet fist-bump at their good fortune, sauntered back towards the building, and then abruptly changed course and headed for the nearest females--a couple of giggly teenage girls lingering outside the door and sneaking a forbidden cigarette on the fly while their parents were out of sight. The two
greenhorns puffed like a couple of pigeons and went strutting up to them. Much giggling, eyelash fluttering and twirling of hair ensued.

He could hear his men snorting in amusement at the youngsters behind him.

The rest of the U.N. delegation disembarked. A tiny wisp of a thing with dark hair in a severe bun, glasses and a somewhat unfortunate nose marched to the lead humvee as though expecting to drive, only to be laughed at by the twenty-something frat-boy they seemed to have with them for some reason, and patted on the head. The leggy blonde with them was preening nearby in her compact and mentioned offhand that all her luggage was still on the plane. The doofus captain looked around and realized he'd sent the two privates off already, looked chagrined and hustled the glasses girl and the glasses guy off to fetch everything. Princess with the legs gave Captain clueless a look that probably froze the mans balls off and he scrambled to open the door to the humvee for her. She hopped in beside playboy who was acting like a kid with a new toy. A dignified fellow in a suit wearing wire-rimmed glasses that looked like something out of Masterpiece theatre came out next carrying a small travel bag and well-worn briefcase. Glasses girl and glasses boy came out behind him, each struggling with several large, expensive looking suitcases--two different sets, probably frat-boy and princess' stuff. The other dark-haired girl, who looked like a librarian crossed with a hippie hurried over to help them.

After twenty five minutes of scrambling and unpacking and whatnot, they were finally ready to go.

"Damned civilians." the sergeant muttered, prompting a few quiet snickers from his men. "ALL RIGHT, LET'S MOVE OUT!"

Tom and Harry watched the convoy disappear and felt their shoulders relax just a bit. So far so good.

"Alright, let's us and the 'girls' finish up so we can be positioned by the time they all arrive at the base."

They each put an arm around their respective 'girl'--actually two shadow clones.

"You make a surprisingly convincing girl."

"We're just pretending to be Lavender and Parvati." Tom's clone explained.

They and the 'girls' headed towards the nearest plane, whose cargo hold had recently been partly emptied. There were some guys working nearby, who eyed them idly, so they pitched their voices to carry.

"Are you going to check for bombs?" Harry's 'girl' squealed, while gazing at him like the second coming.

"And terrorists. Someone has to keep the world safe for democracy."

"O.M.G. Did you ever, like, get shot at?"

"Just an hour ago, in fact. Bullet went right through my upper arm, right here. I dumped some gun powder in and cauterized it. Stings a bit." Tom added nonchalantly.

"Wow. You're totally, like, Rambo or something."
"Just doing my job."

The guys working nearby were trying very hard not to laugh, and even gave them a discreet thumbs up before hopping in the baggage transport and heading inside. The four of them hurried into the cargo hold, confident that if anyone asked about the two privates they'd liberated alongside the humvees from the nearest base, word would come back as to how exactly they ended up wherever the plane was going to. The clones popped, Tom untransfigured the two unfortunate privates and laid them out behind the boxes still inside.

"You were sent off to deliver equipment to the airport. A clueless captain told you both to 'run off'. Taking advantage of your sudden free time, you picked up a couple of girls, bragged a bit on how you're a dangerous and deadly member of the U.N. peacekeeping forces, and also an anti-terrorism expert. You got laid right in the cargo hold of the plane you were inspecting, and fell asleep." Tom explained as he altered their memories. When he was done, he straightened and he and Harry apparated back to base camp to await the arrival of the others.

"You know, I don't think I've ever come to this place other than for dinner." Darla commented as she looked out over the crowd of the Bronze.

"Are you a fan of the blooming onion as well?" Anya asked curiously.

"The what?"

"Oh…right. You were a vampire. A normal one, I mean. Not like Spike."

Darla just looked at her.

"Well then, this should be new and exciting. I've never really had a girls' night out before. Usually if I come here I'm with Xander."

"No girls' nights? Ever? You need to expand your horizons. I have lots of fond memories of girls' nights with Dru."

"Oh? Did you do each other's hair and gossip about Spike and Angel?"

"No. Mostly we just did each other."

"Really? And this is allowed even if you're in a relationship with a man? I wonder why Xander never mentioned this. I know he said it wasn't allowed to be with other men… oh. I see. It wasn't stated explicitly, but he perhaps thought it went without saying. Although…I'm pretty sure Buffy doesn't have such girls' nights…unless she, Willow and Tara are and I'm just not invited. They always leave me out of things!"

"Maybe not. The Slayer doesn't seem like the type."

"I'm not the type to what?"

"Oh, hello Faith. I believe she meant Buffy."

"B? What about her?"

"Did you know girls' nights were okay while in a relationship with a man?"

"I don't do relationships, so it's never really come up. Looking for new adventure, are you?"
"Well, no not really. I just don't like being left out."

"I'm going to have to vote with D on this one. B's wicked uptight. She gets all twitchy and remorseful when she lets loose. I can't see her having any 'girls' nights, not while she's knocking boots with soldier boy. She likes pretending she's white bread through and through. Why so curious? Xan Man not scratching your itch?"

"Not at all. He happens to be a very virile and satisfying lover. I have no complaints on that front, beyond the fact that he's not here right now and I haven't had my orgasms for two days now."

"Tch. I've been in prison for months. Women's prison. I've got no real problem switching tracks, if you know what I mean, but most of those bitches are kind of hard-core grungy. Not my scene."

"I've been dead. I was with Angelus for 150 years and he killed me to protect his schoolgirl toy. Who he's not even with any more, I might add."

"I feel your pain, sister. B tried feeding me to him once. I ended up in a coma for the better part of a year. I was wicked pissed when I woke up, I can tell you that much."

"She tried to feed a fellow Slayer to a vampire? Hmph. She's as insane as Angel is."

"He's insane? I thought that was Drusilla?"

"By vampire terms he's insane." Darla sighed. "I mean, think about it. What would you think of a lion that one day turned on its pride and ran off to join a herd of gazelles, started killing other lions for trying to hunt them and later shacked up with one? Humans and lions alike would agree the lion was a stone cold lunatic and probably needed to be put down."

"You're right, he is insane." Anya agreed. "What's Spike then?"

"Pavlov's dog or a Clockwork Orange. Take your pick. Though he's slightly insane as well. He's been a bit of a sheep in wolf's clothing since the day he was turned. He always enjoyed the human world a great deal."

"What even got you two on the subject in the first place? You looking for some girl-action D?"

"Unfortunately, I can't have any action right now. I was dying of syphilis when I was turned. When I was resurrected I was returned to what I was before that. It never even occurred to me. It's probably a good thing that Watcher fellow mentioned the possibility. I don't know how long I'll be stuck like this. I'd rather not be rotting from the inside out while I do so."

"G-man sent you to a std clinic?" Faith snorted.

"Oddly enough, he did."

"He looking for a bit of action and wants to make sure the goods are all in working order?"

"Probably. Most men are. I was a prostitute when I was alive. I lived on the outskirts of a "Good Christian" settlement. By day it was all God, sin and damnation. Once night fell they were lining up outside my door. Not a one would acknowledge me in the light of day, of course. If I tried to acknowledge them, the best I could have hoped for would have been to be spat upon. At the worst, being stoned and driven from all the 'good and decent' people. Hypocrites."

"You don't have to tell me. I was a vengeance demon for over a thousand years. My specialty was scorned women. I know very well that men often suck."
"Preaching to the choir. All the men in my life sucked from my dad on down, though mom was no picnic either. I don't do relationships for a reason. I seem to be a loser magnet."

The three ladies sighed in unison.

"You know what? This is bull. Come on. We're dancing." Faith decided.

Darla and Anya glanced at each other and shrugged.

"Sure. Let's go."

Despair was her only companion. Despair, fear and a little bit of anger, and perhaps some hope, though that was being crushed the longer she was there.

"Okay, so it's not my only companion. I have companions aplenty." she thought to herself wryly.

She'd been trying to teleport, or open a doorway, or make herself incorporeal, or something, but she not only didn't have any ingredients to do a spell, she couldn't quite muster up the focus she needed to try to just force the issue. She was pretty sure she'd been drugged. Everything seemed sort of soft and fuzzy around the edges. All she could seem to do was sit there and stare out at what had to be the whitest room she'd ever seen or imagined.

She was never going to the zoo again. She'd never really thought about the animals being in cages before. After this she wouldn't be able to look at them all hopelessly locked away and not feel some sympathy.

She was even going to be nicer to Spike. He'd been where she was now…well, not really. She was pretty sure she wasn't in Sunnydale, though only because she was pretty sure they'd destroyed that base. Unless they didn't.

Maybe she was actually in Sunnydale. Just a few blocks from her friends. It might have well been a continent. There was a big, mean looking guy with a gun right outside the door to the cage room where she was being kept. She couldn't do magic, and she was only wearing a thin pair of pajamas, like something from a hospital.

The door to the cage room opened and she blinked slowly at the sudden assault to her senses. It was the first color she'd seen in what seemed like years and years. Everything in there was either white or shiny metal. The doctors, or whatever they were, wore white coats. It was so pervasive it made her eyeballs ache. A group of people, who didn't look like the doctors entered and there wasn't a white coat to be seen.

"So, this is the rehabilitation center then?"

It was sort of funny. The guy sort of reminded her of Spike. Well, Spike if he was more like Giles. He even wore glasses and had the same "I'm so very British, I drink tea and my upper lip never moves, it's so very stiff" kind of voice.

There was a dark-haired girl just behind him who was staring around at all the cages and looking like she was going to cry. She reminded her of Tara.

Tara.

She must be so worried. She'd been so scared when those commandos had busted into their room. She had just backed into a corner, shaking her head 'no', trembling so bad she had just sunk down
to the floor once her back hit the wall. She acted like she thought they were coming for her. When they had grabbed her instead, she had looked so shocked, so horror stricken, she had wanted to comfort her, even while she was being zapped and knocked unconscious.

She didn't actually know if they had left Tara alone or if they'd grabbed her too. She'd been trying not to think about it, actually. She didn't know if Tara was in a cage too and she just couldn't see her from where she was, or if she'd tried to fight the commando guys and they'd shot her…

Even beneath the fuzziness, her mind flailed and ran screaming from the idea that Tara might be gone from the world. No, it was easier to sit quietly and let the fuzz take her.

The tour group was wandering around, peering in cages, asking questions, writing things on their clipboards. She was definitely never going to the zoo again. She felt like a thing, not a person at all, sitting here while they all stared at her. She wanted to scream at them, flip them off, something, anything just so they would stop looking at her like she didn't even matter at all.

That was when something weird happened.

A sparkle of non-white on the ceiling drew her attention, though it was hard to get her head to respond enough to tilt back so she could look at it properly.

The initial blue glimmer slowly became a swirly rainbow vortex.

That's when the flying sabre-toothed vampire squirrels appeared. They dropped down and started flying and running every which way. All the gawkers started screaming and flailing and bunched together in a big knot right in front of her cage.

That's when it got really weird.

Another her appeared right in front of her, just as a pair of arms wrapped around her from behind. The world went dark and she felt like she was being squeezed in every direction, like a Willow-sized pea being sucked through a straw.

Suddenly, the world returned and the squeezing sensation disappeared. She was in the desert, in an empty space between some large rocks, just outside of a cave or something. There were cars parked nearby. It was really cold. The thin hospital pajamas did nothing to keep her warm.

The sky looked amazing. All the stars seemed to be twinkling just for her. She would never take her freedom for granted ever again.

She was still too fuzzy to react much when one of the tweedy boys they'd met in the graveyard suddenly appeared right next to her with a soft pop.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"Drugged. They all were. I wish we could get all of them."

"We had enough trouble getting just this one. The rest are going to have to find their own rescuers."

"Can I just say how happy I am that we moved when we did? This is too much like our worst nightmare scenario back home."

"Same here. Bloody muggles."
"She's probably cold. Did you send Spike the signal?"

"No, I'll do it now. Why don't you get her inside?"

Willow found her world tilting and realized she was being carried by someone. Oh. It was the other tweed guy.

Why in the world had they come to rescue her? And Spike? Why would Spike and two guys she didn't know rescue her? Where was Buffy?

Her unlikely rescuer carried her into the cave and then into a log cabin that had been built inside, and then up a set of stairs to a second floor that shouldn't have existed. She was brought to a bedroom, set on the bed.

She'd just started to get nervous, wondering if she'd been rescued for nefarious purposes and ravishment, but the tweed guy just covered her with a blanket. The other tweed guy peeked inside a moment later.

"I guess we just let it work its way out of her system. If nothing else, it'll keep her calm while we wait."

"How long will the shadow clone last?"

"Long enough, I hope. Since it just has to sit there and look dazed, it should last a good long while, I would think."

"Good. I'd like the others to be free and clear and far from the area before it pops. I don't want any suspicion to tie the two events together."

"There's still the problem of her being an escaped prisoner. They're probably going to come looking for her."

"Well then, I guess we'd best hope that Mr. Giles has some luck getting his Watcher's council to intervene, or that they find the Slayer's boyfriend and he's become a vampire. They might be able to successfully argue that he was compromised and had her abducted, not because she belongs there, but because it was a part of a 'Mwah ha ha' evil vampire plot to undermine and destroy the Slayer."

"Given what Spike's told us of her history, that's probably not going to go over well, even if it does save her friend."

"Understatement. It's not going to help things any that her last boyfriend's former lover is back from the dead."

"Even worse from her perspective, her old boyfriend might have been shagging the guy she seems to despise most in the universe last night."

"It's possible, I suppose. We know they have at least once before."

"Speaking of shagging…"

They both grinned at each other and sauntered into each other's personal space. Willow could see them both clearly, even lying as she was. She really hope they didn't decide to have sex in here.
She suddenly thought of Amy, her former classmate turned rat. She was in a cage in her bedroom. The bedroom she shared with Tara.

She'd been having naughty naked time with Tara in there for a while now. Before that, she'd been having naughty naked time with Oz.

Amy the rat had gotten an up close and personal view of the sexual adventures of one Willow Rosenberg. Eep.

Even under all the fuzzy she could feel horrified embarrassment spread through her whole body and try to swallow her whole.

Much to her relief, the tweed guys disappeared out the door.

Sadly, they went right next door. She could hear everything.

It was loud, and went on for quite a long time, considering they were both teenage boys. They weren't exactly known for their stamina.

Willow had fallen asleep at some point. When she woke she was moved to tears by the simple fact that the fuzziness that had afflicted her the last few days was gone. She could think, and move! You didn't realize how much you took little things like that for granted until they were taken away from you.

There was a set of clothes waiting for her on a chair beside the open door to the bathroom. She took the invitation offered and indulged in a long, hot shower. She felt like herself again when she emerged.

She could smell food cooking. She peeked outside the bedroom door, and crept down the hall and down the stairs, following her nose.

The tweed guys were in the kitchen. The taller one was sitting at the table reading. The one with glasses was cooking breakfast and singing along with the radio. Every so often the tall one would glance over and smile, before turning back to his book and sipping his tea.

"Good morning, Miss Rosenberg. No need to lurk at the door. We don't bite."

Willow jumped when she was addressed. How glasses guy knew she was there when he had his back to her, she didn't know.

"I saw your reflection in the window."

Wow. He was psychic too.

"Are you hungry?"

Her stomach gave a loud rumbling gurgle. Mortified she covered it with both hands.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Um, yes please."

"Take a seat. It'll be ready in a few."
Glasses guy set out plates for all of them and was just taking his own seat when a cell phone lying on the table suddenly rung. The two boys stared at it, then glasses guy turned to her looking very serious and held a finger to his lips while the other grabbed the phone and answered it.

"United Nations, Special Investigative Unit. This is Rupert Payne speaking. How may I help you?"

Willow’s face twisted up in confusion, but she stayed silent.

"I see. That is a pickle. Do you need me to reschedule your trip to Botswana?"

He listened for a while longer.

"Just your meeting with the Vice-Consul. Do you need me to make travel arrangements? Lucky bastard. The rest of us have to go commercial. I guess it pays to have friends in high places. Hmm, yes, that is rather disappointing, but duty calls and all that. Did you get to see the mass graves and the rumored civilian detention center? Well, so long as those were covered I suppose you can call it a job well done and put it out of your head. If it was just a pile of wild animals of some sort, it's not really of any interest to us, is it? Oh, you and your stories. Demons. See, this is what comes of going to church. You start seeing the devil in your tea. So we schedule some sort of follow up or something. I hardly think it of any real import. There's quite enough real problems in the world without worrying over bogey men. Of course, Sir William. I'll get right on that. Do you have a fax number for where you're at? Honestly, Sir William, you really need to get with the current century, old man. Very well. I'll fax it most of the way and then have it sent by courier and try to get it to you before you leave. What airport were you at again? Nevada, eh? Do you have time to swing by Las Vegas by any chance? Pity. You as well. Cheerio."

He hung up the phone and the two of them relaxed.

"Well?"

"They're being held there for the moment, though they don't seem to be under suspicion. He thinks they'll be able to leave tomorrow."

"I hope to god our enhancements last that long. It would be ruddy well tragic if we went to all this trouble and everything goes to hell in the final hour because two of the investigators catch on fire."

"The humvee's windows are sunproofed. As long as they get to them they should be fine even if the enhancements fail, which I doubt they will."

"I hope so. I like uncle Spike and Gramps. I don't want to see them go poof."

"Neither do I. I haven't had this much fun in…well, ever really."

"You're such an adrenaline junky."

"And you're not? Please."

"Um, what the hell is going on? You're with the U.N.?"

"No. Well, Uncle Spike is. Sort of. He knows a guy. It's rather complicated. The rest are just pretending. It's how we got in to rescue you. They're all pretending to be a U.N. inspection crew so we could find you. We were able to get a general location, but that place is the size of a city and it's a veritable fortress of death and destruction. We were sneaking around invisibly and
teleported you out after making a distraction. We probably could have wandered around for years without locating you otherwise. I'm still amazed it worked, actually."

"You and me both."

"You have some amazing friends. I know very few people who would have risked sneaking into a place like that, even to rescue someone they loved."

"Well, I already knew that. It's nice to know someone who isn't us agrees though. So... wait... those people gawking at me were actually my friends? I mean, I know the one guy kinda reminded me of Spike, and the one girl made me think of Tara..."

"Yes, that was them. We put them in disguise, and layered Spike and Angel in gobs of trickery to make them register as human long enough to get in and out. Ask them to tell you about just how bloody secure that place is and how hard it is to get in. It's unreal."

Angel's cell phone rung a few hours later. Harry answered it, putting on a snooty accent.

"Fowl residence. Ah, young master, how goes it? No, sir, I'm afraid the master is indisposed at the moment. Yes, there were several. Your father bid me remind you that any bastard children left lying around are your responsibility, he's certain your dear mother is appalled and quite possibly rolling in her grave at the moment, and wonders why you continue to disappoint him. Indeed, I shall be certain to pass it on. Yes, one moment please. A Miss Townsend called four days ago to remind you that you never called her and she hopes you're well and will return her call at your earliest opportunity. Miss Townsend called twice more the same day and every day thereafter. Same message. I'm sure I wouldn't know sir. Continuing on, a Miss Mills called three days ago, to thank you for the best twenty minutes of her life. She would like you to know that she'll be in Rio de Janeiro for the next few months and hopes you might cross paths again. I'm sure I wouldn't know sir. A Miss Goldbloom called three days ago to tell you that you are, and I quote 'a selfish, egotistical, no-good bastard and she hopes you rot in hell, end quote'. Your father bid me to remind you that no one with a name like Goldbloom is likely to be either Irish or Catholic, and he wonders why you continue to disappoint him. I'm sure I wouldn't know sir. Indeed, I shall be sure to pass it on. There is one last message, from a Mr. Burke. He says you met briefly in the Silver Lounge and he feels that you made a special connection. He would like you to know that he's free all this week, and also that he has written a one-man play and only needs a little push to get it on Broadway. I'm sure I wouldn't know sir. Your father bid me to remind you that sodomy is an offense against God and man, he'll not have a catamite for a son and wonders why you continue to disappoint him. Indeed. I shall be sure to pass it on. Very good sir. Goodbye."

Willow stared at him in bemused horror when he hung up. "So... you work for a bigoted, anti-semetic, gay-hating jerk?"

"No. We're just helping them maintain their cover while they're stuck in armed forces central. Angel's character, Nigel Chester Fowl's father is a bigoted, anti-semetic, gay-hating Irish Catholic billionaire tycoon... or so we've now made him. None of us has ever met the man. We just sort of hijacked his identity a bit. And his private jet. The good news is they're on the move. Depending on whether they have to run the gamut of the security checkpoints again, which given the tight security, they almost certainly will... it took what, two and a half hours to get in the first time? So, two and a half hours and they should be almost home free. Now, we just have to wait and cross our fingers."

"I hope the Slayer can manage to stay in character. She's the weak point in this whole scheme."
"No she's not! Buffy is amazing. She always saves the day."

"This is completely different from anything she's likely to have done before. She's used to being in charge, barking orders and throwing her weight around. She's been acting the part of a flunky, to Spike no less, who she tried killing just a few hours before they headed in. She has to maintain the fiction that she's a weak, helpless civilian with no fighting skill or power. While she knew your life was in danger as was everyone else's she was able to keep it together, through sheer force of will if nothing else. Now that they're almost home free, all her worry, frustration and anger is probably bubbling to the surface. She absolutely needs to keep it together until they are completely away and out of the thirty mile kill on sight zone that pretty much forms the perimeter of the entire base. You have no idea how much danger they will all be in if she can't stifle her impulses for the next four hours or so. Longer if the military escort follows them all the way back to the airport."

"T-thirty mile kill on sight zone?" Willow squeaked. "T-they wouldn't just kill them though, right? They think they're big shots from the U.N."

"If she can't hold their cover story together, they're not big-shots from the U.N., they're unauthorized intruders into a secure military installation, which means they can and will just kill them. You'd best hope and pray she remembers that."

Willow paled and felt the bottom of her stomach drop out.

Buffy breathed slowly in and out, and tried her best to keep her mind on the goal: herself and all her friends…and Spike" she grudgingly added "Alive, safe and away from that terrible place and the damned commandos with their uniforms and their guns and their swaggers, who reminded her too much of Riley, who she still didn't know the status of, and it was slowly driving her to distraction now that most of the danger had passed.

She just needed to hold on for a little longer.

She wouldn't believe Willow was safe until she saw her with her own eyes, no matter what signal stupid Spike gave them. These last few days had been so hellish…there was a part of her that wanted nothing more than to take Angel to a dark corner somewhere, curl into his bulk and hide from the world for a few hours--or days.

A larger part of her absolutely refused to give him the satisfaction of needing him in any way shape or form after the things he'd said. Cold fury filled her even now, remembering his words.

He had compared her to a soulless, evil thing and found her wanting.

There could be no forgiveness for something like that, not after all the pain and hell they'd been through already, all the things she'd forgiven, the second chances she'd offered. She cried so many tears over Angel, that now at the ripe old age of nineteen, she felt wrung through and empty--her heart and soul a desert where nothing could grow.

Truthfully, she couldn't blame all of that on Angel. Anya's accusations against Riley before they'd all left town had burrowed deep and festered in the time they'd been traveling.

The stress and fear from being trapped on the base had pushed those worries aside, but now they were nearing the end of the tunnel, and they were making themselves known once more.

Please, please, please let it all end soon. She needed to break something, hunt something, kill something before she burst.
"It isn't fair" she thought to herself resentfully "I'm not the one that should be feeling like this."

She was human, and the Slayer. She wasn't a killer, she was a protector and a champion for humanity…and yet, ever since they had done the ritual to call on the spirit of the First Slayer, she'd been having such urges.

She had gotten no sleep last night. The urge to hunt had coiled through her like a tightening spring.

It had gotten bad enough that she had found herself eyeing Spike and Angel both and wishing she'd had a nice thick stake in hand. Only the sure knowledge that their disappearance would probably ruin any chance the rest of them had for getting off the base alive had stayed her hand from simply splintering the nearby table and going to work.

The thought made her sick. Never, even when he'd been Angelus and at his worst had she ever really been able to contemplate the idea of staking Angel. A world without Angel was a world she couldn't and didn't want to even think about.

It had been much harder to quell the urge to stake Spike and damn the consequences.

The only thing that had actually stopped her was Angel's recent assertion that they were family. The very idea of him claiming such an absurd thing just made her angry all over again. Angel was good and had a soul and did the right thing…Spike was evil.

He had tortured Angel with hot pokers for the location of that horrible Gem of Amara. He had tried to kill him in a ritual when he'd first come to Sunnydale to restore Drusilla. He had reformed the Judge, whose job was to cleanse the earth of humanity. It was probably his fault that horrible Acathla thing happened as well. He had betrayed them to Adam. He had turned them against one another. He had stolen Riley's doctor, who he needed to save his life, trying to get the chip out so he could go back to ineffectually trying to kill them.

It was just like Faith all over again—he'd chosen Faith over her too. After everything. After she'd betrayed them all, tried to kill Angel, after she had nearly killed her to feed her blood to him to save his life. After she'd nearly died herself while offering up her own blood to save him.

She slipped out of the enormous stupid truck they'd "liberated"--vampire for stolen. She wasn't stupid. Spike and his whole stupid family were a bunch of criminals. Well, it was obvious they couldn't be right in the head anyway--what kind of person seeks out a vampire for family time? A crazy insane criminal, that's who.

One of the commandos, who seemed to be in charge of their escort saluted Xander, who then started pulling bags from the trucks and tossing them down--obviously expecting her and Wesley and Tara to start loading them on the plane. She heard him quietly ask Spike a question when he thought the rest of them were out of earshot.

"Who in the Sam Hell did you piss off to get landed with this lot?"

A wave of absolute fury began vibrating through her. She was the Slayer! She was the one who saved the day! He was a stupid, soulless evil monster! Why couldn't these stupid commandos see what was right in front of their face?

"Ah, that…yes. Well, ahem. My boss' wife may have called out my name at a most unfortunate moment. I, of course, have no idea why she would do such a thing."

Sergeant Big Jerk whistled. "Not cool man."
"There are times when it is eminently justified."

Spike and the commando shared a look, and Big Jerk pursed his lips and nodded. "I hear you."

"Is there anything further we need to do? It's been a long couple of days."

"Do you have the requisition orders for the humvees?"

"They're in the glove compartment, I believe."

"Ah, good. We'll be taking those with us. The two privates that were here yesterday are apparently being searched for by the MPs." Big Jerk pitched his voice to carry to Xander. "In Kosovo."

Xander blanched and gave Big Jerk a sickly smile. "Oh, wow. But…not to worry. I'll make a few calls, see what I can do. I guess it's good I work for the U.N., huh?"

Spike discreetly rolled his eyes heavenward as though praying for patience, leaned slightly and whispered something quietly into Xander's ear.

"Oh…they're not. No worries. I have friends in N.A.T.O. too."

"Does everyone have everything out of the trucks? Speak now or lose it." Spike pitched his voice to carry.

After getting affirmatives from the group, he glanced at Xander and raised an eyebrow.

"Wha? Oh. Carry on, Sergeant. Dismissed."

"Sir, yes, sir." Big Jerk and his crew answered.

You would never know at the moment that they all thought Xander was a big doofus.

Two of the guys took the drivers seats and the convoy began rolling out while Wesley and Tara were loading bags onto the plane.

Once they were out of sight, it felt like a deep and terrible weight was lifted off her shoulders. She clenched her fist and swung at Spike, waiting for the impact, needing the pain and the thud and the splatter of blood.

The creep twisted around her fist, got behind her somehow and left her twisting and spinning ineffectually as she tried to get him back in front of her so she could pound him into the tarmac and leave him a flattened smear of blood and gore before rendering him to ash. Suddenly her arms and legs snapped tightly together and she toppled over.

"You really don't listen well, do you Slayer?" Tom huffed disgustedly.

The crowd froze and looked from Spike, who was radiating annoyance and a cold menace they weren't used to seeing from him these days. It was strange; none of them had really noticed just how much Spike had changed over the last year until the difference was suddenly shoved in their face.

"We do not have time for any more of your antics, little girl. We have exactly one hour before this plane explodes and it needs to be in the air by then. Get on. Move it."
"Wha…!"

"Explodes?"

"Tick tok. Move it. Now."

Tom hustled everyone onto the plane, which closed and started for the runway.

"If there's anything in the luggage you want to keep, grab it now." Tom explained as he set something down in the rear of the cabin and tapped it with his wand, revealing a tall cabinet.

"And then get in here. One at a time. Open the door after it closes, exit the cabinet and move away so everyone else can get through."

Everyone looked confused and uncertain, so Spike hopped in, closed the door. Tom opened it and the cabinet was empty.

"Get moving people, unless you want to blow up with the plane. I still have to do some last minute prep work while you're all leaving. Save your questions for later."

Tara didn't need to be told twice, she hopped in the cabinet and shut the door. Cordelia opened it right after and hopped inside herself. Wesley hurried to go next. Xander was right after him.

While the passengers were slowly disappearing, Tom had unrolled a scroll and was tapping inked symbols on it and leaving bodies behind in each of the seats, and flicking his wand to buckle them into their seat belts.

The bodies all looked like their fake personas, but empty and soulless, like giant wax dolls.

"Where'd you get the bodies?"

"We made them, actually. We took hair and blood samples from everyone, tweaked them to look like the fake yous and then enlarged them. They won't stand up to intense scrutiny, but they should stand up long enough for our purposes. Get moving. Questions later."

"What about the pilot?"

"He'll be coming with me when I leave. I'm going to lock the controls to continue on their present course and take him. He'll be left near the wreckage, unconscious, injured, but alive. Leave. You're the last one."

Angel hesitated a moment--it didn't sit right, leaving two humans behind on a plane he knew was going to blow up soon. Spike's nephews were scarily competent though, so he could probably just escape and trust the kid to get himself and the pilot out. It still rankled.

He hopped in the cabinet and closed the door, then opened it. The others--Scoobies at least, were all gathered tearfully around Willow, hugging her and laughing. Wesley and Cordelia stood in their own separate group on the outskirts of the reunion. They were happy, they were welcome, but it was very clear they weren't part of their group. Spike and his other nephew were having their own reunion on the other side of the room.

It was sort of surreal, watching them together. They didn't look alike, but it was nonetheless like seeing human William and vampire Spike standing facing one another. They had a similar manner, and an oddly similar gleeful smirk. Their eyes glinted with the same devil-may-care
attitude. All the black-ops James Bonding they'd done these last few days had been fun for them both, as had running amok in L.A. The two boys were human and had souls, he was quite certain, and yet they got on with his wayward grandson like a house on fire.

He sighed and settled in next to the cabinet. He couldn't join any of the three groups, or someone would be offended, or angry.

If he went to the Scoobies, Wes and Cordelia would feel slighted.

If he went to Wes and Cordelia, Buffy would be furious. She was the alpha female in Sunnydale, and brooked no competition--and yet she'd just spent a good twenty four hours plus playing omega in a made-up pack to Spike's alpha, and the usual omega of her pack--Xander--was beta. It was really no wonder she was acting a bit crazy and off the rails.

Heck, he was still feeling a bit bruised from being reduced to beta status for the length of their excursion--though it was a role he'd played before, just in other centuries. There was a big part of him that wanted to go fangy and growl at Spike to remind him who was in charge. He was quelling said urge as best he could, because he knew full well the Scoobies would start whipping out stakes at the first sign of fangs.

He hadn't really appreciated how much freer he was and felt while in L.A. Cordy and Wes were much more accepting of his total self than the Scoobies were.

He was startled out of his musings when he realized he had a warm human boy hugging him. He looked down at the top of the kid's head uncomfortably while Spike watched with an amused glint in his eyes.

"Everyone else got a 'hooray, our ridiculous plan worked and everyone got out safely, even Willow' hug. I didn't want you to be left out."

He begins to understand a bit more why Spike grew so very attached to these boys so quickly.

They're vampires--complicated is their middle name.

Centuries of twisted relationships with one another often pale in comparison to the twisted miasma that is their relationships with the humans in the room. Friends, lovers--cherished and beloved--but there is always a distance between you and them.

They don't understand you, not really; not the human parts, especially not the vampire parts--they prefer to forget those parts exist as much as possible.

It's always there, of course, even while they try pretending you're just a normal guy with a quirky diet and sensitive skin.

There is always a physical distance between you and them as well, on top of the psychic/emotional distance. They don't slip easily into your personal space, lay an absent hand on your arm while making some point or other, or lean against you when you're all seated together on the couch.

You don't invite such intimacies, actively work to preempt them, though you know they aren't coming in the first place. It just makes it easier--they don't touch you or invade your personal space because you want it that way, really.

The truth is, sometimes you wouldn't mind. Sometimes you wish someone would bridge that gap but they rarely do. Until now.
Old eyes in a young face that say 'I know what it's like to be alone in a crowded room.'.

Spike, always so soft and human, looking for acceptance and simple affection would have been sucked right in.

He finds he feels sort of warm and fuzzy himself-- Oh how the mighty have fallen.

He finds himself smiling at the green-eyed boy and giving him a gentle pat on the back in thanks. That's when he realizes all the rest of them are watching the two of them with an array of odd or curious looks on their faces.

"I hate to bring a halt to all the warm fuzzies, but if you lot'll excuse us, me and Peaches have some unfinished business. Oi, Stormcloud. We gonna catch on fire if we go outside?"

"I can renew the protection for a little while, just in case. It should last until dusk."

"Good."

Harry pointed his wand at each of them in turn. As the others watched a bubble formed around their bodies and then sunk into them.

"Feels bloody weird." Spike complained as he started for the door. Angel followed almost eagerly.

"What unfinished business?" Buffy demanded, her voice sharp and her eyes suspicious. "Because whatever it is you can take care of it here. No need to go slinking off."

"They're not doing it in the living room, you daft bint. I just cleaned in here, and I'm in no bloody mood to be fixing broken furniture all night."

"I'll second that. Who's breaking my furniture?" Tom asked as he entered the cabin.

"No one, because they're going outside." Harry assured him.

Spike and Angel made their escape, and took off running once they hit the open desert. They wanted some distance and some privacy so they didn't get staked by overenthusiastic youngsters that didn't understand that stuff like this was just part of the package.

"Is anyone hungry?"

"I want to know what's going on." Buffy's voice carried over the storm of agreement.

"Do you honestly not know?" Harry wondered as he headed for the large footlocker from Spike's car and heaved it up onto the kitchen table so he could more easily go through it.

"Dominance issues?" Tom wondered idly as he sauntered up to poke through the food as well.

"Of course."

"This isn't some kinky sex thing, is it?" Cordelia interjected.

"I suppose it could be, but isn't necessarily." Tom explained. "It's rather fascinating, really. Minion vamps who just rise after being someone's discarded dinner on the Hellmouth just wake up in their graves and are pretty clueless. If they're lucky, someone comes along and explains things to them. If they're unlucky they blunder around until they either find or make a place for themselves or are
dusted. Family vamps, those that are chosen and purposefully made are different. They're smarter, stronger, faster, and they usually have someone waiting for them when they rise who's prepared to take the new vampire under their wing and teach them what they need to know to survive and thrive. One of the things they learn is that power relationships go one direction only—downwards. Minions have to fight to establish themselves in a pack or hierarchy, or just make themselves useful in some way. Family vamps were wanted and chosen, so it's different, unless it's sire with multiple children, then they have to fight it out amongst themselves to establish who the favorite is. From the little Spike has told us it's not that common for vampires to purposefully sire multiple vampires, unless they're holding a territory of some sort and need a clan to help them oversee it. The Master was one such. His favorite, Darla, only ever sired one vampire--Angelus. Angelus was rather odd in that he was something of a family man. He sired four--the first for vengeance, the last one was unusual in that he didn't choose him, circumstances did. Drusilla, his third child sired Spike. Darla and Angelus stayed together for a number of years, then it was them and Penn for a short time until he went his own way, then it was them and Drusilla for a while, and then it was the three of them and Spike. Darla was the undisputed leader. She was Angelus' sire, though she usually chose to allow him to lead. It was understood though that he only did so at her discretion and she could and would step in to stop anything she didn't like. Straight line top to bottom. That was the established order. Over the last few days the established order was flipped on its head, and that needs to be resolved. It's no different than when two dogs meet. They sniff and stare each other down or growl and establish where they stand in relation to one another. Once that's done they can just coexist peaceably. They didn't actually establish a new dominance hierarchy, it was just playacting and a trick, and so they're both uneasy because of it."

Harry frowned thoughtfully and glanced at Buffy and Xander with sudden understanding. Their actions towards Spike recently suddenly made a lot of sense in retrospect. Buffy had allowed Spike to live, and then beat him down so he would accept his position as omega of her group.

He had thrown off his place and run off to L.A. where Angel had stepped in, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and given him a good shake, allowing him to step back into his more familiar role as Angel's beta.

Buffy was enraged by the loss of her omega and was trying to get him to bow down and reaccept his place, but he was bucking her authority. And no wonder, really--he had probably accepted her so easily before because she'd been Angel's girlfriend--and Darla's replacement.

She and Angel were no longer together, and her new boyfriend Riley was doing his best to get Spike to accept him as the new alpha male, but he wasn't having it. None of them were family, and Buffy was no longer tied to his family either, which would have made it harder to accept, especially as he'd been mostly unhappy with the situation there.

Buffy caught his thoughtful look, as did Xander. Xander frowned and seemed to become rather thoughtful himself. Buffy hunched in on herself, wrapped her arms around her chest looking conflicted and ill.

Lunch was had--made by Harry, Tara and Cordelia. Once everyone was fed, watered and cleaned up, it was time for a meeting.

"We were talking about things after Willow was extracted, and we realized we still have a problem. If Willow was extracted from a government secure facility, she's an escaped prisoner, and all of you are obviously the ones the broke her out. We muddled the trail as much as possible--as far as anyone will know, there was an actual U.N. delegation that came by to visit, checked
out and left…only to die tragically in an explosion on their plane, before they could make it to their next stop. We liberated the trucks you used from the base we all broke into. That should further confuse things, as they'll have to do an internal investigation to try to figure out how their equipment got taken from there and sent to another base, given into the keeping of two lowly privates. It's still going to be pretty obvious that those in this group here somehow did it. It could be a problem later. If they send out another group to grab everyone at the same time, well, there won't be any rescue party a second time. Even if the Slayer were able to keep herself free. As you all realize, from the trouble you had getting back out of the facility when the fake Willow illusion disappeared, it would probably be suicide to try this again."

"So, what do we do? I think I speak for everyone when I say I don't want to live the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for commandos."

"Simple. You weren't responsible for getting Willow back, because she was never actually taken."

"Huh?"

"Cordelia is a seer and gets visions of people who need help, correct?"

"Right."

"So, Cordelia got a vision sometime after we removed all those hidden cameras from the hotel. We all packed up to head directly for Sunnydale to rescue Willow. Tom and I went ahead, as you felt a sense of urgency about the matter. We witnessed Willow being captured, did a trick to mess with the commandos senses long enough to grab the real Willow and replace her with a fake. That's how she disappeared from her cell--she was never captured. It was all a trick."

"And that's why we were confused upon arriving in Sunnydale that real Willow was captured by the Initiative" Cordelia realized "because we had a plan to let a fake Willow be captured in her stead and thought something went wrong with the plan."

"Right. Tom and I had real Willow stashed out of sight this entire time. We all missed each other when you arrived in Sunnydale."

"Because Spike got spooked that he was tethered somehow, and then Angel, Wes and I were busy helping quell a mass vampire rising."

"So…Buffy, Tara and I were just wandering around the desert all this time?"

"You had no idea where to go, and your car broke down on top of it. Spike is told when he meets up with you that real Willow was captured, not a fake one as planned and agrees to take you to look around. Because everyone is driving all around the desert it takes everyone a while to find each other. Tom and I, who were out of sight in Sunnydale this whole time, don't know any of this, and we're all wondering where everyone is and what the plan is now. We don't go out to look around because we don't know if the commandos are still running around"

"Actually, that's perfect. There were still commandos running around, but they were from the Watcher's council. They were sent, along with Faith to watch the hellmouth while everyone else was gone because all sorts of trouble was heading its way. You three were worried that all the rest of us were captured, or that we were just hiding out till it was safe to emerge, so you just stayed lying low."

"So, when all of us finally come across each other in the desert, we compare notes, realize we don't know if real Willow was captured or the fake as planned, so we all head back to Sunnydale to try to find all of you!"
"There's still the problem of the order to capture Willow. This boyfriend of yours who's a commando is missing last you heard, correct? Do you have some way to get in touch with his unit?"

"They were experimenting on him and whatever they were doing malfunctioned and he needed help. I just spoke into the dial tone at his place and told them that and they showed up in town right after with a doctor in tow."

"So we use that. You can rant into the phone about how you want to talk to him and want to know why he tried to do this to your friend and why he just left without a word. If he's with them, they get the message that they never captured real Willow, if he's missing, they get word on that, and that he might have been compromised. If we can get them to rescind the capture order, then the problem should be solved. We hope. Just keep in mind that you never got anywhere near the facility, you were definitely never part of a black ops team to break in and steal her--your only plan was to march up to the front door and demand her back. You know nothing about any U.N. delegations or exploding planes. You've all just been roaming the desert worried sick until presented with the possibility that your friend was safe somewhere else. If we can sell it to the right people, that should do it."

"You all got in and out of that facility alive, this last bit of cleanup should be a piece of cake."

"Do we want to tell these people Cordelia is a seer? W-what if they want to capture her instead?" Tara asked quietly.

Everyone looked at each other worriedly.

"Alright, a seer told us about Willow, who wasn't Cordelia."

"Drusilla." Wesley asserted. "Drusilla…called us. She wanted Spike to know all the good news. She was going to be a mummy to Darla, the red-haired witch was going to be locked away and the Slayer was going to die. It was all rather nonsensical, but Spike has a hundred plus years of experience interpreting. It still took us awhile to decipher. Once we did, we all headed out to see what we could do. She apparently gets regular visions that let her know when she might be in danger, and is very difficult to track or capture for that very reason."

"That works. Everything else can stay the same but for that one substitution."

"That just leaves one question. Why did he do it?"

"Because of the bite houses." Tara interjected quietly.

Buffy stiffened and her face went cold and hard, but there was a desperate, broken look in her eyes nonetheless.

"That didn't happen. I don't know what Anya was going on about, but I'm going to have words with her about it." Xander asserted.

"I'm pretty sure it was true. She mentioned it to me when we were talking about some other stuff. She notices a lot. More than any of you give her credit for."

"Riley was not cheating on me with vampires. He hates vampires."

"He does, but he's also jealous of several vampires and their place in your life." Tara sighed.

"When Anya mentioned bite houses, he stiffened, and checked to make sure his arms were both covered. He used to walk around with his sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He stopped doing that a few weeks ago. He's been acting increasingly erratic for several weeks. You and he argued
about you letting Dracula bite you, it's not really a secret that he's jealous of your past relationship with Angel, and he's also been rather bitter about the fact that you were protecting Spike and going to him for help. It only got worse after the Initiative undid whatever they did to him. He wasn't a super soldier anymore, and you started getting protective of him and leaving him out of the loop. He started missing patrols and going off to do crazy things like attack vampire nests by himself."

"Well, unless we find the guy, I guess we'll never know. It's possible he just got knocked down and chewed on and was hiding it because he didn't want you getting more protective of him. I hope he's alright."

"Why doesn't everyone get some rest. I imagine the last few days have been stressful. Spike and Angel aren't back yet. I guess we can leave when they do. We'll take Willow with us and hunker down somewhere to keep up the fiction that she's been in Sunnydale the whole time."

"Sounds like a plan." Cordelia agreed as she stood and stretched.

Willow and Tara exchanged a look and a grin and hurried off upstairs before anyone else did.

Angel and Spike returned a few hours later, as dusk was approaching. They were both rather battered and worse for wear, clothing torn in places, bruised and bloodied, but they both looked surprisingly cheerful and relaxed in spite of that.

"Wow. That must have been some fight. You should probably get cleaned up. The room at the end of the hall upstairs is free. You can use the shower in there."

Angel nodded his thanks, grabbed some clean clothes and went off to shower first, which answered the question of who had won. Spike settled down at the end of the table, wincing a bit.

"I'm going to need to feed soon. I ate everything I had with me before we set off so I wouldn't be hungry while we were wandering around the base."

"I refilled both your trunks once we knew you were heading back."

"Yeah? More pig's blood?"

"I didn't know where the closest butcher was, so I just raided the base's blood bank. It's all A and B. I figured as long as they had O they'd be alright. That's right, isn't it? They're the universal donor?"

"I dunno. I just know O pos tastes good." Spike grabbed his little trunk and filled a cup before settling back down. "What are you two working on anyway?"

"After our run-in with that rabbit guy at Caritas"
"Timmaeus the Destroyer"
"Yeah, him. We thought it might be a good idea to try to find or make a way to deal with something like him if we ever run in to another."

"Don't you lot have one-hit death curses?"

"Yes, but neither one of us is sure that would work on something like him."

"Death curses only work if you're more powerful than the one you cast on. Harry and I are both among the stronger wizards of our people, so we could conceivably kill most humans with one if
we really wanted to. That guy was a little rabbit thing about two feet high and it took you twenty minutes with a wrecking ball just to get him to talk, and another twenty to beat him down till he stayed down. I don't think we could throw a death curse strong enough, even together, to stop one of his people. He was both a runt and a castrati, for Merlin's sake, and even apparating we were having a hard time staying out of his grasp. So, we want to find or make something that would slow something like that down long enough for us to get far away."

"Granted, had you not been with us, we probably would have just went far away, but the thought still stands."

"We thought a mental attack might be best. Angel mentioned he'd been sent to hell and tortured for ten thousand years, but you said he would have been all demon by then had that been the case, so we wondered if it was an illusion with time dilation as one of the components. We've been trying to figure out how to best put together a charm to do that."

"Bloody hell. You want to hit someone with the mental equivalent of ten thousand years of torture? And people say I'm evil."

In spite of his words, he looked oddly proud of them.

"I thought it was overkill, so once we figure out how to put it together, we're going to make a lesser version too for less serious opponents than Timmaeus the Destructor and his ilk. We thought three days was a good amount for the lite version of the curse."

Spike's wounds were already healing, so he drank another cup of blood to finish the process.

"We worked out a plan to finish things." Harry continued, explaining the idea they'd come up with while the two of them are gone.

"One problem. I'm not going back there."

"If Darla was right and you and Buffy were splitting the guardianship of the Hellmouth between you, you should be safe enough. You both left, and you broke the tether. From what the others said, the Slayer Faith is looking after the place for the moment. Everything might have latched on to her, or it might re-latch on to Buffy when she returns since she's the one who was actively being the guardian."

"She'd never be able to leave town again."

"You were able to before. It might just have been because the co-guardian and you were both gone at the same time that it tried to drag you back like it did. Maybe it got nervous or lonely or something...do you think it has a consciousness? Even a primitive one?"

"I don't know. I'd love to take some more readings when we get back. I just poked enough to realize it was a dimensional rift before."

"Are you lot sure about that?"

"Reasonably sure. If nothing else, you probably wouldn't be re-tethered for the very reason that you so violently rejected the notion before, if there is any sort of guidance to the process. That's our theory, anyway."

"Well...alright. The first sign of any hooks in me and I'm heading for the hills."

"That's fine. We'll just catch up with you later once the whole bit with the commandos is resolved if that's the case."
"The garage is closed. Great! What the hell are we supposed to do now? I don't want to leave my car out here until I get enough free time to come back and get it!"

"For the love of... give it here, monkey boy. All you humans are bloody useless." Spike growled. He stomped to the trunk of his car, removed a battered case of tools and a flashlight. He handed the flashlight to Xander and stomped towards his car and popped the hood.

"Shine 'er in here." he pointed, before taking off his coat, rolling up his sleeves and getting to work.

"You know how to fix cars?"

"Old ones, sure. The new fangled models are all computerized. Bloody stupid if you ask me."

"Why though? You're a vampire. Wouldn't you just steal a new one if your car broke down?"

"We got stranded in the middle of bloody nowhere enough times, I figured it was best not to chance it. I ate a mechanic and spent a few weeks reading manuals and poking around till I knew what I was doing."

"You ate a mechanic? Did it give you his knowledge or something?"

"I dunno. I just figured it couldn't hurt, right?"

Xander scowled at the casual mention of murder, but subsided. He was becoming rather inured to such things after living with Anya, and having Spike around for most of the last year. He bit his lip and began fidgeting.

"What? Whatever it is, spit it out. I've never been one to stand on ceremony."

Xander sighed, and wondered if it was a good idea.

"Could you show me?"

"Show you what?"

"How to fix cars. I'm an only child and my father isn't really quality time guy."

"So long as you don't try calling me daddy. I suppose I could see my way clear. You'll have to pay me, of course."

"What!"

"What? A bloke's gotta eat. I'm a bloody vampire. It's not like I can get a job at the local supermarket. I can't really get a job with most demon places either, since I was helping you lot."

"Angel left money for you with Joyce. Giles made him do it. He made him reimburse him for all the blood he bought for you too."

"When'd this happen?"

"While you were missing. We were looking around for you and found out Angel owns half of Sunnydale. Giles called him up and said he was responsible for you and to see you had money to eat with so you weren't bothering him all the time."
"Heh. He's been scared of the Watcher since he came after him with that flaming baseball bat and set the factory on fire." Spike chortled.

"And what do you mean you can't get a job? Aren't you a fireman?"

"What? No. Why'd do you think that?"

"Because I saw you on the news dressed like a fireman and fighting a fire."

"Oh, that. Nah. I just did that 'cause all the actual firemen were knocked out."

"You still have your chip. How'd you knock them out?"

"I didn't, Dane and the boys did."

"Who are Dane and the boys and why did they attack the firemen?"

"They're vamps that work for Vinny."

"Who's Vinny?"

"Shark guy. He's the loan shark of Sunnyhell."

"You mean an actual shark guy?"

"Yeah. Looks like a great white, exceptin' he's blue. Got legs. Weird looking fellow. Tough bugger."

"Legs? He's a land shark? There's a land shark in Sunnydale. Man!"

"I just said that. What of it?"

"Don't you ever watch Saturday Night Live? It was a thing on there. The doorbell would ring and the people wouldn't be expecting anyone so they'd ask who it was and they'd hear "Land Shark!" and they'd get all worried and confused and be like what?! And there be a pause, right and then "Pizza delivery!" So they'd open the door and a giant shark head would pop through the door and eat them. Funniest thing ever!"

"Oh sure. A giant shark eats a couple of people it's all fun and games. If I do it it's a bloody apocalyptic tragedy!"

"It was a fake shark, Spike. No one actually got eaten. That would be the difference."

"Bloody humans."

"Oh...you were telling a story, weren't you? What were we talking about?"

"I don't remember. I'm still trying to figure out how a great bloody shark eating people is funny."

"Enough with the shark already! Oh, I remember. You were explaining how you came to be a fireman."

"Huh? Oh, right. Dane and the boys. Their buddy just rose and he figured he'd change his name, 'cause I told him Josh was a bloody stupid name for a vampire. He decided to name himself Axe, because Spike was already taken, but the only place to find an axe that he knew of was the firehouse. I told them they couldn't kill the firemen on account of it not being allowed and all, and I went along to make sure. Dane and the others aren't hunters--Vinny doesn't like it 'cause it's bad
for business. Josh was a bloody newborn though, and they're sometimes undependable--new instincts and all that, haven't found their feet yet. The call came in while all the firemen were knocked out, so I made the others get dressed so we could go take care of it. I always wanted to drive a fire truck. When we were done, that reporter bird came over and started asking me questions. I always wanted to be on the telly too, so I did 'er interview. I made them take the truck back to the firehouse later, and drop me off halfway. That's when I got kidnapped…though not really, since it was just my nephews looking for me."

"I see." Xander nodded. Stranger things had happened on the Hellmouth, after all. "You did a pretty good job with that. Why don't you go be a fireman? Be a productive member of society?"

"Even if I wanted to be risking my very flammable unlife nightly, the Slayer would just show up and make a scene, start ranting about me being an 'evil, soulless thing'. I'm a bloody vampire, what do you people want from me? Bloody well not happy unless I'm trapped in me crypt day and night unless she's got a bloody use for me. Maybe she can live like that, but I sure bloody well can't."

He straightened up, grabbed a soiled rag out of the bag of tools and started wiping grease off his hands. "Start her up. Make sure it's working proper." he ordered, before taking back the flashlight and taking it and the bag back to the trunk of his car.

Giles looked up at the sound of a knock on the door, but Anya had already hurried over to unlock it.

"Where's Xander? I don't see him! You didn't let him get killed did you?"

"Relax, he's fine. They got stranded in the middle of nowhere. He's got the part he needs for his car now. They should be along any time now. They were right behind us."

"Willow?" Giles wondered.

"That's a more difficult question to answer. We're not actually sure Willow ever got taken anywhere."

"Of course she bloody well did. Tara came running all hysterical, woke us all up. She was there."

"It's kind of complicated. We had gotten a call from Drusilla. She had a vision and she wanted to give Spike the good news--in her view, anyway. That's why we all came running. The plan was to swap out real Willow for a fake so she couldn't be taken-- and Buffy didn't end up dying looking for her-- but when we got here you all said actual Willow was, and we thought Spike's nephews failed to get her…but we don't know for sure that they did. We need to look for them and find out. With everyone scattered and us running all over looking for them and all… When we all regrouped we traded stories and realized we don't know that they failed. We're hoping they didn't. It's not like any of us know where this Nevada facility of theirs is or anything--not that they really got to look, what with being stranded and all. We convinced them to return here and we're going to look for Willow and the others here in town, since that was the original plan and all. Has soldier boy ever shown up?"

"No. We still haven't seen him. At least, he hasn't been here. I did stop by his place but he wasn't there either and his neighbor hasn't seen him for a few days."

"It's looking more and more like he might have been turned." Wesley sighed.

"By the way, where's Darla?"
"She's in the bathroom."

"I don't hear anyone else in here." Angel said worriedly as he hurried towards the back. The others followed and found him staring at the back door in despair. The handle had been broken clean off from the outside and Darla was nowhere to be seen.

"Drusilla has her. We're too late."

They could only watch worriedly as Angel curled in on himself as though he'd just received a mortal blow. He simply sank to his knees and stared at the broken door with grief etched across his face.

Cordelia hurried to his side, threw her arms around him and squeezed.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The combined Sunnydale/LA/interdimensional gang searches for Riley, Drusilla and Darla. Pool party, philosophical discussion, Xander and Spike do male bonding, the LA gang makes plans to head home. Spike and the boys make plans to do more sightseeing.

Angel's grief over Darla's loss had been a palatable thing. Giles was surprised to find it gave him no joy to see him in such a state. The specter of Jenny had lain between them always since the night he'd found her dead in his bed, the scene lovingly decorated to give the discovery maximum impact. He supposed the specter of Darla would lie between them now as well. Such was life.

He, Anya and Wesley had retreated back to the front of the store to discuss what happens next. It was obvious Angel was in no fit state at the moment to add anything of use, and Cordelia was busy comforting him.

"If Riley was turned we'd have seen him by now, wouldn't we? Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he just skipped town. We don't actually know that he put in the order to kidnap Willow, after all." Anya spoke up.

"If Drusilla was in town she might have ensorcelled him to do so, for some reason of her own. If he was still alive at that point and realized what he'd just done...yes, he may well have skipped town. He couldn't cancel the order, most likely, without risking being captured himself--the Initiative is rather unforgiving, and if they felt he'd been 'compromised' in some way, he might not have been able to expect any mercy. The fact that Drusilla is still walking around makes me doubt that scenario. He would have done his best to end her if he'd been able to do so."

Their grim tableau was broken when a confused babble of voices rose from the back--Angel and two women. Fearing for the moment that Drusilla had returned they hurried back from whence they'd come, only to find a disheveled Faith lugging a commando on her back.

Giles reached out and gripped Wesley's elbow before he could speak--he could almost feel the words of accusation and blame forming behind his lips. Faith and her former Watcher had a bitter past, but dredging it up at that moment wasn't what was needed.

"Faith?" he kept his voice as mildly inquiring as he could make it. He'd already extended her the benefit of the doubt by suggesting she be sent for; time to abide by that.

"Stupid shit must of thought I wouldn't notice." Faith scoffed as she straightened after dumping the larger man in the center of the floor. "Didn't last long did he? So much for Mr. Hot Stuff crack commando. I didn't know how many of them had been turned, so I thought it best to keep dimwit here separate from the rest of the peeps and get some answers."

"I'll get rope." Anya announced. Quirky she might be, but she did have a gift for focusing on the practicalities.

The vampire was tied to a chair and woken up by Faith punching him soundly in the jaw. He woke with his demon out, wicked fangs and golden eyes gleaming like lamps in the gloom.
"Whoops." the thing laughed. "Guess you caught me out. Unfair if you ask me. It was supposed to be my turn tonight." he explained with a lascivious leer at Faith. "I'd have ruined you for anyone else."

"Somehow I doubt that. Your team has been a thorough disappointment so far, in love and in war. From what I've seen, none of you have much to brag about."

"Oh, Slayer, that hurts."

"Truth often does."

"Who made you?" Angel growled, his own demon rising as he leaned in to sniff the commando thoroughly.

"One of my teammates." he shrugged carelessly. "I was on point, half of them were right behind me while the rest were watching our perimeter. One minute I watching for creepy crawlies, the next thing I know I'm taking my new dental hardware out of the neck of some sad, whimpering sack of flesh--the crazies we'd rounded up for elimination."

Giles and the rest reared back with horror, but the vamp just huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Don't get your panties in a twist, ladies. We beheaded them to make sure they wouldn't rise. The Senior Partners don't like screw ups."

"The Senior Partners?" Angel growled. "You're from Wolfram and Hart?"

"Who? What are you talking about? They were sent by the Watcher's Council."

"Eh, we have a former member that left the council and went to work for us as a librarian. He still gave you good information. There was a vampire massacre waiting to happen. There was a hell goddess enroute that we'd already been tracking. They want her contained, but in the world. So long as she's here she's keeping out something worse."

"What could possibly be worse than a hell goddess?"

"A heavenly one."

"What? That's the most..."

"Sensible thing I've heard in years." Anya finished for him.

She looked offended when all the humans and the souled vampire all looked at her like she was insane.

"What? Heaven dimensions are bad news. Yes, hell dimensions aren't happy places, but hell can be negotiated with to some degree. Heavenly beings are elitist snobs. There's no conflict or strife in a heaven dimension because there's usually only one being there, sitting there all glowy and basking in their own perfection. Nothing and no one is good enough for those folks. They're bad news."

"So this Wolfram and Hart...?"

"They're the ones that resurrected Darla. They're an evil law firm."

"Evil is all a matter of perspective." the commando vamp scoffed.
"No, it really isn't, but maybe you haven't had the capacity to realize that for some time, just like all the other losers in that place. Whatever hope there may have been for you is gone now. Whatever tattered remnants of your soul were still left are gone now." Cordelia scoffed right back.

"Save me the self-righteous bullcrap, demon girl. I'm a soldier. I've been a soldier a long time, as has my team. You wanna know why I'm with them? It's because it's the same damn job I've always done, but without the sanctimonious sell. You know the one. "Protecting democracy", "Truth, Justice and the American Way." It's all bull. Protecting democracy is actually setting up petty dictators to give us an excuse to go in, slaughter the sad sacks unlucky enough to live there, all so big corporate interests can move in and steal everything worth having out from under them. It's assassinations to cover up corruption, to off the peccadilloes of high ranking people so they can't tell their story to the masses. At least when I'm working for Wolfram and Hart I know why I do what I do. They never bother to sugar coat it or pretend it's something it's not. I found I prefer it that way. Say what you like, the world needs people like us. Hero types don't like to get their hands dirty, even if it's the more sensible, expedient action. Guys like us exist so that the world keeps turning in spite of your morals."

Angel directed them to the more pressing problem. "I think we can assume we know what happened to soldier boy. Given this guy, he's definitely been turned."

"He's making himself an army."

Giles removed his glasses and squeezed his nose forcefully in an attempt to quell the violent headache trying to form. It was too horrible to contemplate. Buffy's second boyfriend, whom they'd all encouraged her to be with, even though it was becoming increasingly obvious to him at least that their relationship was fraying at the seams and hadn't been particularly strong to begin with--because he was decent and human, and had to be better than Angel. Now he was dead and evil, swallowed whole by his wounded pride and insecurities, and building himself an army of gun-toting commando vampires. When he found the little shit he was going to regret ever coming near his Slayer. This would kill Buffy. It was Angelus 2.0, and it would be so much worse because she had never truly recovered from the first one.

A faint buzz shattered the quiet of the store. Everyone turned to look at the vamp.

"That's work calling. The beast must be on the move again. This was bad timing, really. We were trying to track the prison when all this happened. It's not all bad though. We kept forgetting who the prison was when we were human. We should be able to keep track now."

Angel grabbed the tiny cell phone and answered it, while Cordelia snorted.

"Uh, yeah, like we're going to set you loose to go eating people. Hello."

"I have a job to do. Little things like dying don't get in the way of that. Their employment contracts are very thorough. We need to grab the prison before she gets free again. We have mystics waiting in L.A. to try to see if they can tighten the seals any."

Angel shut the phone after listening to whoever was talking on the other side.

"Faith, let him go. The rest of his team just went back to work after rising. Let them finish what they started. They'll head back to L.A. and then they'll be my problem to deal with, not Buffy's or yours."

"Angel, I can't say I like this." Wesley objected.
"Lilah Morgan told me the same thing about their employment contracts. Sire bonds won’t hold
them. Wolfram and Hart already have dibs."

Giles sighed and then nodded curtly to Faith, who shrugged and untied the vamp. "If nothing else,
the loss of these fellows should make Riley easier to deal with.” he explained.

The vamp held out his hand to Angel, who glowered at him before curtly handing back his phone
and staring him down. The younger vamp just snorted in amusement.

"Uh, commando guy? You might want to head out the back. I see B coming. She gets testy when
she's around people she doesn't like much and starts stabbing things."

"Aw, you do care." he joked before doing just that.

The front door chimed as Buffy, Tara and Xander stepped through the door. Buffy's eyes flicked
over everyone in the room and she crossed her arms.

"What's going on?"

"We think Riley might have been turned and turned a group of commandos as well."

"It's okay though…the commandos are heading off to do their own thing. We don't have to worry
about them for the moment."

Buffy's face shut down and she suddenly looked brittle and inches from breaking. She let out a
shaky breath and shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them back up she was once again
all business.

"We still have the capture order on Willow to worry about and we need to find Spike's nephews
to see if Willow was ever taken or if they succeeded in swapping her out for a fake. I'll do what I
can to alert the Initiative that he might have been compromised. It won't matter if Willow is safe if
they'll be out looking to capture her again. We'll do a sweep through town and look for Riley once
I do that."

"You might want to swing by the army base too. If he was turning commandos, he might be
looking to stock up on gear and weapons too. Just a thought.” Xander added grimly. It made him
sick—Riley would never want some demon running around in his body and wearing his face, let
alone forming up an army of 'hostiles'. The sooner he was staked the better. Riley would want it
that way.

Buffy flinched minutely and then savagely pushed it down.

"Where's Spike anyway?"

"Ah, you've found our wayward vampire, have you?"

"He was the one who found us stranded. He fixed Xander's car too." Tara spoke up.

"How surprisingly useful of him." Giles remarked dryly, only to raise an eyebrow when Angel
frowned at him.

"He was behind us. He said he wasn't coming into town unless he was sure the Hellmouth wasn't
going to try eating him again." Xander added.
Giles rolled his eyes, but then his attention was caught by Spike outside. He frowned and eyed the blonde up and down when he came swaggering into the shop and wondered what had happened over the last few days to effect such a change. He hadn’t really noticed until now how subdued and colorless Spike had become in the time he’d been in Sunnydale. He had taken to dressing in solid black—black boots, black t-shirt, black jeans, black duster, had stopped painting his nails, stopped wearing jewelry of any sort, even stopped wearing a belt—as though those extra touches were too much trouble to be bothered with. Now, he was in blue jeans, black t-shirt with a red button down thrown over it, was wearing his belt with its silver buckle, his nails were painted…he even seemed to be wearing a touch of eyeliner, and had a couple of large silver rings on each hand. He’d also regained the cocky strut that had seemed so much a part of him when he’d first rolled into town, but which had slowly disappeared over the time he’d been there. The change had been gradual enough he hadn’t taken note while it was happening—even with the changes, the blonde had honed being an annoyance into an art form and still seemed to fill any room he was in with sheer force of personality.

"Why all the long faces?" he demanded as soon as he walked in.

Giles expected him to ooze into place at Buffy’s right hand since Riley wasn’t present—and then the usual arguments would ensue, but he walked passed her, glanced around the room and spotted Faith. An appreciative grin broke out over his face as he gave her a slow once-over and stalked towards her with predatory grace.

"Hello, luv. Can’t say I recall meeting you before."

"We did meet once." Faith admitted, a similarly appreciative grin stealing across her own face.

"I would've remembered you, luv."

Faith’s glance flicked very subtly towards the others in the room, landing briefly on Buffy, then she leaned in and whispered something the rest couldn’t hear—though Angel and Cordelia both developed an odd look on their faces and Angel shifted uncomfortably.

"That was you? I had kind of been wondering…explains a lot, that does."

"You remember that then?"

"Oh, luv, believe me, that's not the sort of thing a man forgets." Spike replied with a wicked grin.

He tilted his head then and stared at Faith for a long moment, long enough that she found herself wanting to fidget under his stare, though she refused to do so, and just jutted her chin at him aggressively instead. He just grinned at her in what seemed like approval.

"Doing better then? That's good, luv."

"Not quite 5 x 5 but I'm getting there." she admitted.

Angel cleared his throat and gave Spike a look when he eventually glanced over at him. He rolled his eyes to Faith and a gave her a ‘he’s always ruining my fun’ look that had her grinning again, before heading over to take up station just behind and to the right of Angel.

Giles slanted a glance at his Slayer and her friends and found Buffy looking grimmer and more fragile, Xander looking conflicted and Tara looking sad but understanding. Just what the bloody hell had happened while they were gone?

"Angel, why don't you and Faith check out the army base. Spike, you're with me. We'll start at Riley's apartment and work our way outwards from there."
"I have a better idea, how about I go with that one and you and Peaches can wander Sunnyhell."

"Spike." Angel sighed.

"She tried to kill me after I rescued them from being stranded in the middle of nowhere!"

"The army base will be full of humans, it's better we split up this way. She's not going to try killing you again." he added with a hard look Buffy's way. He and Spike then engaged in a staring contest. Spike backed down with bad grace and went stomping towards the door, obviously irate. "Come on, Slayer, I haven't got all night. I've got places to be, little nephews to find."

Buffy gave Angel a tight smile and stalked after him, looking equally annoyed.

Faith and Angel caught one another's eye and trailed after them.

There was silence in the store after the two slayers and vampires had left. Giles turned to face the others.

"Dare I ask what that was all about?"

"Well…it's like this. All those times Spike complained we were driving him crazy? He might have meant it far more literally than we realized." Xander summarized.

They had searched in and around Riley's apartment and circled through half of Sunnydale already, and Spike had yet to say a word beyond telling her he didn't smell "Captain Cardboard" anywhere in the area. It was strange; how often had she wanted nothing else than for him to just shut up already? Now, he finally had and she wanted nothing more for him to say something.

Spike's nostrils flared slightly and he tilted his head to let her know there were vamps headed their way. They fell into step with one another easily and went to work as soon as the vamps entered their sight—a graceful dance of punches and kicks, she staked her two vampires, tossed the stake to Spike as he half turned to receive it, and he staked his. They were already on their way before the dust finished settling, and he handed back her stake without a word. You'd think they'd practiced it.

A tiny treacherous thought crept up from the depths of her mind to point out how different it was from patrolling with Riley--she had to spend more time pandering to his ego than doing her job, and sometimes it got tiresome. It had been better when he was still full of 'demon essence' or whatever the heck it was they'd been pumping into him. He'd been able to handle himself, and so long as he seemed to be keeping up with her he was fine. Once that changed it had been easier to keep him out of things--both to protect him and to make things simpler for herself.

He was probably dead, and she should feel more about it than this terrible numbness filled with regrets and what-ifs.

"You're strangely quiet tonight" she said to fill the silence. It gave her too much time to think and she really couldn't do that right now.

"Don't feel like talking."

"You usually never shut up."
"So you've told me, Slayer. Repeatedly."

"What was all that back there with Faith? What did she say to you when she was in my body?"

"It wasn't so much what she said as what she did. Rode me at a gallop and made me pop like warm champagne, she did."

Creeping horror stole over Buffy at the very idea that Spike had…and her body had…she couldn't even think it, it was too appalling.

"Wondered what had gotten in to you. You're usually such an uptight pain in the ass. Thought I saw another side to you. It makes sense that it was someone else."

"I'm not an uptight pain in the ass! You are!"

"I'm uptight?" Spike asked, before laughing hysterically. "I can honestly say that is the first time in my unlife anyone has ever suggested such a thing. I'm uptight. Get a dictionary, Slayer, I don't think you know what the word means."

"Ugh! You are so annoying!"

"No, you're just uptight."

"You are annoying. Ask anyone."

"Your friends, you mean? Hardly a fair sample. They're your friends, of course they're going to agree with you. Ask m' nephews, Watcher-lite or cheerleader, and I'll bet you they won't agree. Think I'm charming, funny and a good time they do. So nyah."

"What are you, five?"

"Hundred and twenty, Slayer. So, not only uptight, you've a bad memory too? Might want to watch that. Slayers often don't live too long. You might have Alzheimers or something, since by Slayer standards you're an old lady now."

Buffy swung at him, but he just rolled his head back and avoided it.

"And now we get to why I didn't bother talking to you earlier. You suck at conversation, and always bring out the fists just moments in. If I could fight back, I'd be happy to dance with you--chip makes it a little difficult, so I don't see the point in bothering anymore." He came to a stop just out of reach and arched an eyebrow at her. "Besides, I thought we were supposed to be looking for your boy-toy…or'd you forget about him again?"

Buffy brandished her stake, but he was already stalking off into the shadows and ignoring her again.

He was, by far, the most infuriating vampire she'd ever met.

Buffy caught up to him and they finished the rest of their patrol in silence and then turned back towards the Magic Box to report in. They ran into Faith and Angel along the way and hopped in the back seat of his car. As they were pulling up nearby Spike and Angel both stiffened and sniffed the air.

"What?"

"Captain Cardboard. He's still alive though…and Dru."
Spike and Angel both hopped out and sniffed the air while scanning the street.

"Darla? As in skanky sire who you staked? That Darla?" Buffy demanded as she hopped out behind them. Faith followed a moment later.

"Bloody bitch! I cannot believe this!"

"What?"

"My bloody car is missing! They must've been lying in wait somewhere nearby till we all left, then they doubled back and stole my bloody car!"

"Are you telling me that Riley, still human Riley, has teamed up with your vamp hos?"

"D's not a vampire. Some evil law firm resurrected her as a human or something."

"D? You were hanging out with her? Do you just sit around dreaming up ways to screw with my life? It just never ends with you!"

"Oh, it's always about you, isn't it? Your bloody soldier boy put a chip in my head, and now he's stolen my bloody car and run off with Drusilla!"

"And Darla. Hello." Angel reminded him.

"Ah, grandmum'll be fine. She always was a tough old broad."

"She's dead! Again! She was alive and had a soul and now she's..."

"Angel?" Buffy's voice was painful to hear.

"I just meant... she had a second chance. That's all."

"You said we couldn't be together because I deserved someone who could take me on picnics in the sunlight. Does she not deserve the same or is it only a problem when it's me?"

Faith and Spike hightailed it back to the Magic Box. Neither of them wanted to be in the middle of the epic argument that was about to erupt.

"Um? What are you two doing together? Where's Buffy?"

"Where's Angel?"

"They're outside. Lover's spat. Captain Cardboard stole my bloody car!"

"What?"

"He's still alive. Darla's dead. They smelled them when we came back. Drusilla is with them." Faith explained.

"And Buffy and Angel?"

"She just found out about D. No one mentioned it to her." Faith shrugged.
"What in the hell is Riley doing with Drusilla? Are you sure he's still alive? How could he?"

"He might not be in his right mind. Dru's got wonky mind powers. She's probably keeping him around so he can be Darla's first meal. Revenge on Peaches and the Slayer both. He killed her last time to protect 'er replacement, now she's gonna kill his replacement. Turnabout and all that. Prolly needed him to drive too. Dru never learned--wasn't really safe what with her having visions and talking to the stars and all. I dunno if Darla ever learned, but she's dead right now in any case, so it's kind of a moot point."

"If he's still alive, it means we can save him. We need to go, now, before it's too late." Xander urged.

"Yes, quite. We should split into teams to search. Faith, you're with me. Spike, why don't you go with Wesley. Xander, take Buffy with you. Cordelia, you're with Angel. We should leave now before they've had a chance to get too far away. Anya, Tara…"

"I'll count the money again and restock the shelves that need it. Tara can help me."

"Very well, let's move out."

The shop was quiet and dim after the others left. Anya relocked the door and made sure the sign was still turned to 'closed'.

"I do hope they find Riley soon. At the rate we're going, I'm still going to be here when it's time to open in the morning."

"I'm sure they'll be back in an hour or two. They have to at least look."

"It might not be such a bad thing if Riley becomes a vampire. It will probably solve most of his and Buffy's relationship and sexual problems. I'm sure the Initiative will be happy to give him a chip when they eventually show up. Of course, it won't solve their most pressing relationship problem, so maybe it's not a good idea."

"What problem is that?"

"That he's not Angel. There's a reason Riley's been so jealous of their relationship. Of course, this whole recent thing with Darla might help her finally put it behind her. I guess it all depends."

"I don't think it's a good idea. He wouldn't have a soul, and I think that would be kind of a big thing for Buffy to overlook."

"Chip, soul, same difference. He would still be Riley, just less weighed down with inadequacy. He might actually be able to become the alpha male he only thought he was before."

"I still don't think it's a good idea. I don't think Riley would actually want to be a vampire."

"I happen to disagree. I think he wants to be a vampire very much, but his time with the Initiative has put him a bit in denial about the whole thing."

"Well, I guess at this point it's up to whoever finds them first"

"Or if they do. That Drusilla has been leading everyone in circles so far. Speaking of which…I'd better go check and see if Xander finished installing that new lock on the back door. We really do need a much thicker door back there. Drusilla already just waltzed right in once to take what she
wanted. I don't intend to be another Magic Box fatality."

"I'll go with you. Just in case." Tara offered nervously. She grabbed a crossbow and moved to cover Anya while she checked the door. They both started in surprise when they heard the sound of a car starting up nearby. They exchanged a glance and Anya hurriedly unlocked the door and peeked outside, only to see the rear tailfins of a black De Soto vanishing past the edge of the alley.

"There are five roads out of town. They can only cover four since Spike's car was taken." Tara realized.

"They were just waiting for the right moment to vanish without a trace."

"Do any of them have a phone?"

"I'm sure some of them do, but I don't have anyone's number. Giles' might have in his office, but it's locked and I don't have a key for it either."

"So Riley is going to end up dead because we can't let anyone know." Tara fretted.

"Maybe one of them will realize and think to go look at the one road none of them chose."

"It's kind of a thin hope."

"It's all he's got."

"You know, I don't believe you." Xander burst out in frustration as they reached the city limits. "Riley's alive and has only minutes or hours to stay that way and instead of immediately heading out to try to save him, you're mooning over Angel! Doesn't Riley mean anything to you at all?"

"Of course he does! I've been worried sick wondering what's happened to him, but between Willow being taken by the initiative and Anya's bite house theory I've been conflicted to say the least! For all I knew he called the Initiative in and then skipped town or rejoined them or something and if it wasn't that, he got himself eaten on purpose because he was cheating on me with vampire whores! I've been worried, but with everything else I can't quite make it past the numb stage. What do you want from me?" Buffy yelled back.

"I want to see you respect yourself enough to stop sulling yourself with a vampire that goes evil on occasion and realize what a great guy you have in Riley and appreciate him already! He gave up everything to be with you and you only seem to remember him when it's convenient, like he's a placeholder until your precious Angel changes his mind."

"Sullying myself? How dare you! I loved Angel with my whole heart and soul and he loved me the same way. If it wasn't for his curse we'd be together now because I never would have let him go. But he is cursed and it's too painful to be together when we can't really be together and it's too dangerous to everyone around us. That was the only reason I agreed and I hate it. You and Angel and Riley all like to go on and on about picnics and sunshine and being normal. I'm the Slayer, and I can only do normal for short periods of time before hellmouthy stuff blows up in my face. I've tried the normal and it doesn't seem to work, what's more, trying to pretend I could seems to have driven Riley insane and made him a needy, clingy shell of his former self!"

"You're just not trying hard enough!"

"Don't you dare, Xander. I'm not like the rest of you. Any one of you can walk away at any time. I'm always the Slayer, that doesn't change. You can go to work and have a regular job and a
regular apartment and a regular life, and other than the usual vampire encounters anyone in Sunnydale runs into, your life is your own if you want it to be. It doesn't work like that for me. If I go to college, or to frat parties, or try to take a summer off to find myself, it always finds me. It isn't something I can stop, let go of or run away from. I used to think I could. I used to think that maybe I could have the normal life and the Slayer life and keep them in nice separate boxes, but it doesn't work. I'm always the Slayer, no matter where I am or what time of day it is. It's been that way since I was called and it will be that way until I die--for good, that is. Unlike most, I had to keep on doing it even after I died. My second successor is out there right now with my Watcher. Kendra fell before Acathla was opened, and it was left to me to save the world. Faith went off the rails and helped the enemy and it was up to me to save the world. There is no suburban home with normal guy hubby and the two kids and the dogs and a job in an office or whatever waiting for me. This is my normal--helping rescue my friends when they're taken, waiting for my superpowered boyfriends to go evil, saving the world night by night and week by week and year by year until I fall and it's no longer my fight."

"So…G-man. Too bad about Darla. She didn't finish her treatments before she got taken. Must be disappointed." Faith said innocently.
Giles pretended he couldn't hear her and kept driving.

"Am I going to have to stake you as well if we find them?" Wesley asked tentatively. "Just to be clear, I will certainly do so should it prove necessary… I will admit that I find I hope it will not prove necessary."

"Dru isn't going to be anywhere you or I will find her. She's mad as a hatter, and people assume it means she's stupid. She's not. She's smart, she's canny and she's the stars favorite child. They sing to her wherever she goes. There's five roads leading out of Sunnyhell. Think about that for a mo'."

"She took your car so one road wouldn't be covered. That's the road she's on."

"I will be very, very surprised if any one of us comes across her. It could happen, but I wouldn't count on it. She does get confused sometimes, gets distracted. If that happens…" Spike trailed off and his face creased with pain. "I really hope it's not us. I hope it's not Peaches either. I hope it's the other Watcher if anyone does. He'll at least make it quick, and there's bad blood between him and Peaches anyway. The truth is though, I'm hoping she gets away. I don't like soldier boy, and I can't really find it in me to be too worried about his impending demise, beyond the fact that it'll be more gloom and doom for Peaches to wallow in, another chip in the Slayer's armor, another bit of fuel for kick the Spike. Somehow it'll be my fault, even though I wasn't even in town when Dru showed up, even though I spent the last few hours roaming around Sunnyhell with the Slayer looking for him when I don't even like him, and that Dru didn't so much as let me see a glimpse of her in the distance to let me know she was still undead and kicking."

They continued on for a while in silence until Spike laughed rather bitterly.

"You know…there was a little part of me that almost hoped Dru wouldn't show up till we was prepared for 'er, you know? Angelus has a soul, I have a chip, Darla was human. I almost hoped we could've found some way to make Dru…" he trailed off, swallowed thickly and continued on, his voice a mere whisper even in the quiet of the car. "Maybe we could have been a family again. For real this time. When Angelus showed up last time, he was different. He was always a bastard, always a bit of a sadist, but he loved us all. He'll try to say differently now, but he did. When he came back the Judge said 'e was clean--no humanity in him. I guess getting souled just screwed him up somehow--all his better qualities are in Angel and his worse ones with his demon or
something. I don't know. It'll never happen now. Dru won't come anywhere close if she thinks there's even a chance she'll be in danger, and Darla won't come back either. Angel staked her last time they met. She's not going to give him a second chance to do that."

Wesley glanced over and found Spike staring moodily out the window with tears in his eyes and found he sympathized a bit more with Cordelia's plight. It was rather difficult to keep it at the forefront of one's mind that the person opposite you was a monster that needed to be destroyed at all costs when they were crying over the loss of their family for the second…or third…time.

It was a rather gloomy group that regathered at the Magic Box.

"They were hiding out back the whole time." Tara told them quietly. "We saw the back edge of Spike's car whip past the end of the alley about ten minutes after you'd all left, but we didn't have any way to contact anyone."

"If she drove straight out of Sunnydale on the last road, she's long gone by now. Even if we set out now and split up to search…she could stop anywhere along the way and we might never realize."

Angel's jaw clenched and he stared fixedly into the middle distance, not meeting anyone's eyes, sure he would see reproach and blame on every face. Buffy paced restlessly, not looking at anyone either.

"There's nothing more we can do tonight. It's late. Everyone get some sleep. I would imagine the Initiative will be in town before too long."

"We should blame 'fake Willow' on that hell goddess. Say it was all her idea. Leave Spike's nephews out of things. It would be poor repayment for their help in rescuing Willow if we put them on their tail next. She was headed towards Nevada last anyone heard." Cordelia announced into the quiet.

"Yeah, that's probably for the best." Buffy agreed, equally quiet. "I guess everyone should just head home."

"Um…B? might be a problem in my case…" Faith said hesitantly. Buffy turned and narrowed her eyes at her until sudden realization crossed her face. "You've been staying with my mom?" Faith bit her lip and nodded. Buffy let out a noise that was halfway between a laugh and a sob. "Just stay out of my way." she told her before turning for the door.

One by one the rest of them rose to follow.

"Where will the rest of you be staying? Do you have lodgings? I do have a couch…" Giles offered.

"So do I." Tara added.

"Sounds good." Cordelia agreed easily. "There's lots of room at that mansion, but most of it isn't really set up for occupation by living people who need bathrooms and such."
"If it's not an imposition it would be much appreciated." Wesley added.

The shop emptied out, each individual or pair heading their separate ways. Angel started for his car and then stopped when he realized Spike was headed in a different direction.
"Spike" he didn't bother raising his voice, knowing the other vampire would hear him just fine.

"What?" Spike asked tiredly.

"Where're you going?"

"My bloody crypt, where else? I've been gone a few days. I'm probably going to have to clean out a nest before I go beddie-bye."

Angel hesitated briefly. If Spike went his own way, he could brood in peace, sleep the whole day away. He found he'd didn't much relish the idea of rattling around in the mansion all by his lonesome. He'd been alone most of the last hundred years.

"Come with me. You can stay at the mansion tonight. I don't know why you didn't just go there in the first place."

"Not exactly full of happy memories."

"No, I suppose it isn't." Angel agreed. More to brood on. Just what he needed. "Look…I don't really want to be alone tonight, and somehow I doubt you do either. More than that, I don't want you off by yourself when those damned Initiative soldiers show up. I'd feel better if you were close by till they were out of town."

Spike didn't answer for several minutes. Angel felt his shoulders slumping in spite of himself. He should have known better, he supposed…

"Swing by Willy's on the way so we can grab a bottle or two and you have yourself a deal."

Angel slowed as they approached the mansion and looked around in confusion.

"What?"

"Someone seems to have tended the garden…" Angel replied before inhaling. Night-blooming jasmine…and underneath the faint traces of Spike's nephews and Willow.

"The boys and Red are here? I figured they was gonna go hide out back by the hellmouth." Spike answered as he hurried towards the door. Inside also showed signs of interference—the floors were swept clean of the leaves and detritus that had been gathered in the corners, the walls and ceiling swept free of cobwebs. The tattered velvet drapes had been replaced by new ones and the windows sparkled clean in the moonlight, as did the large chandelier overhead. There was even a faint scent of lemon and pine in the air.

"Prolly Stormcloud's work. 'is relatives did a number on him. 'e can't seem to go anywhere without wanting to clean the place."

Angel stalked towards the steps leading underground where he, Spike and Drusilla, and later just he himself had made a lair, but no scent of humans wafted up—at least none strong enough to indicate they were down there. Spike was already headed upstairs when he returned. There were similar signs of cleaning up there. They caught a slightly stronger whiff of human by the door of the master bedroom and peeked inside, to see a log cabin set up in the middle of it.

Spike snorted, while Angel shook his head, still not able to fathom the weird abilities the two boys seemed to be able to just whip out at a moment's notice. They knocked briefly and ducked inside, to find Harry and Tom camped out on the couch, surrounded by magic books, while nearby stood
the remains of a circle made of sand, some half-burned candles and burned herbs.

"Oh, hey you two. We were wondering when someone was going to show up. Willow's been freaking out, convinced something catastrophic happened."

"Judging by your faces I would say something indeed hasn't gone to plan."

"Where's Willow now?"

"She went to bed already. We've been putting her through her paces most of the day. She told us about some of her magical misadventures, so we took her in hand to try to instill some discipline and basic magical know-how. What we do is completely different from what they do here, but we're still experts on magical theory in comparison. Happily, Tom's been reading everything he can get his hands on since we arrived, so he was able to set her some exercises to do and give her a recommended reading list and some homework. She was a bit pouty about the whole thing, but Tom knows all sorts of stories about magic that went wrong and just how bad it could get. We're hoping it'll be enough."

"It may not be. Some folks don't learn till they lose everything and hit rock bottom."

"I think reminding her she might one day end up right back in that detention center if she didn't get a better handle on things did the trick. That's how we got her to stop complaining and do the exercises." Harry disagreed.

"So, what's been happening elsewhere? Has there been trouble with the commandos?"

They took turns filling them in on everything that had happened, unloading the bottles of whiskey they'd brought with them as they did so and settling in at the kitchen table. The boys joined them and were each given a shot glass by Spike, who made them join him in a toast to their 'wicked girls'.

"We can track things. We can try to find this soldier boy before he's killed, you know."

"Dru always knows. She'll be in the one place you can't find her because of mystical interference, or she'll have a surprise left that will endanger both of you and allow her and the others to escape. It's no use. She really is a masterpiece of vampiric art." Angel sighed.

Tom looked annoyed and ready to argue, but Harry put a hand on his arm to quiet him. He could see that they half-hoped they'd just give up--finding the girls meant they needed to deal with them and they didn't want to do that. It really wasn't fair to the soldier guy though, even if he seemed like he was kind of a dick sometimes. They left the two vampires downing their shots and reminiscing and left the cabin to head downstairs to the garden where they wouldn't be overheard.

"I don't know, do you think it's worth it to go find soldier boy? I really don't like the idea of just leaving him to be eaten. If this Dru is mostly concerned with her own safety, she might just wander off and leave him and Darla behind. We might still be able to find him before he's killed. If Darla is there...they're in Spike's car. His trunk should still have blood in it. We can stash her out of sight of the rising sun somewhere and leave the blood bags with her under a warming and preservation charm or something."

"Alright. Let's go before it gets too much later. I would like to get to sleep sometime tonight."

They tried plotting Riley and got a brief image of darkness and chains before it vanished like mist. They tried Drusilla, Spike's car, Darla's corpse...nothing.

"Damn. They were certainly right about her. There are stories about seers from long ago that had
similar levels of power, but they were thought to be tales made by credulous muggles who didn't know the difference between visions and charlatanry. Judging by her, they might have actually been true. She timed everything almost perfectly so that by the time we tried to find them it was already too late. What I wouldn't give for a chance to study her."

"Looks like soldier boy lost his last chance. I feel kind of bad for him."

"Given all we've heard about the guy… I don't think he's going to be that upset when he wakes."

"Actually, you're probably right. He supposed to be a big lug like Angel. I hope Spike's advanced age will give him an advantage there. It wouldn't be fair if the guy was able to push him around while he was human and can keep doing it when he's a vampire too."

"Eh, if he tries and we're still around, we'll just stake him."

They turned at the sound of unsteady footsteps and found the two vampires, each clutching a half-empty bottle in their fist.

"Did you finish the other bottles off already?"

"It takes a lot to get a vampire drunk." Spike muttered as he stared around the garden with unseeing eyes. Angel had a similar look on his own face. Given what they knew of their history, they were probably lost in not-so-happy memories: a family briefly reunited, but torn apart by madness, jealousy and betrayal, a plan to suck the world into hell, which ended with Angel himself being taken.

"Will you two be alright? We were about to turn in."

"No luck finding soldier boy, eh?"

"We got him for a second, but he disappeared. Your girl has quite a gift."

"We did try to tell you."

"We'll be fine. We'll probably turn in ourselves soon."

When the boys' footsteps had faded, Spike turned to face Angel, his face serious. "Why did you do it?"

He didn't have to elaborate. He knew what he was talking about--when he'd lost his soul. He had turned on Spike first chance he got, tried to destroy the world. It might have been the alcohol, or it might just have been that he was tired and depressed, but he found himself answering with far more candor then he might normally have done.

"Because it was all wrong without Darla here, because even with the soul gone I was still in pain and the only thing that made me happy was seeing how much pain I could inflict, because Drusilla was my creation and belonged to me and you'd forgotten that somewhere along the way, because Buffy was mine--lover or prey it didn't matter, and you interfered with that, because you couldn't tell the difference between he and I the last two times we met, because I could, because I missed you and hated that I did, because I was broken and wanted it all to end--probably a hundred other reasons I can't name. It took a hundred years, but I had grown resigned to the soul and tried to embrace it. I didn't know there was a loophole to the curse. It all caught me by surprise. She was
the first peace I'd known since it happened and…"

"You were bat-shit insane and all that was left was your less savory qualities, because this you got all the rest."

"We're two different people"

"Save it. The only difference between Angel and Angelus, at first at least, is that one had a conscience tilted towards human morals and the other had only a demon's to guide him. After a hundred years all your good qualities as Angelus have attached themselves to your soul and your bad ones to the demon, but they're both still you and they always were. You and I both know this. It might be too much for Bitchy to deal with, but you and I both know it."

Angel said nothing, he just downed another swallow from his bottle.

"Angelus didn't have any good qualities."

"Sure he did. He was fun, he enjoyed life, he took care of us…he was also a sadistic bastard who grew obsessed and liked torture, but he had good qualities as well. Dru might have missed the psycho you that was running around before, but only because you made her crazy before you turned her. Darla and I wouldn't have if there wasn't anything else to him. And before you try telling me Angelus couldn't or didn't love us…you wouldn't have tried coming back to us if you didn't. You had your soul then. I didn't know it at the time, but I know it now. Maybe he can't anymore, but that doesn't say anything about then."

"I can't really think about those days. It hurts too much. I remember the things we did and it sickens me. I spent the better part of that hundred years alternating between living alone and brooding, and wallowing in filthy alleyways, insane and hunting rats. It wouldn't let me rest, it wouldn't let me think of the past, even the times that didn't directly involve murder, torture or mayhem without punishing me for it." He eyed Spike blearily, his eyes apologetic. "The only reason I can be in your presence now without suffering is because you've been tamed, and were in company with humans, and you've been helping Buffy and fighting demons… and even then, knowing you have no soul still makes a part of me despise you, even if I don't want to, because I helped make you what you are and it hurts."

"See, this is why I want no parts of Gypsies or their bloody magic. And they call us evil. Pfah. I hate to say it mate, but it's kind of my and Dru's fault you kept it as long as you did. Well, Darla's mostly. She took us to find those gypsies of yours after you disappeared, but she forgot to tell us why we were there. She always left that sort of thing to you. Dru and I ate them all while she was trying to convince the old guy to take it back. She just locked herself away for a day or two after and then said we was heading for China. Me and Dru had no clue, we just thought you two were on the outs."

"There are prophecies about a vampire with a soul. It probably wouldn't have made any difference."

Angel finished his bottle leaned back and started humming.

"You go singing 'Danny Boy' and I'll bloody well stake you."

"I don't listen to that noise you call music."

"So we'll compromise…Manilow, right? That's your speed. Her name was Lola, she was a showgirl…"
"You know the lyrics? I thought you hated Barry Manilow."

"Do. He's insipid. Copacabana ain't too bad--murder, obsessive love, angst and despair…what's not to like? Go on, sing with me 'yellow feathers in her hair and a dress cut down to there…"

"She would merengue and do the cha-cha…"

"One thing hasn't changed, mate. You still can't sing."

"Shut up, Spike."

Spike just grinned and kept singing. "While she tried to be a star, Tony always tended bar…"

Angel snorted and joined him for the rest. "Across a crowded floor, they worked from 8 till 4, they were young and they had each other, who could ask for more?"

They traded another grin and belted out the rest as loud as they could.

"At the Copa, Copacabana, the hottest spot north of Havana…!!"

Faith was dimly aware of the blonde Slayer suddenly fighting by her side, but ignored her for the moment to concentrate on the vampires in front of her, while hoping she didn't try stabbing her in the back while she wasn't looking. She knew being in prison and having sessions with her counselor was what she needed right now, but she could admit she had missed this--the rush and pain and dancing on the edge, never knowing if you were going to live or die that night, the perfect strike, the cloud of ash and the quiet moment after it was over. There was nothing else like it in the world.

She'd caught the group heading back to their lair and waded right in--the odds were against her, but that was part of the thrill, wasn't it? She had just had time to wonder if she'd bitten off more than she could chew, when Buffy was suddenly there and they were fighting together like two halves of a whole, like they'd never been apart and never been enemies. The last two vamps went down in a cloud of ash and they straightened, realizing they'd ended up back to back. Just that easily the awkwardness set in. Faith stepped away casually to get out of reach.

"Thought you'd be in bed by now. Figured I'd do a last sweep before turning in myself."

"Couldn't sleep."

Faith just nodded and started towards the exit, intent on heading back to the Summer's house. Buffy wordlessly fell into step beside her. They both stopped after hitting the streets and cocked their heads in unison, hearing the faint sound of drunken, off-key singing lilting over the empty night.

Faith snickered. "Bleach boy doesn't sound half bad, though I would've never pegged him as a disco fan."

"What are they even doing? I thought they hated each other? Since when are they all buddy-buddy?"

"Maybe they do. Even people who hate each other can find moments where it doesn't seem so important."
Buffy slanted a glance at her from the corner of her eye and crossed her arms.

"I just don't understand. Angel is not supposed to be running around with Darla, who he hates, human or not, or being all buddy-buddy with Spike, who's a soulless evil vampire or…or…"

"B, chill, geez. Yeah, he's your lover-boy Angel, brood boy with the soul and all, but he's also way old and has past and a life and friends, family and connections that have nothing to do with you. The same goes for you. You can't just disconnect someone from all that and put them in a box and tell them you can only be this one thing right here. Even if they want it too it doesn't work like that. Believe me, I know this part first hand."

Buffy scowled at the reminder of her running around in her body and glared at her.

"No, even before that. I was messed up before I ever became the Slayer. I had nothing to hold on to. You really don't know how lucky you've been. I've had exactly three people who were even there for me a little. My first Watcher, but she was killed practically right after. The Mayor. Yeah, he was crazy and evil and all that, but he cared about me, and he was there for me and tried to take care of me in a way that no one else in my life ever did. Then there was Angel. When I was really crazy and off the rails and didn't know who or what I was anymore, he was there and wouldn't give up on me. He was the only one."

"WE were there for you. I tried to talk to you, Xander tried to talk to you…"

"And none of you understood me, because who I am and where I'm from and what I've seen is so not Suburban Happy-ville U.S.A, I might as well have been from a different planet from all of you. That guy, the assistant mayor, was an accident. I had already committed to the blow. I only realized a split second before it hit and there was no way I could've stopped it then. Everything after, not so much... but you all looked at me and treated me like I was some diseased thing that was in your nice clean kitchen and gooping up your shiny floors. I was hunted like a damned animal, chained up…I was told all my damned life that I was bad news. I finally accepted it and figured if you're gonna be bad, might as well go for it all the way, right? So I did. And what happens later, eh, little sis? For all your weeping and wailing about big, bad me and my murderous ways that first, accidental time… your pretty morals weren't anywhere to be found when you decided to hunt me down to feed me to Angel. Blood of a Slayer, B. You could have filled a damned blood bag at any time and fed him, but that never even occurred to you, did it? No, you hunted me down and stabbed me in the gut. I'd be dead right now if I hadn't of jumped off that building. Yeah, I've got lots to answer for, but you're not as squeaky clean as you like to pretend you are!"

Faith fully expected the fist that impacted her face. She threw back her head and laughed even as she swung back and licked the blood from her split lip. The battle was on then, a whirlwind of fists and feet, the heavy thud of flesh meeting flesh, and she didn't care how much Buffy protested, there was nothing better in the world--because who could truly match a Slayer but another? When they were on their game, they were undisputed queen of the night--nothing could match them one on one, and sometimes even the vamps they hunted didn't give them quite what they needed--you always needed one more hunt, one more kill before you were satisfied for the moment; hunger in your belly, the blood singing through your veins.

Faith slammed into the wall surrounding the cemetary, shook off her daze and tackled Buffy, sending them both tumbling across the ground in a tumble of arms and legs and fists and kicks. They ended up tumbling down a shallow gully and rolling apart to lie panting side by side as the eastern horizon began to lighten just a bit, presaging the coming dawn.

"There was never supposed to be two of us."

"Sounds about right, when you're in the Slay zone anyway… except when it's both of us. We're not alone then."

"I spent most of the ride with Xander telling him I couldn't be normal like I wanted. It just doesn't work. He told me I wasn't trying hard enough."

"Xan man means well, but he doesn't know what it's like to be us. We have to find our own normal I guess. I'm still trying to figure out what that means."

"So am I."

Faith sighed and rolled to her feet, reaching a hand down to Buffy, which she took without comment. The silence between them was almost companionable as they staggered back towards Buffy's home.

"Morning all." Cordelia greeted everyone as she entered the Magic Box.

"Good morning Cordelia. Are you just now getting up?"

"God, no. Please. I've been up for awhile now. Tara had to head off to class. I saw Buffy heading off there too. I wandered around for a bit, saw a few familiar faces, caught up, said hi, that sort of thing. After that I wandered around town to see what all has changed. After that I hit the Espresso Pump and got brunch. Any word from the Initiative yet?"

"Not so far. I don't know if they'll come here, or go to Riley's apartment or Buffy's house or what. They may be here and gone without us ever knowing."

"They better not be. We need to clear up all this business with Willow. She's already missed all her classes this week."

"Quite."

"We also can't stick around forever. I mean, we do have a business of our own to run. We don't get a lot of cases, but we need the ones we do to keep the bills paid in between visions… and that's another thing. What if I get a vision while we're here? We might not be able to get to L.A. before it's too late, and also I'm supposed to be meeting with Lorne… lots of stuff. We have our own lives and our own city to look after now. We'll stick around just in case for right now, but…"

"You don't have to explain, Cordelia. Believe me, I quite understand. Ah, do excuse me." Giles replied, before heading forward to greet the customers that had just arrived as Anya was busy at the counter.

"So, what are you up to?" she asked Wesley as she settled at the table next to him.

"I've been re-reading 'Vampyr'. It's the seminal work on nocturnal creatures of the night, the starting text for the Watcher's Academy. It's been a good many years since I've read any of it. It's quite old and makes for rather dry reading. Mr. Giles and I got into a discussion last night about our respective vampires and how different they are, sometimes, from our lessons at the Academy, even though only one of them has a soul. He mentioned that there was some information in the book about such matters, but it was buried in the back as the important parts—how to spot them, how to kill them—were all we were supposed to be interested in. I had long taken it as an article of
faith that demons couldn't love or feel compassion or really have any sort of positive human emotions whatsoever. I thought Angel was the exception because of his soul, and yet it seems that simply isn't true. It doesn't make them any less dangerous, of course, or negate the fact that they kill people, lots of them, if they aren't stopped. Even so…if you had told me years ago that I'd one day have William the Bloody, infamous Slayer of Slayers, member of the Scourge of Europe, in my car weeping over the fact that Darla was dead before they had a chance to 'rein in' Drusilla so they could the four of them be a family again, I would have laughed at you and probably arranged for you to see a psychiatrist. It makes me wonder at the veracity of the report that he delayed his final battle with Nikki Wood so her son could grow up a bit."

"Wow. That is pretty unbelievable. He was actually crying?"

"Not sobbing, but he was genuinely moved, I could see that much."

Angel opened his eyes and sniffed the air experimentally. Spike's nephew had been in the room. That was probably what had woken him up. Probably came by to see if they were awake yet. He rolled over and pulled up the sheet, then froze as he felt the texture of it. 3000 thread Egyptian cotton. Very nice. The odd part was he was pretty sure there hadn't been anything like that on the bed when he'd laid down…unless he was a whole lot more drunk than he thought he was…except he could remember coming down as the sun was rising, getting undressed… He opened his eyes and blinked them in surprise and sat up. He got out of the bed and crept towards the door, eyeing the room as he went and peeked his head out into the hall.

"Spike! Spike!"

"Huh? Whazzat?"

"Wake up! I think we've been kidnapped…unless we went on a road trip last night that I don't remember…"

Spike rubbed his eyes and sat up, looking around as well. He rubbed the nice sheets, eyed the walls and floor in interest.

"It looks like the mansion, it's just more colorful." he pointed out as he slipped out of bed and slipped his jeans back on to go prowling after Angel who was still rather agitated. They both came to a stop when they entered the 'living room'. It looked freshly painted, the fireplace was on a different wall, the floor was different, as was the chandelier, and the French doors that led out to the garden…and yet, they were both sure it was the same room. They could hear noise coming from down the passageway that led to the kitchen--a place they'd both peeked into when they'd first taken possession of the mansion, but hadn't needed or bothered to look into afterwards. They found Stormcloud there, surveying the place critically while tapping his wand against his chin.

"Stormcloud?"

"Oh, morning. I wasn't expecting you two to be up yet. Come take a look, tell me what you think of the place."

"Sunlight. There's a lot of windows in there."

"Oh, it's okay, I vampire proofed them like I did the windows on your cars. It should be safe enough."

The two vampires tentatively reached into the shaft of sunlight streaming into the window just past
the doorway and both paused, remembering a similar scene the night they first met. Angelus had stuck his hand into the sun as a dare, and William, newly risen and wanting to impress had done the same. There was no burn. They crept into the sunlight, marveling at it once more.

"We're getting spoiled. Maybe you shouldn't keep doing this. Sooner or later you're going to leave an I'll have to start remembering I'm not sunproof again. It's not exactly good for our health."

"Do you want me to undo it?"

The vampires paused and looked out into the garden while each basking in their own separate sunbeam.

"Not yet."

Harry nodded and wandered out, leaving them to poke around. There was a refrigerator which had their blood supply in it, beer, Spike's spicy buffalo wings. The cabinets held miscellaneous things like Wheatabix, hot chocolate, burba weed and little marshmallows. There was a kettle on the stove, mugs in another cabinet, pots and pans in another. They followed Harry's scent into another room and found him pointing his wand at the walls and changing the color.

"You've been decorating since you got up?"

"Yeah, why not. I've been bored. I'm used to being rather busy all the time, and vacation or not I can only lay around for so long and no longer before I get antsy. Hey, could you two stand in front of the wall there?"

The two vamps hesitantly moved to where they'd been asked. Harry eyed them a moment thoughtfully and tweaked the color a bit.

"That's better. The lighter green made you both look a bit sickly. This is better." He wandered around the table and chairs then and began tweaking them as well, making the very plain, utilitarian set look more like an expensive antique from the old world, and then changing the rest of the furniture to match, and then wandering out again. Spike and Angel continued trailing after him from room to room, where he would tweak the colors to suit their vampiric paleness before sprucing up the furniture a bit, or the light fixtures. When he got done with the bathroom, Spike whipped off his jeans right there in the hall to go take a bath in the sizeable tub that was left behind. There was soon a billow of steam coming from the doorway and they could hear Spike splashing around in glee.

"How long will all this last?"

"I don't really know. It might continue on after we leave by taking in little bits of the ambient energy to sustain itself, or it might all just vanish. Your guess is as good as mine, really."

Angel nodded and gazed thoughtfully at the steam.

"I was going to go grab lunch now. This was actually the last room left to do."

"Oh. I'll probably go get more sleep." Angel asserted while still eyeing the steam. He stopped then and remembered that Harry had decorated the room he and Spike had spent the night in. He glanced sideways at Harry and smiled sheepishly. "Though I might take a hot bath first."

"There's probably enough room in there for at least four people to sit comfortably." Harry assured him before wandering off.

Angel shucked his own trousers and headed inside. It was rather nice not having to justify or
explain himself... of course, the boys might not know about his curse, or that most of the people they knew would have gone to fetch the crossbows if they had walked into the bedroom that morning, fearing the worst. Even once they realized he still had his soul, there would have been a round of panicked recriminations and blame.

Had he been less drunk he probably wouldn't have taken the chance, but Spike was right when he pointed out there was no perfect happiness to be had there--they had known each other too long, been through too much for it to be anything like that night with Buffy. He didn't really know if he'd ever be able to achieve perfect happiness with Buffy either, to be honest, not after everything that happened last time.

It was the uncertainty of the whole thing that really killed--would he have been so sublimely relieved that he'd kept his soul that he'd achieve it even sleeping with Spike? He hadn't known for sure... he was honestly relieved it hadn't worked out that way. He slid into the ridiculously hot water with a hiss and then groaned in honest appreciation when it began to penetrate right down to his bones. Spike grinned at him and sunk beneath the water. Not having to breath came in really damn convenient sometimes. It seemed Spike had been right about another thing as well--imperfect happiness was nothing to scoff at.

"Come on, it's sunset."
"Just a mo', Peaches. My show's not finished yet."
"Everyone will be waiting for us."
"Five more minutes won't matter."

The cellphone in Spike's pocket rang and he huffed in annoyance even as he dug it out. "If it's not one bloody thing it's another."

He put the phone to his ear, still watching the television intently and ignoring Angel's irritated pacing near the door.

"Yeah? Oh. You did? Really? Brilliant! Is my stuff still there? She did. Yeah? How much is that going to set me back? Uh huh. Sure, that won't be a problem. I'm not sure when I'll be able to make it down there. No, Sunnydale. Hey, how'd you get this number anyway? Yeah? That's neat. Uh huh. Yeah, I'll be by when I can manage it."

"Who was that?"
"It was me lawyer, oddly enough."
"Your lawyer? Since when do you have a lawyer?"

"Since we rescued Darla. I told the bird they sent me to that me car got impounded remember? And I needed their kind of help to get it loose. That was her. She found it at an impound lot in L.A."

"So they're in L.A. then?"
"Yeah, apparently Dru left word with them that it was there. I guess it was an apology or something."
"How'd they get the number?"
"Mystic phone service. They just put in someone's name and it calls the phone nearest to where they are. Pretty sweet, huh?"

"How are you supposed to fight something that can just do stuff like that?"

"Got me, Peaches."

"Did they say anything about soldier boy?"

"No. Dru prolly just took him and Darla with her to wait for Darla to rise. She should be doing that any time now."

"Meaning we won't likely get there to stop her before he's dead."

"Pretty much. Though I guess I could ask the boys to take another look. If they can't find him, there's really nothing else we can do."

Everyone was gathered at the Magic Box when they finally arrived.

"We've gotten an update. Spike's car is in an impound lot in L.A."

"So get your nephews to pop over and get Riley!" Xander ordered.

"The boys searched for him, for his corpse, for Darla, for Darla's corpse, for Drusilla. They got nada on the whole lot. Wherever they all are is mystically shielded. L.A. is a big city. We don't know whereabouts they are to even start looking for them."

"So that's it then? Riley just dies?"

"Unless the Initiative has some way to track him that still works. If they got Buffy's message, I'd assume they're looking for him too. In fact, they probably are. That might be why we haven't heard from them yet." Cordelia suggested.

"We can only hope."

"Yeah. I'd like Willow to be able to come home."

"Yeah, this goes on much longer I don't know what the hell Stormcloud's gonna do next. 'E's already climbing the walls. He's been cleaning and redecorating the bloody mansion since 'e got there. Curly's been keeping 'imself busy tutoring Red in magic. She was resistant at first they said, until they pointed out that she'd prolly just end up back in that detention center unless she learned how to do magic right."

"That can only be a good thing…I would hope, at least. I do hope these nephews of yours will stress magical ethics."

"They're good boys." Spike said, sounding offended. "Real sweethearts the both of them. Don't go casting aspersions there."

"It was not my intention to offend" Giles replied, voice dry. "I've just been concerned about Willow's attitude towards magic."

"That's on her if she's starts bein' naughty, Watcher. My boys can tell her 'no-no on this' as much as they like. It don't mean nothing if she ain't listening though. Curly'll try to give her a grounding
to build on. What she does after is up to her. I guess you'll just have to keep an eye on 'er if you're that worried. I never really understood why you weren't guiding 'er anyway. She was getting most of her mojo from your collection. The least you could of done was made sure she read the books in order, and didn't just jump in the deep end for a lark."

"I'm Buffy's Watcher, if you'll recall, not Willow's."

"Red's part of your team, right? You walked on the dark side of mojo, you could've at least given 'er the benefit of your youthful indiscretions, chatted over tea during research nights. Could've been giving the Whelp pointers too. I know you're a fair hand with a sword…or a bat. Could've whipped the lad into shape while keeping yourself in top form. In fact, I never understood why you lot didn't try recruiting the various geeks you ran afoul of now and then. That itty boy Jonathan would've given his right nut to hang out and do somethin' useful, and unlike Red his mojo seems to work the way he wanted it to. I didn't meet the lad till after I was chipped…course, I prolly wouldn't have snagged him--I don't like mojo at the best of times. Seen it go wrong too often, and that berk Dracula was just bloody annoying…" he trailed off, leg jiggling impatiently. "You know what? I need a drink and something to kill." he announced. He was halfway to the door before turning back. "Oi, Whelp. You and me got an appointment tomorrow night at Guido's all night chop-shop. He needs an engine rebuilt. Seemed like a good place to start."

He was gone then, in a swirl of smoke and leather. When the door chimed and slammed behind him, everyone turned to look at Xander.

"He fixed my car. I asked for lessons. I sort of figured I'd have to remind him, probably next time my car broke down, and maybe I'd get another free car repair out of it. I wasn't expecting him to go dragging me off to chop shops to rebuild some guy named Guido's engine."

"Now that you're going to be doing male bonding activities with Spike, does this mean that you'll finally stop complaining about the lack of testosterone in the group? I do hope so. It gets rather tiresome after awhile." Anya commented from the register as she counted up the day's receipts.

"He's not a guy, he's a vampire. He doesn't have testosterone." Xander pointed out. "And he wears nailpolish. I go hanging out with him, I might as well just join the Village People and be done with it, you know, because that's what people will think. They'll look at him, look at me, and no matter how many times I protest that I have a girlfriend, they'll make assumptions and then try to beat us up, and Spike won't even be able to kick their asses and so will end up hiding behind me, egging them on, which will just make them more convinced, and I'll end up in the hospital, while he stands around wearing stupid nailpolish and calling me monkey boy! Not going to happen!"

"You spend a lot of time thinking about outings with Spike, don't you? You seem to have considered the matter very thoroughly."

Xander sighed miserably and began banging his head on the table.

"I guess I might as well patrol…I hope there's something left for me to do. Faith was probably running around all day while I was in class."

"I'll come with you." Angel offered. Buffy smiled at him happily. "I don't like the idea of Spike wandering around by himself when the Initiative could be in town right now looking for soldier boy." Buffy grimaced in annoyance but followed after him anyway.

"It's nice having Faith, Spike and Angel all here. I wish they could stay. It's nice not having to pitch in to help with the evening patrols."
"So, Wes, wanna head over to the mansion? We can see what Willow and the boys are up to."
Cordelia offered.

"Do you mind if I come too?" Tara asked.

"And me. I've been rather curious about these nephews." Giles admitted.

"That's right. Nephews. Human nephews. With testosterone. Count me in too." Xander cheered. Anya frowned at him worriedly. "Are you planning a boy's night? I thought that was only for when your partner was out of town and couldn't give you orgasms." Xander stared at her in horror and began banging his head on the table again.

They stopped for pizza along the way, deciding it would be rude to just show up empty handed when they probably weren't expecting them. The mansion looked a lot different when they pulled up alongside.

"This place was kinda derelict before, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was. Are we sure this is the right place?"

"Yes, it is. Did it acquire new owners at some point? The wall around the property looks new."

"There are lights on the trees in the garden too."

A woman's scream jolted them from their contemplations. The pizzas were piled on Anya, who sputtered and hurried after them for safety in numbers, while the rest pulled stakes or crossbows, or grabbed swords and axes from the trunk of their cars and sped off.

"They're coming over the wall!" Tara screamed. "Willow!"

Giles leveled his crossbow and the vampire leaping towards them vanished into ash. Wesley and Xander grabbed at a second long enough for Cordelia to stake it. Tara got another with the crossbow.

"They're still coming! Quick, to the garden!"

Xander, Cordelia and Wesley sped ahead to give Giles and Tara time to reload their crossbows. Anya made for the door and hurried inside, not wanting to be grabbed from behind while so encumbered. She hoped Willow and the nephews living there for two days was enough to kick start a threshold.

The trio halted for a moment in shock, to stare at the sight that met their eyes. They didn't remember themselves until Giles and Tara prodded them from behind to get moving and take out the horde that was still coming over the wall. They shook themselves and got to work pinning and staking, and tried to concentrate on the vamps nearby, the threat, but it was hard, when Spike's little nephew with the glasses was raining ashy death on the far side of the garden with a sword, and the other was taking pot-shots at any vamps that got too close to the back door from the safety of the house while Willow and Anya peeked nervously over his shoulder.

Finally the last of the vamps was dust, including one sad sack that tried to climb back over the wall and escape after all its friends were dusted.

The group slowly lowered their weapons and gazed at Harry in bemused shock as he bounced happily on his toes and cackled in a disturbingly Spike-like manner.
"That was just what I needed, after being cooped up like this! I wonder what brought them all here like that?" he finished wiping his sword down and sheathed it in an absent movement over his shoulder where it disappeared. He then looked around at the piles of ash littered all over. "Bloody hell, I only just finished cleaning up out here! And look at the pool! Looks like grey sludge! Who's going to want to swim in that? Stupid vampires."

The others could only stare as he drew his wand and began stomping around vanishing the dust.

"Is that pool heated? I wish I'd brought my swimsuit."

"So…pizza?"

"Wow, Harry, it looks so pretty out here. Hey, we should eat outside!"

"You can if you want to…I'd prefer the vampire free zone."

"Oh, yeah…that's a good point. Oh! We should have a daytime pool party! That'll give everyone time to grab their suits."

"Oh, I'm so right there with you. I really miss the pool at my dad's old house. Him and his stupid tax-evasion."

Four thuds behind them had everyone turning and brandishing their weapons, but it was just Buffy, Faith, Spike and Angel.

"Is everyone alright?"

"We're fine."

"There were about a dozen vampires here!"

"We took care of them."

"I guess this answers the question of why so many were trying to leap in here."

"Also explains why it was so bloody quiet tonight." Spike huffed, before leaping down from the wall, followed shortly by the others.

"We brought pizza."

"Great. I'm hungry." Faith enthused.

"Is there any beer left? You and Curly didn't drink it all, did you?"

"We didn't drink any of it." Harry sighed.

"Yeah? Sweet."

"You have beer? Great. Grab me one." Xander said gleefully.

"Myself as well." Giles agreed.

Spike glowered at all of them, until Tom patted him on the shoulder. "It is customary if you're playing host. Only polite and all that."

"When I lived with them, the bloody cheapskates only fed me often enough to keep me from going grey and mummy-like and complained if I used any of their precious cereal to give it
"If it makes you feel any better, it's not very good beer."

Spike sighed, before stomping towards the kitchen. "Helps a little."

When he returned to the living room, he found humans sprawled out all over the place, all of them shlapping pizza like it was going out of style. He dropped the six pack of bottles on the coffee table after swiping two for himself, and looked around to find someplace to sit so he could enjoy his blood in peace.

Peaches, the coward, was hiding out in the kitchen till he finished. He took Faith's lead and just sprawled out on an empty section of floor. His Stormcloud was kind enough to fold his legs up on the couch so he could lean back against it.

Bitchy was sprawled sideways on a loveseat. She was quick to sit up and offer the other half to Peaches when he reappeared. He sat down awkwardly and smiled with a rather tense, sickly smile at everyone, then settled in to brood.

Why the hell psycho him ended up with all his sense of fun, he'd never know… prolly did it on purpose so he wouldn't lose his soul again. It seemed a damned stupid way to anchor a bloody soul. Can't be happy about anything or 'poof' you'll go crazy and kill the people you like, instead of random wankers on the street when you're hungry like you're supposed to.

He guessed that was the part that made it a curse. Bloody gypsies. Didn't restrain themselves to just making Peaches ruddy miserable, they had to punish everyone who dared spend time in his presence as well. Looking back, he was glad he'd ate all the wankers. The world was surely a better place without them.

"I was rather impressed with your luck against those vampires that attacked" Giles suddenly spoke up, pinning Harry with a look that demanded answers.

Harry just shrugged dismissively. "I've been training in unarmed combat since I was seven, armed combat since I was eleven…though I did learn to throw knives when I was seven. I've been told I'm pretty good for my age."

"Pretty… I think you've vastly understated things… I do beg your pardon, what was your name again?"

"He's Stormcloud, broody one is Curly."

"You can call me Harry. He's Tom."

"Harry then. I'm Rupert Giles. I don't think you appreciate how well you did. You took out three before the rest of us came to help. I've only ever seen a Slayer do so well."

"They probably weren't expecting me to whip out a sword as they came leaping over the wall, and I only took out two. Tom got the other."

"That's still quite a feat. Vampires are faster, stronger…"

"And having such advantages makes you arrogant, which can easily lead to your downfall. I have good reflexes and I'm well trained. It's honestly not that big of a deal."
"The vamps were able to see your sword." Tom pointed out.

"I did say I was good for my age."

"You have a sword strapped to your back still?" Tara asked curiously. Harry reached behind his shoulder, grasped something they couldn't see and pulled. A sword appeared as he did so.

"It's hidden from the view of regular people. I didn't fancy being pulled over the by the cops for having it." Harry explained before putting it back, where it disappeared once more.

"A wise precaution. The police in this town are rather unreasonable about weapons. I don't know why. It would certainly make their jobs easier if they encouraged everyone to walk around armed." Anya commented.

"Do they know about all the demons or are they as out of the loop as most folks roundabout seem to be?"

"I don't know about now, but they used to have some kind of alert that let them know where vampire attacks had been so they could send out someone to pick up the bodies and see they got buried. I don't know if they're still using it or not."

"They're in the know and they couldn't come up with anything better than 'barbecue fork related accidents?"

"It's official. The muggle-worthy excuse committee sucks no matter which side of the pond you're on."

"Muggle-worthy excuse?"

"How the higher ups explain things to the ordinary folks that aren't in the know. It wasn't a vampire, it was a barbecue fork that mystically got buried in your neck somehow. It wasn't a dragon, it was a freak storm that didn't show up on any radars, and a comet that crashed to earth and set your house on fire. That's all really."

"Comets don't crash to earth." Xander pointed out helpfully.

"That was kind of the point, monkey boy." Spike snarked in reply.

"Yeah, did you not hear me say they sucked?"

"Shutting up now." Xander sighed, downing the rest of his beer.

Spike, Tom and Angel all noted the two Slayers were eyeing Harry and sizing him up. It didn't set well with either of them to be compared to an ordinary human and a boy at that, or to have him be so dismissive of taking out two of the creatures they were specially empowered to fight.

Angel suddenly stiffened and a cloud of gloom and doom surrounded him. Spike eyed him a moment and reached out through his blood to Angel's. He'd probably been watching and waiting so he could wallow in his guilt. Ah, there it was... No...that wasn't Dru...who was that then? Oh. It was probably that guy from the submarine. Wonder how he was doing? There. Dru was exultant. Darla had just woken.

"I need something stronger." Spike mumbled. "Peaches?"

"Yeah."
"I'll be back."

"Hold up. I'll walk you."

"We'll be back in a bit."

The two vampires ghosted out of the house like a couple of leather clad shadows, so swift and silent was their exit.

"Okay… anyone else confused? I know Angel isn't exactly Mr. Party guy, so him disappearing I get… Spike you normally can't get rid of."

"They went to get more whiskey probably. They drank all four bottles they had last night."

"Yeah, we heard them when we were heading back from our patrol, singing Barry Manilow's greatest hits." Faith laughed.

Buffy's face twisted in horror and confusion. Angel didn't drink. He also didn't sing.

Xander cackled at the image of the two vamps, who both thought they were so cool, doing such a thing.

"Why were they drinking?"

"Because of Darla. Angel wanted to save her and give her a second chance. From what Spike has told us she didn't have a very happy life, and she was dying when the Master came to her bedside to turn her. He never got a chance. He no sooner discovered she was alive than she was taken and turned again."

"Okay…I can maybe see why Angel might be unhappy there-- his skanky vamp ho is all with the soulless and evil again. Why was Spike unhappy?"

"Because he wanted his family back, and the way things stand now he and Angel are on one side, the two girls on the other. Spike and Angel can't be what they were, and the girls without chip or soul to restrain them can't be other than what they are either. Angel's soul won't allow him to stand idly by while they commit atrocities, but the part of him that still cares for them both will suffer for ending them. Spike still loves Drusilla very much, and he seems to hold a great deal of affection for Darla as well from what we saw. The thought of them meeting their end pains him greatly."

"Uh, yeah, news flash there Wesley my man. Demons can't love. They don't have souls. It's impossible."

"Wrong. They can love just fine. Spike can at least. It's not like I've really been doing a systematic study or anything. It might just be because of the chip, I don't know. All we ever got to see of him before was the fangy and the 'grrr' and the 'must kill now'. He can't act on any of that, so we get a chance to see what else is in there. Turns out it's a lot. He's just overflowing with emotion."

"He is not. He's just an empty thing. He doesn't have a soul."

"Yeah, I know." Cordelia sighed "But trust me on this, he's full of emotion regardless."

"What, he tell you that? Newsflash Cordy, he was probably lying."

"I can read auras. I'm quite certain."

"Since when?"
"I'm a seer and can do other stuff too. It's a thing."

"I still say he was lying."

"He never said anything one way or another. I'm just telling you what I saw."

"So... who'd like to play a game or something?" Harry asked curiously, wanting to stave off the argument that was brewing.

"That sounds like a good idea." Tara spoke up.

"Yeah, a game." Willow nodded agreement.

"There a radio or something? We could use some music" Faith added.

"In the cabinet there." Harry pointed.

While Faith moved to put on some music, the others began arguing over what sort of game to play.

"There's a billiards room. I'm not sure if the table has all the balls or not. I know it has some. I didn't really check. There's a dartboard too. It's right near by."

"Pool. Yeah. We can play pool. You two any good?"

"I've never played." Harry admitted.

"I haven't played in awhile. I used to be pretty good." Tom added.

Harry looked at him curiously.

"What? There wasn't a lot to do back then, especially if you were a poor orphan in the inner city."

"No problemo. I'm sure we can show you the ropes. A nice, manly game, with beer. Sounds good, right?"

Tom glanced over the array of nice-looking women and the middle-aged man that made up the Sunnydale part of the group.

"You don't have any male friends, do you?"

Harry elbowed him sharply in the side and Tom winced. They were all gathered because what was likely the only other young guy in the group was probably being eaten right now.

"Sorry. I was being rather tactless, wasn't I? My apologies."

Xander was only able to muster up a very half-hearted smile. He was beginning to think maybe it wasn't so bad that there were no other guys around. Male bonding seemed to be rather difficult.

The three boys, Giles and Wesley headed off to check out the billiards room, leaving the girls behind in the living room. Faith had found a soft rock station that no one found objectionable, so there was now music playing in the background.

"I hope Angel doesn't drink too much. He can get kinda nasty…" Cordelia fretted.
Buffy eyed her with surprise and perhaps a bit of jealousy. She had seen Angel drunk as well? When? Why? How? In all the time they'd dated she'd never seen him so much as touch a single drink. He wasn't a hang out an have a few drinks sort of guy. No matter how many times she invited him, he never hung out at the Bronze with her and her friends. He didn't tell jokes, or play games. Did he suddenly turn into a completely different person when he left town?

"What happened?"

"There was this actress that he was working for briefly as a bodyguard. She realized he was a vampire and slipped him a happy pill in his drink. She wanted him to turn her so she'd stop getting older since her career was going down the tube. He attacked her. When she came running up the stairs all freaked out we thought she'd slept with him and he lost his soul…"

Buffy bristled in indignation. It wasn't sex that made him lose his soul, it was the pure contentment and happiness he experienced from making love to her, the woman he loved, his soul mate.

"He said a lot of really nasty things, cut the power and the phone line, said he was going to kill us all. It was pretty intense. We had to knock him down the elevator shaft. We chained him up afterwards. He was fine when he woke up, remembered everything. I told him off about it, of course. Angelus is a jerk, but an honest one. I told him I expected at least as much from his non-evil self."

"He didn't sound too evil last night. We seriously heard him and bleach boy singing Manilow. Angel can't sing. Bleach boy didn't sound so bad."

"Yeah? Well good. Maybe Spike knows how to keep him from turning nasty on us. I mean, he must have experience; he and Angelus were buds back in the day, right?"

"I don't know. I mean, he never really talked about his past, or even mentioned any of the rest of them until he had to, because they were in town. If you had asked me back then, I would have said he hated them all. He staked Darla without hesitating, but he got in the way of me staking Spike when he showed up here before all crying and drunk because Drusilla left him. He said it was just because we needed him alive to find you and Xander" she added to Willow "but now that I think about it, he could have just sniffed you out. I even said you were probably just in the factory. Let's not forget him getting all lecture-y with me when we were in the desert."

"You were both kind of out of line. He rescued us from being stranded and tried to warn you how dangerous getting Willow back was going to be and you two just attacked him. He can't fight back." Tara pointed out quietly.

"I'm the vampire slayer, remember? I'm not the chipped vamps rescue hotline. I allowed him to live. That right there is going above and beyond. If he doesn't like it he should stop bothering us. I mean, it isn't like any of us like him or want him around."

"Geez. I like him, oddly enough. Maybe I should convince him to come back to L.A. with us when we leave. He's been rather helpful."

"I doubt Angel or Wesley want him around any more than we do." Buffy disagreed.

"I wouldn't bet on that if I were you. He had Wesley playing video games and discussing English literature, and helped him translate Latin while he worked on Greek. Angel grumps a lot about him but he's not nearly as upset with his presence as he pretends to be. They have issues, but there's affection underneath, it's just kinda buried."

Cordelia trailed off when she realized the girls were all staring at her looking rather gobsmacked--
not Anya or Faith, just the other three. Anya seemed to have already known, Faith just took her words at face value.

"Latin? English literature? You're kidding, right? If you had said Angel, that would be one thing. Angel is very intelligent and well-educated. Spike's just some backwards gutter thug. He was probably a cutthroat or a pickpocket or something, lived in the slums." Buffy snorted.

"Uh, no. Geez, did you not read any of his Watcher file at all? He was from the upper echelons of society, not royalty or anything, but the lower ranks of the minor aristocracy at least. He was very well educated--Oxford and Cambridge. He was like a poetry-writing uber nerd straight out of masterpiece theatre. He's been forgetting his accent while hanging around Wes and his nephews. The thug talk is all a put-on, really. He's like the anti-Giles, actually. He started off like Giles and went Ripper, while Giles went the other way. How long has he been around, even living with some of you? How do none of you know any of this? I mean geez, I spent part of a couple of days with him, while you've all had what, a year plus? I mean, helloo? Sir William Pratt, anyone? That was his real name. Geez."

"No, that's the name of the guy he killed so he could set up shop in his corpse."

"Look, I'm not going to debate the metaphysics of souls and demons with you. He thinks of it as being his original name, that's good enough for me for the moment."

"Maybe we should change the subject."

"Probably not a bad idea."

"Hey…do you hear something?"

The girls all quieted down and listened for a moment. They could hear a loud argument outside. Concerned they got up to go see what was going on.

Giles, who was facing the doorway of the billiard room saw them all passing by on their way to the door and called out to them, which naturally brought the rest of them to peek out at them.

"We heard an argument going on outside. It sounds like Spike and Angel. We wanted to see what was wrong."

"…it's bollocks! It's your brand of bollocks, Angel, from first to last!"

"You just can't see the big picture! You can't see any picture!"

"I am talking about something primal, yeah? Savagery. Brutal animal instinct."

"Yeah, animal instinct always wins out with you. You know, the human race has evolved, Spike!"

"Into a bunch of namby-pamby, self analyzing wankers that can never hope to…"

"We're bigger, we're smarter, and then there's this thing called teamwork…not to mention the superstitious terror of your 'pure' animal…"

"You just want it to be the way you want it!"

"It's not about what I want!"
They were right in each other's faces, eyes blazing, chests heaving as they each argued their point of view. They were suddenly propelled back from one another and found Buffy standing between them, looking irate, stake clutched in her fist.

"What's going on here? We could hear you inside!"

The two vampires straightened. Angel tried to act nonchalant, while Spike busied himself lighting up a cigarette.

"It's nothing important."

"It must be somewhat important or you wouldn't have been screaming in each other's faces about it." Buffy disagreed, before eyeing Spike suspiciously. "Did he try doing something?"

Spike flipped her off, then flipped Angel off as well when he glared at him quellingly.

"It was mostly…just theoretical." Angel replied uncomfortably as he shifted from foot to foot and looked like a naughty toddler caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Buffy's eyes narrowed suspiciously at Angel now, and he squirmed under her regard.

"Oh for the love of…look, if a caveman and an astronaut were to get into a fight, who would win?" Spike demanded.

Buffy just looked at the two of them like they'd lost their minds.

"It wouldn't matter which of them won. The bunnies would just kill them both." Anya asserted.

Spike, Harry and Tom shuddered slightly, remembering Timmaeus the Destructor.

"Well, yeah, that goes without saying. However, in this scenario, there are no bunnies."

"Bunnies?" Buffy demanded incredulously.

"Do the astronauts have weapons?" Xander wondered, wanting to move past his girlfriend's weird obsession with rabbits.

"No." the two vampires answered in unison.

"When you say caveman, are you talking Neanderthals or Cro Magnon, or one of the earlier more monkey-like ones? That will make a big difference to your argument." Harry chimed in.

"How and where did they meet? Are they in a cave, a forest, an open plain?" Tom asked.

"You said the astronaut didn't have weapons…how is he dressed?" Wesley wondered.

By now, Buffy was looking at the whole group of guys like they'd lost their minds.

"Is it night or day?" Faith asked. "Do cavemen have good night vision?"

"Actually, it's been speculated that Neanderthals might have been able to see other dimensions, but that it faded from the evolutionary model because it wasn't very useful. Tigers don't pop out at you from the fifth dimension, after all." Wesley remarked.

"Okay, but how about night vision?"

"When you say astronaut, are we talking Buzz Aldrin or Commander Whorf? Or the Borg…"
"They're astronauts." Xander asked.

"The Klingons are primal warriors. Buzz Aldrin. Actually, the Klingons are a good case in point…primal astronauts kick everyone's arse." Spike decided.

"You can't just change the rules in mid-play, Spike." Angel huffed.

"Sure I can. It's one of the rules."

"What? No it's not!"

Buffy watched speechlessly as all the guys and Faith started towards the billiards room, passing around one of the bottles of whiskey the vamps had brought back and still arguing.

"Who is that?" she demanded. "It's certainly not Angel."

"It's not Angelus." Willow pointed out. "I-if it was, there'd be dead goldfish a-and vampires burning to death nearby while giving messages and all sorts of badness."

"We're definitely keeping Spike." Cordelia decided. "He's a good influence on Brood boy."

"You call that a good influence?" Buffy squeaked in outrage.

"Uh, yeah. Duh. Angel doesn't connect with people, he broods and he fights and he flounces around looking yummy and dangerous in his leather coats and then goes back to brooding in dark corners. Until he died, Doyle and I were working on getting him to be more a part of the world. Now that Wesley's with us we're trying to continue that. We've had some luck--he'll occasionally make small talk, I got him to join us for meals once in awhile, though he still prefers to hide out alone to drink his blood. Baby steps, but there was definite progress. Now, look at him--he's at a party and instead of skulking and staring at the walls, or hiding out in the kitchen, he's right there in the middle of the crowd, talking and arguing and male-bonding all over the place. He's been more animated and…alive, if you'll pardon the word choice, than I've ever seen him."

"You can't just decide where Spike lives." Buffy pointed out. "What if he doesn't want to move to L.A.?"

"Why wouldn't he? You've all gone to a lot of trouble to make sure he knows he's not welcome here. You said just a little while ago none of you want him around. In L.A. he'd be a welcome and valued member of the team." Cordelia scoffed.

"And if his chip fails? What then?"

"Duh. Angel subdues him and we call Willow to get him a soul or something. As a bonus, if Angelus comes to visit again, we'll have Spike to help subdue him. It's win-win."

"What makes you think he'll help you two and not Angelus? Didn't you just get done saying a little while ago that he and Angelus were 'buds back in the day'? What if you just end up with two evil vampires running amok? What'll you do then?"

"How likely is it that the chip would just randomly fail and Angel would lose his soul at the same time?"

"Now that you've said that, really likely." Willow said apologetically.

"I don't think it'll be a problem. Spike's had an invite to your house for going on three years now, right?" Cordelia asked Buffy impatiently.
"What?" Willow spluttered.

"And during most of that time he was unchipped, correct? He never snuck in to kill you or your mom in your sleep. I think even if his chip fails we'll still be able to count on him to not go after us. He likes us. That seems to make a difference with him."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard! Are you even listening to yourself?"

"Buffy…why has Spike had an invite to your house for almost three years?"

Buffy waved her hand dismissively. "It's from when we teamed up to take down Angelus during the whole Acathla thing."

"WHAT!" all three girls exclaimed.

"Buffy…when…what? Spike helped save the world? He helped you take down Angelus? When did this happen? How? Why did you never mention it?"

"Um, hello? I'd just sent my soulmate to hell and I left for the summer to find myself, remember? It never came up."

"I-is that why you decided to let him live? Because he helped save the world?"

"Well, no. It's just…I knew him and he was harmless, you know? Annoying, but harmless." Buffy said evasively.

"Okay…he's already helped subdue Angelus once, and yet you're here arguing with me that he'll team up with him if he reappears. From the looks of it, all the parts of him that like Spike are in Angel. He's probably not going to want him around any more than the rest of us. So, what's the real reason?" Cordelia demanded.

"Because it was handy having him around for backup. He likes to fight. He's been out dusting vampires on his side of town, which meant I didn't have to patrol there. If something big and Hellmouthy came up, he was an extra fighter I could count on to wade into the thick of things so none of my friends got hurt or killed."

"You want him as cannon fodder, in other words."

"Pretty much, yeah. If you take him to L.A. I won't have that anymore."

"So have Willow hit your boyfriend with a soul tomorrow night after he rises. Bingo. Instant cannon fodder, if that's all you're looking for."

"Oh, yeah, that'll work. Did you forget the perfect happiness thing? We have a big reunion, BAM, it's Angelus all over again. No thanks. At least with the chip I could count on Spike to always be Spike."

"E-except he keeps trying to find people to take the chip out of his head. W-wouldn't that just be Angelus the next generation…literally in fact?" Tara interjected hesistantly.

"No, because if the chip comes out, he's dust. End of story."

"Hmmm…I still think you're holding back on us, Buffster. Wasn't he running around in Sunnydale for awhile with Harmony before getting chipped? You didn't dust him then…or Harmony as far as I know."
"I actually did stake him, but he had the gem of Amara. We were fighting outside and I thought he'd burn up before he got anywhere. The next time I saw him he was chipped. Harmony's just too pathetic to kill. She and Xander got into a slap fight and then she ran away. I'd feel like I was beating up a puppy."

Cordelia eyed her and nodded. So far as she could tell with her new mad aura-reading skills, she was telling the truth…mostly. There was stuff moving beneath the surface, but she wasn't sure what all it was.

"Should we go see how the argument is going?" Tara wondered.

Buffy sighed. "Yeah, I guess."

When they arrived in the billiards room, they found Faith and Giles playing, while the others were ranged along the bar that ran down one wall, still arguing. Faith and Giles would each take turns adding to the discussion when it wasn't their turn. Spike's nephews sat across from he and Angel, an odd human mirror--one tall and on the quiet side, one short and hyper. Shots of whiskey were being downed rather freely, and there was some definite slurring of speech noticeable.

Xander seemed oddly happy to be arguing with Angel and Spike. Poor guy, he must really be desperate for male company if having a stupid discussion about astronauts and cavemen made him so happy. Angel seemed oddly happy too—not perfectly happy, obviously, or there'd be bodies and badness aplenty.

It took Buffy awhile before she really got it. Angel had gotten his best friend back. Him being souled while Spike was still running around being evil meant they couldn't really hang out anymore—obviously. Now that Spike was chipped and helping them out, it meant he could hang out with him again without anyone objecting too much.

It was hard to wrap her mind around. Angelus once had a best friend, just like any normal guy, and had missed him, or something. Spike was Angel's best friend. Even repeating it didn't make it make any more sense, but it was there right in front of her. How had she missed this? All the times he'd badmouthed…

He never really had, had he? He told her he did terrible things when he was Angelus, he told her he regretted the things he did. He told her Darla had made him a monster when she'd killed him. He'd told her Drusilla was his greatest crime. The only thing he'd ever really said about Spike was that he was dangerous, really dangerous…but he'd tried to get them to leave town, not dusted them. He hadn't tried dusting him after he'd been chipped, even though in between he'd both turned on him and tortured him. So far as she knew, Darla hadn't done anything like that, but he'd still dusted her without batting an eyelash—to protect her.

Maybe that was the difference. He'd never been around for most of her fights with Spike…though even the ones he had been present for he hadn't moved in to dust him; he'd always escaped afterwards—even though he had known right where he and Dru were all along, because he went right to them the moment he lost his soul.

Given how he was acting earlier about Darla…had it actually bothered him to dust her? Had he regretted it? But what about his soul? Shouldn't he despise them all for being unrepentant killers? Shouldn't he be sickened by their continued existence? Angelus couldn't love and Angel should be horrified and want nothing to do with any of them…so why were they all still undead and kicking? None of it made any sense.

She pushed her way into the group beside Angel and caught his eye. "Angel"
"No, you can't have Jedi as the astronauts"

Angel licked his lips and his gaze darted briefly from side to side like he was looking for an escape before settling back on her. "Buffy."

"Why not? They're in space!"

"Because the argument is brains vs. brawn. Magical astronauts with force powers—which are a primal power"

"I don't understand any of this. You need to explain it to me." She whispered back, confusion and hurt heavy in her voice.

"Actually, I think only the dark side could be considered properly 'primal' in the way we're using it here. The light side is all about order and limits, the dark side is about embracing the messy emotions and using it to fuel their power."

"What exactly do you want me to explain?" Angel asked nervously.

"Exactly--and there's only properly supposed to ever be two--a master an apprentice--but the light side can have bunches. That right there tells you primal forces win out."

"If we could get back to the cavemen though"

"This. Everything. You. Everything is so upside down. Nothing makes sense. I feel like I don't even know you anymore."

"Yeah, we were ruling out Jedi as the spacemen. It has to be Buzz Aldrin or another like him. No superpowers, no weapons, just intellect vs. physical power"

"Isn't he like 90 years old? Is that really fair?"

"Buffy." Angel repeated with a sigh.

So many things hovered unsaid in the way he breathed her name. She could hear all the unspoken words and longings and things left unfinished between them. It was this, this never ending loop of words that couldn't be spoken, desire that couldn't be quenched that had prompted him to leave, but it didn't help. Every time they were together it was still there, ready to reignite into an inferno that would destroy them and everyone around them.

"Since the argument is brains vs. brawn it's perfectly fair…unless ol' Buzz has lost his marbles, in which case no it wouldn't be."

"Anyone know?"

"No. Couldn't we just make it Buzz Aldrin in his prime?"

Buffy's eyebrow twitched in annoyance as the stupid, meaningless argument continued around them undaunted. How were she and Angel supposed to properly appreciate the never-ending pain and drama of their epic love when everyone around them was saying such stupid things?

"You haven't weighed in yet, Slayer. What's your thoughts on the matter?" Spike interrupted, while handing her a shot glass, his eyes challenging.

Angel relaxed minutely as her eyes lost the dewy 'we need to talk, emote and maybe cry together' look and flashed with annoyance at Spike, who just smirked at her. She snatched the shot glass
and downed it in one go, prompting a delighted laugh from Faith, who still thought she could stand to relax a bit, past badness between them aside.

Buffy's whole face scrunched up and she stuck out her tongue. "BLEAH!" and gave a theatrical full-body shudder, which naturally set the rest of the guys to laughing at her rather indulgently and trying to get her to have another.

Xander and Spike took Giles and Faith's places at the pool table. Faith took Xander's place playing bartender. Tara and Willow had slipped away at some point when no one was looking. Buffy tried to get Angel to slip away with her so they could talk, but he kept purposefully missing her hints and cues and kept in the middle of the stupid argument.

Even Cordelia and Anya got in on the act. Buffy sat miserably in the center of the crowd, downing the drinks Faith kept slipping her, brooding about Angel and trying not to think about Riley and the fact that she was going to have to stake him when he showed up in town. She also tried not to think about Spike possibly going to L.A. and the fact that the idea bothered her, just a little bit...because of the loss of extra help, of course.

She was getting just a bit dizzy and bleary when Faith was suddenly there, grinning at her with what, on anyone else, she might have called affection. "Come on, little sis, gotta get you home to beddie-bye."

She'd lost track of the rest of them at some point. Xander and Anya were headed for the door, and Anya was trying to take the keys so she could drive. He was resisting and insisting he was fine, but one of Spike's nephews snatched the keys and tossed them to her before seeing them out. Giles, Wesley and Cordelia were stumbling upstairs to grab beds, still arguing good-naturedly with one another.

Spike and Angel, who were also still arguing, though about some guy named 'The Immortal' -- stupid name for a vampire--were heading to the underground part of the house, presumably to go to bed themselves. Faith gave her a tug and pulled her from the house and slung an arm over her shoulders to help her walk.

The cool air outside helped clear her head somewhat, and she was able to throw off some of the grogginess. Faith waited to make sure she was steady and then backed off a bit to let her walk on her own.

"I was expecting you to lecture everyone about drinking so much. I wasn't expecting you to get the most sloshed out of all of us."

Buffy just shrugged half-heartedly and concentrated on walking.

"You alright? This about soldier-boy? For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I did look around for him, but I didn't see hide nor hair in the time you was all gone."

"If he was with Drusilla, I'm not surprised. She's got wonky mind powers or something."

"Even so. He seemed like a good guy." she offered somewhat lamely.

"He was." Buffy agreed sadly. "Very suburban happy-town USA... or corn-field Iowa USA, I guess. He grew up on a farm, very Norman Rockwell, Little House on the Prairie. He joined the military because that's what true-blue patriotic farm boys do. A year in my world ruined him and now he's dead."

"You didn't ruin him, B. He was a big boy, made his own choices."
"No, I did. There wasn't any darkness in him when we met. He was exactly as he appeared to be, no hidden agendas, no shameful past. A year with me drove him crazy or something. Anya swears he was going to vampire whores and paying them to bite him. Xander said he was doing crazy things like attacking vampire nests by himself. He was jealous of Angel, always questioning me about why I let Spike live. I think he was jealous of him too."

"So you and bleach boy did have something going on?"

"No! No. It's just a stupid spell Willow did. She made us get married. We were all over each other and planning a wedding. Riley saw me looking at wedding dresses and I told him I was getting married. I told him later I was just messing with him because he was looking at me like I was a ball and chain, but I think someone must have let something slip…maybe me. He did ask once how old Spike was. I told him my boyfriend was 'way old' but not as old as my last one while I was under the spell. Not exactly the best foot to start off a new relationship on, I guess. Now he's dead, and will probably come back to town as a vampire and I'm going to have to kill him. He has no soul, he has no chip, and with his commando training and all the angry resentment that's probably going to come to town with him he'll just be too dangerous to leave running around."

"So have Red stuff a soul in him."

"Happiness clause. I already have one souled vampire ex-boyfriend running around that I can never sleep with again. I don't want to start a collection."

"Yeah. That's rough, B."

"So what does that leave me? I had the boyfriend with superpowers and it ended badly. I've tried a couple of times for the normal guy and they've all ended badly."

"I guess you could join the girls' club like Red did."

Buffy wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Maybe as an experiment…and even then. No. Just no."

"See? This is part of why I don't bother. I dunno. G-man? He's pretty smoking for a fusty English librarian."

"EW! He's like a father to me. Yech! And he slept with my mom! On a police car. In broad daylight."


"You are not sleeping with Giles." Buffy told her fiercely.

Buffy woke with an aching head to the sound of her mother knocking on the door. "Buffy? Are you in there?"

"Yeah." she croaked, pulling herself up into a sitting position. "I'm here mom."

Joyce cracked open the door and peeked in to see Buffy sitting there looking like warmed-over death. "Buffy! Are you alright?"

"I had too many shots last night."

"You were drinking?"
"Riley's missing. We think he might have been turned into a vampire."

Joyce's face contorted with shock and sympathy. "Oh, no. The poor boy! Oh, Buffy…I had no idea. Though I suppose that explains why there's a commando in the kitchen?"

"Huh? A commando? Here? Now? Oh no…" She stumbled out of bed, wincing slightly as her head began to throb.

"I'll hold him off while you get dressed."

"Thanks, mom."

Joyce hurried back downstairs and smiled apologetically to the soldier seated there.

"I'm sorry I took so long. Buffy just told me that Riley was missing. She's a bit hungover. She must be so upset…"

The soldier, who had subtly been radiating hostility, relaxed a fraction. If she was so torn up about Riley that she'd drunk herself into a stupor when she couldn't find him, maybe she wasn't completely without merit. He still thought Riley should have kissed this town, and that girl, goodbye and come with them where he belonged.

"No problem, ma'am. I can spare a bit more time." Graham assured her.

Buffy appeared a few minutes later, dressed simply, hair in a messy bun, no makeup. She looked pale and drawn, and had dark circles under both eyes, which were slightly bloodshot. She was a lot tinier than he remembered. There seemed to be nothing to her.

"Graham? Is there news? Did you find him?" she asked, while wrapping her arms around herself as though to shield herself from an expected blow.

"We found him in L.A., dazed and stumbling down the street. He seems to have no memory of the last few days, he was dehydrated and had low blood pressure. We've taken him into custody and we'll be keeping an eye on him."

"He's still alive?" Buffy demanded.

"Yeah, he's alive. In bad shape, but he'll be fine with some R and R, or so we hope. What I need from you, Missy, is to fill in some of the blanks. His memory is wonky, he's got bloodsucker bites on his arms, and he was hours from here with no real memory of how he came to be there, though he seemed to think you were with him at least part of the time."

Buffy did her best to marshal her scattered thoughts and remember the plan.

"Look, there were some commandos here a few days ago that were tracking a hostile that they said makes people insane. Our friend Tara saw commandos break into her dorm and kidnap Willow, supposedly to take her to Nevada to the facility there. She came and woke the rest of us in a panic and we ran around all crazed and then hopped in our friend Xander's car to head to Nevada to try to find out where she'd been taken and get her back. Meanwhile, those of our friends that were still here realized they hadn't seen Riley all day and started looking for him. I tried to get him before we left, but he wasn't in his apartment. While my friends here were running around searching for Riley, Willow came back from visiting her aunt and was rather confused to hear she'd supposedly been kidnapped. Those of us who'd headed to Nevada were actually stranded in the middle of nowhere when our car broke down. Some other friends from L.A. had come by to visit, and went to Nevada to look for all of us and let us know Willow was safe and back here. We all met up eventually, they helped us fix the car and we all returned. Riley still was
nowhere to be found. That's when I called you guys. With more people to help, we all split up and went looking for him again, but there was still no sign. At that point, we feared the worst and assumed he was dead or turned. That's all I really know. Riley's alive and in L.A. though…thank God. I've been so…” she let her shoulders sag in relief and blinked relieved tears out of her eyes, while her mother hurried to wrap a comforting arm around her shoulders. "You're going to rescind whatever capture orders you had on Willow, right? I mean…if that was you guys…except it might never have happened." Buffy trailed off uncertainly. "Is there a capture order on Willow? Was there ever, or did that crazy-making hostile just mess with everyone's minds? I don't even know anymore."

Graham sighed and rubbed his head in annoyance.

"God almighty, but I hate this town." he lamented before straightening once more. "Tell me more about this 'crazy making hostile'.” he ordered.

"I'll tell you what I know, though keep in mind I was stranded in Nevada when most of this happened."

"Tell me what you know, we'll work from there."

"Willow! Will?" Buffy called excitedly.

She let herself into the dorm and looked around, but there was no sign of her or Tara.

"Damn. I really have to learn to call first."

She let herself back out and hurried to the Magic Box, thinking everyone might have regrouped there.

When she arrived, she found Anya helping customers and Giles surrounded by books and researching. "Giles! The commandos stopped by"

"Yes, here as well. They asked a lot of pointed questions. I do hope I remembered the order of events correctly. I understand Riley is still alive. It's a miracle, frankly. Neither Drusilla nor Darla is noted for their compassion, after all."

"I know. I couldn't believe it. I wonder why they let him go. I mean, I'm happy, obviously, but still, it's weird, isn't it?"

"Extremely weird. Will Riley be returning to us?"

Buffy hesitated and then shrugged, looking uneasy. "I don't know, actually. Graham said he had vampire bites all over his arms."

"I did tell you." Anya chimed in from behind the register.

Buffy stoically ignored her. "I'm glad he's alive…but I'm not sure I can forgive him."

"While your position is understandable, don't you think you at least owe the young man a chance to plead his case or at least tell his side of the story?"

"I think I already know his side of the story."

"Nonetheless, a relationship of the length yours has gone on deserves at least that much, don't you
Buffy nodded reluctantly and changed the subject. "Any sign of Tara or Willow this morning? I went to her dorm to give her the good news. Graham is going to cancel the capture order now that they know Riley was compromised in some way."

"I believe they might still be at the mansion. I did see them this morning at breakfast. I believe Tara had no classes today, and decided to just stay where Willow was until we had some word on whether or not it was safe for her to show her face."

"Oh. Makes sense I guess. I'll head over there and tell them the good news. I'm sure they'll both be thrilled. I know it was probably killing Willow, missing a whole week of classes like that."

"Indeed. We're all relieved, I'm sure."

"Tell Xander no more drinking copious amounts of whiskey. It makes him fall asleep before giving me my orgasms. Also, tell him not to stay out too late tonight while he's playing with Spike."

Buffy and Giles both winced at the first half of her message, though they were both becoming somewhat inured to Anya's very blunt way of approaching the world. The second part of her message left her puzzled. "Uh, come again? Playing with Spike?"

"He's going off to do male bonding by performing auto mechanics, remember? Men often indulge in these sorts of ritual behaviors as a way of affirming their manhood."

"Oh, right, the chop shop thing." Buffy realized. "Sure, I'll tell him."

"I believe they all said something about trying out the heated pool."

"Oooh. Pool party. I'm so there."

Buffy stopped short after entering the mansion and stared at Spike--a Spike she'd never seen, even while he was living with Giles: barefoot, shirtless, only wearing a pair of jeans, hair free of the gel that normally kept it slicked back like a helmet to his head. The blood-covered breakfast cereal was familiar, as was the sight of the vampire watching soap operas and mouthing off to the television. "You stupid nit! What are you doing? Can't you see she's playing you mate? Bloody hell."

If not for the blood, it would be easy to mistake him for a living man. He was even sitting in a sunny well-lit room. His stupid nephews must have put another 'sun block' spell on him. She wished they'd stop. It was hard enough to keep in mind that he was a soulless vampire, a killer, sometimes. Happily, he made it easier by constantly reminding them he wanted them all dead.

When the commercial came on, he finally peeled his eyes away from the t.v. long enough to glance her way. "Slayer."

Buffy rolled her eyes in response. "Vampire" she greeted in turn.

Spike rolled his eyes back, not seeming to appreciate her little joke.
"The others are out by the pool."

Faith stepped in behind her and peered at the vampire and grinned. "Hey bleach boy. Soap operas? Seriously?"

"What of it? Helps pass the time." he shrugged, completely unembarrassed. "You heading out to the pool as well, kitten? Did you bring a tiny red bikini?"

"Yeah, how’d you know?"

"Had a dream about it. I look forward to seeing the real thing."

Faith grinned and pranced past. "Just remember, seeing is all you're going to be doing."

"You're cruel and heartless, luv. I like that in a woman."

Spike watched her walking away with obvious appreciation, a small smile still playing on his lips. Buffy snorted loudly. It figured bleach-wonder and Faith the psycho-slayer would get on like a house on fire. Spike's eyes flicked back to her and he eyed her a moment before grinning—that stupid grin that always made her want to punch him really hard.

"What's the matter luv, jealous? Don't fret none-- I'll be happy to leer at your arse as well while you walk away."

Buffy gave him a look of disgusted affront, before storming past. She had to work to keep from trying to cover herself as she walked away. She swore she could feel his eyes on her like a physical weight. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of thinking he'd gotten to her. She kept her eyes determinedly forward as she slipped towards the stairs that led down to the underground part of the mansion where she knew Angel would be sleeping.

They still needed to talk, and she wanted to give him the news about Riley and Willow. Now was as good a time as any. Everyone else was occupied, and there were no stupid arguments or stupid whiskey to keep his attention off of her.

There were several rooms down here, most without doors. Angel slept in the back in the room that had one. He'd done that even before when he was still living in Sunnydale. This part of the house had been refurbished same as the upstairs—midnight blue as far as the eye could see. The light from the hallway fell across him as she opened the door. He was ensconced in dark ruby sheets, the color of fresh blood, leaving him the only spot of pale light in the whole room. He was asleep on his stomach and had a smile on his face, his hair was mussed. She found her gaze following the line of his back till it disappeared beneath the sheets and wondered if he was wearing anything. He shifted slightly and the tattoo on his back rippled as his muscles did. Her mouth went dry and she suddenly found it hard to focus and remember why she'd come down here. She should leave, now, before it was too late… she couldn't make her feet move though, not when what she really wanted was to crawl into that bed with him and wrap him around herself till they each forgot where one of them began and the other ended.

She came back to herself with a start as a sleep-roughened voice called her name.

"Buffy?"

Angel was peering at her sleepily, not quite awake.

She dropped the bag she carried that contained her swimsuit and towels for her and Faith, peeled off her coat as she was kicking off her shoes and crawled onto the bed, pushing Angel to his back as she did so, so she could crawl on top of him. The feel of him, the smell of him, it brought back
so many memories of stolen kisses in dark corners, a single beautiful night together, long months of despair and longing and grief—before heartbreak and innocence lost and the desperate empty hollowness that seemed to fill her even now.

Angel, still half asleep, gripped her by the upper arms and deepened the chaste, desperate kiss she had pressed to his lips and rolled them till she was pinned beneath him. Things started to get very heated very fast, but then Angel suddenly tore his lips from hers and gazed down at her with a hungry, feral gaze for a long moment, before tearing himself away from her and vanishing into a far corner of the room before she'd had a chance to blink or to bemoan the loss of contact.

She had but a moment to affirm that, yes, he had been quite naked all this time, before he began hurriedly dressing, while cursing under his breath. She shook off her daze and just like that the shame and anger at herself came rushing in.

What had she been thinking? She knew, better than anyone, all the reasons they couldn't…and she had a boyfriend! A live, living, human boyfriend that loved her and had been through a terrible ordeal…

She scrambled from the bed and hurried to where she'd dropped her stuff.

"I'll just…yeah."

"That would probably be for the best." Angel agreed, while carefully not looking at her. She put on her shoes and ran blindly up the stairs, only to crash into Spike, who lightly gripped her upper arms to keep her in place. He looked furious with her.

"What the hell Slayer? Did you go into heat the moment you went down the stairs? I can smell you from up here! If you've unleashed that bloody not-Angelus on us again, I'll rip your entrails from your body and feast upon them while you live, chip or no chip."

Buffy broke away from him and fled upstairs to the nearest bathroom. You knew it was bad when a soulless vamp was lecturing you on responsibility.

"Say, where's Buffy anyway? I thought you said she was right behind you?"

"She was. I dunno, maybe she's watching soap operas with bleach boy?"

Xander's face briefly contorted with an ugly look, before he smoothed it away and smiled. "Say, you have anything to drink around here?"

"There's some iced tea, milk and juice boxes in the fridge."

"Great. I'll see what's keeping Buffy while I'm in there." he said casually while hurriedly drying himself off.

Xander slipped inside and palmed a stake from his bag and then slipped down the stairs. If she was with him, he was dust. Enough was enough already.

He could hear voices coming from the end of the hall and slipped down, his bare feet quiet on the stone floor. He eased up to the open doorway and found a miserable looking Angel who looked like he'd gotten dressed in a hurry—the top button of his pants was undone and his shirt was open—sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, while an equally half-dressed Spike leaned against the wall nearby watching him carefully and smoking.
"I was still half-asleep. She was just suddenly there. I had sort of wondered if, after everything that happened before, that maybe the perfect happiness thing wasn't something I'd actually have to worry about, but obviously I wasn't going to take any chances..."

"I take it it's still a problem then?"

"Yeah. Nothing even happened and... I could feel myself unraveling."

"Bloody gypsies. I don't get why it's still like this though. Red did it the second time, right? Surely she wouldn't have cursed you. She knew Angel, not Angelus. If anything, she'd have considered it a blessing of sorts, saving you and whatnot, right? So why is it still a curse?"

"She used the Calderash spell that was originally used on me. Jenny Calendar...that was Giles girlfriend"

Spike made a face like he'd smelled something bad. "Your 'art project', right?"

Angel winced and a shudder went through him. "Yeah, her. She was a member of the Calderash clan. She managed to translate their book of soul magic--the spells were lost to them for decades. It was the same spell that was used on me originally. It might not have mattered how Willow felt about things--the curse might have been embedded in the spell. I just don't know."

"You know, I know a bloke in Uganda. He's a shaman of sorts, does soul mojo. He might be able to fix you. You'd have to go through trials and whatnot. You said you had tried to embrace the whole soul-having thing, become a proper white hat and whatnot. Maybe you should go one step further. Really embrace the soul, make it your own."

"It's kind of far to go for something we don't even know would work. Anyway, what about the folks in Cordy's visions? Who's going to help them if I'm off in Africa? I'm supposed to be earning my redemption. Maybe one day, I can be forgiven. The curse is part of that. I'm supposed to suffer."

"By who, mate? Your victims? They're dead, remember? Besides, even I know this one. You need to be able to forgive yourself. What good does endless suffering do?"

"You don't have a soul. You don't understand."

"Maybe I don't." Spike agreed easily. "I really don't see what purpose all the wallowing and self-flagellation serves. It doesn't help anyone, it doesn't bring back your victims, it doesn't erase the past, and no matter how much of it you do it never will. It's bloody ironic, if you ask me. Back in the day, Angelus was a gleeful sadist who enjoyed the pain of others. This you seems to be a gleeful masochist who enjoys your own pain. That was something I never really understood about you--you and the bloody preshow. It was never enough to just shag and enjoy it, you always had to bring out the chains, holy-water and the 'special knives'."

"You didn't always mind."

"Actually, I usually very well did. I never got off on pain like the rest of you did. It got to a point where the lines began blurring, simply because it was so familiar by then...but no, given a choice, I don't actually like being tortured for fun. Not my scene, mate."

Xander very quietly crept back the way he'd come. He ran into Buffy, who it seemed had just been getting changed, to judge by the fact that she had her clothes in one hand and was carrying a bag full of towels.

Buffy glanced at him, the doorway, then her eyes dropped down to the stake in his hands and her
eyes widened in horror.

Xander suddenly felt angry all over again.

"He seems to still have his soul. No thanks to you, I might add. What a nice welcome home present that would have been for Riley, huh?"

"It wasn't like that, and more importantly, it's not your business." Buffy said firmly.

"If you're doing things that might endanger all of us and the world, yes it is. When's Dead Boy leaving?"

"Now that everything is straightened out with Willow, probably tonight or tomorrow. I don't know."

"Let's hope it's tonight. The sooner the better if you ask me."

Xander stormed off towards the kitchen and found Harry gathering juice boxes. "Oh, hey, there you are. Wanna grab the iced tea? I've got hands enough for the glasses, I think."

"I can get those." Buffy offered, scooping them up and heading outside. Xander glared after her, still irate.

"Something happen?"

"Happily, no. You should thank your lucky stars. You don't want to meet Angel's worser self."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't anyone tell you about his curse? How he got his soul?"

"Cursed by gypsies after he ate one."

"Yep, that's the one. It goes by-by if he's perfectly happy. Unfortunately for all of us, our resident Slayer, Buffy seems to give him happies without even trying very hard. She almost gave him one earlier."

"When you say 'gave him a happy…"

"Yeah, just like that." Xander agreed, voice vicious as he yanked the pitcher of iced tea from the fridge and sent some of it slopping over the rim.

"Excuse me if this is a personal question, mate…but why is it such a big deal to you? I thought you were with Anya?"

"It's a big deal because he's a murderous psychopath that wants us all dead!"

"I got that much." Harry agreed mildly. "But you're acting like a scorned lover, not a guy in fear of his life."

Xander's face twisted in bitterness. "We never got that far."

Harry eyed him a moment and nodded. "Let me guess--you've been the eternal friend. You occasionally feel that she forgets you're even male and treats you like another one of the girls. You've been there from the beginning and constantly passed over for a long line of lunk heads, in
your opinion, that weren't right for her and not quite good enough? Every once in awhile, you were almost sure that she did see you there, and briefly had hope…but it always came to nothing in the end. Now, you've moved on, you've got a pretty, sweet girl who obviously adores you…but there's a part of you that's still seething in resentment that you were never that guy. Am I right?"

Xander didn't answer, but the look on his face was answer enough.

"I know a girl back home--younger sister of one of the guys in my dorm. She's had a crush on me since forever. She tried every damn thing she could to get my attention, and did a lot of rotten things to my girlfriend at the time, Cho. I wasn't in to her to begin with, but having her go after someone I was into just made me dislike her. Cho and I eventually split up, it was at least partially her fault. I eventually got over it, made nice with her when I had to--she was in the same house, so I couldn't really avoid her, you know? She kept trying to get my attention, starting dating a string of guys, at least partially to make me jealous. She eventually dosed me with a love potion. She's a pretty girl, very pretty actually. Long red hair, big brown eyes, mischievous smile. She was sort of funny sometimes, somewhat intelligent, though not a scholarly type--more of an athlete. She's got a rotten temper and can be a super bitch sometimes, but I still knew plenty of guys that weren't me who were jonesing for her something fierce. Quite the popular girl. The thing was, I was just not into her. It didn't matter what she did or didn't do, it just wasn't there. I liked Cho, not her. It didn't mean I thought her unworthy, or not good enough, it just wasn't there. It happens sometimes. My advice to you is to let it go and appreciate your Anya, or whoever else comes along in your life, man. It isn't worth it to keep pining after someone who doesn't feel the same way and getting all resentful about it. Sometimes that's just the way it is."

Harry patted him on the shoulder and headed back outside.

He ran into Spike and Angel lurking out of sight, obviously listening in. Angel looked slightly guilty, Spike quite unashamed.

"Ah, you're awake. Are you coming out?"

"I don't know. Vampires and pool parties aren't exactly mixey things." Angel said uncomfortably, chancing a peek out the door to the back, where he could see Buffy, playfully wrestling with Willow in the water, Tara in her modest swimsuit sitting on the edge and smiling, Cordelia in a tiny black bikini and Faith in an equally tiny red one… Lord have mercy.

"I thought you were a masochist, mate? I'd think a garden full of scantily-clad beauties would be right up your alley?"

"He's got you there, Peaches." Spike snorted gleefully. "Gods, look at them. Luscious and lovely, every last one of them." Spike said as he absently ran his tongue along his upper teeth. He winced slightly and shook his head, the chip knocking him from his bloodlusty haze.

"I guess it couldn't hurt." Angel said, sounding as though he was certain it would hurt, and quite a lot at that.

Harry just nodded amiably and flicked his wand at each of them, making their trousers into black swim trunks and then zapping them with sunblock.

"You really are a handy bloke to have around." Spike commented as Angel prodded the swim trunks he suddenly found himself wearing. A knock sounded at the door. Harry handed the juice boxes he was still carrying to Angel and hurried to answer it, only to find Giles and Anya at the door. Anya had on a big hat and sunglasses and was carrying a towel. Giles had his glasses off and a couple of six packs of beer with him.
"Hey you two, you're just in time. Everyone's out by the pool."

Riley looked up as the door to his hospital room opened and mustered up a half-hearted smile for Graham as he came inside. He was feeling much more clearheaded now that he had some fluids and a meal in him. He saw Graham's eyes linger on the vampire bite marks that littered his arms and found himself hiding them beneath the sheet that covered him.

"Rough couple of days, huh?"

"I guess. I'm still a little fuzzy on the details. Where's Buffy?"

"Home. That's where she's been the last few days, except for a side trip to Nevada where she got stranded by a broken down car. She and her friends have been looking for you. Your car was still outside your apartment building, but no one'd seen hide nor hair for a couple of days. They thought you were dead."

"No. That's not right. Buffy was with me. We were going to L.A. so she could introduce me to her father."

"Yeah, you told us earlier. I mentioned that to her. Her dad is in Europe somewhere with his secretary. She doesn't know how to get in touch with him. Deadbeat. You know the score. You got the whammy put on you by some kind of weird new hostile, possibly a hybrid of some sort. Details are fuzzy all over my friend, not just with you. What's been going on, man? Look at you. What's with your arms?"

"Must have happened while I was fuzzy."

"Docs here say no. Those bites are from at least a week ago, two weeks ago, three weeks ago. They're clean. No struggle. Unless this hostile's been putting the whammy on you a lot longer than anyone realized, that's not what those are. Talk to me."

Riley sighed and slumped in place. He hesitantly brought out his arms and laid them out so the marks were visible to both of them. For the first time he really appreciated how much he looked like some sad-sack junkie. The bare, clinical confines of the hospital room seemed to strip away his pretensions and his rationalizations.

He closed his eyes, suddenly not wanting to look at them any more.

"I've been going a bit off the rails, I think." he admitted. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I thought I just wanted to understand but…"

"Understand what?"

"Why they have the hold on her they do."

"You're not making sense, man."

"Her last guy was a hostile. One of the bloodsuckers. Apparently he has a soul and is good, except when he's not. She's still hung up on him."

"So, you're telling me your woman was rutting with an animal before she met you and instead of kicking her to the curb like any sensible person would, you went and became a free meal for hostiles? What the hell!"
"Dracula came to town. She let him bite her. She and her friends have been protecting hostile since he escaped. I didn't know it till after everything went down, but that's why we couldn't find him, he had help. He's her ex-honey's son or grandson or something. Apparently she got custody." He laughed then and it was painful to listen to.

"They all have a hold on her, and it's a part of her I can't seem to touch...and the more I try to get her to let me in, the more she pushes me away. I just wanted to understand why. There was a place were they gathered on the edge of town. They had a pimp, if you can believe it. A bit of cash his way, they'll bite you all nice and pretty. When he realized who I was, he tried to shake me down, threatened to tell Buffy. I panicked and burned the place down. As far as I know none of them survived. The place went right up and those that made it out the door I staked as they came running. The next night I headed out by myself, looking for other nests. I had a couple of close calls, but I was out again the next night. I had a few more close calls...really close. I wasn't at my best to begin with. I was exhausted. There was a woman dancing in the graveyard. She moved like a snake. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She babbled some nonsense at me and I raised my stake... that's where it all gets fuzzy. It's all confused after that. Next thing I really remember clearly is waking up here."

"You should have come with us, man. That damned town and that girl are going to end you. What the hell were you thinking? Letting yourself be dog food."

"She doesn't love me." It was said simply, without blame or resignation, but there was a wealth of pain behind the words.

Graham sighed and rubbed his face, looking away from Riley's pain like it was obscene. "Pull yourself together." he muttered gruffly.

He debated on what to tell him, not sure if it would help or send him further into his self-destructive cycle. He figured finally that honesty was the best policy. That little slip of a girl had Riley by the short and curlies. Lying about the state she was in would just come back to bite him in the ass, even if it did make him reconsider rejoining the unit.

"I don't know her, so I can't really say one way or another. She cares about you, I do know that much. She drunk herself stupid when she couldn't find you after three days. Like I said, man, they thought you were dead. Looked like she was gonna cry when I told her you'd been found. Her mom looked real pleased. I don't know if it helps."

Steeling his resolve, he looked back up into his friend's face and pinned him with his gaze.

"Whether she does or not isn't the point though. The point is, that place and that girl are killing you and you need to get out before it's too late. I'm serious here man. I'm not superstitious, but I can't help thinking that, if you don't get out now, you're not getting out."

"I can't just up and leave. You said they all thought I was dead, right?"

"Well, you're not going anywhere right now in any case. Docs wanna observe for a few days, make sure there's no surprises waiting. After that though... Say your goodbyes, make a clean break of it and come back where you belong."

Riley stared back, lost and conflicted. "I'll think about it."

"Think real hard, man. I'm not sure if I'll be able to offer this chance a second time."

Xander and Spike came to a halt outside a grungy looking door down a back alley.
"You really know how to show a boy a good time." Xander scoffed, choking slightly at the smell.

"Ah, shut yer gob, ye wanker. It's a bloody chop shop. Obviously it's not going to be out in the open where any bloody person can just come traipsing by."

Spike swaggered down to a rusty door at the end of the alley and knocked twice, then three times, waited a beat and knocked once more. A flap in the door slid back and a pair of large brown eyes peered out.

"Oh, hey Spike. Hang on a sec."

The flap closed, there was the sound of some bolts being drawn back and the door swung open revealing a cavernous warehouse with a cement floor covered in cars in different states of assembly. Guido turned out to be a tall, portly demon with blue skin, knobby pustules all over and four horns. He was wearing a grease-stained coverall and peering at them with benign good will. There were other demons in the place-- a green one that looked sort of like an iguana, one with ram's horns--looked like what Giles had turned into before, the last time Ethan Rayne was in town, a couple of vampires, and a couple of humans. It was official, he'd landed in bizarro world.

"The engine's right back there. This is a big help. I'll owe you one."

"Enough of one to get me new parts for the desoto?"

"If I come across any, you'll be the first to know. We don't really come across many of them."

"I know, a blooming tragedy, that. It's a sweet little ride." Spike sighed before signaling Xander to follow him.

He weaved across the floor with the ease of familiarity, greeted the vamps, the demons and the humans by name, exchanging greetings and the occasional quip, inquiring after spouses and children as he did so. Xander boggled at the back of his bleached blonde head. Who was this cheerful, polite guy? It wasn't Spike.

Spike stripped off his coat and tossed it onto a nearby chair, as well as the button down shirt he had on over his t-shirt. Xander followed suit, not wanting grease all over one of his few nice shirts. Xander looked out over the array of pieces laid out and waiting and wondered if he'd bitten off more than he could chew.

Spike clapped his hands together and rubbed them, before snagging a box filled with battered, somewhat greasy tools and pulling it closer.

"Let's get to work, shall we?"

Buffy sighed and leaned against her cue stick as she watched the group gathered around the bar. Spike wasn't here, neither was Xander, and they were still having stupid arguments. So much for her theory that Angel would be himself again once Spike was gone.

"What are they even talking about, do you know?" Faith asked curiously. "Wes started yammering about some philosopher or other and the others all started quoting things. My eyes crossed at that point and it all just sounded like white noise, you know?"

"No clue here." Buffy sighed. "I was hoping Angel and I would get a chance to talk before they all leave, but instead he's off being Mr. I-like-to-argue-guy again."
"They're debating the needs of a small group versus the needs of society at large and what's justifiable in the name of keeping the smaller group a secret. Apparently Spike's nephews are part of a small, hidden community of wizards that have been hiding out from society at large for hundreds of years to protect themselves. The argument could apply equally to vampires and other demons, cults, terrorist organizations, all sorts of things. They got sidetracked by trying to narrow down what exactly constitutes 'harm', and whether the whole 'needs of the many outweigh the few' really holds any water when it means the few's very life and existence are at stake." Cordelia answered from nearby.

Buffy huffed and blew her bangs out of her eyes. "Fascinating. Really." she muttered. "What's to even debate though? Society at large is what's important. Assimilate or die, that's the survival of the fittest at work, right? Demons bad, humans good."

"Spike's nephews are humans, so are the rest of their folks. That doesn't really work in their case. What's more, after the whole Willow was kidnapped, drugged and put in a detention center by the government thing, she and Tara are both on the side of allowing a lot for hidden communities to stay that way. Angel is ambivalent because of the whole 'used to be a murderous vampire thing', as are Giles and Wesley, because the Slayer and the Watcher's council, while not strictly a secret are nonetheless not very well known outside of certain circles. Anya is further obscuring the debate, because as a human she likes being in the know and able to protect herself. As a demon, she didn't like people in the know because they could protect themselves and make her lose her powers. It's a complex, many-sided issue."

"Boooring. Why can't they talk about something useful and interesting, like new movies that have come out or something. Of course, I haven't been to the movies in I don't know how long, so that wouldn't be all that useful from a giving-me-a-way into the conversation point of view, but at least I could rate the lead actors as hot or not." Buffy griped.

Cordelia sighed and turned back to the debate at the bar. Coming back here was like traveling backwards in time in a lot of ways. Buffy, Xander and Willow were mostly unchanged, as was most of the town. You'd think they'd never left high school. She hadn't quite realized it until now, but she'd grown beyond that. Wes had grown beyond the dorky Watcher he'd been, and was still growing and changing. Angel was growing and changing as well, moving past being nothing but the guy lurking in the shadows and Buffy's star-crossed lover. Even Faith had grown and changed. She was a little quieter, a little more thoughtful, a little less reckless. The rest of them seemed to be running in place and going nowhere fast.

Faith and Buffy eyed Cordelia as she turned her back on them.

"Geez. I feel snubbed."

"Ignore her. Classic Queen C, alpha bitch of Sunnydale high." Buffy snorted. "You'd think she'd have grown out of that by now. We're not in high school anymore."

"I can't believe you talked me into climbing up on the roof."

"Shh." the other folks from the chop shop hissed.

"Oh, this is terrible. I have quotas to meet." Guido lamented.

"I got bills to pay." one of the humans, Carl he thought his name was, added miserably.

"Damn cops. Why don't they go hunt for real criminals, and leave respectable businessmen like
myself alone?"

The group made their way at a crouch over several rooftops that, much to Xander's relief, were all either connected or close by one another in this part of town. They came to the end of the nearby roofs and Xander looked down in despair. There was nothing to hold on to and the nearest rooftop was further than he was comfortable in attempting to jump.

"Come on, Whelp, one more. There's a fire escape on the next one that'll let us down." Spike urged.

"I can't make that!" Xander hissed back.

"Duck!" one of the other vamps--Armageddon, if he wasn't mistaken--hissed. They had been seen escaping onto the roofs, and there were cop cars down below still searching for them.

A light went swinging by, searching, and they could see the flashing lights of the cop cars bouncing off the nearby walls.

The cop car turned the corner. All the demons scrambled to their feet, each grabbing hold of a human and leaping across.

"No. Oh, no no no." Xander protested as Spike tugged him along.

"Put an arm across m' shoulders and don't scream." Spike advised as he grabbed him around the waist and started pulling him into a run. The next thing Xander knew he was kicking his feet uselessly in free fall and then landing with a thud and a grunt on the far side. He wanted to sit a moment, rub his knees, give his pounding heart a chance to slow down, but Spike was already tugging him onward, dropping over the side of the building and landing a moment later on the fire escape. Xander peeked over and saw it was a good storey if not more below the rooftop. He shook his head no, but stopped when Spike glared at him impatiently.

"Hang by your fingertips and let go. I'll catch you. Do it quick though. I don't fancy ending up in the clink, and I doubt you want to end your days stuck on a bloody rooftop."

Xander whimpered and did as told. It took a bit of willpower to make himself let go. He didn't quite believe Spike was going to stick around to catch him. The fire escape was such a narrow target…

He nearly collapsed in relief when he felt himself being caught and steadied. The flashing lights were coming closer.

"Move!" Spike hissed.

The others were already long gone. They must have had lots of practice at doing this, given how swiftly and smoothly they'd all vanished as soon as the first hint of cops sounded. Spike just jumped over the edge and landed with a thud and a crunch of broken glass down below. Xander scrambled to follow as quickly as he could. He landed on the ground just as the cop car was rounding the corner. He froze like a deer in the headlights, till a hiss of "MOVE IT MONKEY BOY" sounded from the nearby alley. He took off running, not needing to be told twice.

What followed after was a blur of smelly alleys, random hungry vampires leaping out to grab them, only to be swiftly beheaded by a twist of Spike's hands. He never even broke stride. They somehow ended up outside the Bronze and slipped in.

Xander did his best to slow his breathing. Spike made a beeline for the pool table, grabbed two sticks, tossed one to him and broke the triangular formation of balls in one swift move. He shot a
warning look Xander's way as he prowled around the table to make his next shot. Xander was content to lean his weight on the cue and catch his breath.

Another warning look was shot his way as a couple of cops briefly stepped inside and looked around. He didn't need the warning. He himself was the only one they'd seen. He kept his eyes on the table, moved to take his turn, and nearly collapsed in relief when the disappointed cops left again.

Once they were gone Spike chortled in delight and signalled the bartender for two beers, before turning to him with a grin.

"And you said I didn't know how to show a boy a good time."

Xander just glared at him.

When the waitress came by with their two beers, Spike smiled at her, flirted a bit and dropped a few bills on her tray. Xander grabbed his and took a long swallow. Spike took his and held it against his forehead and slowly sighed in relief, closing his eyes.

Xander slowly lowered his bottle and stared at him as a cold chill began to travel down his spine.

His chip had been going off while he'd been tugging him along and jumping them over the rooftops. He'd somehow held it together long enough to get them here to play possum.

Angel had warned them when he'd first come to town how dangerous he was. He'd just carried him one armed across the rooftops. He'd killed three vamps by ripping their heads off while running and never broke stride, and all while his chip was firing warning shots.

Just how strong was Buffy if Angel was a lot stronger than Spike and Buffy was a lot stronger than him?

She had to be like, Spider man or something.

He'd had this guy living in his basement, and had been making a point to make fun of him and put him down. What the hell had he been thinking? He'd been essentially kicking a muzzled attack dog and laughing about it with his friends. His hands started shaking a bit and he missed his next shot. He stepped back and let Spike take his turn. His momentary chip-induced headache seemed to have passed as he took a pull off his beer and lined up his shot without comment.

If the gap in power between Buffy and vampires was so great…was the reason she'd never given him a second glance because she was worried about breaking him?

Riley was a big guy, in good shape, pumped iron regularly. He was a big, strong guy by most standards.

Buffy thought of him as 'helpless and kitteny'. He'd heard her say that at least once.

Is that where her sick fascination with bloodsuckers came in? They were her natural enemy, but they were also the only ones she could be reasonably sure she wouldn't break? "Is that what she was talking about when she said she couldn't do my kind of normal?"

"Oi. Nummy treat. It's your turn."

Xander snapped out of his contemplations to glare at his partner in crime. "Could you not say stuff like that? Geez."

"What? You're the one who told me you were moist and delicious." Spike snickered, obviously
pleased at having riled him up.

Xander froze as a couple of big jock types came swaggering over, looking between the two of them with distaste.

"Great. The local homophobe crew. This night just keeps getting better and better."

"Bloody wankers." Spike muttered under his breath before sauntering over to intercept them. Xander winced. Those three bruisers made him feel like he was a bit on the petite side, and he was pretty average for a male of his years. Spike was just a wee bit of guy, and he couldn't do shit against them because they were human. He had a feeling it would be no contest otherwise. The three guys stopped and blanched for a second. Xander heard the distinctive 'crackle' sound that was made when a vamp went fangy and then the soft sucking sound that came when the fangs went bye bye.

"You don't want to mess with this one, mates. That there's Vinny's boy." Spike said conversationally. "I wouldn't recommend it if you value your health."

"That's Vinny's? You're shitting me." Doofus number one blustered.

"Looks like his mum. Bit of an embarrassment, truth be told. Won't matter none if you mess with him. Family and all that."

The three guys exchanged glances, glowered at both of them and strode off.

"Uh…those guys know who Vinny is? That's the land shark, right?"

"Yeah. I saw the big wanker in the middle on his knees a few weeks back, begging and pleading to not 'ave his knees broken. Got a bit of a gambling problem, that one."

"They know about and accept the existence of demons…and spend their weekends beating up gay guys…what they think are gay guys, since I have a beautiful girlfriend that I regularly have sex with. That doesn't even make any sense!"

"Sure it does. In a purely human world, wankers like that would be the most dangerous thing in the neighborhood. There are demons about, so they learned real quick that they're not the most dangerous, not by a long shot. This doesn't sit well with them, so they make a point of seeking out those they perceive as being weaker--easy prey. Makes them feel all manly. They must have aspirations to be pro ball players or they'd probably be vampires by now." Spike said indifferently.

"But they're human!"

"So?"

"So! Humans good!"

Spike looked at him with pitying contempt. "All these years on the Hellmouth and that's your summation of the world? You really are a monkey boy, aren't you? What do you think it is that makes vampires so dangerous?"

"Duh! They're demons that hunger for the blood of men!"

"No. What makes them dangerous is that they used to be human first. Your average demon is pretty uncomplicated, usually somewhat lacking in imagination. No, it's the human mind melded with the demon essence that makes vampires dangerous. The average demon has nothing on the sorts of twisted evil that arises from the human mind with such ease. Case in point, Angelus. You
think Guido or the others back at the chop shop would ever think hey, you know what sounds like fun? Let's get that fellow's girlfriend, set her up dead in his bed for him to find, and decorate the house so he thinks she planned a romantic evening for two! Hell no. Most demons would just stare at anyone who said that in horrified fascination that anyone would be that depraved. If they wanted to hurt someone, they'd just go beat them up. Second case in point--vengeance demons. That bloke d'Hoffryn recruits angry humans to do the work. That's how you get really depraved vengeance--give a human demon powers. Humans by themselves don't have the power, demons don't have the imagination. Put the two together and you get something that can rock the world."

Xander couldn't think of anything to say in response, so he just lined up his stick to take his turn.

Buffy sighed and leaned on her hand, her stare drilling into the side of Angel's head. They had dropped the whole secrecy discussion a while back without coming to any definite agreement, and moved on to discussing some stupid foreign play that was full of metaphors or similes or... something literary anyway. She caught Faith's eye and they both slipped off, grabbed their stakes to go do another patrol.

"Oi, lemme stop by and see Joyce for a mo', the light's still on. I don't want to disturb her too late."

"Why do you need to see Joyce?" Xander asked suspiciously.

"You said Peaches left something for me with her. I just want to get it, that's all." Spike huffed, before hopping up the steps to ring the doorbell.

"Oh, right. I forgot about that."

The door opened and Joyce smiled in surprise. "Spike! They found you!" she said cheerfully. "And Xander too. What a surprise."

"It was all a misunderstanding. My many-times great nephews came across the pond to say hello and visit for a bit. I took them to L.A. for a bit of sight-seeing. I didn't realize there was going to be a fuss."

"Really? How fascinating that must be for you. You'll have to bring them by so I can meet them. Would you like some hot chocolate?"

"I'd love some." Spike said cheerfully as he followed her to the kitchen. Xander could only stumble along in his wake, stunned by the obvious friendliness Buffy's mother was displaying to the vampire.

"Well, that makes two pieces of good news we've gotten today. I don't know if you heard, but they thought Riley was killed."

"Yeah, I heard about that. I was actually helping your daughter look for him last night."

"You were? That was sweet of you." Joyce said with beaming approval. Xander could only watch in fascination as "Mr. Big Bad" turned into a bashful schoolboy under Joyce's maternal gaze.

"Weren't nothing." he mumbled. "So, he's in hospital, is he?"

"I'm afraid so. Dehydration and low blood pressure and he seemed confused is what his friend
Joyce slipped them each a cup of hot chocolate, and fetched a bag of little marshmallows which she slid over to Spike, smiling when he grinned and grabbed a handful to drop in his mug.

"Oh, I have something for you. Now, where did I put it? oh, I remember. Hang on just a second."

She returned a minute later with an envelope with the name 'Spike' scrawled across it in old-fashioned looking script.

"Cheers." he replied as he tucked it away. "I noticed that vase in the living room. Tibetan, isn't it? Lovely piece. Is that new?"

"I actually got that last year during my buying trip. It is lovely, isn't it?"

"5th century?"

"5th or 6th, the dating was a bit uncertain. You've got a good eye."

"I knew a guy in Rome from way back that specialized in Asian art. I've got a good memory, I guess."

"You should bring your nephews by the gallery. I have several more pieces from that trip on display and some Chinese pieces. I remember you mentioned a certain fondness for Chinese Art."

"Yeah, I was in China a while back for a few years. Nice place. We had a lovely little house a short hop from the marina, really beautiful. Darla always liked a view, and she and Dru both had a fondness for Chinese silks. The air smelled like incense--there was a incense and perfume factory right nearby. So many people. The place was just humming with life. There were these street vendors you could get food from. They'd cook up the meat and throw in all these peppers and spices right there. People from all over--Chinese, German, all these missionaries. It was a real memorable experience."

"I've never been. I'll have to go there now. You paint a rather vivid picture."

"This was during the Boxer Rebellion, right?" Xander asked, remembering a comment by Giles.

"Yeah. 1900 or so."

"Was Angel there?"

"Hmm? Yeah, he showed up for a few days or so and left again. Me and Dru just thought he and Darla were having an extended spat. I didn't see him again till World War II on that German sub."

"You ran into Angel on a German sub during WWII?"

"Yeah, me and a bunch of other vampires were captured by the Nazis. They were going to try to make vampire soldiers. The Americans captured the sub, but it got damaged during the fighting. The American government grabbed Peaches and threatened him and made him come out to try to get the sub working and get it back to American shores before it was recaptured by the Nazis. They wanted us and the info on the Nazi Initiative program. The only guy who knew how to fix the sub got injured and was dying. Angel had to turn him so he'd be around long enough to get 'er running again. The other vamps got dusted. I know the Prince of Lies burned at least some of the info they wanted before he bit it. He was pretty outraged that they wanted to experiment on us. Bloke Sam got the sub up and running again, and Angel kicked us off before we got back to shore. How bloody ironic is it that I got captured fifty years later and had a bloody chip stuck in
Buffy and Faith slipped back into the mansion. They found everyone had gravitated from the billiards room to the living room. There were empty beer cans scattered all over. The discussion had mutated again. They were now discussing art. Buffy sighed and headed for the kitchen for a drink that wasn't stinky beer. She didn't want a hangover two nights in a row, thanks.

"Why are we stopping in here?" Xander complained.

"It just occurred to me, everyone thinks I was bloody well kidnapped. Clem's prolly been all aflutter."

"Clem? Who the hell is Clem?"

"Friend of mine, isn't he?"

"Spike! You're okay. You might want to lay low. Angelus was out looking for you the other night."

"S alright. I saw him already."

"Word on the street is you got kidnapped. There's been commandos spotted as well. Those Initiative bastards aren't back in town, are they?"

"They was for a bit, but they were just looking for Slayer's soldier boy. They found him. I don't think they were planning to stick around."

"You missed book club the other night."

"Oh, bloody hell. We were doing 'The Chronicles of Emperor Zurg, weren't we?"

"Yeah. We're discussing Hellboy next week."

"That ruddy bastard? Though I suppose I can't say much now myself, can I? Where do I get a copy?"

"You'll have to see Passionata. She's got the copies."

"The damn succubus? Bloody hell."

"What are you complaining about?"

"She's all wham bam, now get out. Empty calories, like eating candyfloss, she says. Disappears before you can sink your teeth in and get a proper meal from the exercise."

"Wait...she still? Even though?" Clem wondered.

"What can I say boys? I am just that good." Spike bragged. "Alright, I gotta go. I'll see you blokes next Thursday."

The demons around the table all grunted and went back to their game, while a pile of cute little kittens gamboled innocently in a pot in the middle of the table.

"What's with the kittens?" Xander wondered.
One big gruff demon sighed, as though this was a question he got asked a lot and was tired of answering.

"They're delicious, apparently." Spike answered for him. "I never bothered. Fur gets stuck in me teeth. Couldn't now anyway because of the chip."

"Yeah, that's a pain. My wife has to snap their necks before I can have dinner." Big, gruff and ugly whined.

"The chip protects kittens too?" Xander asked incredulously.

"Well that's what he eats, innit? Bloody humans just assume they're the top of everyone's menu. Poor Barnabas doesn't eat humans, so his feeding instincts--kittens--are what got curbed. Those bloody Initiative blokes are a bunch of scum-sucking pones."

"YEAH!"

"HEAR HEAR" various demons cheered around the bar.

"Okay…that explains him, it doesn't explain you. You do eat humans."

"Yeah." Spike agreed "but fresh blood is fresh blood, whether it comes from a human or a kitten--kitten blood wouldn't really do me much good, but better than nothing in a pinch. It's the same impulse, the need to eat, that rises whether hunting a human, trying to chomp on a kitten or stalking a bloody buffalo. It's the urge to eat that gets zapped. For me, anything living that has blood zaps me. For Barnabas, it's only kittens. For Clancy back there" A grey lumpy demon waved "It's insects, worms, and small lizards that sets it off. Those happen to be his normal diet. Hogan there eats birds--pigeons mostly. He can't hunt either."

Xander by now was looking very confused. Spike shook his head at him, said his goodbyes to the boys and motioned him to follow him. He lit up a cigarette once they were outside.

"You've only ever dealt with the violent demons, the ones that do hunt humans, that try to start apocalypses, go on rampages, that sort of thing. You never ran across any of these blokes because they don't bother with humans if they can help it, they don't hunt humans, aren't rampaging and aren't trying to start apocalypses. That would probably be why you've never realized the majority, slight though it is, of residents in this town are non-human."

"What, seriously?"

"Yeah. The Hellmouth is like a vacation spot for demons. It's like living in Fort Lauderdale or sommat. The hellmouth energy is sorta invigorating in a general way--it's kind of a downer for all the peaceful sorts having a slayer in town. Yeah, it means she's there to kill all the big nasties that scare blokes like them, but Slayers don't tend to care if a demon is peaceful. Usually they see non-humans, they stake first, ask questions later-- if at all. They usually don't bother asking questions. Guido, the chop shop guy? He's prolly gotta have to pack up and move elsewhere. That was the fourth raid in as many months. He's got fourteen children to feed. It's that damned Tony."

"Tony? What, you mean Tony's Parts and Repair?"

"Yeah. That shop's a front for a chop shop. It used to just be on the up and up, but when the Slayer came to town he realized he had an opportunity. Guido's been the only game in town for years now. He and his fellows gather up abandoned vehicles and break them down, refurbish some of them for resale elsewhere. Tony has cops on his payroll. They raid Guido's place, take everything and give it to Tony who sells it and gives them a cut. He knows if Guido tries to
complain or fight back the Slayer'll just kill him for being a big nasty who's mean to the 'poor widdle humans'. Guido's got no real choice but to flee and let it happen. He can't afford it. This last raid'll break him. He was saying after the one before that he thought it was time to pull up roots and find a new place for him and his family. Well, tonight was it. He was hoping to make a bit of cash before trying to move, but that's not gonna happen now. We just bloody well finished the engine right before they bloody cops showed up too. Wankers."

Xander stuck his hands in his pockets and absently kicked a can that was lying in the street.

He was trying very hard to not think too deeply about everything he'd learned tonight. He liked his nice, comfortable black and white worldview. It made things simple and easy. He'd been out there on the front lines since sophomore year of high school when Buffy had come to town, battling the forces of darkness, saving the world--one demon at a time. Yeah, they'd had their share of problems with humans, but they all accepted that it was different--humans had souls and could be good and change. Demons couldn't. Demons were evil, killed humans, tried to destroy the world and needed to be stopped. Humans were the good guys, end of story. The only good hostile was a dead hostile, right?

He didn't want that to change. He didn't want there to be demons who were just trying to live their lives and eat their worms or their kittens, who were the victims of humans. He didn't want Buffy being the heavy for evil humans to victimize said demons. He didn't want the Initiative to be the bad guys, not the guys who were fighting the good fight and trying to save the world. He'd always given Maggie Walsh a pass on things--she'd been killed by her demon creation, after all. She'd been trying to build a better supersoldier, to protect humans. What if she was just some crazy-evil psycho? Was she not a victim, but the bad guy? He didn't want it to be like that. He needed them to be the good guys, the ones in the right, to have the moral authority to rid the world of demons with impunity because it was the right, the only, thing to do. He liked his worldview the way it was, thanks.

They arrived back at the mansion and prowled inside in search of the others. Buffy and Faith were laying upside down on the couch, heads hanging off the side, feet up against the wall, listening to music.

He was rather gratified by the way Buffy's face lit up when he arrived.

"Xander" she cried ecstatically, before rolling off the couch to a standing position. "Thank god you're back! Everyone has been driving us crazy! They've been talking about foreign plays, and philosophy and having earnest discussions about ethics! It's been a nightmare!"

Spike made an interested sound deep in his throat and went prowling off deeper into the house to find the others. Faith, Buffy and Xander watched him go with varying states of disbelief.

"Are you serious?" Buffy pouted. "Spike cannot be smarter than me. It's not allowed."

"Not smarter, more boring." Xander corrected.

Buffy beamed at him and pulled him down to sit between he and Faith, who was now upright, on the couch.

"So, ladies, what are we talking about?"

"We're rating actors and actresses in recent movies and putting them on our "I'd do them" list."

"Actresses too? Tell me more."

"It's just a game, Xan." Buffy huffed. "You know, the exception you might consider being
slightly gay for, even if not really."

Xander beamed at both of them and threw an arm behind each of them on the couch. "Then by all means, let us indulge in the mindless fun. Let all the eggheads talk about boring stuff, we know where the real fun in this place is, am I right ladies?"

"You are completely and absolutely right." Faith agreed, handing him a beer.

Anya wandered out a few minutes later, wondering what was keeping him. She was less than pleased to see him cozied up with the two Slayers.

"Xander Harris! After all the talking and the lecturing and insisting there were rules, what do I find but you here violating those rules! I was right in the next room, and you're trying to find other orgasm friends! How could you!"

"Ahn, no! No!"

"I don't believe you!" Anya huffed, before storming out the front door. Xander jumped from the couch and hurried after her.

He managed to catch her before she got in the car, but she turned her back on him and crossed her arms angrily.

"Ahn, no. It wasn't like that. We were just playing a game. They were complaining that they weren't smart enough to take part in whatever discussion the rest of you were having and they were bored. Besides...it was all a cover. You see, I knew you'd react like this and I needed a believable reason for us both to leave. You see, I need you to help me with something."

Anya glared over her shoulder suspiciously, obviously not buying it.

"Guido's shop got raided by the cops while we were there."

Anya huffed again. "Stupid Tony and his crooked cop minions. The poor guy has fourteen children!" she spat.

"So it's true then? I wondered about that. Spike lies sometimes. So criminal humans are really using my friend the Slayer as a weapon against demons so they can be bigger criminals?"

Anya gave him a 'duh' look and turned her back to him again.

"You want to help me teach that guy a lesson?"

Anya slowly turned around and studied his face in silence.

"What do you mean? You want us to get some bats and go break his kneecaps?"

"No!"

"Isn't that the typical retaliatory injury in a turf war?"

"I don't know, having never participated in a turf war before. I was thinking more along the lines of frame him for insurance fraud."

Anya thought about it a moment and nodded. "Actually, that might work. His dirty cop friends will start getting antsy and putting the heat on him."

"Wow. Listen to you, all down with the lingo and all."
"I've been watching movies and television when I find the time in an attempt to assimilate." Anya told him happily.

"Seems to be working."

"So...are we going to do this now?"

"Yeah, we'd better. I'd prefer Spike was in sight when it happens. He got a chip headache helping me escape the cops notice because I was a bit resistant about running and leaping across rooftops. It would be a shitty repayment to get him dusted right after."

Anya smiled at him happily. "Your male bonding ritual was a success then?"

"Oddly enough, I think it was. Who knew?"

"So, how are we doing this? Molotov cocktails? Dynamite? Bazooka?"

Xander smiled at Anya rather goofily. He should probably be more concerned that his girlfriend was so on board to go burn down someone's business, but damn if it wasn't kind of hot.

The rest of the party began breaking up after Anya and Xander left--Giles citing the need to sleep before opening the shop early the next day, Willow her wish to sleep in her own home again. Buffy tried to corner Angel again so they could talk, but she noticed pretty quick that people were rather pointedly not leaving them alone together. Finally, in desperation, she asked if he'd walk her home. He agreed once informing her he would not be coming inside but simply walking her to the sidewalk and returning. Wesley and Cordelia seemed rather worried even so, though they backed off when he reassured them everything was fine. Buffy left hurriedly once she realized everyone knew what had almost happened between them--even though she now knew Riley, her boyfriend, was still alive and well.

She consoled herself with the knowledge that everyone understood how it was between them, and probably didn't fault her for her moment of weakness after all the stress the last few days.

Angel joined her a few minutes later and they began walking, a foot of space between them and in total silence.

Cordelia, Wesley, Spike, Tom and Harry watched them go from an upstairs window.

"I don't like this." Cordelia fretted.

"I'm sure there won't be a repeat of events in the time it takes her to walk home."

"We hope! There really shouldn't have been an event to repeat!"

"Peaches is awake this time. He won't let there be. I wish he'd listened to my idea about the shaman in Uganda. I don't like all this bloody uncertainty."

"Shaman in Uganda?" Wesley prompted in interest.

"Yeah, he does soul mojo. You have to go through trials before he'll do anything. Poof said no, too many helpless would suffer if he was in Africa instead of L.A., and he's convinced he needs to suffer. Bloody masochist."
"Well, I can maybe kind of see his point…not about the suffering. Africa is pretty far away. Vampire safe-transport would probably take awhile, wouldn't it?"

"Whereabouts in Uganda? It might take a couple of trips, but we could probably take him if you think it's important."

"He'd still need to agree. Peaches is a stubborn one."

"And you think he could, what, fix his curse?"

"I don't see why not. It's at least theoretically possible. O' course, if he needs to be off championing and whatnot, it might not be a good idea. He and Slayer can't concentrate around each other. It might get him killed, or her for that matter."

"I don't see how" Wesley objected.

"Did you ever see those two fighting together before? They stop mid-battle to kiss each other's boo-boos and have mopey conversations about their epic, forbidden love."

"Ah…yes. I can see how that might be a problem." Wesley agreed.

"Uh, yeah. They were pretty embarrassing to be around." Cordelia agreed with a snort.

"Maybe it's not a good idea then. You don't even know for sure that this guy can do anything. It seems a long way to go for a long shot that might end up endangering him in the long run."

"I just don't like the idea of crazy Angelus getting loose again. He was nasty enough to me last time. Now that I've been making nice with his broodier counterpart he's liable to dust me before I even know anything's wrong."

"Believe me, we understand. None of us like the idea of him getting loose again. I guess we just have to be vigilant and hope for the best."

"I don't know that there's anything there to fix." Tom suddenly spoke up. "I would imagine the curse is the soul itself, not something external to the soul. The true happiness loophole would only actually kick in if both the soul and demon are happy, perfectly so, at the same moment, something that likely wouldn't happen often as it would take very different things to make each of them happy, something that wouldn't be encapsulated in a single person or event very often, I would think. At that moment, it ceases to be a punishment and goes away--leaving the freed demon to wreak havoc on the people, places and things around it that effected such a miracle. I believe Buffy is so problematical because she's a Slayer who's utterly devoted to him. I can only imagine that makes the demon in him bask in delight--she's supposed to destroy him, instead she comes purring to his hand when he so much as crooks a finger. The soul loves her and is also content in her presence. He could probably have orgies nightly for the rest of his life and experience no problems on that front. So long as he stays away from her all should be well, in theory anyway. Unless the demon welcomes the soul, actively seeks it and wants it there, the curse will stay in effect--because the soul is the curse, for him at least."

"So, what you're saying is, so long as he's divided against himself, he'll remain cursed, and it will always be a danger?"

"Pretty much."

"Spike, you need to move to L.A." Cordelia said firmly.
"Come again?"

"You being around makes him happy. He's been connecting, a little, with the human side of himself through human friends, but there was never anything to engage his demon side. If you're there and he can reconnect with at least part of his family while souled he might start embracing it and be less divided."

"Except two out of three of us are currently at large, unsouled and free of any limits. Given the choice, Angelus would much prefer to flit off and find Darla and Dru than stick around with me. I don't think that's the answer you're looking for, luv. Besides, Angel owns the bloody hotel, remember? I can tell you right now he won't be at all pleased with you rolling out the welcome mat. Him doing it to 'keep an eye on me' is one thing. You doing it is something else altogether. Trust me on this one."

"So you're what, going to stay here?"

"You have to admit the digs are nice." Spike gestured around the refurbished mansion. "He gave permission, which means I at least won't have to worry about him torturing or dusting me for trespassing if he shows up here unexpectedly. So long as no one tells soldier boy I'm here and not in me crypt, I shouldn't have any trouble on that front, and since Angelcakes apparently scolded the Slayer about all me broken noses, I shouldn't have too much trouble on that front for a few days at least. I have money now, which means I've no reason to go bothering Rupert, or being anywhere any of them regularly linger. I do have friends in town and a life of sorts."

"But…"

"Once I have me car back I can visit you know. Swing by if there are any big nasties afoot that you want help with, that sort of thing. It's a bad idea, but thanks for asking. I wouldn't have done it now anyway. My nephews and I have a few more adventures to be having before they have to go home again."

Cordelia didn't look happy but accepted his argument.

"If you change your mind…"

"The invite has to come from Peaches, luv. That's how these things work. Even then it would probably be a bad idea to make it a full time thing so long as you're the only female in residence."

"Fine, fine. Stupid vampire crap."

"So, are we heading back to L.A. soon?" Harry wondered. "Darla is likely back in the clutches of Wolfram and Hart, which means, in theory anyway, the commando attack was probably cancelled."

"I haven't gotten anymore warnings, so yeah, probably, now that everything with Willow and Riley and all has been cleared up. I hope a lot of people haven't come looking to hire us in the mean time. So much lost revenue…" Cordelia sighed miserably. "And poor Gunn. He was just put on the payroll, and we all left town."

"I'm sure things will work themselves out."

"Where else are you going to take us?" Tom wondered.

"Hmm. I'll have to think about that. I suppose we could go visit the underground demon markets.
Oh, yeah and we could go see the Dire Warriors"

"What are they? Assassins?" Wesley asked curiously.

"Nah, acting troop. Oh, and there's a few bands in town. We could take in a concert. What else? Ah, that's enough to be going on with. I'm sure we'll run into other fun stuff along the way."

"I guess since everything here is done, we can leave any time. Darn, and I had wanted another chance at the pool."

"The cars are still sunproofed for the moment. We could always leave tomorrow after breakfast."

"I like this idea."

"So you're coming back with us?"

"Eh, we were planning to go the short way."

"Well, you two can, I guess. Spike, you should ride with Angel. You know, do some last minute bonding."

"I doubt there'd be a lot of bonding going on. One of his and Slayer's 'talks' is likely to leave him more morose and broody than usual. We can stop in and say hi before we leave the city though. Maybe. We'll have to see."

"Oh, fine."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Spike and the boys return to LA for more adventures.

"Well, here we are, back in the City of Angels. Where to first?"

"First, we get my bloody car back. I still can't believe Dru went and robbed me. Ah, my princess-- how did it come to this?" Spike mused moodily.

"Why did she and Darla leave Riley alive I wonder? If he was to be their revenge, it seems a bit odd to just let him go."

"Probably she saw the commandos finding them and taking them out if she kept him with her or killed him. I can't rightly think of any other reason. In a way, she still got a least a small bit of revenge. Having Captain Cardboard in her clutches those few days while Angel was back in Sunnyhell with the Slayer ruined whatever relationship they might have had. The Whelp is all indignant on Cardboard's behalf, the girls are a bit too, I wouldn't wonder. He's supposed to be her perfect, normal, acceptable boyfriend after all. He's going to notice the odd tension, the evasive answers, the faraway look in the Slayer's eyes. Sooner or later he's going to realize that, while he was off and nearly being eaten, Slayer had her mind too full of Peaches to worry about him overmuch. I can't stand the boy and even I pity him for that. I've also been in his shoes before. Not memories I particularly relish, I can tell you."

"Yeah, it's a shame. I feel sorry for him too, and I don't even know the guy. However, no matter how excruciating it is for him right now, it might be better in the long run. Once you know it's like that, you should cut and run, for your own sanity if nothing else. If she couldn't find some previously unexplored well of love and devotion for the guy while she thought he was dying, nothing he does or doesn't do is ever going to change that."

"Ah, that's a quitter's attitude, that is…of course, I've always been love's bitch."

"There's a difference between being devoted and sticking in there for the long haul to win the object of your affections, and being "love's bitch". At some point, you have to respect yourself enough to say "I deserve better than begging for breadcrumbs from someone who will never feel as strongly for me as I do for them" and cut loose. While you're there writhing and begging for scraps, someone else who can maybe give back what you give them might be out there and you'll never know it because you stayed in a hopeless situation content with less than the whole shebang."

Spike was oddly quiet and thoughtful after Harry's impassioned speech, though he shook off his musings long enough to talk to the guy at the impound lot about his car. Twenty minutes later they were on the road.

"So, you're not a big believer in lifelong devotion to your muse, eh?"

"I'm not a believer in being a doormat for no good purpose."

"But surely the love you feel is reason enough, even if it's not returned in kind?"
"No, it's really not."

"Love is it's own reward."

"Not when you're suffering for it constantly."

"Sometimes that's part of the path to reach it. Romeo and Juliet…"

"Loved each other. No one-sidedness there."

"Cyrano. She loved his heart and his soul and eventually him when she realized."

"Again, there was mutuality there, it just took awhile for her to pin it to the right subject."

"Courtly love"

"Was a game played by bored nobles for amusement in an age of somewhat restrictive social mores."
Tom chimed in.

"Not a romantic bone in your body."

"I guess I think it's not real unless it goes both ways. Unless you’re the sort of person that derives pleasure from another's debasement, such obsessive devotion just makes the object of it start to despise you for not having enough pride to go find someone who actually gives a fuck. I mean seriously. That may just be me, but I couldn't love someone I couldn't respect, and I couldn't respect someone with no respect for themselves who would just let me use and abuse them or use them as a stand in for someone else just so they could have some small scrap of my attention."
Tom shrugged. "I used to be a dark lord with very devoted followers. I know whereof I speak."

Spike fell silent again, considering. He shook off his musings with determination and eyed his two passengers.

"So, where to first lads?"

"Anywhere's fine with me." Harry shrugged.

"Me too, so long as it's interesting. We are on vacation, after all." Tom agreed.

Rupert Giles looked up with a welcoming smile on his face to greet his newest customers, but it froze on his face. Buffy, Xander, Willow and Tara glanced up at his odd stillness and then glanced over to see what caused it. Several tweed-clad gentlemen and one tweed-clad woman were entering the shop. Most looked like academics, but a few of the them seemed to be bodyguards.

The door of the shop was locked, the sign turned to closed. One of the bodyguards checked the rest of the shop, signalled it was clear, before taking up station near the back door, the others moved to cover the front door and all of them.

Giles' nostrils flared in irritation and he removed his glasses to begin cleaning them, while the leader made himself at home, complete with tea and crumpets.

"To what do we own the …honor…of this visit, Mr. Travers. Last I checked, I was no longer in the employ of the Watcher's council."
"And you still are not." Travers replied bluntly. "Word reached me of your inquiries about a certain hell goddess. We're here to find out what you know and where you learned it from."

"That's rich." Buffy said disgustedly. "None of you can be bothered to offer any sort of assistance normally, and yet you think you can barge in here whenever you feel like it and start throwing your weight around? The only useful members of your council I've met are all no longer in your employ. I think that should tell you something."

"Do spare me your hysterical theatrics, you silly chit. You work for us, not the other way around."

"Really? Where's my paycheck?" Buffy answered, voice perky. When Travers made no answer, she nodded.

"Exactly. Newsflash, bub. I work for the world, not you. Don't flatter yourself."

Travers ignored her and focused on Giles.

Giles still looked annoyed, but he answered nonetheless, explaining about the call he'd gotten from the ex-Watcher he hadn't known was an ex-Watcher, and an edited account of events afterwards.

When he was done, Travers sat lost in thought.

"Okay, now it's time for you to share. Why is she of interest to you?" Buffy demanded.

"I find it troubling that an 'evil law firm' is in the middle of this. We know of this hell goddess. She's from before written history, known as the Beast, sometimes as Glorificus. She was trapped here some time ago, and is unable to return to her home dimension unless she has possession of the Key. It is of great importance that she never gains possession of the Key. It opens dimensional gateways. If she gets hold of it it will open all gateways and the very fabric of reality will start to unravel. So far as we were aware, the Key was in the possession of an order of monks with reality warping powers in Eastern Europe. It was their charge to guard it. They're all dead now. We weren't aware that Glorificus had begun to break free of her prison until we got word of your inquiries. The Key must be gotten away from her before she has a chance to use it."

"She doesn't have it though." Tara spoke up nervously. "The commandos said she's looking for it. She was last seen making a beeline for the Initiative's base in Nevada--Area 51. They seem to have it."

"The Initiative has it?" Travers repeated sounding confused. "How the bloody…"

"Evil or not, they did give us good information so far as it goes, and the commandos continued chasing her even after they were all turned. She's supposedly keeping something else worse from being able to enter the world." Giles spoke up again.

"Yes, we were aware of that part. What could the Initiative have possibly sent after the monks that was of sufficient power to kill all of them?"

"Quor'toth maybe?" Xander suggested brightly.

"Quor'toth? That's a very dangerous demon dimension, but I don't see how they could have. There are no portals there. The monks could have utilized the Key, I suppose, but in their own defense, not destruction. Why would you think that?"

Giles briefly outlined the two harmful visions they knew about and the aftermath of them, as well as their speculation that it might have been something the Initiative was going to unleash.
"If the Initiative has the Key, I suppose they might very well do just that."

"Um...pardon me." The one woman with the group interjected "But was the vision of Quor'toth or Qu'artoth? It's just, I noticed the two of you said it differently."

Travers began to looked worried. "These nephews of William the Bloody who were traveling with him at the time...you said they were wizards, correct? Did they happen to have magic wands?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, bloody hell." the woman murmured. Travers just paled. "No. Please tell me they're not here."

"You know what this Qu'artoth is?"

"Well...have any of you read the Harry Potter books?"

The Scoobies all exchanged a discreet glance.

"We haven't read them, but we have some passing familiarity with the series." Giles answered.

"The wizards in that series are essentially the Qu'artothen. The Qu'artothen is an Old One. Some say the Oldest one. Are any of you familiar with the Big Bang Theory?"

Hesitant nods around the table.

"There's some speculation that it was essentially Qu'artothen willing itself into being. It can be anything it wants to be, makes its own rules and can change them mid-play if it feels like it. It's the only Old One still in with its full power--the Children of the Qu’artothen collectively hold its being and its power. Most demons who know of the stories are terrified of it. As individuals they don't have raw power, but they can do pretty much anything they want to."

The gang all exchanged another look, recalling the many wacky things they'd seen the wizards do in the short time they'd known them.

"Spike did say he was being kidnapped by Harry Potter. We thought he was making a pop-culture reference. We kinda just dropped the whole matter after he told us it was a misunderstanding and they were his many-times great nephews from a previously unknown half-sister."

"Harry Potter is here." Travers said with horror. "He's probably one of the strongest of their species. Who is the other fellow?"

"Um...Tom?"

"Tom? Lord Voldemort is here too?"

"No... Lord Voldemort is like old, and looks like a snake man and has red eyes. This guy is a teenager."

"Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort. He made himself immortal by tearing his soul into seven pieces, sticking the pieces in objects to anchor him to the mortal plane. Each of the individual pieces has its own existence, and the piece torn away while he was a teenager tried to eat a girl and make itself a new body. We have the two strongest members of their species here in our world, running around willy-nilly with William the Bloody, one of the most chaotic vampires in the world."
"Were the three of them in Los Angeles a few days ago?"

"Um, yeah, why?"

"Thousands died. Human and demon. The balance has been wobbling back and forth out of control, and no wonder! We've got a couple of the Children of the Qu'artoth running around with William the Bloody!"

"But they're nice! They rescue kittens!" Willow objected.

"They're humans with the powers of an old one! Humans are both good and evil, which means they're players for both sides. There's nothing in the world to balance them!"

"Well, if it's Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, they're arch nemeses. Wouldn't they balance each other?" Tara asked hesitantly.

"No. They're drawing on the same source and they're equals and both human. There's no balance there. It doesn't work like that. One Slayer, a world of vampires, that's a balance."

"How is that a balance?" Buffy scoffed.

"You draw on the same source but you are human and can grow and change and get more powerful, much more quickly and easily than a vampire can. They're frozen in time, and age very slowly and gain power just as slowly. You have none of their weaknesses, beyond the heart being damaged and beheading, which all humans share. One Slayer is equal to a world of vampires, mystically speaking. There is nothing in this world that equals or balances the two of them."

"Where are they now? They have to be convinced to go back to where they came from and leave this world before all of creation unravels!" the tweed lady fretted.

"Um…they're back in L.A. as far as we know. They stuck around for a few days to help out a bit and then decided to go back to their sightseeing."

"They need to be found, contained and sent home, the sooner the better."

"Home sweet home. It's good to be back. Let's hope Wolfram and Hart keep their commandos to themselves."

They each set down various bags and boxes that they'd packed and taken with them during their flight and took a moment to just look around the hotel.

"I'll check the answering machine. Hopefully we haven't lost too much business while we were gone." Wesley offered, before hefting the boxes of books and taking them to the office.

Angel and Cordelia began hauling their luggage upstairs and putting their rooms to rights. They were heading down for a second trip when they noticed Wesley standing in the lobby looking alarmed.

"Wes? Something happen?"

"There was a message on the machine from Giles. A delegation from the Watchers Council accosted them in Sunnydale wanting to know more about the hell goddess, the rogue Watcher and everything else that happened recently. They had some very disturbing news. Apparently Spike's nephews are the qu'artoth, or rather they have a fraction of its power. It's an old one, the oldest one
if the myths and stories are correct. Their people collectively embody and channel the power. The council says they need to be found, contained and convinced to return to their own world before reality unravels."

"Return to their world? They're not from this one?"

"No, though their world is somewhat known to this world it seems, in the form of a series of children's books. They believe Harry and Tom are actually Harry Potter and Tom Marvolo Riddle the main protagonist and antagonist of the series, and among the strongest of their species."

"But…they're nice, and they helped us and haven't been doing anything wrong!"

"It doesn't matter. There's nothing in the world to balance them, so they've been sending the balance wobbling out of control just by existing in this world."

"That's crazy. They're just a couple of guys!"

"With uncanny powers which they wield with stunning ease, and one of them at least can fight vampires one on one almost as well as a Slayer can." Angel growled.

"But…" Cordelia sighed. "If they're so dangerously powerful, how are we supposed to convince them to leave if they don't want to? Especially as Spike is going to be on their side, not ours. Poor guy, he seems so fond of them. It'll kill him to find out they've been lying to him."

"We don't know that they did. They might have just told that story to keep the rest of us off their backs, though your point still stands. Remember, vampire families are made not born. Having claimed them as his nephews, so far as Spike's concerned they are, now, whether or not they started out that way." Angel sighed.

"I can't believe they just looked us all in the eye and lied about the whole qu'arto thing when we were all so worried about it! Did they kill that guy Timaeus the Destructor so he couldn't tell anyone it was them?"

Angel thought back to the night in question and shook his head. "No…they were being honest when they said they chased after him to find out what he knew. I don't think they know they're the qu'arto, or channeling it or whatever it is they're doing."

"This would have been much easier if they'd been waiting for us when we arrived."

"Trust me, having Spike around is never easy." Angel said with bitter amusement. "Damn it. I didn't want to spend another night combing the city looking for him!"

"We don't really have a choice. The very fate of the world depends on it."

"We can start in Caritas. If they've been running amok through the demony parts of town, someone in there will probably have heard about it, right? If not, we can sing for Lorne; maybe he can give us a heads up."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's go."

"It's closed."

"I can see that, Wes."
"Who's Torvald and why is he a) looking for vengeance and b) why does Lorne have to be there to witness it?" Cordelia wondered, reading the sign that had been left on the door.

"It's an epic."

"I've never heard of it before."

"It's a demon epic" Angel clarified. "It's kind of a big deal. It's usually only shown once every sixty years or so. It takes that long to get together enough zombies to be the human carnage. I saw it once. It's quite a spectacle. It has something for everyone--vengeance, large battle scenes, and a lowly demon getting one over on the god that had been messing with him for a thousand years. It even has a happy ending--Torvald ends up in hell and is finally reunited with his slain kin and they set off together to conquer hell and rule it till the end of days. There's usually not a dry eye in the house."

"Uh…yeah." Cordelia replied.

"How fascinating. I was unaware that there were demon epics, let alone demon theatre until Spike mentioned in passing going to see the 'Dire Warriors', who are apparently an acting troupe, not a group of assassins."

"There's usually a strict no-humans policy on places that would have such things." Angel apologized. "Apparently having a human soul is just as bad. I didn't even know they were going to be performing it here! The last time it was performed in London--just a few days before Spike was made. Me, Darla and Drusilla went to see it. In fact, I kind of wondered if that was what got her wanting a playmate. The, uh, reunion of Torvald and his mate is, um, rather graphic. Torvald was a warrior on a quest, had a code of honor and everything--she said she would find the 'wisest and bravest knight in all the land and make him hers with a kiss'. She ended up with Spike instead. Dru always did tend to babble a lot of nonsense."

"You just can't help yourself, can you? Can't even mention the guy's name without badmouthing him." Cordelia scoffed. "Geez."

"Would you describe Spike as the 'wisest and bravest knight'?"

"Well, no…although maybe by demon standards he would be. He was quite devoted to his 'lady fair' and always off questing to win her favor and whatnot, from the stories he told. So...you know, maybe I actually would."

"I wouldn't" Wes disagreed. "A chaotic ball of trouble with a penchant for violence and alcohol seems more fitting to me. Even so, Angel, perhaps you ought to tone down the overt criticisms. Having grown up with the father I did, I know how hurtful and disenheartening it can be to have someone you look up to constantly tearing you down."

"Look up to? Spike doesn't look up to me! He's been a constant thorn in my side. I sometimes think he was put on this earth for the sole purpose of tormenting me!"

"You are so emotionally retarded." Cordelia scoffed. "And you can stop it with the histrionics, seriously. You liked having him around an awful lot for someone you supposedly despise so much."

"Cordelia, you need to stop this. Spike might have a chip leashing him right now, but he may not always. He's never going to stop searching for a way to get rid of it--he doesn't like being helpless. He doesn't have a soul. For all that he can be somewhat charming if he puts his mind to it, he's still the same unrepentant killer he always was. I have a soul, and I still have to struggle against what I
am--a chipless, soulless vampire doesn't stand a chance. The moment he has human blood after being unchipped it's all over. Neither of you can truly appreciate what it's like--human blood gets your aggressive tendencies going, it pounds in your ears and in your head until all that's left is the hunger, which can be momentarily sated but is never, ever satisfied. If you happen to run into him unchipped and he's full for the moment, he might chat with you all friendly like. If he's hungry, he'll drink you down without thinking much about it. He might suffer a momentary pang when he looks down and realizes it's you he's just killed, but that's all. The blood washes all those sorts of pesky little concerns aside. He'll keep walking, looking for his next meal."

Wesley and Cordelia were both rendered speechless by his uncharacteristic bout of talkativeness. Angel got awkward and embarrassed when he caught their looks.

"Look, it was…nice. Yeah, I guess that's as good a word as any. It was nice being able to hang out with him like that. The thing is, I know all too well that it was just an interlude. Unless he's dusted, one day he'll go back to what he is. It's inevitable. When that time comes I might have to stake him. I know this, he knows this. Don't make that inevitable day harder or more horrifying than it has to be. He's not your friend. You can never trust him if he's unrestrained."

Cordelia and Wesley felt a sudden stab of sympathy for the broody vampire. How awful must it be to live with the constant knowledge that your vampire family was a band of unrepentant killers that might need to be put down for the safety of the world, all the while knowing that, unless you were dusted, you would outlive any human family you tried to build?

"Angel…you don't actually know that will happen. I was talking to him about his experiences with the chip, you know? He said it made him slow down and consider his actions and think about what to do next. He's still impulsive and chaotic and likes trouble…but the chip is forcing him to change, slowly but surely, but it's definitely there. If he has it long enough, he might be able to be trusted without it. Only time will tell, but I think the very fact that he was willing to consider keeping Darla human and trying to find some way to 'restrain' Drusilla says he's adaptable if nothing else. He's fond of the Scoobies--he feels genuine affection for Willow and Tara, the occasional odd kinship with Xander, and he thinks his idiotic jokes are funny. He respects Giles and is mildly fond of him as well. Buffy seems to annoy him mostly, though it's tangled with a lot of other stuff. He respects her, I know that much. He seems to like Faith as well--he likes her more, respects her less…not disrespects her, just doesn't respect her as much as Buffy. He's really fond of Buffy's mom." Cordelia objected.

"Spike is perfectly capable of having a small group of people he likes that he won't touch. It doesn't say anything about the rest of the world. That's kind of the problem. Vampires aren't animals, they can have attachments, things that aren't prey--but anyone not on that list is still fair game."

"You're his alpha. Can't you just order him?"

"Spike has made a career of bucking my orders." Angel scoffed.

"Children often move to test the limits of their parental figures. That's classic child psychology--establishing boundaries, as well as receiving reassurance that the parent…"

"I'm not his father!"

"You're still the one who raised him from baby vamp though, right? His Yoda, according to Xander." Cordelia pointed out.

"It's hardly the same"
"I would imagine in some ways it's very similar." Wesley objected.

"Look, can we just drop the subject? We still have to keep reality from unraveling." Angel cut in dryly.

"Oh, yes, of course. We should get on that."

"AHHH!" Cordelia suddenly gasped as she held her head.

"Cordy! You had a vision! Where are they?"

"Sorry to disappoint, big guy, but it wasn't about them. Some woman just got abducted by a demon and we need to rescue her."

"But…"

"But nothing. Obviously reality isn't as close to unraveling as the Watchers seem to think. We have our own mission and we now have our marching orders."

Angel dithered there at the entrance of Caritas for a long moment, feeling irritated and thwarted, before sighing and following the others back to the cars.

"Buffy! What's wrong? What's happened?" Joyce asked worriedly as she hurried to her daughter's side.

"I just saw Riley."

"I thought everyone said he was fine."

"Oh he is--alive and well and all that."

"Then what's wrong?"

"He's leaving town. He's rejoining the military to go demon-hunting in Belize. He said I didn't love him enough to keep him in town, so he was going back where he belonged."

Joyce's eyes flashed. "Has he already left?"

"Yeah."

"Damn it. Sniveling little coward didn't even stick around long enough to let me have a go at him."

"Mom?"

"Bad enough he's skipping town, but to make it your fault? How dare he! It takes two to make a relationship. If the relationship fails it's on both the people involved, but of course men always like to dump responsibility elsewhere, even if it was they who were having affairs with their secretaries and…"

"Mom!"

Joyce caught herself and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. Ice cream?"

Buffy mustered up a watery smile and nodded. "Sounds good."
When they were resettled in the kitchen with their ice cream, Joyce smiled at her daughter sympathetically. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really?"

"It might help."

"I don't think you'll like what I have to say."

"I don't…"

"I'm the Slayer. That's a fact that seems to define the whole rest of my life. Xander and Anya are doing the whole getting jobs and their own place thing, Willow and Tara are doing the whole college experience…"

"So are you." Joyce interjected, already agreeing that she would probably not like what Buffy had to say.

"Yeah, but my college experience has been filled with monsters and battles to save the world, same as my high school experience. Chances are my eventual getting a job experience will be much the same. That's just the way it is."

"So let Faith take over! She's your replacement, right? It's her job now!"

"Mom…Faith's back in prison."

"In prison?"

"Someone finagled a short-term release for her so she could help out while we were all running around looking for Willow. She's been talking to a counselor and doing a lot of soul-searching and whatnot. She said it's what she needs right now. It does seem to be helping her. She seemed more like she was before she went off the rails and everything went kablooey. The thing is, she's actually my second replacement, and I'm still the one stuck with the job. Unless Faith dies another won't be called…so unless you think I should head up to L.A. and off Faith…"

"Of course not!"

"It's still me. The world would have gotten sucked into hell if I hadn't of been there to keep fighting after Kendra died. The town would have been eaten by the mayor if I hadn't of been there to keep fighting after Faith went evil. I have the power for a reason, and I can't simply stand by and allow others to be hurt or killed or let the world be destroyed so that I can go to frat parties, gossip with friends and pretend to be a normal girl."

"You are a normal girl!"

"Who's also the slayer. I've done my best to keep the trappings of the normal girl life, and it's worked for me so far. I'm the longest lived Slayer like, ever."

Joyce's face went white.

"I'm not trying to scare you, mom. I'm just trying to show you the reality of the situation. Kendra lasted a year. She was alone--no family, no friends, nothing much to live for. She had one shirt, and named her stake because it was her only possession and had saved her life many times. I've always had you, and Giles and Willow and Xander, and for a while Cordelia and Oz…Angel. I had ties to the world, something to fight for. That's something no other Slayer has really had. Faith said part of the reason she went off the rails is because she'd been told she was bad her whole life,
and eventually figured she might as well just accept the inevitable...but the thing that really clinched it was that the Mayor loved her and treated her like a daughter. That was something she'd never had before."

Buffy sighed pensively and stirred her melting ice cream around in the bowl while she tried to formulate what she was trying to say.

"I thought I'd found the perfect boyfriend in Riley...the thing was, it was mostly Willow and Xander who were really enthusiastic about the idea, but that was part of what made him perfect. I loved Angel with my whole heart, but there was always a bit of a problem--you didn't like him, Giles never really approved, Xander was rather vocal about his dislike. Willow was supportive, but she was the only one. It made things difficult, but I loved him and so I never really let it get to me."

Joyce opened her mouth to speak, her face set into disapproving lines. "Mom, let me finish."

Joyce sat back and nodded curtly for her to continue.

"After everything that happened, everyone was a bit more vocal about the whole Angel thing. It was Angel I sent to hell to save the world, Angel who suffered, Angel who was punished for what his eviler self did in his body. With the curse, we knew we really couldn't be together again...but we still loved each other and it was..." she trailed off as her throat grew too tight to speak.

"You shouldn't be with a vampire anyway, Buffy...find a nice, normal human guy, Buffy. Be a regular girl for once, Buffy. That was all I heard from anyone. I met this guy Parker freshman year. He seemed nice, I thought we made a connection, and everyone was really sure that a 'normal guy' was all I needed to set things right. Well, Mr. normal guy slept with me once and dumped me, and went around bragging about it. Turns out, it's kind of a hobby of his--freshmen girls, that is. Bastard.

Joyce, who looked furious on her behalf covered her hand with her own and rubbed lightly at her arm as she continued.

"So, along comes Riley. Willow met him and decided he was perfect. She was coaching him on how to win me over. She told Xander all about him and he was very enthusiastic as well. I went with it, had those picnics in the sun that Angel seemed to think were the most important thing in the world." She snorted bitterly. "But you know what? It probably wouldn't have lasted long if it hadn't turned out he was actually a demon-hunting black ops commando in his spare time. That's when I got invested in things. Angel used to help me patrol, you know? Unlike the rest of them he was strong enough to fight, able to keep up with me, and I didn't have to worry about him getting hurt or killed the way I did Willow, Xander, Giles and all the rest. Any normal guy boyfriend would've been a liability--not that anyone ever seems to want to hear that part. But, there was Riley--normal guy enough to make everyone else happy, able to help me on my patrols and help save the world, which made me happy. The thing was, he was still too normal guy. He couldn't deal with the fact that I was stronger than him--a lot stronger. He went a little crazy there. It nearly got him killed. Frankly it's a miracle he wasn't. So what's left then? I dated the man who was a monster, the normal guy, the normal guy that fights monsters...and none of them can live in my world. Who's left?"

Joyce sighed, not sure what to say. Instead she just moved to sit next to her daughter and put an arm around her.
Angel and company headed towards Caritas again.

"I can't believe the Powers have kept us so busy the last three days. Spike and the boys could be anywhere by now!"

"Well, obviously finding them isn't as big a priority as the Watchers seem to think. You did the right thing by concentrating on the visions."

Angel turned down the street that led to Caritas and slowed to a stop. All three gaped at the devastation that lined the road. Cars were flipped on their sides, there was a crater in the wall across from Caritas and another in the middle of the street.

"Not a big priority, huh?" Angel muttered as he pulled back to find a parking spot elsewhere.

There was a large, lively crowd in the club when they finally arrived there. A trio of blue-grey demons were singing up on the stage. Angel noted one of the bus boys was clearing off four small tables that had been pushed together. There were lots of glasses with bloodstains on them. A group of vampires most likely. That bore watching. He should probably ask about it before they left.

They waited till Lorne was done advising the trio on their destinies before approaching.

"Lorne."

"Cordelia, sweetie! Long time no see! You really should make more time to visit your poor papa."

"Sorry. A lot has been going on."

"Alright, I'll forgive you this time. So, what brings you all here? Actually, cupcake, I'm a little surprised at you, missing your family reunion."

Angel blinked at him and looked confused. "Family reunion?"

"Oh! That reminds me...hang on a sec."

Lorne called over the bartender, who rummaged beneath the bar and pulled out what looked to be a scroll of parchment, which Lorne handed over with a flourish to Angel. Cordelia and Wesley crowded in to see what was on it.

When he unrolled the thing, they discovered a drawing of several familiar faces and two unfamiliar ones.

"Darla, Drusilla, Spike, Tom and Harry were all here?"

"And Harmony?!"

"Yeah, you just missed them, actually. They had quite the rousing party, boogied the day away, that sort of thing. Cheekbones even talked the others into singing for me. I wouldn't let him—I don't want to go unconscious again, thanks. Ms. Scowly-britches there tried smashing up the place when she first arrived, ranting and raving about something or other, but ran afoul of the sanctuary spell. Cheekbones made her play nice and join the reunion before he'd agree to fight her though. She wasn't real happy about it, but she didn't have much choice in the matter."

"Yuki wanted to fight Spike? Why?"

"Something about an annoying one, according to him."
"So… Spike's dead then?" Angel sighed.

"He's dead? Why? Who is this Yuki?" Wesley demanded.

"Yuki Makimura. The Master turned her back in the early 1800s. She's nearly as strong as the Master was even though she's only a fraction of his age. This is bad. She's incredibly powerful and can do terrible damage while she's running around loose…"

"Um, hello? Earth to cupcake? She's dead. Spike's still alive. He and the rest of the boys got picked up by some demons and taken off in a limo a little while ago."

"Yuki's dead? How?"

"Wrecking ball. Cheekbones really knows how to make good use of the things. Scowly britches tossed him around like a rag-doll before that. He managed to pin her with the thing, drank some of her blood to help heal him and then lopped her head off."

"Oh." Angel muttered, sounding a bit peeved. "Well, he must be proud of himself. That's his third Slayer."

"Slayer?!" Wesley sputtered.

"She was a Slayer before she was turned. That's why she was so strong. As far as I know the Watcher's struck her from the records and pretend she never existed."

"Why the heck was Harmony with them?" Cordelia demanded.

"Ah, her. The littlest vampire. She's been rather unhappy lately, looking for a place to fit in. She's tried really hard to be evil, since that's what everyone expects from her, but it doesn't seem to be working out too well. She finally decided to try something new, remembered she had a friend here in town. She was rather upset to find out you already knew she was a vampire. She was hoping she could just forget about all that and make it go away. She was afraid of getting staked if she showed her face with you knowing--the others warned her that's probably what would happen. She was feeling rather down indeed, but then Sam there went to chat her up and they seemed to be hitting it off well."

"Why was Sam Lawson here?"

"He was looking for you, actually."

Angel growled, remembering Penn's visit not too long ago.

"Oh, he wasn't looking to destroy you, far from it. He was hoping you could give him some guidance or a mission. Seems he tried on the whole 'evil thing' too and didn't find it a good fit. He thinks he might have been made wrong since you had a soul when you sired him. Happily, cheekbones came to the rescue instead. He and the boys are going to take him to France or something so he can join the foreign legion. When he saw he and the littlest vampire had hit it off, he offered to take her along as well, supposedly as an apology for not taking her when they were dating. He apparently made a lot of big promises and didn't live up to most of them--he felt a little bad about it, but the girl honestly drove him crazy. So, it all worked out for the best."

"They're going to France?" Angel demanded.

"That's the plan, sugar plum."

"Wait, earlier didn't you say they got picked up by demons and drove off in a limo?" Cordelia
interjected.

"Oh, that, yeah. Funny story, actually. It seems your last vision when you were here that hurt you so bad, there was some incorporeal demon named Sahjan messing with you as well, which is why there was so much damage. Long story short, they discovered this by accident because of some 'vision frequency monitor' one of the nephews made."

"They can just do that?"

"Well, he got the frequency when they were scanning you for damage. He was hoping to study it later. Anyway, it was going off and he discovered it was because there was an incorporeal demon nearby listening in on their conversation. He managed to make it so he could see and hear him. He's apparently been messing with your life for some time, Angel Cakes. There was a prophecy or something that the son of the vampire with a soul would kill him. He was rather irate to discover that so far the only being who seemed to fit the bill was Sam Lawson. He chatted with the other nephew a bit and they came up with a plan of sorts. While the others were watching the Spike/Yuki battle, they gave Sammy-boy a sword and recorporealized Sahjan so he could kill him. The limo was sent by Cyvus Vail, he's a sorcerer, a big muckety muck. It seems Sahjan was his old enemy or something, and he's been paying close attention to you as well in hopes of getting hold of this supposed son of yours first so he could off Sahjan for him. I guess he wanted to talk to them, or maybe reward them or something."

"So they all went to see this Cyvus Vail?"

"No, just cheekbones, Sammy-boy, the nephews and the littlest vampire. The others were picked up by a van just after Spike finished off Yuki."

"Do you know where Cyvus Vail lives?"

"No, sorry sweet cheeks."

"I see. Thank you for your help."

Cordelia plucked the drawn picture from Angel's hands when he seemed ready to discard it, rolled it up and tucked it away safely while he was striding out the door.

"What are you going to do with that?" Wesley asked curiously.

"Frame it and hang it up in the office, of course. For good or ill, they're his family, and that tie obviously doesn't just go away just because they're sometimes on opposite sides. I mean, I'm still pissed off at my dad with his stupid tax evasion...but he's still my dad. He never really broached the subject of his family because of the whole 'evil vampire' angle...he probably figured he really couldn't with us. Truthfully, until recently, let's be honest, he really couldn't have. We wouldn't have understood. We'd have been like Buffy all 'but they're evil and you hate them, end of story. Say, what's on t.v.?' If we're going to be his friends, we have to be able to accept both sides of him, or at least try to. He has to be able to feel he can mention the evil vampire family without being judged or condemned for it. He has to feel free to be sad about having to dust them if it comes down to that and not feel he has to hide it."

Wesley smiled at Cordelia with fond pride. "You continue to impress. You have a magnificent heart."

"Aw, you say the sweetest things."

"Are you coming?"
"Actually, you two handle the search. I'll stick here with Lorne for a bit."

"Alright. I'll swing by later to pick you up?"

"Sounds good."

"It took us too long to find this guy. They might not even be there anymore."

"That can't be helped. Maybe he'll still have some idea of where they went."

"It better not be France."

"I guess that will depend on whether they can secure a flight that will get them there before daylight hits."

"That's not a problem so long as the nephews are with them. The only small mercy is that Spike, Sam and Harmony are all there. That's too many for them to teleport, so they'll have to get a flight. Maybe we should just head directly to LAX…"

"Why don't we see what this Mr. Vail has to say first."

Angel grunted and kept driving.

When they at last pulled up in front of the sizable estate in Beverly Hills, there was a lot of activity going on, people running to and fro and shouting.

"Lindsey and Lilah" Angel growled, exiting the car and stalking towards the two lawyers who were consulting with a mixed group of humans and demons. One of the humans saw him coming and said something to the two lawyers who turned to glare at him.

"Well, Angel. What a terrible surprise. What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for some friends of mine. I was told they had an appointment with the fellow that lives here."

"Really? Too bad for you. The fellow that lives here is dead, and thieves seem to have cleaned the place out at some point. We'd really like to talk to these friends of yours. Mr. Vail had several items in his possession that are the property of Wolfram and Hart."

A limo pulled into the drive while they were all talking, and the group turned as one to look at it. The limo pulled to a halt and the driver got out looking worried.

"Is something wrong?"

"Teros, is it?" Lindsey answered, moving to meet him. "I understand you picked up some passengers earlier at Mr. Vail's behest."

"Yeah. He sent me off to pick them up at a nightclub and bring them here. They were here for a bit and came out and I drove them to the airport. Mr. Vail arranged for them to have use of his private jet as a thank you or something."

"Did these passengers have a lot of luggage with them?"

"No. They didn't have any luggage, or anything with them really."
"Where were you while they were inside?"

"Out here. After I dropped them off, someone came out a few minutes later and told me Mr. Vail wanted me to take them to the airport. I waited out here with the car until they returned."

"Did you see any moving vans? Any groups of people carrying off a lot of stuff? Hear any commotion?"

"No. Everything was quiet. The folks came out, hopped in back, and I drove."

"What were they talking about during the drive?"

"France. That's where they were going. The girl with them was really excited, said she always wanted to see Paris. She was planning a big shopping spree."

"They went to France?"

"Yeah. Mr. Vail gave them the use of his private jet. They did him a favor of some sort. Did something happen?"

"Mr. Vail is dead."

"Was he murdered?"

"No, it appears to be a heart attack."

"Damn…what about my job?"

"We'll be contacting you and the other employees in the next few days to give all of you your severance packages."

"Oh. I see. Thanks."

Angel growled in irritation and stalked back towards the car, Wesley scrambling to keep up with him.

"They're either halfway to France or there already, depending on how fast the private jet goes. We're too late."

"Wow! This is so exciting! I haven't had my own credit card in like, forever! I didn't know there were things like this set up." Harmony squealed excitedly.

"Well, word of advice for the future kitten, be friendly, find out who does what in the demon areas, and try to remember it. You never know when that information will come in handy."

"This is a lot of money. Are you sure this isn't going to be a problem?" Sam asked worriedly.

"If it is, it won't be for us since it was all done through others. This is only the icing on the cake--the bloke that handled everything took the lion's share. That Vail fellow was rolling in it. It should be plenty to last you for a while, so long as you don't try blowing it all in one place. It'll start gathering interest—not much, demons don't give as good of interest rates as humans do, because we all live longer—but it should be more than enough to keep you in blood and other necessities for a while, especially as you'll have most things taken care of by the Legion in the meantime. Hang on to it, save it for a rainy day and what have you."
"Oh, Blondie Bear, you're the best!" Harmony squealed before hugging him.

"Just consider this me setting things right between us."

"All's forgiven. I need to go shopping!" Harmony squealed again. "You'll come with me, won't you Pookie, and tell me what I look good in? I don't have a reflection anymore…"

"Actually, we can probably give you both a reflection and sun protection long enough for you to go shopping to your heart's content."

"Yeah, we'll even give you one of the cars we lifted. You can enjoy the city of lights for a bit, and then you can go sign up. You have the info I wrote out for you, right?"

"Yes" Sam agreed, patting his chest pocket.

"Well, there you go."

"Thanks for all your help. It makes me wish I'd waited for you when we both got kicked off the sub."

"It's probably just as well, really. I wouldn't have been as much help back then. I went through my own mid-life crisis; it made a difference."

"Let me snap a few pictures then we'll put the protections on you and all and you can go."

"You're not staying in Paris?"

"Eh, we might tool around for a bit and see some of the sights, but then we're headed elsewhere. Fear not, if in a few years you want to come by and trade war stories, just look for me in Sunnydale, CA. Harm can point the way, she grew up there."

"I'll take you up on that."

The three vampires posed for pictures, Harmony beaming in the middle like it was the happiest day of her life. Tom did the protections on them both, warning them to not try wandering in the sun the next day, and to expect the return of their lack of reflection, while Harry dug out and enlarged one of the fancy cars they'd lifted from Cyvus Vail's house after he died of a heart attack right in front of them all.

Sam and Harmony hopped in, waved goodbye and took off towards Paris' fashion district.

The trio waved till they were out of sight and then turned to one another.

"So, what are we going to do?"

"Eh, I suppose we can get ourselves some fancy togs, and go do the cultural tour while we're here. I haven't been in this neck of the woods for quite a while. There was always plenty of entertainment to be had, lots of beautiful girls, plenty to eat. Damn chip. We'll do that for a day or two and see where the wind takes us next, how's that?"

"I'd like to see the Riviera, and the great cities of Italy…Morocco…"

"That's what we'll do then. The Whirlwind tour of Europe and the Mediterranean, courtesy of yours truly."

"Sounds good."
Giles sighed and hung up the phone.

"Problem?"

"That was Wesley. Spike and his nephews, in company with Harmony and another vampire named Sam all went to France by private jet after doing a favor of some sort for some wealthy gentleman in Beverly Hills."

"But…they need to be contained and stopped and…" Xander protested.

"Wesley and the others discussed it and they think the situation is perhaps not as dire as the Watcher's council fears. They said they were thwarted by the Powers that Be when they tried to search for them while they were still in L.A.--Cordelia was plagued by visions that kept them busy rescuing people in need. When they were finally given a free moment to continue their search, they arrived just moments after all of them left, and then again when they trailed them to Mr. Vail's residence. They were already out of the country by the time they tracked them that far. Nevertheless, Wesley has forwarded the information to the Watcher's Council that they're currently in France, and they're content to let them take it from there."

"This is so unfair! Why does the evil dead get rewarded with trips to Paris when I've never been out of California?" Buffy complained.

"You were just in Nevada recently." Anya pointed out.

"Trying to save Willow. It was hardly a vacation…and it can't really match up to France, can it?"


"You were discussing this?" Buffy snorted.

"Not with him. I ran into Harmony one time and she was burning all Spike's stuff and complaining about him."

"Why didn't you dust her?"

"I was by myself…plus she kicks really hard and it hurts when she pulls your hair way more than it did when we were in kindergarten."

Everyone there snickered.

"You got into a hair-pulling contest with Harmony?"

"Um, hello? She might still be a whiny ditz, but she's also a vampire that has super powers now. I was by myself. Give me a break."

"Sorry."

"So, Buffy…I thought I saw Riley the other day. He's back from the hospital or whatever? When's he coming by?"

"Yeah, when is he? Is he still feeling poorly, is that why he's missing out on all the Scoobie action? Maybe we should surprise him and have a movie night or something."

Buffy sighed. She'd been wondering how long she could put off saying anything. It looked like
her time was up.

"He's not coming back. He decided to re-up with his old unit and fight demons in Belize."

"What? He just left? Just like that? He didn't even say goodbye or anything!"

"Did he say why? I mean, he was part of the team and your boyfriend and…"

"He said I didn't love him enough and he left. End of story."

"No! Not end of story! He was crazy about you! Didn't you try to get him to stay?"

"Of course I did."

"You obviously didn't try hard enough!"

"Like I haven't been trying hard enough to be normal?" Buffy asked bitterly. "Go to hell, Xander." She closed her eyes for a moment and then shook her head. "You know what? I can't deal with this right now. I'll see you all around." Having said her piece, she marched to the door and left without another word.

Xander stared at the door as it shut behind her, looking stricken…and a little pissed off.

"Nice job, Xander." Willow moaned. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Because it's true! Riley was missing and we thought he was dead or dying and she didn't even care!"

"Which is probably a good indication that their relationship wasn't all that. I'm not surprised she just let him go. She wasn't really interested in him till she discovered he was a commando. Until then she was just trying to make you two happy because you tend to be very pushy when it comes to her love life." Anya commented.

"No we're not!" Willow protested.

"Well, not you so much as Xander. Everyone was on her back about moving on from Angel and finding an nice normal human. She was trying to get you to stop bugging her about it."

"But, she said there was sparkage!"

"To get you off her back. She knew you were coaching him and had given your approval."

"Oh. I didn't realize she knew about that."

"And you Xander kept going on and on about how he was human and it was about time and muttering about 'blood breath' and her being a deviant when you thought she couldn't hear you. She started accepting dates with him after you did that a few times."

"Xander! You called her a deviant? And after you went on and on ON about how sexy her vamp face was that one time? A-and you were sorta drooling at vamp-me's uncovered boob tops a-and always dating demon girls and let's not forget CORDELIA."

"He's a hypocrite." Anya nodded sagely.

"Uh, HELLO? I was trying to make Buffy feel better, okay? And the demon chicks? I didn't know until after and it always ended badly. As for vamp-you…well, like you said, they were just kinda right out there. I'm a guy, sue me. And, gee, Will, aren't you and Cordelia like bestest buds
"Well, not bestest... but we weren't back then! We were arch enemies!"

"Uh, hello, Cordelia, remember? She was too self-involved to have arch enemies. She thought about herself, her car, her clothes, occasionally her little lackeys and that was pretty much it."

"I-I thought she seemed really nice." Tara interjected quietly.

"She grew up a lot after her family lost everything and she had to move to L.A." Giles interjected. "She was rather vain, shallow and self-absorbed before that."

"Buffy was her arch-nemesis, not you. She was the one she tried getting vengeance upon, even though you were the one making smoochies with her boyfriend. Can I just say that I like Tara very much and am quite happy that you're gay now? Otherwise, I'd have driven you off long ago." Anya interjected cheerfully.

"What? She has scrawny arms. I can take her."

"What?" Willow scoffed. "In case you've forgotten, I'm a witch!"

"Not a very good one, and it wouldn't have helped you with a bat to the back of the head." Anya pointed out reasonably.

"What is it with you and bats?" Xander squeaked.

"What? I told you I've been watching movies. Bats are the weapon of choice for angry humans, which I am now. Just ask Giles."

"Ahem. Yes. She, um, does have a point. Could we possibly change the subject?" Giles asked while polishing his glasses. "In fact, I even know what we should change it to. We need to look up Cyvus Vail. I know I've heard the name before."

"Cyvus Vail? I've heard of him. He's a demon sorceror. He's so old, he's actually dying of old age, which should tell you something. He specializes in reality warping magic--the same sort of thing the vengeance demons do, but with a slightly wider scope."

"I see."

"I don't like the sound of that. What the heck kind of 'favor' did they do for this guy?"

"Ah, yes, well, it seems there was a prophecy of some sort stating that the son of the vampire with a soul would kill some demon named Sahjan, who was an old enemy of Cyvus Vail. Apparently the prophecy was fulfilled during the ah, family reunion in L.A.""

"Family reunion? Angel has a son? How? Angel's older than dirt. Any son of his should be long dead by now."

"It's not an actual son, but a vampire one. He's the only vampire known to have been made by a vampire with a human soul."

"I knew it! For all his 'oh, woe is me, how I suffer... he made a vampire while he had a soul! HA! Bastard." Xander scoffed, conveniently forgetting the story Spike had told about how he was made.
"From what I was told, there were extenuating circumstances that made it necessary at the time it happened."

"I've heard of Sahjan too. His entire species was made incorporeal because they were so troublesome. Does this vampire have strange powers to effect incorporeal things?" Anya asked curiously.

"Ah, no. The, um, nephews, discovered Sahjan was lurking about and made him corporeal. The vampire just lopped off his head with the one's sword."

"Where was Spike during this? He's not usually one to let another do the fighting."

"He was battling one of the vampires at the reunion, a certain Yuki Makimura, who, according to Angel was once a Slayer before she was turned by the Master in the early 1800s."

"Oh, wow. She must have been really strong."

"I've heard of her too." Anya interjected. "It's said she was as strong as the Master, or nearly, even though she was only a fraction of his age."

"Heh, Spike probably got his ass kicked." Xander snorted. "This is bad though, a vamp like that running around loose. Do they need us to come help them hunt her down?"

"No need. Apparently Spike killed her after she did in fact 'kick his ass'. She showed up wanting to avenge the Anointed One before heading here to resurrect the Master."

"Goodness, he's really been adding to his reputation lately." Anya said with some admiration. "That also makes three Slayers, which is something no other vampire can claim."

Giles sighed and began cleaning his glasses again. Only Spike could become marginally reformed and still find a way to kill Slayers…and in a way that wouldn't earn him censure, no less. He was a damnable nuisance, that one.
"Why are we doing this again?" Tom asked in an *I can't believe I'm actually doing this* kind of voice.

"Because last time I was here I led a failed crusade against the Vatican. This time I'd like to succeed." Spike said easily.

"But why? You're a bloody vampire. What are you going to do with a city that's the center of the Catholic Church?" Harry demanded.

"I don't need to hold on to it for long, just long enough to say I did it. This damn chip means I still won't find out if I could get superpowers from biting the Pope though. Bugger."

"I feel like I'm in a Monty Python sketch." Harry said glumly, looking down at his vicar's outfit. Tom was dressed similarly.

"That was actually where I got the idea." Spike chortled. "You blokes ready?"

"As we'll ever be." Tom agreed dryly as he put on his dark sunglasses.

"Hang on a sec." Harry spoke up, before making two shadow clones.

"That's just neat." Spike admired as he poked at them and found them to be solid.

"The Bishop always has four vicars with him, not two. If we're going to do Monty Python, we should do it right." He considered a moment and decided to put the two of them and the two clones in disguise. No sense ruining the rest of his and Tom's vacation should things go badly...

"Too right we should. We ready now?"

"Yep." the boys and shadow clones chorused.

"You're sure he's in there, right?" Tom said uneasily. Yeah, he'd been a murderous dark lord...but years and years before that he'd been an altar boy. A tiny bit of supernatural dread curled down his spine when he thought too hard about what they were about to do. As if he hadn't already damned his soul enough!

"Yeah, now go."

Spike adjusted his bishop's hat, took a firmer grip on his crook and threw open the doors. He and the boys went running inside.

The pope, and the various priests, cardinals and such that were attending him all froze and turned to look at them.

"I have a message from God!" Spike shouted as the boys began confounding everyone. "You need
to sign these papers and then announce that I am now the master of Vatican City!"

The priests, cardinals and such began staggering around looking dazed. The Pope shook his head, trying to throw off his daze, but Spike stuck a pen in his hand and pointed him to the proper line to sign.

"There! Official signature and everything."

"I think he's got a seal too." Harry reminded him.

"Bugger. Which of you blokes has the seal?"

One of the dazed cardinals held up his hand.

"Stamp this, then we all need to head out to the balcony there and address the populace."

"Oh, dear Lord."

Angel and Cordelia came out of the kitchen upon hearing Wesley's horrified cry.

"Wes? Something wrong?"

"Come here. You have to see this. I'm seeing it and I don't quite believe it." Wesley muttered as he raised the sound on the television.

"Is that Spike?"

"Wearing a fake beard, dressed like an Anglican bishop and addressing the crowd from the Vatican? Yes. Yes it is." Wesley sighed.

"Um…is it just me, or do the four vicars with him look like you, Giles, Angel and Xander?"

"Yes, they do rather, don't they? Well, if we were all scruffy, unshaven smokers in dark glasses, they do."

"What did he do?"

"He conquered Vatican City for an hour. He overturned all but the first two commandments, lifted the ban on gambling, pornography, and drinking within the bounds of the city, and commanded the crowd to have an orgy to celebrate his victory."

"Oh my god!"

"Oh, if you can believe it, it gets worse. Quite a few of the people in the crowd took him at his word. There's a lot of priests and nuns in lock up tonight for public indecency."

Cordelia was still watching the t.v. with horrified fascination, as was Wesley, at least they were until Angel started kicking things.

"Bastard. Everyone knows priests and nuns were my thing! He understood and respected it once upon a time! He always has to be such a damn copycat! I thought we had an understanding, but noooo. It's the same as it always was. He just has to buck my authority. He's going to be utterly insufferable when he gets back. Oh, if only he was here I'd smash his stupid… Damn. The Immortal is going to get to him first. Bastard. That's fine…I'll just go kill the Immortal. He has it coming for violating our women anyway. I never did get my blood vengeance on that bastard."
"Kick me out of my town, will he?" he trailed off as he realized Wesley and Cordelia were now watching him with horrified fascination.

"Okay, we conquered the Vatican City, and managed to get away clean. What's on the agenda for today?" Tom asked.

"Well…so long as we're still in Rome, I guess we can get vengeance on the Immortal." Spike decided.

"Who's the Immortal?" Harry wondered.

"Bloody annoying ponce, that's who. Way back in the day the four of us were living here, living it up, having a grand old time, and then one day Angelus and I are out on our own, and a bunch of goons attack us. Next thing we know, we wake up chained to the ceiling of an old barn, and some blokes come in and tell us that 'his beneficence, the Immortal' has allowed us to go free, but wants us out of his city. When we protested that we were there first, they said, no, because he lived here three hundred years ago and had returned. Naturally, Angelus killed the guy talking. We went home, figuring we'd rest up and eat and what have you and then go get him. What do we find when we get home though? He'd been there while we'd been locked up and violated Darla and Dru…concurrently even! They never let us do that…"

"I don't think you quite understand what violate means…"

"They were violated." Spike insisted. "So, naturally Angelus and I headed off to get that guy and avenge the women, but he had some kind of ponce barrier around his fancy party to keep us out. God. I hate that guy! Every damn person you meet in Rome is always "Oh, the Immortal, he's so bloody magnificent!" Everyone just loves the bastard, it's uncanny!" Spike huffed and downed his blood with an angry gesture. He licked his lips and suddenly frowned in thought. "Everyone just loves him. He's done everything, everywhere, and done it better than anyone else… Bloody hell. The Immortal is just some bloody ponce using one of them paragon spells like that little nit Jonathan! No wonder we couldn't get him, it's built into the spell! He wins, you lose. Why did I never realize this before?"

"Well…we're technically in another dimension right now. Maybe the spell's affect on you doesn't spill past dimensional barriers?"

Spike glanced around at the interior of the log cabin and nodded thoughtfully.

"That's probably it. That means the only way to defeat him is to take out his demon."

"His demon?"

"His balance. It's part of the spell. You get to be Mr. Fabulous, but it creates a demon at the same time that's a nightmare or something. Probably it gets stronger the more powerful your spell is. I don't know if it has to stay nearby or if it just has to be in the world. It could be anywhere."

"What's it look like?"

"I never saw the thing up close, I just know it has a triangular marking on it, like this. He'll have a matching one on himself somewhere. Like this." Spike drew an example.

Tom studied the mark a moment and then moved to head upstairs.

"Where's he going?"
Harry shrugged. He didn't know either.

When Tom returned a few minutes later, he was carrying a jar with that marking on it.

"It's one of the things we got from Cyvus Vail's house. He was some kind of sorcerer, right, with ties to Wolfram and Hart?"

"Yeah. And his specialty was reality warping magic. I don't believe it. We've got the Immortal's bloody leash right here."

"I wonder if the spell faltered because we technically took the thing 'out of the world' when we stuck it in here?"

"That'd be beautiful. He'd be poncing around, pretending to be all fabulous and all of a sudden "WHAM", everyone can see what a wanker he actually is. It's almost perfect."

"What would make it more perfect?"

"I want him to know, and to suffer and to fear. Come on. Let's go have ourselves a drink. We've given time for word of our conquering of the Vatican City to spread among the demon population. He should be sending minions to grab us if the spell is still in effect. We just need to grab a minion, find out where the wanker is and get him."

"Yeah, alright." the boys shrugged.

Harry woke to someone jostling him from the side and cursing.

He came to and looked around in confusion, to find himself hanging from chains in a garage.

"What the hell?"

"It's the bloody spell, it's built in--he wins, you lose."

"How'd they get the drop on us?"

"I don't know."

"Ugh..."

"Tom? Are you alright?"

"I feel like I just got trampled by an elephant, but otherwise, yeah. How'd we end up like this?"

All three tensed as the door to the garage opened. Harry immediately relaxed upon seeing Angel.

"Angel? What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"It's not Angel, it's one of my shadow clones. I left him lurking in the area with orders to do a rescue if anything went wrong. I'm glad now that I did."

"Angel" drew a wand and tapped each set of shackles in turn, dropping the three men to the floor.

"Why'd you make him look like that?"

"You said Angel would be pissed if you got revenge on the Immortal without him. I figured this
way, when everything is over and being talked about later, his name will come up as being part of it and you won't have to put up with him pouting about it."

"Good thinking. The poof's insufferable when he's got a bee in his bonnet."

"You still have a chance to get the minions; they're headed this way." 'Angel' interrupted. "I got here just ahead of them."

"Right." Harry agreed. "Help me real quick." he ordered as he handed Tom his pouch and then made three more clones. "Shackle up boys" he told the Tom and Spike lookalikes and his own twin. "Just rattle and bluster till we get the drop on them."

The real ones moved to crouch on either side of the door, ready to pounce.

Three well-dressed men swaggered in the door and stopped out of reach of the shackled prisoners. The one in the lead drew a stake, while the others hefted swords.

"William the Bloody. His Beneficence, the Immortal remembers you of old. He has decided that you have used up all your chances with him. He told you that you were not welcome in his city, and yet you persist in coming back. Even the mercy of a great man such as he eventually meets its end."

The three goons collapsed to the floor from a trio of stunners to the back. They made quick work of transferring the goons to the shackles. One of the goons fell on his sword and was now copiously bleeding from a gash across his chest. Spike's nostrils flared in hunger. Tom and Harry both grimaced and turned their backs. "Have at it if you must. Just don't expect us to watch."

"Yeah?" Spike said happily. "You little blokes are my favorite people in the world. Peaches and his minions, not to mention the Scoobies would be all 'EEWWW! How could you?'"

"You're a vampire, you eat blood...besides, that guy was going to kill me while I was shackled to the ceiling." Tom shrugged indifferently.

The extra clones disappeared while they listened to the sound of Spike happily slurping blood off the prisoner's chest.

"Hey, "Angel", go put a bit of blood around your mouth. It'll help when we wake these losers up."

"Angel" grimaced, but swiped a bit of blood on his finger and dabbed it on each corner of his mouth as asked. Spike slurped happily for a few minutes more and then stepped back, looking dazed and sated. Tom wrinkled his nose in disgust and sent a cleaning spell at him to remove the blood that covered his face, shirt and pants.

"He's dead. It was a pretty deep cut." Spike informed them.

"We'll just say he refused to give the Immortal's location and died for it, that's all. It might make the others more cooperative."

"Yeah, that'll work."

"We ready? Spike, when "Angel" comes out, just play along with what he says."

"Sure."

A quick ennervate was cast at the remaining two goons, who woke with a start and seemed truly bewildered to find themselves in their captives place.
"You! But…how?"

A dark chuckle rumbled out behind them, making both remaining goons flinch and twitch in their shackles. Angel, vamp face in view, looking gleeful and predatory and very dangerous, sauntered out of the shadows nearby and grinned at all of them, showing off a double row of razor sharp fangs. The blood he'd smeared earlier glinted redly from the corners of his mouth.

"Simple, lads. You forgot to factor me into the equation." he purred, a hint of his Irish roots peeking through.

"Angelus!"

"I go by Angel now, but you've heard of me? Ah, it's always nice to be appreciated, isn't that right, William, my boy?"

"It does make it all worthwhile." Spike nodded sagely while licking his lips and eyeing the remaining two goons hungrily.

"Shame about your friend." Angel continued conversationally. "It just doesn't pay to be uncooperative."

"Worked out well for us, of course." Spike snickered.

"It's all very admirable, I'm sure, to be so very loyal to your lord and master. I wonder if you two will be half so loyal? I truly hope not. We're here for vengeance, and we'll get it, with you or without you. My boy and I, we pay our debts, no matter how long it takes for the butcher's bill to come due. We'll not be leaving this fair city until we've brought your precious Immortal to his knees."

"HA! The Immortal will easily destroy you!" the minion in the middle scoffed with utmost confidence. He wasn't expecting all four of the men in front of him to grin in amusement, like they knew something he didn't.

"Ah, won't you feel a right fool when his comeuppance comes a calling?"

"Feel like a right couple of toffs they will, sniveling and kow-towing to a pimply loser with delusions of grandeur."

"So, where is he boys? While normally we like to savor our vengeance, we figure we've savored quite long enough, and would like to get to the pain and misery part of the program."

"You know, mate, we only need one of these buggers to talk. I'm still a bit peckish." Spike mused as his own game face came forth. He and 'Angel' grinned at one another and then turned to look at their 'prey', both of whom were sweating buckets.

"He's at Wolfram and Hart! He's talking to his lawyer!" the one on the end babbled.

"Shut up! You fool!" the other snarled.

"I don't wanna be eaten!"

"Wolfram and Hart, huh? Well, this just gets better and better…what do you say, lads? Two for the price of one?"

"Since we're already avenging Darla, might as well do it proper and take out all the buggers what messed with us…and with her."
'Angel's' eyes flashed. "This is true. Thanks for the info, boys. We've a message we want you to send to your master. Tell him we know about the mark, and we know the game he's playing…and we've got his leash."

The goons stared at them both blankly, but they scrambled away quickly enough when their shackles suddenly opened and sent them sprawling to the floor.

Ilona Costa Bianchi, CEO of Wolfram e Hart, Rome, raised an eyebrow in consternation when her favorite client, The Immortal, screamed into the phone he was holding like a little girl and then began pacing and wringing his hands. "No! Not them…to lose to the likes of them? Unacceptable!"

"Immortal? Darling? Tell Ilona all about it, yes? Let me make it all better."

"Better? After you called me in here to accuse me, The Immortal, of theft and murder most foul? What need have I, The Immortal, of the paltry funds of the likes of Cyvus Vail? You dare accuse me, when right now, Angelus and William the Bloody are roaming in my city and threatening me with things held for me by him? What sort of fool do you take me for?"

"Darling, what are you talking about?"

"Angelus and William the Bloody, they assaulted and killed some of my henchmen and threatened me with something Cyvus Vail had in his keeping. They are the ones you want, not I!"

Ilona studied him a moment and picked up the phone. "Darling? Send out a team and bring me Angelus and William the Bloody." she ordered before hanging up.

The Immortal nodded, still full of rage and nervous energy. He pulled his own phone and ordered his own forces to scour the city, leaving no stone unturned. He wanted those annoying vampires bruised, broken and bleeding at his feet. He would see them meet their end this night.

"You know, for a law firm run by hell, they sure have lousy security. Just dress like a lawyer, and you can walk right in the front door."

"I ain't complaining none." Spike muttered as they slipped down another long corridor. "Oooh, cells. This looks promising."

"I'll keep watch at the door." Harry offered. "Don't take too long. I'd like to get this vengeance thing over with so we can be on our way."

"Right, right."

Spike peered in the first cell and found a stocky man with a stupid moustache and an inane grin.

"Hello. What are you in for?"

"I am the Champion of the People! These-a people, they are not nice-a people."

"You can say that again, mate."

"These-a"
"That was rhetorical. Wanna get out? Go championing or whatever?"

"Yes!" the man nodded.

"Alright, hold on a sec." He tried one of the key-cards they'd found in the previous room and slid it through the lock. The door opened with a click. "There you go. Head out that way, weapons room on the right. If you want to kill any lawyers, be my guest."

"I'm a champion. I'm not supposed to…'

"They work for hell, contracts and everything. Sold their souls, they did."

"Oh. I see. That might make a difference. I will have to think about it."

"Yeah, you do that." Spike sighed, already moving on to the next.

"What're you in for?"

"Simple, I hate everyone in this building and want them to bleed and scream."

"Good on you mate. You leave me and my boys be and you can do just that." Spike agreed, opening his cage.

The large demon stepped out and peered down at Spike with predatory interest. "I don't do deals. You look like you'll make a good appetizer." Spike punched him hard and he staggered back, still grinning. He stopped when he suddenly turned into a small fluffy bunny rabbit.

"Hey…any of you mind if I eat that?" Asked another demon that Tom had just let out of his cage.

"Be my guest." Tom replied graciously.

The bunny squeaked and tried to run away, but the demon pounced and bit it in half. After seeing this, even those left who were of a mind to attack them decided not to. A steady stream of demons, humans and others made their way out of the holding cells, stopped off to arm themselves and started hopping on elevators or charging up the stairs, feral smiles in place, looking to do some damage.

Spike made his way to the last full cage in the room and stared in consternation.

"Hey, dude. Wow, small world, huh?" said the chaos demon cheerfully.

"You? What the hell are you doing here? Last I saw you, you were in South America!"

"I was, yeah." He agreed, nodding amiably. "After you and Dru had your big argument, I thought maybe it was time to seek greener pastures. I came here, met a nice girl. Things were going great…and then one night I came home and found out the Immortal had violated my sweet Angelina. She was lying there, dazed, all tangled in the sheets, looking half-dead. That was bad enough…he also violated her sisters, her mother, her cousins and the maid! Well…I got angry. I tried to do something about it. I ended up here."

"I know where you're coming from, mate. The Immortal violated Dru and Darla back in the day. I'm here for a bit of vengeance. He's still in the building so far as I know, if you want to get in on things."

"Yeah? That's good of you, man." he answered as he ambled out of his cage.

"Weapons room on the right. Lawyers and the Immortal upstairs."
"Thanks. I'll chop him into messes." the Chaos Demon growled menacingly as he left.

Harry and Tom joined him. "I guess all that's left is to take care of the Immortal's demon and we can go. How's Greece sound?"

"Sounds bloody marvelous to me."

Tom withdrew the jar from his pocket and smashed it on the ground. A demon emerged with a roar from the resulting light show. Spike was poised with the sword nearby to take him out.

The demon fell dead with a thump. The three of them stood around staring at it.

"Seems anti-climactic."

"Yeah, vengeance often is. Ready to go?"

"Yeah, let's."

"Did you see the news last night? Or the paper this morning? Do you have any idea how difficult work was? All the guys kept eyeing me, wondering if I'd found time to flit off to Rome and conquer the Vatican! I'm not even Catholic!"

"You were dressed as an Anglican vicar, dear. Church of England. I would imagine the queen is getting some rather irate inquiries lately. Probably Monty Python as well." Anya interjected.

"At least you just had to deal with a bit of suspicion. I find myself heartily glad the Watcher's Council decided to call first and didn't just send out an elimination team. That's what they do to people they consider troublesome, you know." Giles muttered.

"How about Wesley and Angel?"

"Wesley got a call as well, from his father. Angel, I've been told, has been sulking, because 'priests and nuns were his thing'."

"Ah, Buffster? Are we absolutely sure he didn't lose his soul?"

"Quite sure. Spike went down to check and made sure. Threatened to eat my entrails if I'd let 'not Angelus' loose again."

"Uh…ewww."

"Seconded. How'd chip boy think he was going to do that?"

"It was an empty threat. Had he gone downstairs and Angelus had been loose, he'd probably just have been staked."

"I wonder if he's the unholy pope that was prophesized to emerge at some point. I heard rumors that there were signs a few decades ago, but nothing ever came of it."

"Let us hope not." Giles muttered, his voice dry. "I cannot imagine anyone more horrifying in the role of unholy pope. The only small mercy is, at least he's chipped and wasn't able to bite the pope. I've been told he thinks it will give him superpowers."

"Um, as a vampire, doesn't he already…"
"It's Spike." Giles interrupted, as though that were all the explanation needed. In truth, it was.

"So…this is Greece. It's beautiful…though I wouldn't have described the water in these parts as 'the wine-dark sea'. It's very blue. Do they drink blue wine hereabouts?"

"Not that I know of. It's just poetic license and whatnot."

"Poetic license or not, it should still make sense."

"Oh, I almost forgot." Tom interrupted. "Here."

Spike took the vial that was handed to him with a raised eyebrow, uncorked it and sniffed.

"Blood? What's the occasion?"

"It's the Pope's. I snuck a bit for you while you were making your speech. I'm a bit curious about the super powers thing myself."

"What if it is holy or something? Wouldn't it just act like holy water and burn you, only from the inside? Maybe you should consider this…" Harry warned.

"What's life without a bit of risk? If it does burn me up from the inside, you'll tell everyone that I lived my unlife to the fullest, I loved deeply and without reserve, I saw the world and took the parts of it I liked for my own and smashed the rest, I danced, I laughed, I sang…"

"We get the point, old bean. You had a rollicking good time." Tom interrupted.

"Too right I did, at least till the soldier boys did me."

"You haven't been having fun?" Harry asked curiously.

Spike stopped and considered the last two weeks and realized he actually had. He'd been depressed, almost to the point of suicide when he'd first been chipped. It had seemed a fate worse than death. It had helped, considerably, when he'd discovered he could still fight demons, and wasn't completely helpless…but only so much. Not being able to kill anyone he came across if he chose to still seemed a terrible fate for a vampire. The last two weeks he'd discovered a new appreciation for sneakiness, dissembling and role-playing…it still stung to know if his opponent happened to be human he was helpless to fight them one on one, but he'd regained some of his spark nonetheless. There was lots of fun to be had without setting out to kill anyone. Who knew?

"Yeah…I've been having fun." he agreed quietly.

He smiled at the two boys appreciatively and held up the vial to study the blood for a moment in the moonlight before downing it. He let the vial drop held out his arms and threw back his head, waiting for something to happen.

"So…no superpowers then?"

"No. I guess not."

"How'd it taste?"

"Sweet. I think the holy father has a bit of a sweet tooth. Diabetes, if I'm not mistaken…sugar in the blood, right?"
"I think so."

"Kind of disappointing."

"Yeah."

"Well, at least it didn't burn me up. Suppose it would have at least been a unique way to go."

"It would have."

"So, where to next?"

"I guess we hop to one of the small islands, set up, ward it to hell, and go see what the nightlife is like."

"Sounds like a plan."

Darla glanced over when Drusilla suddenly lost interest in her meal, who took the opportunity to run for it. She didn't even notice, she was too busy laughing and dancing in the street. Darla sighed, finished her own meal and wandered off to grab her new sire, and pull her out of the path of an oncoming semi. It amazed her sometimes that she'd managed to stay in one piece as long as she had.

"Wanna share?"

"The stars are singing such a lovely song. The King of Cups has not had his birthday, but he's gotten his picnic, and it was sweet and salty and smells like goats and olives."

"How...nice." Darla sighed.

Dru stopped dancing and a look of consternation crossed her face. Darla shook herself as a memory from long ago, that until a moment ago had been a sweet one, resurfaced, though greatly changed.

"Grandmother...the sunshine was a lie!"

Darla shuddered in disgust and wiped at her arms and chest as though to remove the memory.

"I can't believe it! They were right! We were violated! He wasn't even a proper demon! He was just some pimply-faced half-Lister demon with ideas above his station! How dare he!"

"Our boys gave him a good thrashing they did, and made a lovely mess."

"Pity we weren't with them to help. Damn the Immortal anyway."

"Don't say its name, grandmother! It makes my ears bleed and all the little worms cry no, no, no!"

"I've had some sad customers in my day, but he really takes the cake. I wonder if our friends at Wolfram and Hart will resurrect him so we can get our own revenge?"

"It would be a lovely party. We shall have tea and feast on his innards."

"Ugh, never mind. You know what? I've had enough of the Immortal to last me a lifetime."

"Don't say its name!"
"Sorry."

Angel stared at the wall, lost in his brooding thoughts.

Darla, resurrected, alive and human, only to be snatched away from his grasp before he could save her. Sam Lawson, one of his many sins, though one that came by in search of him to talk, not torment…and once again, Spike was a convenient substitute. What was all the suffering, all the people he saved, all the pain and agony of his soul worth if an unsouled demon could just substitute for him in a pinch?

There had been a family reunion, and he hadn't been invited. Of course, if he had been, he'd probably have ended up having to battle Yuki as well—he still had his soul, he was considered a stain on the bloodline, every bit as much as Spike who had destroyed the Anointed One.

What the hell was it with vampires these days anyway? Not one, but two decided that the 'whole evil thing wasn't working out'. They couldn't do that! They didn't have souls. They didn't have a choice in the matter! Spike at least had the chip as an excuse…not that he was good. He wasn't. Only he, Angel, was good. Because he had a soul, and prophecies…except apparently some demon he'd never heard of named Sahjan had been messing with them.

There might not be a shanshu…not that he'd actually been looking forward to being human again. He'd done that once already, and he'd given it back. He'd be dead inside of a week if he was lucky. He had too many enemies to make being human a viable option.

He'd had to pretend to be happy about it…Wes and Cordelia both seemed so damned happy for him. They'd never been anything but human…well, at the time. Cordelia wasn't human anymore, was she? Being human was like being rendered blind, deaf, and having a really bad cold that cut off your sense of smell, while wearing a lead suit. No strength, no speed, you couldn't hear anything or smell anything, or see anything unless it was right up close, and forget about night vision.

It had been nice, being out in the sun without burning up…but even when he'd been human the first time, he'd been a bit of a night owl. Sleep all day, party all night. It hadn't been that big of a change for him.

Maybe having kids would be nice… Of course, he had 'kids' already, and they'd been nothing but trouble…okay, that was mostly his own fault. He'd driven Penn and Dru a bit crazy--him after, her before. Sam he'd made and threw off the submarine. He hadn't had any hand in his upbringing, and he was the 'good' one.

Alright, maybe the kids thing was a bad idea.

He was jolted out of his dark thoughts by the phone ringing. He sighed and answered it.

"Angel here."

"Angelus, oh my gawd…"

"Darla?"

"Duh. Thank you so much for putting an end to that piece of crap Immortal for me. I should have listened. We were violated. Ugh! I can't even think of it! A pimply faced half-human, half-Lister demon! Ugh! I can't believe you and Spike jaunted off to Rome together. If you wanted to revisit the past, you should have brought us along. We'd have helped! Hey, did you ever figure out who
the King of Cups was? He's apparently having a picnic of goats and olives or something, though it's still not his birthday. Eh, Dru. Gotta love her, right? Anyway, thanks for kicking the Immortal's behind."

"Um…you're welcome?"

"Next time take us along. I've gotta go. Dru and I are going dancing to celebrate. Ta."

"Uh…bye."

The phone clicked. Angel stared at the handset a moment and replaced it in the cradle. He was beyond confused. Why did Darla think he was in Rome, or that he'd gotten the… Wait a second. The Immortal was dead. This made him happy. Damn. Think miserable thoughts… Wait a second. Spike was in Europe…could he? No. Wait…yeah, maybe he could have. Stupid wizards. He suddenly had another happy thought. Spike had possibly killed the Immortal, and he was getting credit for it. Damn. Can't be happy…um, come on, misery, misery.

Spike had taken over the Vatican…only for an hour, but still. Damn copycat. There…that was better. At least there's no way he could have bitten the Pope. Spike was bad enough as he was, he didn't need holy superpowers.

"Who was on the phone?" Cordelia asked as she breezed into the office carrying a couple of picture frames.

"Uh…well…"

Cordelia eyed him suspiciously for a moment and then pierced him with her gaze. "Spit it out."

"Darla"

"Darla?! What did she want?"
"She wanted to thank me for offing the Immortal and demanded I take her and Dru with me the next time I went to Rome."

"Come again?"

"Apparently Spike offed the Immortal, but for some reason the girls think I did it…or that we both did it. She did say they next time 'we' ran off to revisit the past…"

"Why does she think you're in Rome, especially as she just called you here?"

"Wolfram and Hart have a mystical phone service. You put in the name of the person you want to call, it dials the nearest phone to that person…that's what the lawyer told Spike anyway."

"Okay, who is this Immortal, and is it a good thing or a bad thing that he was killed?"

"Good. Very good."

"Evil huh?"

"The evilest. He's a vile and wretched thing. We were denied our vengeance a hundred and twenty years ago. Damned barriers."

"You were evil then. What did he do?" Cordelia wondered, half afraid to find out what could be so bad that Angelus, evilest of evil vampires, was disgusted.

"He violated Darla and Dru. Concurrently."
"I don’t think you quite understand what…"

"They were violated!" Angel insisted.

"Concurrently?" Cordelia repeated, her voice dry.

Angel nodded, and she heard his very faint mutter of 'they never let us do that, even after… bastard.' and decided to let the subject drop. She turned her attention back to the frames in her hands and started looking for a good place to hang them.

"What've you got there?"

"This."

She turned the largest to face him and he saw the drawing of the 'family reunion', nicely framed in a wooden frame that nicely set off the fine parchment it was done on. It really was a well done drawing—it put his own artistic efforts, which were quite decent by most standards—to shame. The colors, details and subtle shadings made it look almost like a photograph, though not quite.

They'd captured Drusilla's blend of madness and innocence, Darla's jaded world-weariness beneath her innocent China-doll looks, Spikes blend of dangerous and vulnerable, Harmony's perky desperation, Sam's military bearing overlaid with a half-century of wandering lost, and Yuki's mad devotion to a Master long gone at war with a calling she cast aside. All of them, so broken in various ways beneath their ageless countenances. How could he bear to look at it day after day?

"No."

"Angel. They're your family. Those ties linger in spite of our best efforts some times. See? I was going to hang these up as well."

She showed him two smaller frames—one of a preteen Cordelia, dressed to the nines, smiling her best California cheerleader smile. She had none of the lines of stress, or the pain in her eyes that the woman today had; she also had none of her depth or compassion. She was framed to either side by her well-dressed, affluent, smiling parents. All three of them looked to be on top of the world and loving it. None of the three knew the near future would bring desertion from the mother—a combination of prescription drug abuse and a smiling pool boy, or imprisonment for the father for tax evasion, leaving the smiling girl to head to the big city in search of a famous future for herself, only to become a seer and a dedicated champion of the helpless instead...

The other frame showed a much younger Wesley, standing stiffly between his mother, who looked tired and sad, and his father, who looked grim and disapproving. This Wesley was a brittle, callow youth, desperately striving for some small bit of approval from a father who would never give it. Their own Wesley had started to come into his own—he was years and miles from the stiff boy-child in the photograph.

"Sometimes we need to look back and see where we've been in order to see more clearly where we're going, you know? No one's past is either completely miserable, or completely wonderful—life doesn't work like that. Part of healing is to be able to look back and put things in perspective, accept the bad things and remember the good things. Completely erasing your past is like killing yourself, really. All the things that came before this moment helped shape each of us into the people we are now."

Angel glanced up, seeming struck by something that she said.
"All that we were informs all that we become."

"Um, yeah. The good and the bad, it all adds up to me today, you today, Wes today. Just like that." she agreed as she held up the frames on various spots on the wall till she found one she liked.

He watched her for a bit, fussing and measuring and hammering in hooks to hold them and then obsessively tapping them to get them to hang straight. When she was finally done, she stepped back to admire her work.

"Well? What do you think?"

Angel raised his eyes and made himself look at the display—all those faces—beloved, barely known, the strange young incarnations of the two people he now counted as among his closest friends, and felt a small knot deep inside himself ease.

"It looks good."

Lindsey shifted nervously under Sidney's expectant gaze.

"You have news?"

"The Rome office has been decimated. The latest reports say several employees and a handful of clients were all killed, all their prisoners escaped, and a mob of enraged women formed up and went to storm the Immortal's stronghold and destroy it. According to rumors, Angelus and William the Bloody are responsible for destroying the Immortal and his hold on the city of Rome. They're being hailed as heroes by the enraged women and their menfolk."

"According to our surveillance, Angel hasn't left L.A. He was seen out and about at several locations just today, and over the last couple of days."

"William the Bloody is in Europe with a couple of wizards that can teleport at will. He could have been there and back before we knew to look for him."

"Or someone is just trying to point us towards the two of them as the culprits. Spike and his entourage left Cyvus Vail's house calmly and with no hue and cry being raised. Spike was in Vatican city at least, but he fled afterwards once the Swiss Guard came into play. He can't harm humans. Our people and the Immortal's both combed the city high and low for some trace of him, but he and the others were nowhere to be found. Angel hasn't left the city limits. We've had someone on him the entire time."

"It's those damned wizards! They ruin everything! Not a single thing has gone to plan since they arrived!"

"So, what? We take off the kid gloves?" Lilah wondered.

"Definitely. I want them dead. I want them destroyed. I want them roasting in a fiery pit being tortured for eternity and then some!"

"So…you want us to send out a team?"

"A team and some mystics. I want them gone. All three of them."

"We'll get right on that."
"How are things with the whole Beast situation?"

"Um…well, they're somewhat unclear. The black ops team is still out searching for her. They've found plenty of traces of her passage, but not her, not yet." Lindsey replied.

"She hasn't yet made it to the Initiative base. There's been something of a civil war going on in there, but no signs of her, just all of them worried they've been infiltrated by an insanity demon that makes you unable to tell reality from dreams. The place will probably be a crater by the end of the week if not sooner." Lilah added.

"Fine, keep me updated."

"Where are we going, anyway? There doesn't seem to be much going on in these parts, excepting a bunch of stupid tourists tromping all around." Spike asked.

"I want to see the Oracle at Delphi. In our old world we had hidden it from muggles a long time ago after a stupid would be hero slew the python that was the actual oracle, along with her priestesses. There was an outcry about it, so he found a madwoman to take her place, not realizing that the reason no one who came to consult the oracle could understand the priestess is because she was speaking in parslemouth, not gibberish. He installed some handlers to 'interpret' the madwoman's prophecies for a while, until the remaining priestesses of Python's order, along with one of Python's daughters came and retook their mantles at the shrine. Then, years later, a wizard named Herpo the Foul made a basilisk and a horcrux, which led to a purge of snakes and parselmouths alike. It ended up deserted after the second purge as the fear and hatred of parselmouths had grown virulent enough that none of the remaining priestesses or the oracular snakes wanted to take up their posts again. I want to see if anything remains here." Tom explained as he ducked into the cavern that had once held the shrine.

"Prolly not, mate. Greeks hate snakes. If they see one on the road they'll bloody well drive into oncoming traffic just to make sure they run it over good and proper."

"Damn. I had hoped their was some demon equivalent to our own world that had remained until the present time."

"Shh. Listen. Do you hear it?" Harry said suddenly.

"I don't hear nothing…wait, yes I do. Sounds like hissing."

"It is. There are snakes of some sort in there. Excellent. Hello?" Tom called out hopefully. The lively discussion they'd been able to hear cut off and silence reigned for a long moment.

"Hello? We mean no harm. We just want to know if the oracle is still in operation."

A woman peeked out nervously from deep within the cavern.

"There is no oracle. Go away."

"We're travelers. We'd just like to look around."

A forked tongue suddenly flickered out of the woman's mouth, tasting the air, there and gone so quickly Spike was almost not certain of what he'd seen.

"You're not one of us. How do you speak our tongue?"
"We have nagas in our family tree."

"Not him. He's a vampire."

"Yes, he is. He was crippled by a military program. He can't hunt anymore, though he can still battle demons that try to attack him. We're just visiting, and he'll not be a problem while we're here."

Spike gaped as the woman emerged into the light. She had a human head and torso, but the rest of her was a snake.

"Lamia?"

"Naga."

"I thought they just had human heads."

"They have multiple forms--fully serpentine, human head with a snake body, half and half and fully human."

"Neat."

She studied the three of them for a long moment, weighing their sincerity before finally answering them.

"The oracle is no longer open. We've gotten tired of angry humans attacking us, and then more angry humans coming to avenge those we defend ourselves against. Truthfully, even if we were still in operation, we couldn't give you a reading today. Everything keeps changing so quickly the balance has begun to spiral from the abrupt shifts. It's not supposed to do that, you know. We haven't been able to get any proper readings for a week or two now."

Tom and Harry traded a discreet glance. Their troubles seemed to have started around the time they'd arrived in this world. Surely it wasn't them though--they hadn't really done anything.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Much the same thing happened in our own world a long time ago."

"Since you've come all this way, I can at least offer you hospitality. Come."

"You are very gracious Miss…?"

She let out a string of incomprehensible hisses. Spike glanced at his companions with an eyebrow raised.

"It doesn't translate well." Harry apologized. "It's something like she-who-wanders-in-darkness-unworried"

"I see. I'll just call you Betsy, alright luv?"

She-who-wanders gave him a tired look. "Fine." she grumbled before leading them deeper into the cave.

Buffy entered the house listlessly. She'd patrolled alone, again. Xander and Anya asked for the night off citing early mornings, Willow and Tara had some project or other that needed doing. Riley was gone.
She wanted to be angry, wanted to rage at the unfairness of it all, but she was just tired. Tired of the guys that couldn't stick around, tired of the never ending battle against the forces of darkness… She was just tired. She opened her mouth to call out for her mother, only to jump to attention and run for the kitchen as she heard something breaking. She burst into the room brandishing a stake and looking for something to slay. All that was there was her mother and a broken cup. She would have just chalked it up to a simple accident, but her mother was holding her head and looked to be in pain.


Joyce looked at her blankly and then got angry. "Who are you? What are you doing in here? Get out!"

"M-mom?"

Joyce winced and rubbed at her head some more, while looking around the room as though she were confused.

"Mom? You're scaring me."

Heart pounding, she edged towards the phone and nearly dropped it, her hands were shaking so badly. She dialed Giles' number and waited impatiently for her Watcher to pick up.

"Please tell me it's not an apocalypse." his tired voice finally answered.

"Worse." Buffy whispered. "It's much worse."

"Buffy? Is that you? What's going on? Are you alright?"

"Giles…something's wrong with my mom."

Harry stretched and made himself comfortable on the small stretch of beach on their present island home.

"This has been fun. I'm about ready to move on though, how about you?"

"I'd like to go visit those Nagas again." Spike objected.

"I'd rather not. I already feel weird enough knowing there might one day be children of mine living in that cave there."

"You and me both." Tom grumbled. "They must have some sort of allure. I'm pretty sure I never would have agreed to something like that otherwise. I never really planned on having children."

"I did, but not like this. We'll have to come back sometime and peek in on them…that's if any are even conceived. We don't know if we're actually compatible."

"There will be children. Magic tends to take care of details like that. How do you think there are half giants, half veelas, half vampires…wizards tend to mate with anything that moves, when it gets right down to it. Witches as well. We're a race of uber-sluts."

Harry and Spike snorted and started laughing.

"Uber-sluts? I think we spent too long in California."
"Wait, did you say half-vampires? How's that work then?"

"Our vampires were a little different than you guys. The first of them was made when a human killed a unicorn and drank its blood to heal himself. His descendants were all vampires. They need to drink blood, but they don't have the super-strength or super-speed or anything. They weren't as interesting as you either. They were rather dull, and only wanted to talk about blood, all the time. It was rather irritating, really. They're all dead now in any case. They chose not to go with us when we moved."

"Egypt's not too far from here, all things considered. We could go there."

"Oooh, yes. I've wanted to go to Egypt ever since Ron mentioned his older brother worked there as a curse-breaker."

"That's where we'll go then."

"Let's get something to eat, then we can pack up, take down the wards and get going."

"Are you ready to go then?" Sidney Wong asked the group of assassins they'd gathered.

"Yes, sir."

"We got a lock on them; we just need to activate the teleportation circle."

"Are you sure they're still there?"

"They should be. They were in the same general location for the last three hours--we checked periodically while setting the circle up."

"Good. I want those three gone and out of our hair. The senior partners won't be pleased about all the trouble they've been causing us. I want this taken care of before I have to go report in again."

"We're ready."

The assassins stepped into the circle. The mystics etched a few more symbols and closed it and then began chanting. Light began flickering along the edges of the circle, and then the men within disappeared.

She-who-wanders-in-darkness-unconcerned, along with her nestmates turned to look at the center of the cavern when she felt the first flickers of magic. All around the cavern the nagas called their young and retreated into the winding tunnels that bordered the central gathering place to watch from safety until they knew what sort of threat approached.

It was a group of men--humans with weapons. The massed nagas hissed in fury. They had long ago decided that the gloves were off when it came to humans--they had all had enough of being hunted. The humans had gone too far this time--sending men directly into their caverns to hunt them? It wasn't to be borne.

The elders shot forth from their tunnels, surrounding the men and unleashed the full force of their fury upon them. Nagas could control the fury of the elements--it was time the foolish humans remembered that.
The assassins barely had time to scream before they were bombarded from all sides by lightning, fire, water and earth. All that was left was a charred, bloody smear in the center of the cavern.

"They have gone too far this time!"

"Death to the humans!"

"Let them feel our fury!"

The caverns filled with ominous hissing as the fury of the nagas grew. There would be a massacre this night to repay the humans for their latest trespass.

Cordelia yelled in shock as a vision tore across her mind.

"Cordelia?"

"Um, guys? We need to leave the city limits. Right now."

"What?"

"Less talking more moving. I'll explain on the way. Come on."

Angel, looking rather irked, stalked out to his car, Wesley, Gunn, and Cordelia hot on his heels. They all stopped short when they saw Darla and Drusilla sitting on the front of Angel's car.

"Hello, not-daddy. The stars told me you would give us a ride out of the city. The Wolf, Ram and Hart tickled the sleeping dragon, and now the rain is coming. It will be a lovely massacre, but I don't want my pretty dress to get wet."

Darla glanced at her, grinned and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, what she said."

"I'll go with Wes in his car." Cordelia decided.

"Me too." Gunn grumbled, staring at the two vampires with distaste.

"Yes, that's a good idea." Wesley agreed. They hurried off, leaving Angel and the two female vampires alone.

"Sometimes I really hate my life." Angel muttered as he unlocked the car.

Sidney Wong looked curiously at the teleportation circle as it began to glimmer once more.

"Did you arrange to retrieve the team the same way you sent them?"

"No sir…that would require a circle at their end."

"Why is the circle doing that then?"

"Doing what?"

Sidney pointed to the faint glimmers of light that were shimmering through the sigils and lines drawn on the ground. They were becoming brighter and more frequent as they watched.
"Um…sir…we should get back. It's not supposed to be doing that…"

The glimmering lights suddenly strengthened and the whole circle gleamed with rainbow light. The mystics took one look at it and fled. Sidney was right behind them. They had almost made it to the doorway at the far end of the ritual chamber when the world went white.

Outside, Lilah Morgan was in her car, approaching Wolfram and Hart when the roof of the building suddenly exploded.

"Oh, shi…." Lilah shouted as she threw herself down on the seat and covered her head. She screamed as the shockwave shook the car and cracked her windshield.

Overhead, a half dozen forks of jagged lightning shot out of the open roof. Where the lightning touched, the sky began churning and more lightning began to flare. Dark ominous clouds began gathering from all directions and the wind began to pick up.

Lilah slowly sat up from where she'd thrown herself when the explosion happened and looked up at the sky nervously. She didn't know what was going on, but whatever it was, she wanted no part of it. She threw her car into reverse and took off as fast as she could in the other direction.

It was slow going. It had gone from a still, cool evening to class 5 hurricane conditions in an instant. Outside, people were screaming and running for cover from the wind and rain. The ominous clouds overhead rumbled and lightning began shooting down, striking people, cars and buildings alike. Lilah screamed again as it struck the road ahead with a deafening boom, sending several cars flying, cracking the road, and leaving her ears ringing and spots before her eyes.

Panicked, she wrenched open the car door, kicked off her five-hundred dollar high heeled shoes and started running.

Angel floored the gas as he saw the city limits approaching. The storm was unreal in its fury, deafening in its roars. The streets of L.A. were flooded, it was so dark one could hardly see, and it was difficult to keep hold of the car against the wind, even with vampire strength. He was glad Wesley was ahead of him; hopefully he'd gotten out of the city limits before it got too bad.

The sudden silence was louder than the storm, and he nearly lost control of the car once the wind resistance was gone.

"What the hell was that?"

"You heard Dru--the sleeping dragon. I guess it must not like being tickled." Darla responded.

She looked shaken--whatever she'd been expecting from Dru's prophecy, this was obviously not it. Drusilla just laughed and began singing a discordant nursery rhyme from the back seat.

"Tell me we're not going to Sunnydale."

Angel opened his mouth, then closed it again. It probably wasn't a good idea, especially given he'd almost lost his soul again, and he'd just been there. Angel's phone rang and he fumbled to reach it and then tried to remember how to work the damned thing. Darla smirked at him and took it from his hand, then answered.

"Hello. He can still hear you. Motel 6, huh. You really know how to live the high life. No, the only thing around here is a Best Western. I hate motels. Identical rooms, cheap furniture and not a decent view to be had."
"Tell them we'll be at the Best Western for the night. We can regroup tomorrow depending on how the storm looks."

"Did you get that? Ta."

Darla hung up and glowered at the approaching motel.

"Oh, yes, that's a good choice." Drusilla giggled. "I shall make some lovely new friends there."

"You're not turning anyone, Dru. No killing."

"There's no one left to kill anyway, silly Angel-beast."

"What are you talking…about…"

Angel trailed off as he entered the parking lot in front of the hotel. It rather looked as though the circus had come to town. The parking lot was filled with all manner of cars and trucks, RV's and trailers--and they were all filled with demons. Through the front doors he could see dead humans scattered across the lobby. His soul twitched in horror when his stomach grumbled at the sight.

"They're still warm. They'll make for a lovely snack if we hurry." Drusilla giggled before climbing out of the car.

Darla smiled and eyed the big, strapping demon that was striding across the parking lot.

"Well, look at him. Good to know I'll be having fun tonight. Thanks for the ride." Darla laughed.

When she tried to exit the car, she suddenly felt an arm wrap around her waist, and got pulled across the seat to land sprawled in Angel's lap. The steering wheel was digging into her side, but she didn't care--he was looking at her like a starving man looked at an all-you-can-eat-buffet. The sounds of the demons having an impromptu party out in the lot, Drusilla singing and laughing, the traffic nearby, all faded away until there was just the two of them, both panting though neither needed to breathe. They both lunged at the same time--lips, teeth and tongues. They both knew it couldn't last, not as they were, but for the moment it didn't matter.

When they pulled apart, they could both feel the gulf that separated them, and Angel began to withdraw.

"Angelus…" Darla whispered. When he only glared at her, she rolled her eyes "Angel then. Stay."

"Nothing has changed, Darla."

"I know. Stay with me. Just for tonight."

Angel opened the door to the car, face expressionless. Darla stared at him for a long moment before closing her eyes in resignation and sliding off his lap to stand outside. She was about to move away, track down the strapping demon she'd seen earlier, when she felt him climb out behind her and slam the door closed. She had to blink tears out of her eyes when she felt his arm curl about her shoulders. It felt like home.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Spike and the boys continue their road trip, meet unexpected people along the way.

"Do you understand everything I've told you? Do you have any questions?"

"I think you covered everything."

"We'll see you back here in three days for your surgery. It's still early enough, your prognosis is good. A few more weeks and that might not have been the case."

"Thank you doctor." Joyce answered, mustering up a smile and giving her daughter's hand a squeeze.

Giles, Xander, Anya, Willow and Tara were all waiting outside, and jumped to their feet when the two of them appeared.

Joyce looked tired and a little pale, Buffy looked like the world was ending, though they could all see she was doing her best to muster up some semblance of calm and optimism for her mother's sake.

"Goodness, all of you didn't have to come all the way down here. I'm fine. I have to return in a few days for surgery, but I'm fine."

"What's wrong with you?" Anya wondered, only to frown at the others when they all glared at her, before turning apologetic smiles on Joyce and Buffy.

"Brain tumor. The doctors say it's early enough they should be able to remove it without too much trouble."

"Well, there you go, no worries." Willow chirped, though she still looked worried.

"That's right. You'll go in for your surgery and then you'll be fine and we won't have to worry ever again." Buffy agreed, while pulling up her best *all is right in Buffy-world smile.*

"Now, if none of you mind, I am a little tired. I'm going to head home."

"Should you be driving?"

"I'm fine." Joyce repeated.

"Yeah, you heard the woman, she's fine and dandy and just wants to take a nap." Buffy agreed. Hugs were traded all around and they waved to the two Summers' women as they left.

"God, I hope it really is as simple as Joyce is making it out to be. Damn Riley anyway for taking off like he did. Buffy really could have used his support." Xander growled.
"It might be better this way. If they were fighting, it would have just been more stress for her to deal with." Tara pointed out.

"She's got all of us to help her through this. Riley couldn't cut it; it's better that he's gone." Willow agreed. "Do you think we should call Angel?"

"NO!" the rest answered in unison.

"Really Willow…" Giles added, sounding exasperated.

"It was just an idea…" Willow pouted in response.

"A very bad one."


"A-and he probably has his own problems to deal with." Tara offered.

"That's right, that freak-o storm that hit L.A."

"I hope he, Wesley and Cordelia are alright. I should call them when I get home." Willow fretted.

"Is it just me, or does that guy have lavender hair?"

"It isn't just you. What a poof. Who the bloody hell runs around in shorts with suspenders? To have purple bloody hair on top of it… I'm rather surprised no one's stoned the bloke--they're not big on poofs in these parts."

"He might be a metamorphamagus, or have nymph heritage." Tom pointed out.

"Should we introduce ourselves? He looks depressed." Harry wondered.

"Eh, why not." Spike shrugged before sauntering over and plopping himself down at the fellow's table.

"Lo. Don't mind if I join you, right? These are my nephews, Stormcloud and Curly. I'm Spike."

"Um…that is…"

"Hello." Harry said brightly, before seating himself as well.

"What brings you to Egypt?"

"I really don't…"

"Have you ordered yet? Oi! Waiter!"

"Now really…" the young man protested.

He was staunchly ignored by all three of them. He sighed and glanced at the door, wondering if he should just go. He had places to go, magic to find…a quest to return his true love to the world.
He was also really hungry and he'd already ordered. Decisions, decisions…

"Oh, looking for magic are you? Well, you've certainly come to the right place." Tom mused after skimming the man's mind.

"What? How did…?"

"I'm a wizard."

"Looking for the mojo, huh? What sort? I might be able to help you out. I know people. What's your name anyway?"

"Maximilian Pegasus."

"Bloody hell, your parents have a lot to answer for…bad enough to give you that hair, without sticking you with a name like that on top of everything." Spike muttered.

Pegasus gaped at him, one hand moving towards his hair before he could stop it. He was angry, but he wanted information, and the return of his dear Cecilia more. He forced himself to keep this firmly in mind while formulating his reply. Perhaps it was a test of some sort? He'd heard such things happened. Yes, that was probably it--a test of his devotion and willingness to follow through.

"My wife, Cecilia. She died. I want her back." he croaked out as his throat closed up.

"Resurrection, eh? Was your bird human?"

"What sort of question is that? Of course she was!"

"Hmm. I don't know if the same ritual would work…not that I really know specifics, anyway. My great-grandmum was recently resurrected, you see. She was a vampire when she died her final death. I don't know if that makes a difference or not. No worries, I can send you to someone who might help. I try to avoid the mojo when I can--stuff can go wrong, and sometimes even when it's right it goes badly, sort of a 'be careful what you wish for' sort of thing, right? Make sure you question whoever you eventually get sent to thoroughly before you agree to anything. Some resurrections bring back zombies, some return the person to be what they were before they died--fine if they died in an accident, not so good if it was a terminal disease, got me? I even heard tell of one, though it was one intended for a greater demon, that required yearly sacrifices to keep it going. Ask questions, make sure you get a resurrection you can live with. And for mercy's sake, don't sit there quivering and looking desperate--that's how these blokes reel you in, right? See you all weepy and making promises that you might not want to keep--they'll make sure you do keep them though, make sure you remember that."

Spike dug around in his coat for a moment and withdrew a small black book, which he flipped through for several minutes. After finding what he was looking for, he scrawled some information down on one of the napkins and pushed it over to him.

"There you go. You go see Tehutu, he'll send you on to where you need to go. No worries."

"Oh, goody, our food's here."

Pegasus ate his food mechanically, wondering at his strange luck. As soon as he was finished, he got the hell out of there.
"Weird bloke. Twitchy." Spike mused as the lavender-haired man fled.

Tom and Harry just nodded agreement.

"So, where you want to go next? I heard around there's some scorpion demons gonna be fighting out in the desert tonight. Wanna go see?"

"Sure. Sounds like fun."

Hours later, as they were clomping along on their smelly camels, going to see scorpion demons battling in the desert no longer seemed like such a good idea.

"Where is this fight supposed to be taking place, anyway?"

"They said it was pretty far out. We're heading in the right direction…I can feel something going on up ahead. I'd have thought we'd have been there by now though. Hang on… I see something. Hopefully it's the scorpions. I'm going to be pretty ticked if we came all this way and missed it."

He nudged his camel into a slightly faster walk and they kept going, heading for the smudge Spike could see in the distance. Two hours later, the smudge had finally resolved into something the boys could see as well.

"That doesn't look like a battle royale to me…it looks like a military operation-slash-mystical ritual." Harry cautioned.

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it? Well, at least we know something's going on way out here."

They pushed their camels a little harder and got close enough to start seeing details as the ritual that was going on came to a crescendo.

"What the hell is that?"

"I'm guessing it's a scorpion demon?"

"No…it's the Scorpion King. Where's the oasis though? And the armies of Anubis?"

"The who the what now?"

"It's a movie I saw…three actually. The Mummy, the Mummy returns and The Scorpion King. There was this guy, he was a priest or something for some Egyptian pharaoh, I don't remember which one. He was having an affair with the pharaoh's mistress. She gutted the pharaoh and then committed suicide, figuring her boyfriend would resurrect her and she'd be immortal. He tried to, but he was caught and his punishment was some rite with a weird name--he was mummified alive, and entombed in a sarcophagus filled with flesh eating beetles or something. He kept regenerating and getting eaten alive for 3000 years. He was released by accident by some librarian and he had godlike powers. He kidnapped the librarian chick and was going to use her to resurrect his girlfriend into, but she got rescued and he got resealed away. The thing was, the girlfriend's spirit was called back long enough that when it snapped back to her reincarnation, she remembered who she was. She started a cult and went to resurrect the high priest guy. She wanted him to defeat the Scorpion king so they'd have the armies of Anubis at their command. They went to the oasis where the temple was, but the high priest guy got stripped of all his fancy powers once inside the temple--you have to defeat the Scorpion king in a 'fair fight', so to speak. The thing is, the only thing that can defeat him is this particular spear. Well, high priest guy got all scared without his superpowers and tried to convince the Scorpion king it was this other guy that had called him up--"
one of the guys that helped defeat him the first time. He managed to get the spear and run the Scorpion guy through and told him and his army to go to hell. The oasis and temple started turning back to sand and this big hole opened up in the ground. Imhotep, the priest, and the other guy both ended up hanging from the edge. The librarian chick—who turned out to be the reincarnation of the daughter of the pharaoh Imhotep and his girlfriend betrayed and killed—ran forward to save her guy. The priest guy called out for his girl but she looked at him like he was an idiot and fled. I felt really bad for the guy, you know? He suffered for 3000 years just so he could be reunited with her and she just left him there—couldn't be bothered to help him out. I mean, really, what a bitch, right? He lost the will to live and just let go and let himself fall into hell. The librarian and the other guy escaped, so did their son. That guy out there is the Scorpion King. He gave his soul to Anubis in order to get the power to defeat the people who betrayed him. He's an immortal warrior and is the general of Anubis' army."

"And these wahoos just resurrected him. Lovely."

"Maybe we should get out of here." Tom warned.

"He needs to be defeated before anyone gets control of the army and goes a-conquering. It's supposed to be an unstoppable army. He could have conquered the world with it before, but his deal was just for vengeance. He died once it was complete."

"So…you need a special spear to defeat the guy?"

"Yeah, it's the only thing that can hurt him, the spear of Osiris."

"For balance purposes, the spear had to be brought back as well, I'd think. It's a holy artifact too…not Christian, but still. Whoever resurrected the guy prolly has it. Those berks off fighting the thing are just distractions, I'm betting. What's this spear look like anyway?"

"It's gold, looks sort of like a scepter or a longish wand. You have to twist it to make the spear point pop out."

"Accio Spear of Osiris." Tom intoned, while pointing his wand at the group up ahead.

A glimmer of the fading sunlight twinkled off something heading towards them at high speed, and in the distance a woman shrieked in rage.

"Oh, goody. I wonder if it will burn me?"

"I have dragon hide gloves."

"Yeah? Give em here, Stormcloud. I want to fight the Scorpion King."

"No, I get to!"

"That resurrected girlfriend you mentioned…what did she look like?"

"I dunno, tall, long dark hair."

"Like that?"

"Huh?" A woman, probably the same one who shrieked earlier, was chasing after the spear and peeking over her shoulder every so often, probably to make sure the Scorpion king was still occupied—the demons he was battling wouldn't hold him for long, he was making very short work of the whole group.
"What was her name anyway?"

"Anck-Su-Namun. You think that's her?"

"She was looking for immortality, right? She must have gotten it or she wouldn't have been so quick to toss her boyfriend aside. Now, she's looking for power."

"She did have some pretty kick ass moves. Alright, I'll fight her, you can have the Scorpion King." Harry grumbled.

"Gloves? That thing is almost here."

Harry dug around for a bit and handed over his gloves. Spike put them on, and then leapt off his camel to catch the spear. Anck-Su-Namun shrieked again and started cursing him in ancient Egyptian. Spike stuck his tongue out at her and started charging past her back towards the Scorpion King. She moved to follow him, but Harry leapt down from his camel to intercept her.

"Get out of my way, fool! You don't know what you're doing!"

"Actually, I'm perfectly aware of what I'm doing, it's you who seems to have lost the plot somewhere."

"I don't have time for your foolishness!" the woman hissed, before striking out with the paired sais she suddenly had in her hands.

"You've already waited three thousand years to get most of what you wanted--what's a few minutes against all that?"

Her surprise and momentary hesitation were enough for him to start driving her back, though she rallied admirably.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, child, get out of my way."

"Anck-Su-Namun, she who makes faithlessness into an art form, most wretched of women. You betrayed and murdered your pharaoh, you betrayed your lover, after he suffered for three thousand years waiting to be reunited with you. I know exactly who you are and what you're doing here, and believe me" Harry growled as he pushed his advantage and began beating her back once more "I take great pleasure in informing you that all your preparations have been wasted. The Scorpion King was defeated years ago, and the man who did so had no temple all set up to call him forth at will. He was an ordinary mortal…and he's dead."

Harry didn't know that for sure, but it was a pretty good guess, really.

"The armies of Anubis are forever beyond your reach!"

The sai from her left hand went flying and landed with a muffled thud on the sand. Anck-Su-Namun began looking panicked as she continued fending him off with her remaining weapon, her eyes darting to and fro, looking for some escape. Her gaze caught sight of something behind him and she smiled in triumph.

"Wizard! Wizard, I command you! Destroy this wretched boy!"

"Why would I do such a thing, o faithless one? You left me to die, spat on our love and my sacrifice. Why should I not do the same to you?"

Her eyes widened in shock, which quickly turned to horror as her wizard sneered at her. Harry
began maneuvering the two of them so he could get a look at the guy--he didn't want an unknown wizard at his back, even if he did seem to be on his side for the moment.

He was a tall, bulky middle-aged white guy with blonde hair and blue eyes--probably a college ball player who'd gone somewhat to seed in his later years, a product of rich living, judging by his paunch and his soft hands. He really didn't look like a guy who'd speak fluent Ancient Egyptian. 

"High Priest Imhotep, I presume?" Tom asked curiously before snapping another photograph.

The guy looked surprised, then pleased. He smirked and gave a sort of bow in Tom's general direction. Anck-Su-Namun gasped and looked vaguely ill--not to mention rather terrified.

The tableau was shattered by a half of a demon landing in their midst. The Scorpion King had nearly finished his opponents and was headed their way. Spike was stalking behind him, keeping one eye on the fight and the other on the spear as he tried to get the point out. He was looking decidedly nervous as the number of demons was swiftly reduced. Imhotep was looking worried and eyeing the surrounding desert in search of a place to hide.

Anck-Su-Namun was as well, but every time she tried to run for it, Harry was there, driving her back with his sword and back towards the Scorpion King. Things were getting tense all around, when suddenly Spike's delighted laughter rang out over the battlefield. He hefted the spear and began stalking the Scorpion King from behind, looking for an opening. Imhotep saw Spike and the Spear and smiled. He gathered his courage and stepped out to get the Scorpion King's attention. Once he had it, he dropped to his knees and bowed.

"Oh Great One! I am your servant. This here is to be your bride. Come and claim her."

The Scorpion King stopped his rampage and stared at Imhotep in shock. Anck-Su-Namun tried to run. Harry caught her in a shadow and held her in place, and stuck her tongue to the roof of her mouth. Tom, feeling whimsical, put her in wedding garb befitting a princess--a long linen tunic covered in beadwork, a king's ransom in jewels. She looked down at herself in horror and then turned her horrified gaze on the Scorpion King, who looked far too interested in the proceedings for her liking.

Spike struck at that moment, running him through from behind.

"Sorry, mate. Return to where you came from and take your bride with you, yeah?"

The Scorpion King roared and lunged for Anck-Su-Namun, grasping her to him as a pit opened up beneath him, sucking them both in. The portal disappeared, leaving the desert silent but for the pained groans of the few demons that weren't yet dead.

"Kinda anti-climactic there at the end. I wish I could have gotten a proper fight out of the bugger, but I nearly had me head chopped off enough times, I finally just decided to send him back where he came from. Bloody bug man."

He twirled the spear, which he'd somehow managed to keep of.

"At least I got a nice spear out of it, eh?"

They were all distracted from the sudden end of the threat by a bus chugging along through the desert. It came to a stop and disgorged a group of old people, followed by slightly younger but still old people, some middle-aged folks, a few teenagers and a few kids.

The old man in the lead, who looked to be about ninety hobbled out ahead of the group and looked around suspiciously.
"Where's he at, eh? I'll murder him!"

"Rick! Let one of the children handle it. You're getting to old for this!" an equally old woman scolded as she hobbled along behind him.

"Lay off, Evie! I'm as strong as I ever was!"

Imhotep glared at the old man and then at his wife.

"You! You're still alive! That means…ARGH! Foiled again! The armies of Anubis were within my grasp! ARGH!"

The old couple looked at him suspiciously, and then the old woman gasped and pointed at him in horror.

"Imhotep! You! I can't believe you! Up to your old tricks again, are you? Well, we'll stop you!"

The old man nodded and pushed up his sleeves.

"Too right we will!"

Imhotep covered his face, his shoulders shaking. Rick and Evie traded a look and then peered back at the ancient priest. When he uncovered his face, they realized he was laughing. It was slightly hysterical, but he was laughing.

"Did you make a deal of some sort?" Tom asked curiously.

Imhotep's laughter trailed off eventually and he nodded.

"I begged my Pharaoh for forgiveness. Eventually he granted it. Once I had secured that, I begged the Gods for the chance to revenge myself on my faithless lover. I have done so. My time here is at an end."

He drew a vial of some clear liquid from within his robes and drank it down, then toppled to the ground. Rick and Evie gasped, as did their --friends? Relatives?--that were with them.

Spike sauntered over and peered at the guy and then nudged him with one foot. The man stirred and blinked and then looked around confused.

"Who…where?"

He slowly sat up and looked around at all of them, seeming quite perplexed.

"Eh, what's your name, friend?"

"H-Hank…Hank Summers. Where the hell am I? How did I get here? Who are you people?"

"Did you say Summers? Do you know a Joyce or a Buffy Summers by any chance?"

Hank peered at Spike in surprise.

"They're my wife and daughter. Are they here? Do I know you?"

"They're back in America, far as I know…and no, we've never met."

"Back in…Where the hell are we?"
"Egypt."

"EGYPT?!"

"Bugger this, where the hell is the Scorpion King?" the old man demanded.

"He's already taken care of. Imhotep there told him Anck-Su-Namun was to be his bride. He took her to the Underworld with him."

"Damn it, Jonathan! We got here too late! I told you you should have filled the gas tank this morning!"

"I fell asleep!" another old man complained.

"Grandpa are we done yet? I was hoping to actually see Egypt, not ride in circles through the desert all day!"

"I'm thirsty!"

"I have to go the bathroom!"

"What the hell are those dead things?"

As the tour group started arguing and shouting, Spike, Tom, Harry…and Hank, gathered in a knot a short distance away.

"Well, this has been fun. Where to next?"

"Oh, I know. We're not too far from Uganda. I still want to ask the shaman about Angel's soul. No offense, Curly. I'd just like a second opinion."

"None taken. The magic of this world is different enough from what we do, it would probably be worthwhile to do so."

"What're we going to do with him? Hey, Hank, right? What's the last thing you remember?"

"Selling my business." Hank admitted.

"What year is it?"

"1998"

"Sorry to break it to you, mate…It's 2002."

Hank staggered as though receiving a mortal blow.

"What?!" The others just nodded sympathetically.

"You were possessed by an ancient Egyptian high priest who wanted revenge on his ex-girlfriend."

Hank sagged and looked ill.

"The American Embassy is off thataway. Just tell them you woke up in the desert with nothing. They'll help you get back to America. It happens a lot. You can borrow my camel."

"Oh. Thank you." Hank answered distractedly.
"Could you take ours back with you? We're heading to Uganda. We don't really need them anymore."

Hank looked at them, perplexed and then looked around. There was no airport or anything of the sort in sight.

"Oh! We should get a picture of you. Slayer's been wondering where her deadbeat dad is. It'll prolly be a comfort to her."

Tom shrugged and snapped a picture of the two of them--Hank looking lost, Spike grinning cheerfully with his arm over the other man's shoulders, giving a thumbs up.

"So, we ready?"

"Yep. Let's go."

Tom and Harry each grasped one of Spike's arms and the three of them disappeared with a pop. Hank blinked, waved his arm through the empty space and then stumbled distractedly towards the nearest camel. He'd obviously been drugged by whoever had mugged him. It was the only thing that made sense.

"Um, Buffy?" Buffy looked up from where she was trying to study and found Willow and Tara hovering and looking concerned.

"Yeah? What's the sitch?"

"Do you recognize this guy?"

Willow asked, handing over a photograph that looked like it had been printed off a computer.

"Spike!" she hissed immediately before looking at the guy next to him. "And…my dad?"

Buffy's eyes widened in shock and worry. "Willow, where did you get this? What is Spike doing with my dad? Why does he look like that?"

One by one, worst case scenarios began crowding her brain, each worse than the last.

"He got the chip out…he's killed my father and he's taunting me about it! He's DEAD." she finished in a cold whisper.

She stood abruptly, Slayer face on and went marching off, the damning picture still clutched in her fist. Willow and Tara exchanged alarmed looks.

"Go." Tara told her, while she gathered Buffy's bag and books that she'd left behind.

Willow nodded and hurried after her, filled with guilt and sorrow and a bunch of anger too. She had been one of the ones who'd always tried to be nice to Spike after he got chipped. Buffy and Xander had kept telling her that he hadn't changed and would kill them all the moment he had a chance. She hadn't believed them, but now she'd been proven wrong and Buffy's dad was probably dead.

She couldn't believe it…I mean, yeah, right at first he was still kind of a poop head, but she thought he really had changed and was kinda sorta on their side now. He'd helped rescue her from the Initiative, and they'd had a party at his house and he got a chip headache protecting Xander
from the cops, according to Anya. She thought he was their friend now…she hadn't realized quite how much her opinion of him had changed until now. There was a big nasty, yucky feeling of betrayal sloshing around in her belly now, and it hurt. In fact…it hurt more than when Angel had gone evil and turned on all of them. With him, they were able to blame the loss of his soul, and the fact that he wasn't the same person anymore.

Spike had always just been Spike, no soul to lose…and it was unsouled Spike she thought was their friend. She felt the prick of tears at her eyes--a lovely topping for the yucky betrayal goop in her belly--and wiped them away angrily. She wasn't going to cry over an evil, soulless thing that she'd been dumb enough to trust and think was her friend…she just wasn't.

Buffy walked really fast when she was in Slayer mode. She had already disappeared into the distance. Tara caught up with her before she'd gotten off the campus. She gave her a watery smile, and the two of them hurried after their friend.

They found Buffy at the Magic Box, already ranting to Giles and Anya about the need for Spike's dusty end, the sooner the better. She was still ranting an hour later when Xander showed up from work to pick up Anya.

"Whoa…something Hellmouthy going on?"

"Spike got his chip out and killed Buffy's dad." Willow informed him sorrowfully.

Xander rocked back on his heels, obviously shocked, before he sank down in a nearby chair, his face alight with self-condemnation and bitterness.

Willow was surprised to realize that, for all his constant protestations about Spike and his evilness, he'd come to trust him as well and consider him, if not a friend, then at least a trusted ally, and was cursing himself for letting it happen.

Giles had his glasses off and his eyes were Ripper-cold, though his face was creased with shades of grief--probably remembering Jenny Calendar, and cursing himself for not insisting Spike be staked as soon as they learned what they could about the Initiative, or just doing it himself when Buffy wasn't looking.

Buffy, under her Slayer-grim warrior guise looked fragile and betrayed. She'd never quite gotten over Angel's rampage of evil. The current situation was bringing all that back, spiced with a fresh betrayal from a second un-trustable vampire.

The only good in sight was that at least Riley was no longer around to rub it in--he would so not have helped things.

Tara, who hadn't been around when Spike was evil, just watched everyone with sadness and sympathy, and looked a bit down at how things had fallen out.

Anya was the only one who didn't look depressed or betrayed, she just listened and counted out the register drawer while everyone brooded. She finished up and got the day's receipts ready for deposit and shook her head at all of them.

"Don't you think you're all jumping the gun a bit? Spike doesn't strike me as someone who would send you a picture of a living man to taunt you that he'd killed him. He'd have told you outright he'd done so--and since we all know he's a deadbeat that abandoned Buffy and ran off with his secretary, he would have thought he was doing you a favor, really, and probably sent a message to the effect of 'he's dead now, no more worries', right? What did the message say? I assume there
was one with the photograph he sent, correct?"


"He has a soul…not a human soul, not anymore. He has a demon one. I just thought I should correct that. You lot always go on and on about souls, but you always seem to miss that part. I did say if he had, he would have considered it doing everyone a favor. The fact that he didn't show you the dead body makes me think that's not what's going on. It's just typical really. All of us second tier Scoobies don't get any consideration. Am I right, Tara?"

"Um…uh…that is…"

"Of course I'm right. We're allowed to sit at the table and work for you, allowed to risk our lives, but it's just sort of understood--the rest of you will just kill us at the drop of a hat"

"Ahn?" Xander tried to halt the flow of words, but Anya continued on undaunted

"... while all you first tier folks could probably try destroying the world and get a free pass. It's just unfair. There have been days when I've been really cranky and would have probably enjoyed a bit of mayhem, but I don't dare, because I know all too well I'd be dead before I could say 'PMS'."

"AHN!"

"What? You know it's true." Anya sniffed.

The rest of them glanced at Tara, but she just slouched down in her seat and tried looking harmless.

While Anya was talking, Willow dug out her laptop and logged on to her e-mail account to see if there was any message--she hadn't seen one when she had printed off the photograph.

There was a second email with no attachment, which she opened and began reading while Xander began haranguing Anya about her belief that anyone there was planning to kill her now that she was human, souled and good.

As she began reading through the cheerful missive, a big welling mass of icky guilt rose up and washed away the earlier feeling of betrayal and left her feeling rather wretched indeed. What did it say about her and the rest of them that their first thought on getting an email from someone they knew, who'd been helping out, was to start planning his demise?

"Willow? You have something?" Giles interrupted her musings.

Buffy turned her fierce and somewhat scary gaze on her and she flinched just a bit at the certainty of quick, dusty death she saw in the depths of her eyes.

"Um…yeah. There was a second e-mail that didn't arrive until a few minutes after the first one." Willow agreed.

"Well?" Buffy snapped impatiently.

"H-hold on." Willow sighed before opening the message in its own window and maximizing it so she could see the whole thing.

"Heya Red, Spike here.
If the earlier message came through, you'll see I ran into the Slayer's daddy. I didn't bother sending it to her, because we both know she's a bit of a technophobe, and something of a ditz at times besides. Does she even know how to use a computer? I've never seen her on one, so I figured you were a better bet. She and Peaches are well matched in that respect—they're both a bit out of step with the times in some ways. Bloody Peaches hasn't the... Nevermind.

Curly just reminded me I'm supposed to be telling you how I came to meet the Slayer's pop. He was possessed by an ancient Egyptian high priest who wanted revenge on his old girlfriend. It's a long involved story, but from what Stormcloud told me she totally had it coming and then how.

Anyway, the old girlfriend raised up some guy so she could get an invincible army out of the deal, but between priest guy and us her plans were thwarted and she's now enjoying hell with her new hubby the Scorpion King.

Once his revenge was done, the high priest scarpered, and Pops woke up confused thinking it was 1998 and he'd just sold his business. I lent him my camel and me and the boys continued our vacation. He should eventually make it to the American Embassy --there was a busload of tourists or something right nearby, so I'm sure he'll get by alright.

Since he turned out to be possessed and not a deadbeat, I didn't have m' nephews curse him and have since revised my opinion of the poor bugger--I often thought he must be a real sad sack to let a woman like Joyce get away, and of course, abandoning his daughter goes without saying.

Anyway, we're off to see my buddy Lloyd and take care of some business. I'll show you the rest of our vacation photos when I get back if you like. I don't know when exactly that will be. We're having ourselves a treat of a time, and depending on what Lloyd has to say once we chat with him that will probably determine at least part of our next moves.

BTW, tell Slayer Harmony is in Paris with my uncle Sam. They hit it off, so she's out of everyone's hair for the mo'. This bloke in L.A. gave us all a ride on his private jet after we did him a favor and got rid of this demon that was his enemy or something.

Apparently Sam got some kind of destiny for being made while Peaches still had his soul and was the only one who could kill it or something. I don't care either way since I got a free trip out of it.

Oh, and tell the Watcher Yuki, the Slayer-turned-vampire that the Watcher's council likes to pretend doesn't exist is also gone. I took care of her--that bloody wrecking ball is right damned handy I'll tell you.

I think that's it for the mo'. Say hello to all the kiddies for me.

Your old pal, Spike.

Willow looked up after reading the email and saw the killer instinct drain out of Buffy's face, leaving behind and confused and shaken girl. Xander slumped in his seat and looked like he could no longer tell which way was up. Giles looked like he was itching to research.

"He's going to see Lloyd? Huh." Anya commented.

"You know this Lloyd?" Giles asked in interest.

"Not personally. I've heard of him. He's an Asphyx demon. Last I heard he was lairing in Uganda running demon trials. He's a friend of D'Hoffryn's. Among other things he has precognition and the ability to manipulate souls."

The others tensed and then froze, no longer sure if they could simply take it as a given that there
was some nefarious plan against them, even given that this Lloyd was probably evil and a demon to boot. They had a hard time picturing any friend of D'Hoffryn's being anything but.

"He's such a good friend, taking time out of his vacation to try to fix Angel. I hope he appreciates it." Anya continued while the rest of them were lost in thought.

"I beg your pardon?" Giles scoffed. "I highly doubt that Spike, who is still unsouled and evil, is going to try to find a way to make the soul in Angelus permanent."

Anya just looked at him with pity and shook her head as though he were an idiot.

Xander rubbed at his face and nodded to himself.

"I don't think we can actually just discount the idea. He and soulboy seemed to be getting on fine when they were both here. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen soulboy act so much like a person. He was usually just lurking in the shadow, giving cryptic warnings and then slinking off, without ever changing expression. I seriously never understood what you saw in him, Buff. He wasn't exactly a barrel of fun now, was he?"

"He did get mad when he thought I might have accidentally made Angel lose his soul. He said he'd eat my entrails, chip or no chip if I brought 'crazy not-Angelus' back." Buffy added reluctantly.

"What does he mean 'not-Angelus'. Who else would it have been?"

"Apparently being locked up with a soul for so long made his demon crazy." Anya explained. "We hung out a few times when he was first chipped. Whenever he got drunk he'd get all maudlin about Drusilla and how Darla was dead and Angelus was crazy and hated him for some reason and it was all the soul's fault, not just for driving him crazy but for making him kill Darla as well. I'm glad they seem to have worked out their differences. I know Spike was very upset by how badly their relationship deteriorated."

"You were hanging out with Deadboy Junior? When? Where was I?"

"At work, usually. What's the problem? We were in the same situation, both trying to acclimate to our changed circumstances and trying to figure out what it meant for us. It was a great comfort in those early days to have someone who understood and didn't get weird about reminiscences. In fact, I should try to arrange time for us to hang out again. We haven't seen much of each other since I've been working here and he was off living in the crypt. It'll be easier, not to mention more fun, if he's back at the mansion instead. Tara, you should come with me. We can have our own second-tier Scooby meetings and commiserate about how we're always on the outside looking in. We can drink beer and listen to music and watch movies and discuss poetry and popular culture. It will be fun." Anya added, warming to the idea.

"Um, well…maybe?" Tara replied uncertainly.

Naturally, the original Scooby gang looked none too pleased with this development.

"I can't believe I let you blokes convince me to take the long way so we could see sodding gorillas."

"Why? They were neat. So were the tree climbing lions."
"The demon market hereabouts was interesting as well."

"And we went to that footie game, rugby...you won that car race."

"They call it rallying in these parts. That wizard bloke's fancy car collection sure has come in handy, eh?"

"It certainly has. I'd say our time here has been well spent, all things considered."

"Yeah, I guess."

"How much further till we get to the shaman's place?"

"Not too far now. See the cave there, and the little village before it? He's there, in the cave."

"We've been walking quite a ways. It's getting on towards dawn. I guess we should set up the cabin and wait for nightfall before you go see him."

"Yeah, I guess. Yeah, probably for the best."

"Huh, there's another white person here. A woman no less. Not something we've seen much of since we've been here."

"Where?" Spike asked distractedly, leaving off his perusal of their surroundings to focus on the blonde in the distance.

"I think she just came out of the shaman's cave."

"Bloody hell. That's Darla. What's she doing here?"

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely. Come on." Spike ordered, before speeding off.

Tom and Harry left him to it and kept going at their own pace. They'd been doing a lot of walking recently, tromping through national forests to look at the wildlife, tromping across the plains in search of Spike's shaman friend. Harry knew he was getting a bit worn from it all, and he was in good shape--he could only imagine Tom was in agony.

They caught up to Spike and what was indeed Darla about an hour later--distances were deceptive on the plains, and they hadn't been walking very fast. They set up the log cabin on the far side of the cave and warded it to keep away the villagers they'd passed on the way in, and invited Darla in.

Tom settled down on the couch with a wince and a groan, Spike made up a cup of blood for himself and his gran....

"Oi, you're like, my little sister now, aren't you, luv?"

"I guess I am, technically speaking. Good. I never liked being called grandmum." Darla snorted, before taking the cup of blood tentatively.

She took a sip and her eyes widened in surprise. "This is human. I was afraid you were going to offer me that pig crap Angelus has been living on."

"Not if I can help it. It does taste like crap. I dunno how he can stomach it, though I guess it's a
sight better than rat. I end up drinking it more often than I'd like, even so. It's hard to get hold of human in bulk if you can't get it from the source. Pig's not too bad if you can enhance it. Burba weed spices it up right nice."

"I'll take your word for it."

She drank her blood in silence and realized the three of them were looking at her expectantly. She flicked her glance between the three of them and sighed.

"About a week back there was a freaky storm in L.A. Dru got a vision and said we needed to get out of town. She took us to Angel. His seer got a vision too. His minions took one car, we took the other, and we ended up at a Best Western outside the city limits. Even with forewarning it was a very near thing."

She stared pensively down into the empty cup for a while before continuing.

"Angelus spent the night with me." she offered quietly before suddenly rising to her feet and chucking the empty cup across the room to shatter noisily on the wall.

"I hate this! I mean, come on, it's been a hundred years!"

Just as quickly as it had arrived her rage drained away and she slumped in place, covering her face.

"It's been a hundred years." she repeated quietly. "And even after all this time, it was like coming home." she admitted.

"When I woke up in the morning, he was gone, back to L.A. and his humans and his brooding and his mission. All the demons that had fled the city that were camped out around the motel were gone…and so was Dru. She just wandered off and left me!"

Spike laughed bitterly and downed what was left of his blood.

"Yeah, she does that anymore. Fickle sodding wench."

"I don't have anywhere to go. The Master's gone, the Order is scattered to the winds…not that I was really in such a great hurry to go back there. I mean, yeah, I get it, alright, don't live with the food…but it's boring! My god! Chanting and rituals and listening to him just going on and on and on about bringing back the old ones…I mean seriously! Did none of them realize if we'd actually succeeded we'd likely have just been wiped out? And what's so very wrong about liking the world as it is, huh? There's no nice clothes, no theatre and no view when you're living in a cave. How he stood it for the better part of 800 years I'll never know."

"Sodding fanatic. This is why I don't go in for religion, you know? Makes you soft in the head."

"Tell me about it." Darla huffed. She looked pensive once more as she began pacing slowly around the room, her gaze abstracted.

"I don't do well alone, not for any length of time. I mean, yeah, I could totally find myself someone else, kick up my heels and start a massacre, right? It just…I don't know…seems sort of…empty."

Spike sighed and moved to hug her. She sank into his embrace gratefully, while blinking tears out of her eyes.

"I was going to do it, you know…stay human. I was going to try it out, anyway. I thought
maybe… but then Dru was there and the next thing I knew I was waking up with a hot gush of blood sliding down my throat and it didn't seem too important anymore. So long as Dru was there it was fine... When I woke up there, all alone but for the corpses littering the lobby… I looked around and wondered if that's what eternity was going to look like. I guess I went a little crazy. I got myself to the airport and climbed up in the wheel well of the first flight heading this way. I wouldn't recommend it. It doesn't make for a comfortable flight. All the noise and emptiness gave me a lot of time to think, but now I'm here and I can't imagine what I was thinking... I mean, a soul, seriously? If you're right and Angelus really is crazy from having one, it's the dumbest idea ever! It's an abomination for a reason. But I was here and I thought, well, what else is there? Adapt or meet your end, that's how it goes. I'm four hundred years old. Maybe it's time for a change?"

"Seriously, luv? You were going to get yourself a soul?"

"I thought about it. I don't know, I mean, geez, how needy and pathetic can you get, right? It doesn't matter anyway. Lloyd won't do it unless I go through his trials and that's not happening."

"You're strong luv, I'm sure you'd be fine."

"I'm strong, but I'm not a fighter. I never have been. Even if I'm feeling a bit lost at the moment, that doesn't mean I want to go back to being a big pile of dust."

"Well, I came here to see if there was some way to fix Peaches. When I talk to him, I'll ask if I can be your champion, yeah?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course, luv! You're family."

"You're sweet sometimes."

"Only sometimes, luv?"

"Yeah, the rest of the times you're either an asshole or a naughty boy."

"Well, that's true enough, I guess. That's me, man of many faces." Spike laughed.

He grew serious once more, his gaze troubled.

"You sure this is what you want? Given the little Peaches has told me... it doesn't sound like much fun."

"He seems to be doing alright. I suppose if it's too awful I could always just stake myself." Darla sighed.

"Well, feel free to make yourself at home. Try to eat us and we'll stake you. Fair warning." Tom replied before climbing to his feet. "I'm going to go soak in the tub till I wrinkle and then I'm for bed."

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea. Goodnight you two."

"Home sweet home." Buffy sighed as she walked into her empty house. She was still buzzed from
the seemingly successful conclusion to her mother's surgery, and she'd be coming home tomorrow, but it was hard to keep it going when faced with an empty house at the end of it.

A deep shudder wracked her as she realized how lucky she was. If her mom hadn't of had that weird episode, coming home to an empty house might be what she'd be facing from there on out. The very idea was enough to make the walls start feeling like they were closing in on her and the ground beginning to crumble underfoot.

It made her wonder how Slayers before her had ever lasted even a year. All her recent losses--Willow being taken, Riley walking out, her mom…the betrayal scare from Spike even--had left her reeling and feeling like there was nothing to hold on to.

How did those Slayers go out night after night after night, knowing they had nothing but a fight they never asked for and a trusted stake?

It made her realize all over again just how lucky she really had been--she'd escaped Kendra's fate, an early demise, and Faith's, going evil for a while--because she had people who loved her and depended on her.

It was getting harder now that they were older. All her friends were paired off and living their own lives, even if they were right there to help out when she needed them, but that was going to probably become more and more of a problem as they got older. Her mom was ill, Giles wasn't getting any younger. Eventually they wouldn't be there anymore. She knew this even if she couldn't bear to face it.

One day, this empty house would be the reality.

She was knocked out of her depressing thoughts by a knock at the door. Buffy frowned, not expecting anyone. She opened the door and felt all the air rush out of her lungs.

"Daddy?"

Her dad smiled at her hesitantly, as though unsure of his welcome, as his eyes darted over her to take in the changes.

"Buffy? God…you…You've grown up so much. Look at you. Where'd my baby girl go?"

Buffy's eyes filled with tears as she threw herself into her father's arms. A load of tension went out of him at his warm welcome. He rocked her back and forth, murmuring soothing nonsense as she sobbed all over his chest, and steered her into the living room. It took a while for her to stop crying, but when she did she fixed a watery smile on him.

"Daddy. You've been gone so…"

"I know, Buffy, I know. I'm so, so sorry, you have no idea. I lost the last four years of my life. I must have been drugged or hit in the head or something...amnesia."

"Spike said you were possessed by an Egyptian high priest that wanted revenge on his girlfriend."

Hank's eyes darted to her in surprise, and he stared at her a moment as though waiting for her to run off and dial the loony bin. Still studying her face intently he nodded.

"That's what everyone kept telling me. They had some crazy stories…but…” he trailed off and studied her face a moment longer.

"You believe it, don't you?"
"Dad, trust me on this. The world is a whole heck of a lot stranger than I ever thought back when I was a kid."

"Is that a fact." Hank replied uncertainly.

He looked around then and then back at her.

"So…where's your mom?" Buffy's eyes widened in horror.

"Oh…you don't know! We didn't know how to reach you."

Hank began looking worried. "Buffy…your mom isn’t…"

"No! No… She is in the hospital though. Brain tumor. They said she should be alright. She's supposed to come home tomorrow."

"God…Joycie. I had no… Oh, Buff, I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

"Dad, stop. Really. It's okay. It wasn't your fault. You're here now. That's all that's important."

Harry, Tom and Darla all rose to their feet when Spike exited the cave.

"Well?" Darla asked with some trepidation. The longer she was here, the more she was rethinking the whole soul angle.

"He said you had to go through the trials yourself if you wanted a soul, luv. Apparently it's part of the mojo and it's required."

"Oh." She wasn't sure if she felt relieved or disappointed.

"I have a suggestion. Feel free to scoff if you like."

"Yeah…what is it?" Spike asked suspiciously.

"Well, you currently have a chip. You're a fighter, you don't like it, you want to get rid of it, right?" Tom asked.

Harry glanced at him and nodded, already seeing where he was going.

"You're a lover, not a fighter. You want something that will make your continued existence acceptable to Angelus/Angel or whatever."

"So…why don't you do the trials for yourself?" Tom concluded. "And we can put your chip in Darla."

"I don't know…” Darla backed off.

"From where we're standing, it seems like an ideal solution. I mean, think about it. If you show up at his place with a soul, he might just get so happy he loses his and then where will you be? Spike having a soul will just piss him off, no happiness there. It will make you acceptable but not change you unduly. And you, it will leave you in the same place you are, but more able to defend and take care of yourself."
Spike and Darla both looked rather conflicted about the whole thing.

"I dunno. I mean, what if I don't want to be all soul having? Brooding and moping and…"

"If you go in knowing you'll be getting it, and do the work to have it restored to you, you probably won't have the same difficulties Angel does."

"Let me sleep on it."

"Me too." Darla agreed.

"I mean, it's crazy, isn't it? Willingly allowing myself to be crippled. It's insane."

"Well, if it ends up being that much of a problem, we could probably swing by Sunnydale on the way back and just have Willow curse you."

"Let me think about it." Darla repeated.

Spike paced restlessly to and fro and then glanced at Darla.

"Let's go for a run, yeah? Always helps clear my head." Darla shrugged then sauntered up next to him. They looked at each other and then were gone, racing across the plains like the high-speed predators they were.

Cordelia grabbed at her head and winced. When she straightened, she found Angel, Wesley and Gunn all staring at her expectantly.

"Lindsey, evil lawyer guy, is going to rise as a vampire soon. We need to go stake him."

"He hasn't even risen and you've gotten a vision about him? That's strange. Usually when you get visions about vampires it's a group that are about to start feeding on people."

"If he gets away, Wolfram and Hart are going to steal Angel's soul and give it to him. Spike and Darla show up not long after, Angelus tries to kill them both. They end up all suicidal rage and dismay and go storm Wolfram and Hart looking for vengeance and they both die. Angelus will run free, team up with Drusilla and try to bring on an apocalypse--complete with burning skies and death everywhere. It's bad. He needs to die like, pronto."

"I'm down with that." Gunn responded easily.

"That doesn't even make any sense. Why would I…he...try to kill Darla and Spike?"

"Don't ask me, brood boy, I'm just telling you what I saw."

"Where's he at?"

"Best Western."

More disturbed than he cared to admit, Angel nodded and set off to go find and stake Lindsey.
Spike and Darla returned a few hours later. They were mussed and muddy, sporting scratches and bruises that were already healing and were each sporting bites on their necks. They were subdued but seemed at peace with one another and the world. They strolled up swinging their joined hands between them, looking very much like the brother and sister they claimed themselves to be.

Tom snapped a picture of them for the album--their last hurrah as unchained demons.

He could see from the look on their faces that they'd made their decision to go forward towards something new rather than backwards to try to reclaim what they were.

"Well…you two seem to have had an interesting time."

"You could say that." Darla agreed, smirking just a bit.

They headed inside to clean up and joined the two boys at the table a while later.

"So, you're going to do it?"

"Looks like. If I turn into a morose, broody pain in the arse though, I'm gonna find you two and spank you."

"Kinky." Harry drawled, while Tom waggled his eyebrows.

Darla snorted and grinned at them.

"I can see why he likes you so much. Are you sure you don't want to be vampires?"

"Nah. We're good."

"Hey…speaking of that. Who'd you try to turn? I don't remember anyone." Darla asked Spike curiously.

"My mum. I told you about that. I said me and Dru went to see her after I rose and it didn't end well."

"You killed your mum?"

"Wasn't trying to kill her, I thought I was saving her. She'd been sickly most of my life, and she was dying of tuberculosis. I woke up as a vampire and I felt great. I thought I'd be doing her a favor, right? Instead, she rises up all snarly and pissed off and accused me of wanting to shag her and tried to grab my bollocks! I ended up staking her. After that, I wasn't too keen to try turning anyone I liked and actually wanted to keep around."

"Oh. I thought at first you killed her for vengeance or something."

"Why the bloody hell would I do that? I loved my mum!"

"Well, Angelus killed his father and little sister. He thought he was getting one over on his old man. I told the poor bastard all he did was make it so he could never win and get his approval. I don't know why he killed his sister. He got along with her as far as I know."

"Is that common? Did you kill your parents?"

"My mother was a whore, same as I was. She died when I was thirteen. I joined the family business to survive. I was never sure who my father was, beyond him being one of her customers." Darla shrugged. "Whenever an older guy came through, I always wondered if he was
my father. The part I could never bring myself to think about too much was, if he was, did he
know?" she laughed then, her smile frozen and jaded. "It wouldn't have surprised me, really. You
learn a lot about men in my line of work, and most of it isn't very nice."

"Well, while I'll admit we can sometimes be wretched buggers, I hope you don't judge us all by
your former customers, luv. In your line of work, you only ever got to see the worst of us, I'll
wager."

"Hmm." Darla replied, her voice noncommittal.

"So…icky family issues all over the place, huh?"

"Well, your lot certainly were no angels. Locked you in a cupboard, made you their slave,
scapegoat and punching bag."

"Things got better eventually." Harry sighed.

"How about you, Curly?"

"My mother died giving birth to me in an orphanage in London. My father was a rich bastard that
left me there. I killed him and my paternal grandparents and framed my maternal uncle for their
murder when I was sixteen."

"Wow. Families suck sometimes, don't they?" Darla laughed a bit hysterically.

"That they do, luv, that they do."

"Hello, Magic Box, can I help you? Yes she is. You do realize this is a business phone, correct?
Well really, there's no need to get testy. Fine, you may speak to her, but only briefly. I will not
have us losing possible money and business because you have the phone tied up."

Giles and the rest stared at Anya curiously as she spoke.

"Willow, it's for you."

"Me? Um…I've never given anyone this number."

"Could you hurry it up? What if someone is in the market for a rare, expensive item and they end
up going to another purveyor of magical goods because you haven't just answered the damn
phone already?" Anya huffed.

"Geez. Sorry." Willow huffed back, before snatching the phone away.

"Hello? Oh…hi. Did I what now? That would be a definite no. Of course I'm sure! It's not
something I'm likely to forget, not to mention it's not something I'd be likely to do. Angel, what's
this about? Vision, huh? What happened? Uh huh, uh huh…okay, why does you killing people
equal me doing a resouling ritual? Oh, right, you were evil…yeah, I guess that would be a good
reason, though wouldn't you just, you know, try to give them both happies so you could all go
traipsing off to be the evil Brady Bunch again? Geez, talk about protests too much. I saw where
you were sleeping, okay? Yeah. Also, Anya spent a lot of time talking to her and she was very
candid. Uh huh. Angel, I don't care. Gay now, remember? The only part I found ookie was the
fact that you all call each other stuff like 'daddy' and 'grandmum' and still got up to all that. Well, I
don't know about Darla--she hasn't been spotted in town, or I'm sure we'd have heard about it at
length from Buffy, but Spike is off visiting some demon named Lloyd in Uganda that deals with
souls, though Anya seems to think he went there to see if there was any way to help you with your curse. Uh huh…uh huh. Hey, did you stop the guy who was going to do everything? So it's all good, no apocalypse nigh? Oh, that's good. Uh huh. Okay. Bye."

Willow turned around and found Xander and Buffy both staring at her and on the verge of an outburst. Giles, who was diligently cleaning his glasses interjected before either of them could speak.

"You two…and you, Anya, keep quiet. Willow, speak."

"Oh, um, well, that was Angel…"

"He's evil? There's an apocalypse?"

"What do you mean you know where he was sleeping?"

"Willow, the vision, if you please. Explain from the beginning. You two be quiet." Giles repeated with a sigh.

"Cordelia had a vision…” Willow went on to explain "And so Angel's been brooding about why he'd kill Spike and Darla if he was evil and he thought Darla must have a soul or something, and Spike was making nice with Angel and he thought maybe Angelus wouldn't appreciate that too much. He wanted to know if I cursed her." she concluded.

"But the instigator of this particular set of circumstances has been dealt with? It's all theoretical now?" Giles prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Good and dusty, as soon as he rose."

"So Deadboy isn't evil at the moment and there's no apocalypse?" Xander questioned. "Nope. Apocalypse free, well, you know, for the moment."

"What is this about where Angel was sleeping?" Buffy cut in coldly.

Willow made an 'eep' face at how Buffy was looking at her and fidgeted under her stare. "Oh…"

"Explain. Now."

"I should think it was perfectly obvious. Spike and Angel shared a room in the log cabin and in the mansion. They were both very cheerful and relaxed in the morning. I mean, really, do we need to spell it out? Why is it alright this time but not any other time?" Anya complained.

"Um, hello? Angel is straight!"

"Angel is a vampire." Anya corrected. "That doesn't really come into it."

"Yes, it does! He was with ho-bag Darla, then ho-bag Drusilla when he was evil. When he has his soul, which he does right now, he loves me."

"Buffy…you guys broke up almost two years ago. You were with Riley at the time." Willow reminded her. "It's not really your business."

"It most certainly is my business if my soul mate is running around sleeping with evil vampires that are guys! You're completely wrong about this. Spike was macking on Faith all weekend, and he's still all hung up about his ho-bag Drusilla the psycho."
"I hate to say it, Buff, but that doesn't really prove anything. Spike macks on everything that moves all the time." Xander objected.

"It's true. He's very sexual." Anya agreed cheerfully. "Though I do wish he would stop flirting so shamelessly with Xander."

Xander sighed and began banging his head on the table when everyone turned to look at him. He finally raised his head and saw everyone was still staring at him.

"He does. He doesn't mean anything by it. It's just a Spike thing. I try to ignore it. It's just what he does. If you let him see it bothers you he just becomes more obnoxious about it."

"It's true." Tara agreed earnestly. "He just does it. I told him I was a lesbian, but he just said that had nothing to do with him or him being 'appreciative'. It's strangely flattering. I never had anyone call me a voluptuous earth goddess before."

Willow was beginning to look upset. "Wh-when did all this happen? Where was I? What were you doing hanging around with Spike and letting him get all…all…"

"I ran into him at the college library. He quoted poetry at me and said a lot of flirtatious things, but he didn't mean anything by it. It's just what he does."

"He doesn't do it to me!"

"Are you upset that he doesn't or that he was doing it to me?" Tara asked suspiciously.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you know…he told me you offered to let him try biting you again after he got that chip in his head."

"So…what? He's been flirting with all of you, quoting poetry, getting you to offer to let him bite you? When the heck has all this been going on? He never does it to me. He just calls me 'Bitchy the vampire layer.' Buffy whined.

"Um, Buffster? Should we be disturbed that you sound disappointed?"

"I am not disappointed! I am upset that you are all betraying me and letting yourself be seduced by our enemy!" Buffy insisted. "And why am I the one being jumped on here? You're the ones that are all getting flirty with Spike!"

Anya snorted as she began counting out the register. "Just admit it. You feel left out."

"I DO NOT!"

"Dear lord." Giles sighed.

Spike really was the most damnable nuisance. He hadn't even been in town the last week and everyone was fighting because of him.

"AAAAHHHH!" Darla screamed and fell to the ground, twitching and clutching at her head. Tom and Harry, who were lounging nearby, watching the entrance to the cave for some sign of
Spike, turned lazily to look at her.

"What the hell did you do to me?" she whimpered.

"We put Spike's chip in your head. Duh."

"Already? When?"

"When he went into the cave."

"You didn't say anything."

"You're both apex predators. Of course we didn't. We know how fast you both are."

Darla whimpered again. Harry sighed and went to her, dragging her over so she could lay with her head in his lap. He rubbed his hand soothingly across her forehead until she relaxed.

"I can't believe he managed to survive with this thing as long as he did. I mean, my god, I just realized I was hungry and just glanced over in your direction. I didn't even do anything!"

"Don't worry about it. You're a predator, it's what you do. As you can see from Spike, however barbaric the method, it does work. It teaches you to think in new ways, to slow down and notice stuff other than all the free food walking around."

"What the hell was I thinking? This is the stupidest idea I've ever had! I was a vampire for 400 years. It worked for me! Why did I ever want to stop?"

"Because you got spooked at the idea of an endless eternity filled with emptiness and corpses."

"So I did. I'm a moron. I could have made a new family."

"You could have. If that's really what you want, we'll take you somewhere else and let you go."

Darla laid there, torn. She really, really didn't like this whole chip business at all…and yet…she hadn't really given it a try yet, had she? Was she just fooling herself? Was it really worth it? She made herself more comfortable on Harry's leg and blinked tears out of her eyes.

She still couldn't believe how much it had hurt. She thought it was going to be a little zing to remind her not to snack on the locals…not a full blown lightning storm in her head! How could some little chip even do that?

"I think I see something." Tom murmured. "Hang on."

Darla slowly sat up as Tom strode away. She and Harry climbed to their feet and watched the cave entrance for some sign. Tom poked his head out and nodded and then appeared with Spike, who was hovering behind him on a stretcher. He was burned, gouged, bruised and bloody, and he was curled up into a fetal position, shivering and crying.

Darla watched silently as the two boys took him into the cabin. It was done. He had a soul. He looked every bit as wretched and pathetic as Angelus had a hundred years ago, just more wounded. The gypsies hadn't bothered beating Angelus up first.

It was official--she'd been seized with a fit of madness. She'd only made one halfhearted attempt to rid Angelus of his soul…halfhearted in that she'd focused more on what they were doing than on any possible side effects. She'd crippled herself and been a party to the youngest…former youngest, in their family in crippling himself as well.
The Master would have flayed the skin from her bones and made her wish for death for such blasphemy. There was a part of her that thought he'd have been right to do so.

She entered the cabin on leaden feet and saw the boys trying to get Spike to eat something so he could heal. They weren't having much luck. A hundred years ago, in a similar situation, she'd let one of her boys down and been of no real use to him when he was so wounded. Maybe this time she could do better.

She moved to where Spike lay, weeping and trembling and climbed up behind him, spooning him and biting at her wrist to pierce it, before offering it to Spike. As she expected, he latched on to her where the human blood was rejected--family blood called you; it was instinct and comfort and safety and home.

She tucked her head against the back of his neck and settled in for the day. Spike likely wouldn't be in any shape to do much for a few days yet.

The few people out on the street all shivered and hurried their steps as a piercing wail shattered the quiet evening. It was the sound of a wounded predator, half-mad and thirsting for the blood of its enemies.

"Wrong. All wrong. Wicked stars. They're gone. All gone. There is none left to come to my party. NO. I shan't listen to you, wicked stars. You lie, and lead me in circles like the lamb to slaughter. The King of Cups has had his birthday, but the picnic is filled with worms and salty tears, dripping dripping dripping…so many, but they cannot wash away the blood. He was mine, my knight and he's been taken from me! So alone. So alone. He was supposed to be mine forever."

Another keening wail shattered the night as Drusilla threw back her head and cried out her distress to the empty streets and gouged long bloody furrows down her face.

"They're all searching for the sun, but it burns, it burns!"

She rocked herself miserably but then she heard music and it distracted her enough that she cocked her head to listen. In a daze she rose from her crouch and wandered silently down the street, distracted now and again by a newspaper floating lazily down the street, pushed by an unseen breeze, the glow of a streetlamp in a darkened window, seeing visions of people dying, screaming, calling for help that would never come. She truly was a wicked devil-child. She filled the world with screams and blood, mummies calling for children that would never answer, daddies that would never come home again, just by walking down the street.

She could still remember, sometimes, a girl who looked like her but wasn't, crying in church and begging God to have pity on her. He never did.

He was a bad doggy. Grrrr.

He turned his face away because she was too wicked for even him to gaze upon.

Her wandering led her to an alleyway. She stopped to wait, singing a lullabye under her breath. Her attention was caught as a sewer grate scraped across the ground and a demon emerged. She became entranced by the winking jewel on his forehead and drifted forward to see. She could hear the music again. It was like a choir of angels, singing just for her. They were singing beneath its skin.
"Silly angels, hiding from me. You can't you know. I'll gobble you all up. You'll sparkle in my tummy and sing just for me."

The demon cocked his head and watched her drift closer, curious but unafraid. She stared at him curiously, studying his jewel in interest.

"It's looking at me. Wink, wink. Naughty jewel, flirting with me."

She languidly raised a hand and ran it lightly over the demon's face, while continuing to study him, all the while humming the angels song beneath her breath.

"I can hear them singing, you know." she confided her voice childlike and curious.

One of her razor sharp crimson nails lashed out suddenly, sending a small trickle of glowing green blood gushing out of the cut.

"Oh, so pretty. See how the little angels make it glow."

She leaned forward, quick as a striking snake and lapped the blood from its face, and then twirled away.

"I can hear them singing. A choir of angels just for me. If they're naughty, I shall send them to bed without any supper, and leave them to cry all alone in the dark."

She nodded her head firmly and continued on her way. The Mohra demon watched her leave, and then continued on its way.

Her wanderings led her to a door which she went through.

"Happy memories. The whole family was here, all but daddy. He's been a bad dog, and cannot come to the party, poor thing."

She drifted aimlessly through the club, listening to the little glowing angels as they moved through her, and kept singing their songs. They had gotten a drummer boy somewhere, naughty angels. She could hear him drumming away and ruining their pretty song "Ba BUMP, Ba BUMP, Ba BUMP"

It seemed like she remembered the song from somewhere, but she had quite forgotten the tune.

Her hazy gaze rested on the back wall behind the stage and she clapped her hands happily. There was a doorway there, about to open. It was a fairytale kingdom inside. There was a knight in need of a wicked princess so he could be king. If the wicked princess was very bad, she could be his queen.

"I'm a wicked princess, and my knight has gone away. He tastes of tears and ashes, blood and feathered dragons now. Poor little mite. So brokenhearted. The dragons will sing him lullabies and try to fix him, now that he has no princess anymore."

She began to cry then, with the wretchedness of small child as fat tears rolled down her cheeks. They were gone, all gone…she couldn't even hear them screaming in their cages anymore.

"Wicked angels and their song…they took them away. All gone. Goodbye my Spike. Your princess will always love you, but she's not your princess anymore."

She drifted up the stairs to the stage just as a portal opened up on the back wall and a demon leapt out. Drusilla drifted into the portal, which closed behind her.
In a log cabin in Africa, and in a hotel in Los Angeles, three demons howled in anguish. Cordelia and Wesley both jumped, grabbed weapons and ran for the lobby when they heard Angel howling.

They came to a wary stop when they saw he had his demon face out…until they realized he was crying.

"Angel?" Cordelia called out hesitantly while Wesley kept the crossbow trained on him. When he turned to face them, Cordelia relaxed and Wesley lowered the crossbow. Angelus could never look as soulfully anguished as Angel did right now.

"It's Drusilla. She's gone."

"I thought she was untouchable because of her seer gift?"

"Apparently not." Angel whispered as he slowly sank back into his seat and lowered his head into his hands. He was in agony--his beloved Drusilla, gone.

His demon was howling for bloodshed…his soul was rejoicing. At the moment, both halves of himself sickened him. He knew he should be glad, really. He'd done terrible, unconscionable things to her. She was innocent of the crimes she'd committed. He'd broken her and driven her insane before turning her so that her torment would be never ending. He should be relieved that she was gone and would no longer be destroying innocent lives, no longer suffering…but it was Drusilla and he'd loved her in his own twisted way. He just hoped wherever Spike was it was far from civilization. Chipped or not, there was likely to be a massacre otherwise. Thinking of Spike turned his mind to Darla--he'd sensed both of them just before Drusilla had vanished. Wherever they were they were together and far from Los Angeles. He shuddered then, picturing the two of them egging one another on and upping the stakes. Wherever they were would be piled high with bodies by morning.

His soul twisted in protest because there was a big part of him that wished he was with them. A pop sounded in the open part of the lobby, and suddenly 'Curly' was there. While Wesley and Cordelia gaped at him, he ignored them and focused on Angel.

"Oh, good, you're here. Could you give us a hand? I don't want him shattering the shell and dislodging the dimensional pocket."

"Uh…"

Curly sighed and started for the garden. Bemused, the rest of them followed him. He pulled something from his pocket, and then backed off as a log cabin unfolded itself and sprung up from the ground. Once it did, they could hear anguished sobbing coming from within. Angel didn't hesitate, he strode for the door and entered.

Wesley and Cordelia exchanged a look and hurried after him. They both stopped in the doorway and gaped at the wreckage in the room. Stormcloud gave them both a weary smile.

"Hello again. Shame we didn't meet up under better circumstances."

"God, what happened?"

"Darla and Spike. They were just sitting there and then all hell broke loose, so to speak. Apparently Drusilla is gone. It really was bad timing with the empathy spell. Spike flipped out and Darla was right there with him. Oh well. This can all be fixed…we were just worried about him..."
smashing the walls and dislodging the pocket dimension; that would have been a bit of a mess. Fixable, but still a mess. Hopefully Angel can rein them in."

Cordelia heard the phone ringing back in the office, and hurried out to go answer it. Wesley followed a moment later when he saw Angel descending the stairs, a chained and unconscious Spike and Darla floating behind him. Angel stepped back into the hotel and started for the stairs. He'd have to be sure to lay down the law with Darla before releasing her.

He hoped no one expected him to stake her. He couldn't deal with that right now. He was all messed up as it was.

He was halfway up the stairs when he caught Drusilla's name in the phone conversation Cordelia was having. He came to a halt and listened, and then collapsed to the stairs when he heard the rest.

"Angel! That was Lorne…" she quieted for a moment, seeing him there, sitting on the stairs and looking gobsmacked, while the two unconscious vampires floated nearby, still wrapped in their chains. She ignored them for the moment and focused back on Angel.

"That was Lorne. A portal from his home dimension opened up in his club, and a 'drakken beast' escaped into our world. He needs someone to track the thing down and kill it. They're supposed to be dangerous. He said Drusilla…"

"Was human and went through the portal to his world. I heard."

He somehow managed to answer through all the cacaphony in his head.

His demon was raging again, thrilled with the thought of being able to torture and make Drusilla all over again.

His soul was rejoicing at her good fortune and twisting in horror and disgust at the thought of destroying that innocent girl once more.

He couldn't deal with it, and so focused on the practicalities.

"Demon huh? Dangerous? Good." he nodded.

He vamped out and pierced his thumb, running a bit of blood onto both Darla and Spike's lips. They licked the blood and began to stir. When their eyes fluttered open they both focused on him.

"Drusilla's still alive…truly alive. She's human. She must have eaten some Mohra demon blood. It does that. We're going hunting right now, and then we're going to question a guy about how to get to where our girl is."

The two blondes nodded. Angel glanced at Curly, who eyed the two vamps a moment and flicked his wand, removing the chains and settling them back on the floor.

"We'll be back." Angel growled.

Spike and Darla's vamp faces both emerged as well, and the three of them vanished out the door, silent and deadly.

"They didn't even grab weapons." Wesley fretted.

"They don't need to, they have their own."

"Well…yes…I suppose that's true." he nodded, glancing at Cordelia, who had been surprisingly
quiet during the whole exchange.
"Cordelia?"

"Huh? Oh. Sorry. Just a little surprised is all."

"Well, you must admit, if he can get them to behave, Darla and Spike will be excellent backup in handling the demon."

"Huh? Oh, not that. Spike has a soul."
Wesley blinked, and then his mouth dropped open, so astonished was he. "Surely you jest?"

"Nope. He's got a soul."

"He's always had a soul, it was just a demon one. Now, he has that and his human soul as well."

"A chip and a soul? Goodness…"

"No, just the soul. Darla has his chip now."

"What?"

"Yeah. She went to Africa to get her soul back…" Harry explained how they'd met up. "So we suggested he do the trials and we'd just give his chip to her instead."

"And she agreed?" Wesley sputtered.

"Yeah. Predator logic--adapt or die. The sane half of the family was curtailed, she'd been abandoned by the only free demon left, who'd turned her against her will. She was going to stay human. She nearly changed her mind after the thing went off, but she figured she should at least give it the old college try. They were both still recovering from the shock when Drusilla disappeared. We were planning on staying in Africa for a few days yet to give them both a chance to acclimate."

"This is…astounding. Unprecedented…amazing."

"Yeah. We're really proud of both of them. It took a lot of courage, and a bit of insanity, but mostly courage, to make a decision like that."

Wesley nodded distractedly and wandered off in a daze to go call Giles and tell him to update the Watcher records on the Scourge of Europe again.

They drove to Caritas in silence, which was odd, but nice--Spike talked enough for any three people, and frankly Darla could too when the rare mood took her. He was still too raw, too unsettled to want to indulge at the moment, so he was happy enough to bask in the silence and brood.

He hoped this drakken beast of Lorne's was big, and dangerous. He wanted the freedom of a fight to work some of the tension out of his system before it had a chance to bubble over and spill out onto Wes and Cordy.

When they arrived at Caritas, Lorne came to greet them, but Angel was only half listening--he was distracted by Spike roaming through the club on a meandering path, sniffing the air, till he ended up on the stage.
Darla watched him quietly, but she looked like she was in pain. He was rather surprised she was still so upset…he knew she cared about Dru, but it still seemed out of character for her to be so broken up. She certainly hadn't shed any tears when she'd driven him off at stake point when he'd gotten his soul.

Spike he wasn't surprised at--he'd always been oddly obsessed with Dru, though in a different way than he himself was. Darla blinked tears out of her eyes…she was crying? And moved to join him. She didn't say anything, just stared at him until he came back to her and leaned his head on her shoulder, while she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stroked lightly at the back of his neck until his shakes subsided.

"It hurts…but it's exquisite. It's no wonder you've always been so crazy if you've been carrying all that around with you…or weren't you? Is it different now?"

"No, still the same mostly. The only real change seems to be guilt and a desire to empathize with the food, other than that I'm the same."

Angel watched them both, face blank, and his gut churning. Since when were Darla and Spike so buddy buddy? Trust Spike to be so petty as to try getting revenge for him 'stealing' Dru in Sunnydale when they had other things to be doing.

That was Spike all over though wasn't it? Selfish, thoughtless, bratty… Why the hell was Darla indulging him like this?

"Let's go." he growled.

Darla turned her head slightly and whispered to Spike, who straightened and wrapped his 'Big Bad' persona around himself like a cloak. Angel had to stifle the urge to growl at him, or snatch Darla to his side and punch him, but it was a near thing.

He ignored the passing thought of pressing him back onto the nearest table, licking the tears off his face and… Bad thoughts. It was their fault. He'd had more sex the last month than he'd had in the last hundred years. He usually had better control than this…

He saw them both focus on him, smelling his arousal. Damn it. He wasn't used to being around other vampires all the time, who knew what was going on beneath the surface even if you didn't want them to. He was out of practice…and in the past, he hadn't cared if they knew things like that--it just meant whoever was closest would come play for a bit…

Snatches of other times and places--bedrooms, haylofts, alleyways, back hallways…wherever the mood took them and opportunity knocked--flitted across his mind's eye. It took more doing than usual to push all of it away, down deep where he didn't have to experience it or admit to it. He clamped down with the iron control he'd perfected in the last hundred years.

Spike and Darla both cocked their heads and stared at him like he was an interesting specimen under a microscope--Darla bemused and Spike looked... pitying. Little bastard. He was going to kill him. A deep growl rumbled in his chest as he glared at them both.

"Let's go." he repeated, before stalking towards the door.

The moment they got out into the night air to begin stalking their prey, Angel immediately began to realize what a bad idea it was--yeah, they were strong and it would make fighting whatever it was easier…but it brought him to much to the surface: Angelus.

It didn't matter that they were after different prey than in the old days, it was too similar for him
not to draw comparisons. The sweet smell of the night air, a few visible stars overhead, mostly blocked by the lights of the city, and his family behind him.

One would think he hadn’t separated from them for a hundred years, it all came back so vividly, soul or no soul--they fell into synch, following and then herding their prey as though no time had passed.

They saw it up ahead, with a frightened woman it was about to eat. It was man-sized, sadly--he’d been hoping for something big with tentacles, so they could all have a piece of it. Luckily it was strong and sturdy--but even so, with two of them it didn't last long. He glanced around for Darla.

She had grabbed the woman and led her aside. She seemed to be struggling some to comfort her--the woman was bleeding, and Darla was obviously hungry, though she seemed to be doing her best to ignore it for the moment. It must have been difficult; she looked like she was in pain.

The beast finally went down and they joined Darla, who backed off and half hid behind him when they approached.

"T-thank you. Thank you. I was just walking along…I was almost to my car and it just… What was that thing?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. In any case, it's dead now. Do you need further assistance?"

"N-no…I'm alright. Just shaken, you know? M-my car is just over there. Thank you so much. How can I ever repay you?"

"It was our pleasure, ma'am."

The woman smiled at all three of them with tears in her eyes, obviously still shaken, and wobbled her way down the street to her car. She sat in there for a bit, leaning on the steering wheel, until she pulled herself together enough to drive. She waved as she passed, glanced briefly at the dead drokken beast and shuddered, before vanishing down the road.

"Do these make good eating, you think?"

"I think Lorne said his people eat them sometimes, but it has a poisonous bite that you have to be careful of."

Spike nodded, and filched Angel's phone from his pocket. "Oi, mate, it's me, Spike. You ever hear of a drokken beast from Pylea? Man-eating, poisonous bite, but I'm told it can make good eating so long as you keep that in mind. Fair enough."

Spike gave him directions and shut off the phone, handing it to Angel, who snatched it back and checked it suspiciously as though looking for damage. Spike lit up a cigarette and wandered a short distance from the rest of them, to stand and stare up at the moon, looking tragic.

It aggravated him. Spike was always such a drama queen. He glanced at Darla, expecting to see her looking amused and impatient, but she was watching him with that strange, sorrowful gaze again. He didn't understand it. She didn't have a soul--he'd checked discreetly earlier, given Cordy's strange vision earlier in the week. It made no sense. Why had Angelus wanted to kill them both? Unless…for betrayal? She stunk of him, he was all over her--blood, musk and tears.

It still didn't make sense. He could see putting Spike in his place... a few dozen times… he shifted uncomfortably as his trousers grew tight --and then kill him, sure; her he would have just punished for her transgressions--again and again and again, possibly on the ashes of her lover…or punish them both--tie Spike to the headboard and make him watch while he punished Darla and not let
him take part... have them both, separately and apart until they both smelled only of him... Damn.

Where was his iron control now? Think unsexy thoughts.

Damn it. What the hell were they waiting for anyway? He got his answer when a van pulled up and two demons hopped out to examine the beast. One of them stooped and tore a sliver of flesh from the carcass to sample, and then poked at it for a bit before nodding. Money changed hands, and the two of them took the drokken and vanished back into their van and then away. Angel snatched the money away, intending to pocket it, but Darla snatched it from him, split it in three, kept some for herself and gave he and Spike the rest before heading back towards Caritas and the car.

Lorne looked relieved to see them all back.

"You said that beast came from your homeworld, earlier. That means Drusilla is in your homeworld right now. We could use your help. We need to get Drusilla back. Can you open a portal?"

"Can't, cupcake, sorry. You need to find a hotspot. It was here before when the drokken came through, but it's gone now."

"The boys might be able to help. They've all sorts of tricks up their sleeves."

"Wes is a fair hand at magic as well. I'm sure he's up to it." Angel answered defensively. He turned to glare at Spike and really saw him for the first time--he'd been more focused on Darla and hadn't paid much attention.

"YOU... YOU... HOW?"

Spike just sighed and glanced at him tiredly, not answering.

"He did it for me." Darla replied.

The air he didn't need seized up in his lungs, and a red haze of madness descended across his mind.

"Angelus! Snap out of it!" Darla snarled, seizing his chin and pulling him down to look her in the eye. She was as strong as she'd ever been, her grip inescapable. His vampire face had re-emerged, snarling and feral, but she just continued to hold him in her grip, not even struggling.

She lifted her other hand to stroke down his cheek, while still staring sadly into his eyes all the while.

"I'm sorry, Angelus. I'm so sorry. I wish I could say I would have done things differently. We both know it's a lie. When you came to me... You were snivelling and weeping and crouched in the corner. You smelled like prey and it sickened me to see my strong, powerful warrior reduced to that. You looked at me and..."

Her voice broke for a moment and she closed her eyes and centered herself. When she opened them again she was once again in control.

"You were a danger to the rest of us... and we were a danger to you. I am sorry though. You came to me for comfort, or help or healing and I couldn't give you what you needed. I wish I had been able to. I wish I had been able to make your pain go away, or at least ease it. I wish you hadn't been alone for all those years. I wish you'd been able to stay with us when you returned..."
but I look at you now and I realize it would have killed you by inches, and I never wanted that. I wanted so badly for you to return to us someday, but the world doesn't work like that, does it? Too much time has passed, and too much has happened."

Her eyes filled with tears as he growled at her.

"We all tried changing you, didn't we? And you're so angry at all of us, furious even. I can feel it. So much pain in you, even now."

She smiled at him through her tears.

"It meant a lot to me that you wanted to save me. I was going to do it, you know. Stay human. It didn't work out, but that time in between changed me. I'm not the same Darla that I was. I thought maybe I would try something different, and try to change for you. I went to Africa to get my soul back. You had to go through trials. I was never a warrior though, was I? Spike offered to be my champion, but it wasn't allowed. I had to earn it back myself. The boys suggested a compromise. Spike went through the trials for himself and they gave me his chip. Training wheels, they called it."

Angel by this point had sunken down to his knees. She was such a tiny thing, his Darla was, that he was still nearly as tall as her. She turned his face slightly so they were both looking at Spike, who was watching them both with an unreadable expression, his arms wrapped around himself as though he was afraid he'd fly apart otherwise.

Having been where he was, he was amazed he was holding it together so well.

"He was such a mess afterwards. I didn't know how to help or what to do, and I kept getting headaches... The boys hit me with an empathy spell. I could feel what he felt. They had just gotten done when Dru disappeared."

She cupped his face in both her hands, turned him back to face her, and gazed at him with such sorrow and such love, he felt undone, as though he was coming apart at the seams. As he began trembling, she moved to embrace him to her silent bosom, an eerie parody of the night she'd turned him, but he was crying this time. When had that happened? And why? He tried to struggle free, but she just tightened her hold on him and rocked him like a child while he sobbed, murmuring apologies into his hair all the while.

Spike moved closer and embraced them both. It felt like forgiveness…and like coming home.

"Hello, Magic Box? How may I help you? Just a moment."

"Giles? It's Wesley Wyndham Pryce. He has something Watcher-y for you."

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Anya. This is Giles. Hello Wesley. Yes, it does seem to be becoming a bit of a habit, doesn't it? Ah, the damnable nuisance is back, is he? Oh joy."

The Scoobies watched as a very irritable look crossed Giles' face as he listened to whatever Wesley had to say.

"He's done what now? For Darla? Miracle? It's bloody absurd, is what it is! How do you know it's not just some crack-brained...I wasn't impugning your judgment, old boy. You have to admit it's mad, to say the least. Yes, yes, you've made your point. Human? Good lord, what is going on with them? It's like Russian Roulette, you never know which it will strike next. Bloody ridiculous." he repeated.
"Giles?"

Giles held up a hand, spoke a few more minutes and then hung up.

"So…what's the sitch there, G-man?" Xander asked.

"I think we'd all like to know." Buffy agreed.

"Well…our pet vampire has done another stupid thing. He's apparently got a soul now. Darla has his chip, and Drusilla is currently human and in another world. They're planning to mount a rescue as soon as they find a gateway."

Everyone turned to look at Willow, who held up her hands.

"No soul giving here, honest."

"It must have been Lloyd. I'm rather surprised, really. I don't recall Spike wanting his human soul back. He was doing fine without, if you ask me. I would have bet money on him going to talk to him to help Angel."

"Apparently that is why he went there. He ran into Darla there. She's the one who went to get her own human soul back. She didn't think she could pass the trials. Spike offered to be her champion, but that wasn't allowed. His nephews suggested giving her his chip and him doing the trials. He decided to do so, for whatever reason. Who knows. One can never tell with him which way he's going to jump. Honestly, I don't think even he knows what he's doing from moment to moment."

"So he's soul having and has no chip." Xander sighed. "Happiness clause?"

"No. He earned it, it's his. No loopholes, no clauses."

"I see. And Darla agreed to be chip girl. Why? That makes no sense."

"Training wheels, they said, to prepare her for her soul should she eventually choose to seek it out."

"She needs training wheels to be a decent human being. Nice." Xander scoffed disgustedly.

"Well of course she does. She's not a human being, she's a vampire. She was a vampire for four hundred years. She wasn't very old when she died--either time. Her life before she died was no picnic. She saw nothing good, useful or worthwhile in humanity, and given her experiences I can't say I honestly blame her. She's trying, and really taking one for the team to achieve it. The least you can do is respect that. Being a demon is pretty easy, when it gets right down to it. Being human isn't. It's painful and confusing and smelly and squishy and full of stupid rules. She's made herself helpless to learn. That's scary…and stupid and sort of impressive. I guess it doesn't surprise me. She was a pretty impressive woman. I rather liked her in the short time I knew her." Anya objected.

Cordelia gave the three vampires a smile of welcome when they returned, and tensed slightly. There was something different about Angel, both to her regular sight and her cool new aura vision. He was rather Angelussy.

It was weird, considering they were the same person, but Angelus was taller than Angel. It was
the confident swagger--Angel swaggered too, but he did so with stooped, rounded shoulders, as though he were constantly hiding from the world even when in plain sight.

Angelus was cocky, Angel diffident. Angelus' eyes were cold and calculating, Angel's soulful, for lack of a better word. Angelus smiled, laughed, embraced the world. Angel brooded, frowned and shrank from it.

The guy who walked through the door was a weird combination of both. Taller, no rounded shoulders. Soulful eyes. Smile. Diffident. Neither one nor the other. He seemed lighter too, like some great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He also looked like he'd been put through the wringer, and was surprisingly cheerful about it.

Darla looked wrung out as well, though content for all that, tucked as she was into Angel's side. Spike was all over the place much like Angel was--not quite the brash cocky vampire she'd had movie night with a few weeks prior. He had more colors than before, still flashing from one thing to another, a mix between his flares and sparkles from before and the muddier jewel tones of Angel, all of them tinged with sorrow.

He seemed to be shifting and churning beneath his skin, looking for a more comfortable fit.

They came to a halt, just outside the circle of couches where all of them were sprawled and eyed Harry's laptop and the white wall that had sprung up out of nowhere in interest.

"What's going on?"

"Vacation photos. You're just in time, actually, they're still setting up. You get the thingy?"

"Yeah. We're going to need to find a hotspot to open a portal to Pylea so we can go get Dru. It's kind of important. There are humans living as slaves in that world and they call them cows. Dru needed taking care of occasionally while she was still a vampire. I can't bear to think of what might become of her if she's human. She won't be as sturdy."

"We'll start the research in the morning. You all look done in."

Soulful brown eyes flitted to her for a second before dropping bashfully, and he squirmed very slightly as though embarrassed about something. Darla, who wasn't even looking at him, ran a soothing hand down his arm, while Spike's hand slid up his back rubbed lightly at the nape of his neck and then dropped.

Such small, casual touches, but for a moment Angel looked done in, like he was going to collapse in a big puddle of goo and weep, then the moment passed. Some subtle tension she hadn't realized was there before oozed out of him, and his bashful gaze flicked to the blondes on either side of him. Whatever he saw reassured him, as the last of that tension eased away, leaving him looking years younger.

She hadn't quite realized how careworn the 'ageless' vampire was until some of it was gone.

"Okay, we're good to go. Take a seat, everyone."

"So…anyone want to go Bronzing tonight?" Buffy asked hopefully.

"Wow. We haven't done that for a while, have we? What's the occasion."
"Lots of unexpected free time. My dad has been looking after my mom, I've already finished my patrols, and all my homework is caught up."

"It's still early. You're already done?" "Yeah, it's been dead around here. I went through the whole town, and didn't spot a single vamp. All the deaths this week in the obituaries have been natural causes, or accidents."

"Wow. That's great. We don't do the hang out thing enough anymore…not that we don't hang out, because we do, it's just usually Slay-related. This will be nice."

"Yeah. Nice." Buffy agreed with artificial cheer.

It wasn't that she wasn't happy to be spending time with her friends doing something normal and fun…it was just she was antsy and bored from the lack of slayage, and no one liked being the fifth wheel on couples' night. She needed the distraction though.

She kept thinking of that skanky ho-bag Darla, all fakely chipped and repentant, batting her eyes at Angel and trying to worm her way into his graces. The only good she could see is that Darla was still soulless, which meant Angel would never touch her…not that she thought he would. He staked her before. He just wanted to save her because he knew her and she was human and that's what good guys did. It wasn't because of residual feelings or anything.

There were no feelings.

Angel said he'd never known love till he was with her.

There had been no love, just evil and blood and torture and other icky things. She firmly quashed the little voice that reminded her that Spike had loved Drusilla even without a soul, and he and Angel had certainly seemed cozy for a couple of vamps that supposedly hated each other. Not cozy in a gay way. That was ridiculous. Angel was straight, and Spike was a guy and so not his type….which was women. Because he was straight. Willow just didn't know what she was talking about.

It was probably just one of those weird pack-predator things. Some weird vampire quirk. More defensible if they were all in one spot. Made sense. That's all it was. She was sure of it.

Darla was probably chained up in a bathtub right now, being forced to drink pig's blood out of a straw. That's what they'd done to Spike when he'd showed up chipped. It made sense. Yeah, she couldn't pounce on or bite humans, but it didn't make her good and it didn't make her safe. Angel was smart enough to realize that.

She wasn't too proud to admit she got a certain vindictive pleasure from imagining it.

"So, what'cha thinking about Buffster, that's got you smiling so bright?"

"Just picturing Darla chained up in a bathtub."

The ringing silence snapped Buffy out of her little daydream, and she found all her friends staring at her with varying levels of unease.

"Not…you know…in a kinky sex way or anything!"

"Isn't that what you did to Spike when he was first chipped? Even though he couldn't hurt any of you?" Anya mused. "You all and your strange vampire bondage fetishes."

"There are no bondage fetishes!" Buffy insisted."
Right. That's why you immediately went running for the chains, and Xander for the ropes once you had him at your mercy. And you didn't even do it right." she added to Xander.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you how to properly restrain someone?"

"There were no fetishes there! I didn't want him lurking around while I was sleeping!"

"Well, that plan was a failure. I mean, he just used to wait till you fell asleep and slip out of the ropes, wander off, sample your father's alcohol, watch t.v. and slip back into the chair just before you woke up."

Xander blanched and wondered how he'd ended up unscathed by any weird Spike plans.

"I warned him off drawing funny moustaches on you while you were sleeping." Anya explained, seeing his look. "I told him I'd spank him if he did." She giggled to herself then and grinned reminiscently.

"What is that smile?" Xander asked worriedly.

"Oh, it's nothing… It's just, he did the eyebrow thing and asked if I could front him some money to buy markers. I told him I'd be spanking him with a flaming paddle of course…and then he got all maudlin about Drusilla."

Those at the table all blanched.

"Okay…TMI. I can't believe he misses her if she used to beat on him with flaming paddles."

"Oh, no, it was nothing like that…well, not entirely. She did light something on fire once, but she had a vision and dropped it and the room caught on fire. They ended up having to flee. Spike managed to get his, Drusilla's and Darla's stuff out, but not Angelus'. He was sleeping at the time this happened, and had to leap out of a window, just in his underwear and a shirt. A passing cop saw him and tried to arrest him, so he vamped out. The cop just pulled out a cross attachment for his billy club and beat him with it and he had to flee. Meanwhile, Spike hired a carriage, got all their stuff loaded on, and he and the girls fled. The cop chased Angelus and he ended up going in the opposite direction. He caught up with them a month later, and was ready to throttle the lot of them, but when he found the house they were at and went inside, he let out a bunch of pigs Spike had stolen and nearly got trampled. Then Darla showed up and was just like 'Oh, you're still alive? Took you long enough to catch up", and he got all indignant and wondered why she thought he was dead, and of course it was because he'd fled from an overweight police man. So he's really pissed by this point, but Spike and Drusilla defended him--buttered him up really--by claiming it wasn't his fault he was the 'evilest evil around' and so just had an especially bad reaction to crosses. That improved his mood some and he was busy agreeing that yeah, he really was all that, when Darla interrupted to yell at them for letting the pigs free, because they were supposed to keep them away from the part of the house where they were living. That distracted Angelus, who then wanted to know why he'd nearly gotten trampled by pigs. Drusilla wanted to give them wings. She heard someone say something would happen when pigs flew, and thought it would be neat. Spike, being Spike, ran off and stole a bunch of pigs so she could try it out. Angelus was impressed and wanted a wish-granting pig as well, and he was all indignant that they never explained the wings part in the stories, so he was all set to help track them down. Drusilla told him the stars were weeping about something and it was too late. So they got drunk and had an orgy instead. Well, tried to more like. A bunch of irate farmers showed up to get them for having stolen their pigs. A riot broke out and they had to flee the country."

There was a long beat of silence as Anya finished her story, and then the whole group burst out
laughing.

Spike woke, surrounded by warmth. It was nice…comforting. His nephews--and they were his; it mattered not that they were from a different world--their heartbeats made a soothing rhythm to either side of him. He had a feeling, no matter how long he lived from this point onward, he would associate their scent with happiness.

He loved his vampire family, for all their quirks and cruelty, but they were a family of demons and altruism wasn't really in their nature. For them it was blood and belonging and you're one of us so we don't eat you.

He'd never before had someone just pleased to be in his presence, who would stick around against a dangerous opponent when they didn't have to and not leave him behind, who would spend a night wrapped around him to soothe his nightmares. He'd spent his whole life trying to fit in, trying to be acknowledged, trying to be what he thought he should be and what others expected. This was the first time he'd ever had anyone just accept him as he was, flaws and all and love him anyway.

It wasn't the grand romance he'd dreamed of as a young man, but it soothed a gaping wound deep in his heart nonetheless. Besides the two of them, the only person who had ever just loved him was his mother… His whole being seized up as he remembered, vividly, the last time he saw her.

"Oh god…mother!"

The boys stirred and each wrapped an arm over him in an attempt to soothe.

"I killed her. The things she said…"

"You did." Tom agreed.

"That thing wasn't my mother."

"It was, inasmuch as you were still yourself when you rose as a vampire."

"no. No."

"Yes."

"I'm going to be sick."

"Spike. Did your mother love you?"

"Apparently not."

"No. Lay that aside. A single moment does not a person make. Did your mother love you?"

"I thought so."

"Trust in that. You said you had been gone for several days before you and Drusilla returned to see her, correct?"

"Yes."

"She was dying."
"Yes."

"She was alone, and worried, and then you and she return and you were manic, high on your transformation and the new blood running through your veins."

"Yes."

"She was probably angry then, and confused and frightened."

"She was. Horrified."

"Had your positions been reversed, how would you have felt if your mother had been the one to return, a strange man in tow, acting crazy and all over the place, and then turned into a fangy creature bent on devouring you for your own good?"

"Horrified. Angry that something was using her face and defiling it. Frightened."

"Do you think all that would make a difference to how she rose?"

"...Yes."

"When she did and realized it was really you in there, in a metaphysical way, as much as it was her in there by the same manner…would it have made a lot of difference to how she'd react if all the other stuff had all been frozen in place as she formed?"

Spike choked off a cry and closed his eyes in pain.

"No. It would have still been there and her first instinct would have been to attack the thing she was so furious with."

"Did your mother love you, her brief stint as a vampire aside?"

"Yes. Yes she did. It still doesn't make it right. I killed her."

"You were trying to save her. Personally, I think intentions count for a lot." Harry interjected, his voice sleepy as he murmured in his ear from behind.

"I don't know how Angel can stand it. All these things in my head. All those people."

"How did it go? The mind is its own thing, it can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven?"

"Paradise Lost, yeah? Something like that."

"The only advice I can really give is just let them come and acknowledge that you did them, accept the burden of your past. Don't try to hide from it. I think that's most of Angel's problem. This change was just thrust on him unprepared, and solely for the purpose of hurting him. You've had the preparation beforehand, and you've had people here to help you through. Acknowledge it, all of it--the people you hurt, the damage you left behind, and try to do better in the future. It's all you can do, really."

"And keep in mind, you were a vampire, with a vampire's instincts and a vampire's moral compass, and those things are all still a part of you. People will occasionally still smell like food. The desire to cause pain, enjoy a good fight, to separate out the weak from the herd will all still be there. It isn't like demons have cornered the market on that sort of behavior--it's just magnified in vampires, and built in to how you operate. Your id unleashed from the depths, that sort of thing. Don't take a hundred years to accept that they're all a part of you. Don't fall into the trap of
despising your demon and putting humans on an undeserved pedestal. Humans can be good or evil. You know that. Demons can be as well. You just need to find your center and be yourself."

"You were all demon when we met you. We liked you just fine. Let your soul make you more than you were, not less."

"Hey. Room for one more?" Darla asked as she entered the room. They all obligingly shifted, opening up a space between Tom and Spike, which she crawled into and made herself comfortable. She snuggled into Tom

"Mmm. Warm." and patted Spike on the cheek.

"I've got a credit card and a yen to go shopping. Want to come?"

Spike groaned. "Bloody hell."

"Aw, it won't be so bad. We'll be going to stores, not raiding closets or waiting for the things to be made. You could use some new clothes as well. You have what, one t-shirt, one pair of jeans, your boots and your coat. Come on, it'll be fun. It might keep your mind off things for a bit."

"What time is it?" "It's still light out, early afternoon. You said you could protect us from the sun and give us reflections for a short time, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there you go. Unpack one of those sporty little cars, magic us up and let's go."

"Darla? Are they coming?" they heard Cordelia call from the hallway. "Still trying to convince them to get out of bed."

Darla called back, laughing.

Cordelia came in the room and raised an eyebrow at the four of them. "Is this a private orgy?"

"Nah. We're a friendly bunch. Jump right in." Spike sighed.

She looked briefly tempted but headed back towards the door.

"Nah, if I do that, I have a feeling the stores will be closed before anyone gets up. Let's go. The sales won't wait on everyone's lazy bones."

When they were finally ready to leave, they realized the hotel was empty.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Vision. A girl at UCLA. Gunn was here, so he, Wes and Angel headed out to investigate. The sun-proofing on Angel's car is still working, though he hide out in the back seat with a blanket close to hand just in case. They figured so long as they were inside, it should be fine, and it's late enough in the year that the sun should be going down in a few hours. Time enough to investigate and come home safely. It's just us for the moment."

"Did they make any progress on finding the hotspot to open a portal from?"

"I think Wes did make some progress, but whether we like it or not, the visions come first. They might even be involved, actually. The powers aren't completely heartless. I'm sure they realized how keen Angel is to go haring off and find Drusilla. I guess we'll find out. Oooh! Pull in over there. This place is great--decent clothes, reasonable prices."
"Bloody hell. That's what you consider reasonable prices?"

"To look good? Yeah."

"This has been fun." Buffy admitted, grinning at her dad.

"And new clothes? Definite bonus."

"I have years to make up for."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Doesn't matter. Now, come on. I don't want to leave your mom by herself for too long. Let's see if she feels up to having dinner with us."

"Dad, it's only late afternoon."

"True, but none of us has eaten since we arrived this morning. I know I'm hungry, I would imagine your mom is too…and you could stand to put a bit of meat on your bones."

"Psh."

"I'm serious here. Being slender is all very well and good, but you're down to skin and bones there. How's Italian sound? A big plate of pasta should put you to rights."

"Sounds good, actually."

They found Joyce messing with her wig, which she'd acquired to hide her shaved head and the scars she'd acquired from her operation.

"It looks ridiculous, doesn't it?"

"No, mom, it looks fine."

"Maybe I should wear a hat?"

"It looks fine, Joyce, and your own hair will come in before you know it."

"It's not windy out, is it?"

"No, it's not. It's fine, mom really. How do you feel?"

"Tired. Still more tired than I should be, I think, but otherwise good."

"You up for lunch? I was thinking Italian to fatten our girl up a bit."

"That sounds delightful, actually."

They headed out and hopped into the car.

"It's so strange, realizing you've lost years of your life. Part of me kept disbelieving it, but I keep seeing changes where I'm not expecting them and it just brings it all home again. He slowed and
peered mournfully at the corner they were passing.

"Like that. Remember Francesca's?"

"Yes, I do. Gone, huh? That is disappointing."

"Well, keep driving. I'm sure there's other places."

"Yeah. It's still disappointing though. I shouldn't be surprised. A big city like L.A., there's bound to be changes, even without losing four years. It's just hard, when even familiar places aren't."

"Oh, look there. That looks like Italian, if you're still in the mood for it."

"And they have an open air terrace. Nice. We could eat outside, watch the people walking by."

"Joyce?"

"Sounds lovely."

"Alright then. Hope we don't need a reservation."

They found nice seats on the terrace, overlooking the sidewalk below. Her mom and dad fell to chatting amiably about people and places that used to be there, years and years ago. Buffy smiled at them, content for the moment to just be with them, hear their voices and pretend for the moment that they'd never divorced, that she'd never been the Slayer, never died. She was just a normal girl, with her normal parents, taking time to visit during her college years.

Traffic was moving slowly; a long line of cars inching forward, and there were lots of people out and about, enjoying the warmth and the nice weather. There were several nice cars in the bunch. Maybe since her dad was feeling so generous he could see his way clear to getting her a car? She didn't need one, most of the time. Superpowers were good for that much—wandering all over town was never much of a problem. Still, it was the normal girl thing, wasn't it?

It was so embarrassing, not being able to drive, not having a car of her own. Maybe she should start dropping hints later? Traffic loosened and several cars passed before slowing down again. A fancy little convertible with loud music blasting eased in to place right below them, filled with people. Familiar people.

Her gaze sharpened and she leaned forward intently, staring. Back seat: Two annoying wizards and Cordelia, who was dressed to the nines, had a fresh manicure and had a filmy scarf tied over her hair to keep it from getting too windblown, wearing designer sunglasses and looking like a movie star.

Front seat: Spike and Darla. Darla—newly chipped and not only not locked up, but tooling around town in a sporty convertible and dressed to kill, sporting a similar scarf and sunglasses combo, curved into Spike's shoulder like she belonged there, and running her hand lightly up and down his thigh while she laughed at something he said.

"Stupid ho-bag."

"Buffy?"

Buffy blinked and turned to find her parents watching her curiously. She smiled brightly and did her best to ignore the car down below.
"Wow. I'm starved. When's the food getting here?"

"Who were you looking at?"

"No one. Just cars. No one I know at all."

"Buffy."

"Remember Cordelia? From high school? Her."

Her dad just nodded, but her mom stared at her curiously, head cocked like she was trying to read her mind. "Anyone else?"

"Oh, you know. Just people. Darla." Joyce raised an eyebrow. "And Spike and his nephews. They were in Africa, apparently. Giles mentioned they were back. I guess they decided to stay in L.A. for a bit."

Hank raised an eyebrow and leaned so he could see the cars down below. He spotted the vividly white hair first, and then noted the two teenage boys in the back seat.

"Yeah, that's them. Gave me a camel, asked me to take the others with me and then vanished in mid-air. The world is such a strange place."

"I take it Darla is the 'stupid ho-bag'?"

"She is! She was an actual professional."

"That's not very nice, Buffy. She was born in the 1600s. The only real choices for women in those days were to be a governess and then an old maid, get married or do what she did. Given that her mother was in the same profession, the chances of the first two happening were slim to none."

"How would you even know that?"

"She was staying at our house while you and the others were gone."

"WHAT!"

"Mr. Giles explained what had happened. He didn’t think it appropriate for her to stay with him. She was in your room, Faith was in the guest room. Apparently she bit me once. She apologized about it. I remembered her. She said she was there to be your history tutor."

Buffy just sputtered in horror at the idea of Darla sleeping in her room.

"So…she's a vampire again? Shouldn't you do something?"

"She's got Spike's chip in her head now." Buffy grumbled, her face forming into an unhappy pout. "Spike got his soul back and Drusilla's human."

"Spike's old girlfriend, Drusilla?"

"Yeah. She's a stupid ho-bag too. And she's crazy."

"Yes, he mentioned that. Said it was one of the things he liked about her."

"Well, Spike's crazy too, so no surprise there."

"I don't recall him mentioning her being in the same profession."
"She wasn't. She was going to be a nun. Mostly to hide from Angelus, though she apparently
liked him after she became a vampire. She was running around with him after Angel went evil that
time."

"Okay…who is Angel? And what do you mean he goes evil?"

"He's a vampire with a soul. He's a good guy. He used to help out. He lost his soul because he
was too happy. He was cursed and that was the escape clause, though no one knew about that. He
went evil and tried to destroy the world. I had to send him to hell to save it. Angel, that is, not
Angelus. Willow gave him his soul back, but it was too late. The portal was already open."

"He and Buffy dated for a while. I didn't know about it till after he'd gone evil. I never liked him."

"That's because you only knew his evil side. Angel is a completely different person."

"Not according to Mr. Giles, or to Spike for that matter. He's the same person, he just occasionally
has a conscience."

"No, mom, you're wrong about this."

"No, I really don't think so. I think you want it to be true so you don't have to deal with the things
he did."

"I'll prove it. You'll see when you see Spike again…although I'd imagine he's probably going by
William. That's his original name. He'll be some weird Victorian guy, though one with a demon in
him that he has to fight."

Joyce raised an eyebrow and stared at her long enough that she had to fight down the urge to
squirm and drop her eyes. Her mother seemed to sense this and looked away, peering over the
railing at the car down below.

"Bleached hair, punk music, knows how to drive a car. Looks like the same guy to me."

"Whoops. Looks like gramps is mad." Spike tittered as they pulled in back at the hotel.

"He'll get over it."

"Where have you all been?"

"Shopping, remember?"

"All this time?"

Darla just looked at him, and continued past him to the trunk, which Spike had helpfully popped
open.

"And why did all of them need to go with you?"

"I needed other opinions, didn't I? Did you expect me to go alone? What if I had been beset by a
mugger?" she pointed out reasonably as she began loading him down with her purchases.
Cordelia smiled at Spike and began loading him down with hers.
"Oi!"

"What? You've got super strength, I don't. Besides, isn't it the gentlemanly thing to do?"

"She's got you there." Tom pointed out.

"How much stuff did you buy? Do we even have any money left?"

"Just a few necessities. Surely you don't expect me to live in this one outfit forever?"

"Well, no, but…"

Darla was already walking away, leaving him to trail after her, unable to see over the packages she'd dumped on him.

"What is all this stuff?"

"If you like I can model it all for you…"

Harry helpfully tugged at his sleeve to keep him from running into the door. Darla bit her lip to keep from laughing, and took the topmost packages so he could see. Still grumbling a bit, he trailed after her as she headed upstairs.

Wesley and Gunn watched the two vampires and turned away so they wouldn't see their amusement.

"Geez. Whipped. In bleach-boy's case it's just sad--Legs there isn't even his girl."

"Well, they're rather remarkable ladies, aren't they?" "Prolly clean up the vamp problem in the city if we just sent those two out a few nights. They can nag them into shape and put them to work fetching and carrying."

"We shall have to try that sometime." Wesley agreed with a grin.

Everyone reconvened a short time later in the lobby. Gunn looked Spike up and down and shook his head. "That's a new look for you."

"Bloody women." Spike grumbled.

He was in dark blue dress pants and shirt, and had a dark grey, short leather coat on instead of his usual battered duster, jeans and t-shirt.

"Nearly stripped me there in the bloody store."

"So, how'd things go with the vision, anyway?" Harry wondered.

"The girl in question, a Miss Winifred Burkle, disappeared five years ago. We did some digging and a few other students in her department also disappeared under mysterious circumstances. We found the book from your vision. We hope will give us a clue about the strange portals that seem to be responsible."

"Yeah? Let's see it." Cordelia peered at the thing in interest. "You know what? I think this might be in Pylean. Lorne showed me some of the language. I said earlier that the vision might be connected to Drusilla in some way. What if this Winifred Burkle is in Pylea as well? If this does open the portal, we just need to find the hotspot and go. Let me give Lorne a call. I've seen Pylean, but I can't actually read it."
"We can only hope it will be so simple."

After Cordelia hurried off, the rest of them settled back comfortably to wait.

"So...how long are you planning to stick around?"

Spike gave Angel a sour look and sneered lightly before resting his head on the back of the couch.

"I'll be out of your hair as soon as we rescue Dru. Don't worry about it."

"I didn't actually mean it like that. I was just curious."

"Save it. We'll head out as soon as I know she's safe."

"You can't keep her, you know. She's human now."

"She can make her own decisions, just as she always has. Anyway, I wasn't planning to 'keep' her in any case. Me and Dru are quits, have been for a while. That's not going to change just because she's changed species since it happened. I hardly think she'd be happy in Sunnydale regardless. The Scoobies are a self-righteous unforgiving lot at the best of times. I have a feeling they wouldn't be too welcoming of her, human or not. Anya still has a hard time being completely accepted, and she's human, and never had half the difficulties with them that Dru and I had. I'd never subject her to them given a choice. She might want to go head off the nunnery, for all we know. Might want to start popping out sprogs. You know how she was with her bloody dolls. Regardless of what she decides--and she gets to decide--she's not a thing for keeping. She's a person and will go wherever her little heart wants her to go. I'll see to that, even if I have to fight you to make it happen."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Angel's gang, Spike and the boys, and Lorne head to Pylea to rescue Drusilla.

"Is everyone ready?"

"You know…I've changed my mind. There's plenty of folks on this little expedition already and…"

"Shut up, Lorne."

"Hopefully the van will keep us all together. It would be rather a poor start to our expedition if we all get flung in different directions." Harry mused.

"So long as we don't end up fused together on the other side, it should work." Wesley offered.

"That's a possibility? No one mentioned that was a possibility." Gunn complained, reaching for the door.

"Give that here." Darla huffed, grabbing the book to begin reading.

"Krv Drpglr pwlz chkwrt strplmt dwghzn prqlrz n lffrmtpzlzt!"

A glowy, wavering portal began to open up in front of them.

"Hold on!" Angel called and floored it.

They landed with a bump and skidded to a halt, everyone screaming. Darla and Angel, who were in the front seat, both threw their arms over their faces and tried to scramble into the back, where Spike was already trying to crawl away from the window.

"Um, guys? You're not on fire." Harry pointed out.

"Did you put sun protection on us?"

"No. In retrospect, we probably should have. We didn't think to do so since it was dark when we left." Tom apologized.

"So…why are we not on fire?" Angel wondered.

"Different metaphysical rules, maybe?"

Lorne, who was looking ill now that he was in his homeworld, climbed shakily from the rear of the van.

"Who has the book? I guess we should head back here to leave again, since this is where the portal opens."
"I had it in my hand when we went through, but it's gone now." Darla replied.

"How are we supposed to leave again?"

"Maybe you dropped it."

They searched the van, peering under seats and feeling around, but there was no sign of it.

"If the purpose of the book was to open portals to this place, there's no point in it being here. It might have remained behind so it can continue to exercise its function. We'll just have to find another way. We know such ways exist, as at least two portals that we know of opened from here to L.A.--one dropped Lorne through, the other the drokken beast. We just need to find what those ways are."

"We should hide this." Lorne pointed to the van. "We don't have cars in these parts…or, you know, roads."

"No problem." Tom offered, before shrinking the van and dumping it in his pocket.

"Neat trick."

"It has its uses."

"So…if you were Drusilla, where would you be?" Cordelia asked.

"Your Drusilla is a seer…there's a couple of possibilities. None of them are particularly good." Lorne warned.

"Tell me." Angel growled.

"She might have been captured and collared. Cows aren't allowed to walk around free."

"You just started and I already don't like what I'm hearing." Gunn growled.

"Or, if anyone realized she was a seer, she might be in the hands of the Brotherhood of Trombli. There's a prophecy, you see."

"I hate prophecies." Angel, Tom and Harry all said together.

"That a person with the 'curse' would come and com-shuk with the groosalug, who then would become king."

"Okay…what the hell does that mean?"

"Com-shuk is a mating ritual. Groosalug means undefeated champion."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad, you know, under the right circumstances." Darla opined.

"The reason for this is that the Groosalug will take her visions. If she survives, she'll probably be killed afterwards. I doubt the Brotherhood took it at all well that their prophesied one, with a connection to the powers, is a cow." Lorne disagreed.

"I'm liking that damned word less and less the more you say it." Gunn growled.

"There's a reason I didn't want to come back here! I hate this place. The day that portal opened up and dumped me in L.A. was the happiest day of my life." Lorne protested.
"Lorne. Come take a look at this."

Lorne glanced over at Harry and Tom, who were crouched down, looking at a map that had etched itself in the dirt at their feet.

"Do you know where this is?" Harry pointed.

"Where are we in relation?"

"Here."

Lorne took a careful look around and then at the map.

"That would be the palace. Looks like the Brotherhood's got your girl."

"Hey…that girl from your vision. What was her name again?" Tom asked.

"Winifred Burkle."

Tom waved his wand over the map they'd made and another dot appeared equidistant between themselves and Drusilla.

"Split up?" Wesley suggested.

"Might be for the best. There are a lot of us." Lorne agreed.

"Why don't you three and Lorne go get Drusilla. We'll look for Winifred Burkle."

"Be careful. You'll end up dead or collared if you're not." Lorne warned.

Harry just smiled and shook his head. "I'd worry about anyone who tried, not about us."

After walking for about a half hour or so, they began to see signs of civilization. The dirt road, thatched houses, and haze of smoke over the village brought back old memories for Angel--his home in Ireland back in the day hadn't been too far off this place. They began to hear indignant muttering at 'a herd of cows' wandering down the street like people, uncollared and uncontained. They also heard a few mutters about Lorne--betrayed, traitor, deserter. Lorne likely heard them as well, but he stared straight ahead and kept walking; only the tension in his back and shoulders gave away how unhappy he was to be there.

"Krevalorneswath of the Deathwok Clan. You have returned." A large, grumpy looking demon of the same sort as Lorne announced, before looking him up and down in contempt. "You return wearing strange clothes and keeping company with cows. You compound your crimes and your betrayals."

"I'm a man on a mission, cupcake." Lorne tittered nervously. "Off to the palace to see the Princess, don't you know. These are her family. I'm here to be their guide."

"These cows have no collars!"

"Sends a mixed message, don't you think? Royal family in chains?"

The large demon gestured and they found themselves surrounded on all sides by grim demons.

"Take them to the Brotherhood. Let them deal with them."
Darla gave the demons a haughty stare from where she stood safely ensconced between Angel and Spike. One of the demons moved to grab Spike, but his hand shot out and grasped the reaching arm and give it a quick twist. The rest of the demons halted warily at the demon's scream. They'd never heard of such a strong cow before. Angel glowered at the demons nearest to him with the promise of death in his eyes. The demons backed off and just provided escort, though it burned them to allow cows even that much leeway. It burned even more when they set off, and the cows simply sauntered along as though they were important people, and they themselves their lackeys. It was small consolation that the Brotherhood would likely behead them for their insolence.

Lorne relaxed just a bit. The first hurdle was passed. If they could keep it up, they might all even get out alive.

After another long walk they at last came to the palace--a sizeable stone edifice, much different from the rural cottages that seemed to dominate the rest of the landscape. Large demons with swords guarded the entrance and were posted at intervals throughout the rest of the building. They were led down a long hallway, and passed over to some of the hulking guardsmen, who sneered at them before prodding them along. They were finally shown into a large hall, filled with demons, some in armor, some in robes, some in plain clothing that seemed to indicate servants of some sort.

At the focus of the hall, upon a high dais, in a throne, was Drusilla. She was dressed in a skimpy bikini with skirt combo, slit high on each side, reminiscent of Princess Leia--not that Spike ever watched Star Wars or anything--and wearing a crown.

"Princess. Prisoners to see you. What would you have us do with them?"

"Off with their heads!"

Around the room, swords were drawn and the armored warriors began to advance.

"Dru, pet, that's not very nice. You could at least offer us hospitality before bringing on the fun and games."

"No, I can't. I'm a wicked princess."

"That you are luv, that you are…but if you cut off our heads there won't be any more games to play."

"Miss Edith agrees. Release them."

"Fine old bird, Miss Edith. You should always listen to her, pet."

"Are we close yet?"

"Just about. She should be somewhere up ahead."

"REBEL COW! Seize her!"

"Uh…did the rest of you hear that?"

"Yeah."

They scrambled to the tree line and peered out to see a dirty, collared human fleeing before several
armed demons. One of them threw something at her and it wrapped around her legs tripping her to the ground and sending her tumbling. When she was down another pointed a device at her and pressed the button. She didn't react.

"It is as we thought. This cow has done something to her collar."

They surrounded the girl and one aimed a kick at her.

"I've seen about enough, I think." Wesley remarked as he hefted his sword.

"Right there with you." Gunn growled.

The two of them burst from the treeline, each bellowing a war cry. The noise attracted more demons, who came running. Tom and Harry split up and went wide to get behind the new demons that were approaching and began laying them low from a distance. Wesley and Gunn worked to drive back the demons surrounding the girl, while Cordelia went in to grab her and get her away.

They got the demons there, but they could hear more coming, attracted by the sound of battle. Deciding to retreat for the moment, they dashed back into the trees, and ended up following the girl they rescued, who darted ahead, beckoning. She led them on a roundabout route, through water and across rocks, before doubling back and coming at last to a cave.

Once they were all inside, the girl began to fidget and twist her hands.

"You need to be careful. You don't have collars. You're supposed to have collars. Cows do. We're all cows. I didn't used to be a cow, but I am now. I don't like it much."

"Winifred Burkle."

The girl shook her head once and backed away from them, spooked.

"No. That's not me. I dream about her sometimes. She lived someplace else. Before here. But nothing was before here. I've always been here. I wish she was me. They were nice dreams. TACOS. I like tacos...at least I think I would if I'd ever had such a thing, but if I've always been here being a bad cow, then I never did. No. No.No." Growing more and more agitated, the girl scuttled to the wall of the cave and began writing on it, her tolerance for communication obviously at an end.

Cordelia looked stricken, and they could all see she wondered why the poor girl had been left here so long to suffer as she had. She glanced helplessly at Wes, who had been studying the writings on the wall. It looked like equations, mixed with the odd writings from the portal book they'd used.

"Leave us." Drusilla commanded.

She really had taken to the whole being queen of the sodding demons right quick, she had. Of course, years of him telling her she was his dark princess had probably made the role seem natural.

"Princess...surely you do not mean for us to leave you with the prisoners?"

"They're my family. Run along, or Miss Edith will become cross."

"I'd do what she says, mate. You don't want to see Miss Edith in a sulk. It's never pretty." Spike
agreed cheerfully.

The robed monks looked irate, but they left them alone with only a bit of grumbling. One of the monks turned back before exiting.

"Word has been sent to the scum-pits of Ur. The Groosalug comes."

Drusilla simply waved a languid hand his way, but otherwise paid him no attention, something which obviously irked the demon, given the hateful look he cast her way before shutting the door behind him.

Drusilla rose from her throne, resplendent in her finery, like a savage pagan goddess of old. Her change of species had robbed her of none of her grace; she still moved like a snake, all sinuous movement that could turn deadly in an instant. If not for the heartbeat and the faint tinge of pink in her porcelain skin, he'd have thought her unchanged.

She kept her eyes on him as she undulated down the steps, every movement giving a flash of pale leg. She was barefoot, arrayed in jewels at ankle and wrist.

He had wondered if she would lose any of her power over him now that no blood tie existed between them. She hadn't. Regardless of what Angel might think, her power over him was always so much more than simple blood, though that had always been a big part of it. No, he had loved her—mad, bad, and dangerous to know, innocent and childlike, temptress and destroyer—he had loved every broken part of her for as long as she'd let him, and part of him probably always would. When she held out a hand to him as she descended, he could no more have resisted her pull than the ocean the pull of the moon.

He kissed the delicate hand placed in his, marveling slightly at its unaccustomed warmth, and stood quiescent as she drew closer and ran her fingertips lightly down his cheek, while peering into his eyes.

"Still my Spike, but you're all agleam. My dark prince has become a lord of light." she whispered.

Her eyes fluttered and she swayed, her gaze becoming unfocused.

"So many paths... they twist and wind together and I can't see where they all lead, but there's fire and battles and glory there... pain and sorrow too. It burns... It burns... wicked spark. So cruel to your poor mummy... burning it all away." she whispered.

Her gaze sharpened and his unbeating heart fluttered just a bit. He had always lived for these moments—when her gaze was clear and the madness had retreated just a bit. During those moments, he knew her whole attention was on him and no one else. She'd had far more of such moments once Angelus had left the picture, and few after he'd returned for a short time.

"You were supposed to be mine forever."

"Was. Am. Always."

"No. You don't love your princess anymore."

"Oh, Dru, love, no. You threw me away... more than once, but I don't stop loving people once I start. I don't know how."

"Lies."

"I'm a sodding bad liar love, ask anyone."
"Am I still in your heart? Will I always be?"

"Should God create another Eve, and I, another Rib afford, yet loss of thee, would never from my heart; No, no, I feel The Link of Nature draw me: Flesh of Flesh, Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy state, mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe."

Drusilla smiled and sighed as she leaned in. Spike met her halfway and their lips brushed briefly in a chaste kiss. They leaned their foreheads together and stood silently for a moment together.

"Will you still love me when I'm no longer wicked?"

"Planning a change of state, luv?"

"The stars told me I had a new knight. He would take away my wickedness and make me all brand new again. The stars are full of tricks though, my Spike. If he becomes wicked, he'll shrivel away like dust and ashes, and live in chains, then naughty priests will gobble princess up."

"Why does your knight shrivel up, luv?"

"Can't be a knight and a princess both. Not allowed. His blood will gobble my wickedness, and my wickedness will gobble him up. Make him a princess in chains…but Princess can't be a knight, only a cow, and cows get eaten."

"It's a good thing I'm here then, isn't it love? I might be a knight errant these days, but I'll always come when my lady calls."

"Dru." Angel called, feeling just a bit irked at having been so far ignored.

Spike's hand tightened on hers as her eyes filmed over with their usual madness and she turned from him, seeking her maker. Spike let her go. He knew how utterly pointless it was to fight against his pull—he'd learned that lesson the hard way. Angelus had broken her and made himself the center of her universe. He had once thought he could fight that—and to some extent he could. She loved him, those part of her that were able, but he always had and always would come in second to her precious Daddy.

She was human now—that meant she could change and grow in a way that demons just didn't—growth and change for them was always slow, always painful, and usually accompanied by great trauma besides. The core of her madness was her visions. As a human girl she'd been feared, resented and blamed for the catastrophes she'd foretold. She had tried in vain to warn her family of the creature that was stalking them. One by one they'd fallen, and those left had feared and resented and blamed her even more as their numbers dwindled. Angelus had capped it off with telling her, in the guise of a priest in the confessional, that she was a wicked devil child and was indeed making all the bad things happen.

He wasn't too keen on her com-shukking with any groosalug…but if that's what it would take to give her a chance to be free and heal, he'd help them right along. Although...by the sound of it, the poor shmuck would lose his strength and become a prisoner and pawn of the nasty little monks hereabouts. That didn't seem to be quite fair...though if it was the only way for Dru to be free, he was all for it. His blood would gobble the wickedness, would it? It seemed, even if you weren't a vampire, it was still all about the blood, wasn't it?

He flicked a glance and saw Angelus and Darla were busy petting and cooing at Dru. Angelus was rubbing his paws all over the hand he'd been holding but a moment ago.
He'd deny it, but he knew full well he was trying to overpower his scent with his own. He'd always been a greedy pillock, Angelus was--didn't like anyone else playing with his toys. He was no different now, no matter what he was calling himself these days, telling him he couldn't 'keep' Dru, like she was naught but a dolly to be passed hand to hand and stuck on a shelf for all time. Bastard.

They all turned as three booming knocks sounded on the doors to the throne room. The doors opened and a large demon strode through.

"The Groosalug comes."

He stepped aside and revealed a muscle-bound human looking bloke, with startling sapphire blue eyes. He was part demon, he could smell it…in fact, he smelled a bit like Cheerleader. He was quite a strapping fellow, looked a bit like Angel in a general sort of way--same general type anyway, though he sported long flowing locks that tumbled over his shoulders.

Lorne gave fellow a finger wave. Darla and Dru both looked him up and down and then grinned at one another. Angel bristled and stared baleful death…not that the meathead seemed to notice--muscle-bound demon he might be, but a bloody boy scout nonetheless.

Yeah.
New plan.

It seemed he was a greedy bastard himself. He wasn't sure he'd be able to just stand idly by while the meathead had a go or three with Dru…didn't want to kill him either. By the look and sound of it, he seemed to be a true-blue hero type with a tragic past. He'd never done anything to him, and he was supposed to be turning a new leaf these days… Of course, letting him get on with com-shukking his princess was going to be bad for him in the long run too, wasn't it? Seemed a shame to leave him to be stripped of his strength and made a prisoner. Had he read Dru right? He thought so, but one could never tell with her. Full of tricks, that one.

He risked a glance at Dru who grinned her wicked grin at him, before drifting closer to the Groosalug.

Eh, the hell with it. He usually had the most success when he winged it. If it didn't work, he could still say he tried, right?

He sauntered closer as though getting ready to introduce himself. His princess kept the bloke's attention by swaying and speaking to him in a lilting voice--it wasn't quite thrall, but it did sort of dull the senses and make you calm.

Had to strike quick, and get away.
He waited for his moment and moved.

In the blink of an eye, he was behind the Groosalug, had his arms pinned in an 'x' across his chest, and bit down.

Something was wrong….but he couldn't lose focus…Dru was depending on him. Gobble down a few deep mouthfuls, not too much, careful, careful.
Slobber over the wound to help it seal.
Dru, his darling, helped out by hopping on his back and holding on tight. Time to run.
Drop the Groosalug, run like hell before Angelus got all bent out of shape and tried to stake him.
Bust the doors...damn, reduced to kindling...
bat aside the guards and the damned monks that wanted his princess dead.
It would never happen, not on his watch.
Roar and growl to let them know this.
Feels good. Do it again.
Uh-oh, grandpa and little sis are charging after them and shouting. Run like the wind!

Through it all, Drusilla held on tight and laughed gleefully in his ear, cheering him on as he bowled over another group of monks. He got outside, leapt for the surrounding wall and over it, then ran full out to the nearest woods. Needed to find a safe place and see if his plan worked.

It was so hard to think...

Dru tugged on his horns to turn him down a barely there path... Wait, horns?

He chanced a quick glance down at his hands and flexed the scaled, leathery hands with their long wicked claws.

It seemed sunlight and reflections weren't the only wonky things in this world. Don't worry about it now...keep running.
Dru tugged again and led them to a small hidden cave.
She hopped off his back and dropped to the ground to scurry inside. He was bigger as he was. He needed to change back.
It was so hard to think...to remember who and what he was...
Dru peeked out, leaned forward and ran a hand gently down his face, while staring into his eyes. Just like that it all melted away, and he was human-faced again.
Dru smiled at him and scurried back inside, beckoning. He could hear Angel and the others running, yelling and searching in the distance, but they were safe enough for the moment. He crawled inside, laid his duster on the ground. He and Dru stared at one another in the gloom, and fell together onto it in a tangle of limbs.

If his princess needs to be com-shukked good and proper to be well, he'd bloody well be the one to do it. He just hoped it worked.

"Um...where is everyone? The place looks kind of deserted."

"It is."

"It is? Isn't this where Angel and the others were supposed to be headed?"

"Yeah...I think something went wrong. I can hear fighting in the distance. Let's just try to find those books I saw in my vision so we can go home. We'll try to find the others afterwards." Cordelia decided.

"Alright. Let's go. We should split up. We'll cover more ground that way."

"No, let's stick together. I don't want to be caught on my own if any soldiers show up."

"Alone is bad. Bad things happen here." Winifred Burkle agreed.

"Accio books."

"Huh?"
"I'm going to take a quick look around." Tom said casually, before ducking out of sight.

They could hear thumping and then three large books came sailing into view. Harry caught them and stowed them away.

"Okay…we've got the books. What about the rest of my vision? All the humans on this world are going to get their heads blown off…well, not us and Fred, but the rest of them."

"Well…we've still got a bit of time. I can see if I can find a master control or something and tweak it. It's a control device, so they'd want to keep the failsafe close to hand, right? It would be the best defense, really--make it so no one in their right mind would ever consider trying to breach this place for fear of getting their head blown up, and they need never fear the humans revolting and trying to overthrow them in the first place. If they're angry and suicidal enough to try anyway, well, they're easily dealt with." Harry mused.

"Where'd your friend go anyway?" Gunn asked suspiciously as Harry began scanning and heading deeper into the palace.

"To look around, see if there's anything else of interest worth taking. Huh. There's something this way. Come on."

"He's robbing the place?"

"Of course he is. It makes good tactics, when you think about it. Anything you take you deny to your enemies. It only makes sense."

Gunn eyed him a moment, and then began scanning the rooms as they wandered with an eye to getting useful stuff for himself as well.

Harry at last led them to a long room and to one wall. "Found it. Give me a few to tweak it. Look around nearby, there might be other things of interest." he told the rest of them absently. Gunn, Wesley and Fred weren't listening--they had spotted a table laden with food nearby and were guzzling it down as quickly as they could.

Tom found them while Harry was still messing with the failsafe. He grabbed something to eat and then came by to have a look. He scanned Harry's work and then slanted a glance at him.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side."

"Like it?"

"Quite. It has a certain flair."

"What did you do?" Wesley wondered.

"Tweaked the system. If one of those Brotherhood fellows tries to kill all the humans, it will remove the collars from all the humans necks, put them on the monks and blow them up instead. Murder-suicide made easy."

"You're a scary dude." Gunn said with horrified awe.

"I try."

"I guess we're done here." Tom decided, before casting another locator spell.

"Hmm…Spike and Drusilla are in the woods somewhere thataway. Lorne, Angel and Darla are
together elsewhere."

"Well, let's round them up and say goodbye to this place."

Angel stomped into yet another clearing and sniffed the air.

"I can't really smell anything. We'll never find them at his rate."

He gritted his teeth and began kicking the nearest tree, then snarled, broke off a branch and drew a knife from his pocket to begin hacking at the end to make a large stake.

"I never should have trusted him. He's a mad dog, same as always. Dru's probably dead right now. Well, no more. He had his chance, he blew it. I'll put him down as soon as I find him."

"Um, Angelcakes, don't you think you're going a bit overboard there?"

"Yeah, seriously. Why are you suddenly in such a lather to kill Spike?"

"You saw what he did! He bit the Groosalug! He turned into a monster and went on a rampage! He killed Dru!"

"He took the monks by surprise and got Dru away so she couldn't be killed, kept the Groosalug from losing his strength and kept the monks from getting Dru's visions."

"What do you mean he kept me from losing my strength?" the Groosalug asked curiously.

"Dru had a vision. If you had com-shukked her and gotten her visions, she would have been killed, and you would have lost your strength and become a prisoner to the monks. He bit you to steal a bit of your vision-stealing power." Lorne explained.

"What the hell are you two talking about? Spike went nuts and ran amok! Angel objected.

"He followed the plan your girl gave him, pudding."

"What plan? There was no plan!"

"She told him when they were talking, remember?" Lorne reminded him.

"She was babbling. I tend to tune her out...it makes soothing background noise."

"She told him about her vision and gave him something to work with to prevent it."

"And seriously, you think he killed her? He had to be talked into torturing her, even when he had no soul. What makes you think he's going to kill her now that he has it?" Darla scoffed.

"Spike's obsessed with her, he always has been."

"Um, he loves her, sugar cakes. She loves him too and trusts him implicitly. I doubt she'd have hopped on his back like that if she didn't." Lorne disagreed.

"Dru's insane."

"So...they were trying to trick me, not honor me for being undefeated champion of this world?" Groosalug said sadly.
"Pretty much. Sorry."

Groosalug frowned and sat down on a nearby stump to ponder this.

"So even now, when I have worked hard for many years to prove my worth, they still scorn me for my cow blood?"

"Human, sweetie. Human. It's nothing to be ashamed of, really. We started out human, and became something else along the way." Darla explained.

"Monsters. We're all monsters."

"Demons, darling, demons."

Angel grimaced. Darla sighed and then vamped out. Angel blanched in horror and stumbled back from her. Darla looked somewhat similar to how Spike had looked earlier--scaled, leathery skin, horns. She was colored differently--dusky rose instead of blue, and her horns were smaller and more delicate looking; she also didn't have as many. She had long wicked claws and still looked dangerous though.

Demon Darla cocked her head at him and growled inquiringly, before moving closer to sniff at him. A deep rumbling purr began vibrating in her chest as she rubbed up against him.

Angel gasped and shoved her away from him. Darla rocked back on her heels and then growled in anger, lashing out and catching him on the chest and arm with her claws and leaving several deep furrows behind. She scented the wind and then took off at a fast lope into the distance, in the opposite direction than they'd been searching.

"Oh…god…she's going back to town to eat all the humans!"

"Town's that way, sugar. I think she left to find the rest of your little pack since you rejected her."

Angel's eyes flashed in fury. Darla was his and it was time she damn well remembered that. He could feel the change coming over him and tried desperately to push it back, but it swamped over him in spite of his best efforts. When his full demon emerged, he sniffed at Lorne and ignored him, then at the Groosalug, who was still bleeding slightly and wrinkled his nose at the smell of his blood, before growling and sniffing at the wound some more. He then cast around, sniffing the air and growling again, before taking off in hot pursuit of Darla.

Lorne sunk down onto the tree trunk beside Groosalug and tried to stop shaking. This was bad. This was really bad. Vampires on Pylea turned into mindless, slavering monsters, and now all three of them were in demon form. If they came across any of the others, they'd try to eat them… and the others would kill them before they realized who it was.

"We need to find the others I arrived here with and warn them to stay away."

Groo pushed himself to his feet, ready to be of service. "Very well. Let us find your companions. It seems there will be no princess and no com-shuk for me this day. It's a pity. I was quite looking forward to it."

"I'll just bet you were, cupcake. I'll just bet you were."

They headed back towards the town. They were nearly to the edge of the forest when Groosalug held up his hand and listened.
"A strange and smelly beast comes this way."

"No. Not a beast. It's a carriage...a wagon sort of. Those are the companions I told you about." Lorne explained, before running out, waving his arms overhead to signal them. The van came to a halt nearby.

"Oh, Amigos, you don't want to go any further. All our little vampire friends went full demon and ran off. You don't want to get near any of them in that state. They're mindless beasts. They'll attack you and gobble you all right up given half a chance!"

Everyone climbed out of the van for a bit to stretch their legs and confer. Cordelia and Groosalug caught sight of one another and froze. One could almost hear the movie-soundtrack music rise as their eyes met. There was even a portentous wind that whipped by to fetchingly ruffle their clothes and hair as they stood caught in one another's gaze.

Gunn looked from one to the other, shook his head and moved around them to talk to the others.

"Great. What do we do now? We can't exactly go back to town, there's a revolution in progress!"

At the talk of revolution, Groo managed to tear his gaze away from Cordelia, though it looked like it was rather difficult.

"There is?"

"All the cows rebels have decide to revolt."

"Chances are the Brotherhood of Trimbly will be defunct before too long."

"This is terrible. I must go and help my people!"

"Which ones?" Tom wondered. "By the look of you the demons and the humans on this world are both your people."

"Hey, what happened with the com-shuk anyway? Does Drusilla still have her visions?"

"Ix nay on the omshuck-cay. Cheekbones ran off with the fair princess after biting our friend here."

"He's gone evil? Damn it, just once can't a souled vampire stay good all the time?" Gunn complained.

"Drusilla had a vision." Lorne explained the conversation she and Spike had. "So he was actually trying to help them both. He caught everyone but her by surprise and so got away clean."

"Hey, you were supposed to be king when all this business was done, right?" Cordelia asked.

"Yes, though according to the cursed one it was all a trick."

"Doesn't matter, really. Everyone is expecting you to be king. Maybe you should try to get things settled down and have a peace summit between the humans and the others, outlaw slavery, that sort of thing."

"I have not the blessing of the powers that be."

"Eh. Close enough. If that Brotherhood has been in charge all this time, there's going to be a power vacuum when the fighting dies down. Better an honorable warrior with ties to both peoples
than another dictator with a love of slavery."

Groosalug gazed into the distance, lost in thought and eventually nodded.

"If the Powers saw fit to end the Brotherhood's plans, then perhaps it is my destiny to rule without benefit of guidance?"

"Could be. Whether it is or not, someone needs to take things in hand."

"Very well. I will go and champion both peoples and sue for peace and a new age of brotherhood for all." he decided.

The setting double suns shone down on him for a moment, illuminating him and edging him in gold, while another portentous wind sent his long hair streaming behind him. Cordelia swooned, Fred blinked at him myopically and sighed. Even Lorne fanned himself a bit.

Groo strode off, and Cordelia watched him go with stars in her eyes.

"Oh, I am so coming back here some day. A hottie like that shouldn't go to waste."

"Why don't we regroup where the portal let us out. Hopefully Spike and the others will snap out of their demon forms and come looking for us before too long. We'll wait a bit and if they haven't shown up we'll go look for them again."

"I do need time to study the books we acquired to search for the portal spell." Wesley offered.

"There you go. Sounds like a plan."

Spike and Drusilla ducked back into the cave after watching Darla and Angelus for a while. Darla had shown up first, crawled in between them and mewed unhappily. Angelus showed up a few minutes later, growling, pissed off and ready to pounce. Darla had gone from sad kitten to ferocious lioness in an instant and had leapt at him, sending the two of them tumbling end over end out of the cave. She'd then proceeded to smack him around and claw at him for the next quarter of an hour, while he growled and mewed at her and tried to nuzzle at her. When he was good and chastised their play had changed and gone from smackdown to wild animal kingdom: mating season. They were still out there now, going at it like rabbits…or horny lizards, really.

Spike chortled a bit at his little joke, and settled back down beside Dru, content to just enjoy this interlude before they parted again.

"What are you going to do now, luv?"

"I don't know, my Spike. I don't know."

"Shh, shh, pet. Don't worry about it now. You have a lifetime to decide, yeah?"

"Only one lifetime. I'll grow old and die and all of you will continue on without me."

"Yeah. That's the price of being human."

"I don't want to be alone again…but I don't want to be wicked anymore either."

"You don't need to decide right now. Take a year, get yourself better, mourn your dead and think on what you want. Enjoy being human for a bit. You might decide you like it. Remember, pet, you won't be alone. Angelus and Darla are right there in L.A. He owes you at least that much, to
"You won't be alone. Angelus and Darla are right there in L.A. He owes you at least that much, to take care of you and see you have what you need."

"Why can't you stay? We can be a family again."

"Simple, luv. Angelus doesn't want me there. He was already making noises about me overstay my welcome before we came here, and warned me off you. I've no doubt he was off sharpening up a stake for yours truly the moment I ran off with you. I don't know why, but it seems he hates me anymore, souled or unsouled. I'm not sure why. He doesn't seem to hate either of you. I should have expected it, really. We seemed to be getting on fine there for a bit, but he told me outright he despised me for having no soul. Getting one doesn't seem to have made any difference in things."

"Daddy is greedy. Everything he sees belongs to him, but you never did. Wouldn't stay put, wouldn't stay down, growled back you did. He doesn't like it. If you just let him have you he'd be happy."

"No thanks, luv. As you know all too well, Angelus tends to break his toys and then gets bored with them. I like myself unbroken."

"Can't I come with you?"

It hurt, those words, so innocently spoken. For a hundred and twenty years he'd have done most anything to have her choose him over the great poof, just once. Why did it only come when it was already too late for them? She was still his dark princess though, whatever form she took, and he still loved her even if it was now all tied up with guilt and a bit of self-loathing.

"You can if you want to, though I don't know if you'll find Sunnyhell much to your liking these days. If you don't, well, it's not like I'll be far away. Gonna get myself a phone and a computer when I get back. You can give me a call whenever, get Percy or Cheerleader to set up e-mail for you if you want to write instead. You and Darla can visit when it gets to be too much and we'll all have a grand old time for a few days or weeks till you're both ready to go back."

A shadow blocking the entrance to their little cave lair drew both their attention.

Tom crouched down and peeked inside, the tip of his wand casting light where he pointed it.

"Ah, there you are. Good to see you alive well, aunt Dru. We were all quite upset when we thought you'd been dusted."

"You're a sweet little dragon. I almost wish I still had fangs so I could gobble you up."

Tom just smirked wryly. "Are you both ready to go? Darla and Angel seem to have snapped out of their demon transformation, unfortunately their clothes don't seem to have survived."

"Where are they now?"

"Asleep in the field over there. I brought the cabin with me, so I can take you all in one trip once you're inside."

"Alright, we'll be just a mo."

Tom nodded and withdrew.

When they exited the cave, they found Darla and Angel headed their way. Darla looked cheerful and at ease, even wearing what was likely one of Harry's robes, slightly scuffed and bruised and with leaves in her knotted hair. Angel, the big lug, was lumbering along, wearing what was probably one of Tom's robes—it was long enough, but not quite broad enough in the arms or chest.
He was bruised, scratched and disheveled as well and seemed to be torn between feeling pleased and brooding. Nothing new there then.

He sneered reflexively at Angel when he bristled upon seeing the two of them wandering towards the log cabin hand in hand, tightened his hold on Dru and drug her along. Maybe he should pack her up and take her to Sunnydale with him, in spite of his misgivings and Peaches' objections. It had never set well with him, leaving Dru in the hands of the man that had tortured her into madness, no matter her protests to the contrary. It sat even less comfortably now that she was human and breakable in a way she hadn't be the last hundred and sixty years. It probably wouldn't be good for Dru's happiness or mental health, not that anyone else seemed to agree with him. Par for the course, that.

"Where's everyone else?" Angel asked upon entering the cabin.

"They're with the van back at the spot we came in. Wesley's studying some books we grabbed that should have a way back in them. Harry's doing a quick flyby so he can get pictures of the revolution."

"Revolution?"

"I'm sure the others will be happy to tell you all about it once we're all reconvened. Oh, and Lorne went off to say goodbye to his mother and such. He really didn't want to, but Cordelia urged him to find closure, so he went. Apparently a friend of his back in L.A. told him much the same. Cordelia went with him to meet the 'relatives'. I'm sure they'll be thrilled." he added, voice dry.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"My club!"

"Home sweet home."

"Not real, not real, not real…"

"Yay! Can we do it again, daddy?"

"Ugh. Note to self. Portals to other worlds…bad idea."

"I don't know…the light effects and the images of time and space warping around us as we passed were sort of interesting. It wasn't half so exciting when we came to this world…well, except for nearly falling into the hellmouth and having to fight its pull as soon as we arrived."

Everyone tumbled out of the van in various states of shakiness. Lorne stumbled through his club, where they'd arrived and nearly wept at the damage their sudden entrance had caused. He calmed down considerably when Tom just shrunk the van to get it out of the way, and Harry started putting the place to rights with a few flicks of his wand.

Spike casually separated from Angel's group and lit up a cigarette to give himself something to do with his hands. He'd told Peaches he would get out of town as soon as Dru was rescued and he knew she'd be safe. Looked like it was time to make good on that. He saw Curly eyeing him curiously for a moment, and then flick his eyes to the others. When he looked back, he gave him a very slight nod to show he understood.

Stormcloud finished the repairs, and patted Lorne on the shoulder absently when he tearfully thanked him for not just leaving everything wreaked. Peaches probably would have. Greenbean
was lucky they were along or he'd be out a mountain of dosh trying to fix his place up again. He'd
probably never blame Peaches for it, and continue being his biggest fan. That seemed to be the old
man's lot in life--make messes, leave others to clean them up, get praised for it. Getting out of
town and away from all the baggage that came from his 'family' was sounding better all the time.

He caught Stormcloud's eye. He cocked his head slightly, pursed his lips, slanted an unobtrusive
glance at Angel's group, looked back at him and nodded. Soul or not, there was still a very large
part of him that wished he could have made them both vampires and kept them. Happily, there
was a larger part that liked them as they were and didn't want to spoil them or lose the things he
was trying to keep. Having to stake his mum had haunted him for years afterwards. He really
didn't want to go through that again.

"Well…I'd like to say it was fun, but it really wasn't. Next time you want to go on a revolutionary
jaunt to another world, just bring me back a postcard, alright?" Lorne sighed before ushering them
to the door so he could lock up and go home.

The little mouse girl they'd rescued--Fred--freaked out a bit upon getting outside. Looked like
Peaches and company were going to have their hands full for the foreseeable future; he just hope
Brood boy managed to help them some and didn't break them in the process. Oh well, wasn't his
problem, was it? Wore out his welcome, simply by existing. Sod this. He needed to get out of
stinking L.A. before he turned as broody as the great wanker. It was still early evening. He hoped
the boys didn't mind taking the long way back to Sunnyhell. He could use a nice stint on the open
road to clear his head.

Curly hugged each of the girls goodbye and followed Peaches and the others down the block a bit
to an open spot, and resized the van when they got outside. The others moved towards it, except
for Darla, Dru and the Cheerleader. The mouse gave him a timid wave and scurried after them to
hop in the van--seemed to feel safer inside; prolly reminder 'er of her cave. Stormcloud got his
hugs in, kissed each of the girls' cheeks and followed Curly.

Drusilla gave him a mournful look, kissed him gently and squeezed his hand before following
him. Darla took her place.

"You'd think after all this time you boys could stop fighting."

Spike just shrugged one shoulder and said nothing and then pulled her closer for a hug. He had
missed Darla, though he liked this new, softer version better. Old Darla and he hadn't really
become good friends until after the great poof was gone--version 2.0 seemed willing, even eager
to be friends, even with him back. Good to know the whole family didn't hate him.
Brooding again. Damn.

Hopefully there'd be demons or a riot or something interesting between here and Sunnyhell to
keep his mind off things.

"You can call or write. You can visit. I won't be that far away."

Darla squeezed him and headed towards the van as well, while Cordelia moved to take her place.
He was a bit surprised that cheerleader had joined in, but only a bit. She fancied herself a bit of ol'
Spike, he could tell.

"You said only so long as I was the only female in residence."

"Lied. I did try to tell you I wasn't the great enticement you seemed to think I was. He's got them
both now, just like he likes it. Time to make myself scarce."

"Stupid vampire crap."

She won a smile from him, and managed to raise his spirits. He liked her; she was a feisty one. He gave her a squeeze when she hugged him; her smile told him she got the message.

The boys had the DeSoto out and resized and were in it waiting for him. They were surprisingly good at reading him. He found he didn't mind it, as thus far they'd never used it against him--that definitely made a difference.

"See you around, cheerleader."

"Cordelia."

"Cheerleader. I don't do names if I can help it. Your annoyance brings me joy."

"Jerk."

"Ta, luv."

He wrapped the 'big bad' around him like a shroud, swaggered to the car and took off with a roar and a squeal of tires and never looked back.

Gunn and Wesley watched the DeSoto tear off with Spike and the two wizards, and both sighed and spread out a bit on the seat.

"Good of them to unload a second transport. It was rather crowded in here."

"Don't know why he didn't do that in the first place instead of crowding up the van." Angel muttered as Cordelia climbed in and shut the side door, after settling in next to Drusilla.

He glanced up at the rearview mirror and caught sight of Dru and Cordy both glaring at him. He turned to Darla, hoping she could enlighten him, but she was glaring at him as well. Now feeling quite out of his depth, he turned his eyes back to the road and pulled out into traffic--though he did so carefully and with an eye to safety and traffic laws, unlike Spike, who even with a soul was reckless and a criminal to boot.

"Oh! Tacos! We should get some. Do they have a drive thru?" Cordelia spoke up suddenly.


Angel pulled over into the drive thru without further prompting and ordered a bunch to go. None of them had eaten in a while. He had blood back at the hotel, but the humans wouldn't want any. Darla would. Spike too. Damn. He was going to have to get in more. Maybe he could convince Spike's rich fake nephews to pitch in. At least Dru didn't need blood anymore, and Cordy just dribbled a bit on her food now and again. She didn't seem dependent on it, which was good, or it would start being damned expensive to feed everyone. Maybe he could convince the fake nephews to pitch in and then subtly remind Spike he was going to head back to Sunnydale soon. With luck, he'd head out before all the blood was gone and save him some expense. Yeah, that would work. He should have enough to cover all of them for the moment. He'd make a run tomorrow night, or have Cordy do it in the morning.
They pulled into the Hyperion and he looked around, surprised that Spike and the boys hadn't beaten them back with the way he'd taken off. He'd probably stopped for beer or something, though why he'd want it when there was perfectly good Irish whiskey at the hotel he didn't know. Of course, Spike drank like a fish. It was probably just as well he was getting beer, or he'd likely have no whiskey left by the time he left. He flopped down on the couch and spread out, happy to be home again.

"Home again, and all of us here and in one piece. Things worked out well, didn't they?"

Cordelia huffed and crossed her arms. "Stupid vampire crap."

"That's not vampire crap, dear, that's just Angelus." Darla corrected. Drusilla nodded in agreement.

Cordelia huffed again and sauntered off to go grab glasses for the drinks.

Angel eyed the women warily, wondering what sort of bee had gotten in their bonnets, but Darla followed Cordelia, likely to get herself some blood, and Dru got distracted by the tacos that were being unloaded. Being Dru, she dropped to the ground and crawled towards the coffee table and pretended she was stalking prey and giggled when she managed to snatch one away before Gunn had a chance to grab it. He just eyed her warily, gave Wesley a 'what the hell?' look and reached for a different taco. Fred snatched another and scurried off behind the couch to crouch down and eat hers. Drusilla, feeling playful, crawled to where she was hiding, carrying her taco in her mouth, and then curled up beside her to eat.

"Tastes like a taco. Is it a taco?" Fred was muttering under her breath.

"Mine tastes like wishes and moonbeams." Drusilla confided.

"Must be the hot sauce."

"It's the sour cream. It squooshes in my mouth and makes my tummy sing." she crunched down on the taco then with noticeable enjoyment.

"Funny little shell. It crunches like giant bread."

"Made from ground up bones. Jack climbed the beanstalk."

"Right, pet!" she congratulated her. "And after tricking the mean giant he climbed away down and went home again…or did I get the story wrong? Maybe he stayed and kept his castle."

"Probably did. Full of monsters. No beanstalk."

"There most certainly was a beanstalk."

Fred opened her mouth to argue, growing agitated. She wasn't used to interacting with people anymore. Drusilla cooed at her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders and petted her hair.

"There, there, luv. Don't fret none. It's alright if you're all twisted 'round. You'll find the beanstalk soon enough. Would you like me to sing you a lullabye?"

"Yes please. I remember someone doing that, in the before that wasn't before."

"My mummy used to sing me lullabies. Daddy gobbled her up though, so she doesn't sing anymore. I still remember though."
She began singing an old song and petting at Fred's hair. Fred relaxed into her side and thought about what a nice dream it was...unless she was dead, in which case, it wasn't nearly as bad as she'd thought it would be.

On the other side of the couch, the others exchanged an uncomfortable glance with one another, before slanting a look at Angel, who was brooding and avoiding everyone's gaze. He cast a hopeful look at the door, wishing Spike and the boys would get back soon. Everyone would stop staring at him if Spike was yammering on like he tended to do. He never thought he'd welcome it.

"Huh, well...that's not something you see every day."

"What's that then?"

"Soldiers fighting demons in the parking lot of a motel."

Spike and Tom both craned their heads to take a look.

"Bloody Initiative. I just got rid of my chip--I'm not going anywhere near that."

"Wasn't going to suggest it. I wonder who will win? The two groups seem to be pretty evenly matched at the moment."

"I dunno. Soldier boys have some fancy toys, but the demons will be aiming to kill and watching each other's backs. Demons hate the Initiative. Too many know of friends, acquaintances or enemies that got laid low by them and crippled, or turned into parts. There's a dozen besides me that are chipped back in Sunnyhell. They've mostly stayed off everyone's radar so far because none of them were hostile to humans. I say were, because several of them are now feeling rather hostile, given what happened. Stupid wankers."

"Would they be a danger to the community at large if they were freed?"

"That bunch? No. Peaceful sorts the lot of them. The dangerous ones were all used for parts, so there was none of them but me that escaped."

"Maybe we should do something about them before we leave town. Bad enough to do something like that to demons who are a danger to the community, it's worse when they're harmless."

"You were both happy enough to leave it in me."

"You expressed a desire to eat us on several occasions, and pouted when we asked you not to. Simple good sense. I accept that predators are predators--it's how you're made to operate; it doesn't mean I'm willing to stick my head in the lion's mouth, so to speak."

"Fair enough."

"Oh! Pull in over there. They've got a photo center. You said you wanted copies of some of the vacation photos, right?"

"So I did. Should pick up some beer while we're here. Oh, and looky there, a Red Cross station. Wonder if they've got blood stores there? I'm running a bit low."

"Wow. Lots to do. I guess we should split up."
"I can't believe it's still so quiet around here." Willow chirped happily as she sipped her drink. "How long has it been since we've made it out to the Bronze as a group twice in one week?"

"Not since high school, at least. We had our priorities in line, once upon a time." Xander agreed.

"I think this break has really been good for Buffy. She's smiling more, she's dancing. I haven't seen her this relaxed in a long time." Tara noted.

"That's true, isn't it? Even when Riley…"

"Yeah. Looking back, he wasn't quite as good for her as we'd all hoped, was he? I mean, what with the lying and the vamp-hos and the macho crap…plus, he never really hung out with us very much when it was fun time, even if he was there a lot for slay-time. Yeah, once in a while…we all went to the beach that time…but mostly not so much. He was never really one of us, was he?"

"No. I guess he really wasn't. I'd had high hopes for having another guy in the mix, but we never really hung out or did any guy stuff. I've done more guy stuff with Spike, and how sad is that?"

"Pretty sad."

"Hey, what's Anya doing?"

"Looks like she's chatting up guys."

"Wait…that's Jonathan."

"Who's the guy with him?"

"Friend of his, I guess. I wonder what they're talking about? They seem pretty happy."

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Maybe she's recruiting them." Tara suggested.

"Recruiting?"

"For the second string Scooby gang she's been talking about. Jonathan is good with magic, right? He might be sort of handy to have around."

"But that's what we're there for!" Willow protested.

"It's not a contest…and you do more than magic. You're good with computers and research too."

"Still…private club here!"

"It shouldn't be. It's not a club, it's about saving lives and saving the world, right?"

"Even so. We've been doing it just fine without their help all this time."

"Yeah. Our exclusive club won't be nearly as cool if Jonathan's a part of it." Xander agreed.

Tara sighed. "Not a contest." she repeated. "Wanna dance?" she added to Willow, hoping to defuse an argument. Willow looked a bit pouty, but she nodded and followed her to the floor.

Xander watched them go and then turned his attention back to Jonathan and his friend.
On the one hand, it would mean more guys around. On the other hand, it would lower their collective cool factor. He was one of the cool, special people now. Sort of. All his friends were girls, but hey! Saved the world a lot.

Jonathan and his buddy were the losers. They were the guys that got beat up. They were bottom of the totem pole, social suicide to admit to knowing them, not good enough to breathe the same air as the popular kids... And until Buffy came along, he and Willow were just like them--teased, dismissed, beaten up, sneered at and told they were losers.

Once Buffy came to town, that all had changed. Changed so much, that Queen C, most popular girl in Sunnydale, top of the pecking order for as long as either of them could remember, had wanted to join their club, because they were now the coolest, most exclusive clique in Sunny D.

He still felt like that guy…the geek, the uncool… If Buffy had never come to town, he'd probably be over there with them, hanging out and being a loser. He took a deep pull on his beer and thought about that for a bit.

He'd never gotten on well with Angel--he'd had Buffy, which he'd hated, he lurked and stared through him when he made jokes and looked at him like he wasn't worth his time. He was an evil vampire guy, cut from the same cloth as the guys who used to beat him up in high school. They'd had nothing in common, he'd very obviously not wanted to be his friend in any way, shape or form, and had only been marginally civil so as not to get on Buffy's bad side.

Riley was generally nicer and friendlier about it, but he was pretty much the same way. They were the guys who had always been popular, always had the girls lining up, always been the star. Neither one of them could fathom what it was like to be on the opposite side of the equation. They'd both been happy enough to spend time with Buffy--but she'd been the trendy, popular girl at her old high school, before getting a calling to battle evil. The rest of them, not so much.

And somewhere along the line, he'd become just as bad, hadn't he?

The geeks, the losers, the unpopular kids--that had been him and Willow, once upon a time. Still was, more often than he'd like, outside of their little Scoobie Gang.

He finished his beer and rose from his seat, to approach where Anya was still chatting with Jonathan and his friend.

If nothing else, they would probably get his jokes. Even if he didn't want to admit to it, they were his brothers beneath the skin, weren't they?

"Oh, Xander. You remember Jonathan? And this is Andrew."

"Hello, amigos. Tell me…if a caveman and an astronaut got into a fight, who would win?"

"Do the astronauts have weapons?"

Xander smiled and pulled up a seat. "No."

The Welcome to Sunnydale sign fell over with a crash.

"Home sweet home."

"Is there a reason you drove into the sign?"
"Well, it's tradition, innit? Public service, really, make the government wankers earn their pay and all that."

"Works for me."

"I really need to go check on my crypt, get the rest of my stuff. Damn. I'll probably have to clear out a whole nest of stupid fledglings. They better not have taken anything I left behind… everything I can't or won't do without was in the trunk of me car--it's why I was so upset when Dru stole it, you know, beyond the obvious reasons. Everything else is in the crypt. I made it secure as I could, but no one needs an invite to come into my place. It's a nice crypt--roomy, with a touch of class, you know? There was lots of folks wanted it. I guess if I'm going to be living at the bloody mansion I might as well let word spread…though I don't want it to spread too far. I don't have a lot of friends among the nasties in this town these days. Maybe I'll give Clem the heads up."

"That was your wrinkly friend?"

"Yeah, him. He wants to move out. Mum's been on his case a bit about him spreading his wings and leaving the nest and all."

"Is he one of the chipped demons?"

"Yeah."

"We should try to get that taken care of before we leave."

"I'm sure they'd appreciate it." Spike replied, after battling down his initial urge to beg them to stay with him and never leave, ever.

"I'd like to stick around longer than a few more days…but I'd also like to graduate sometime in the next century. We can come back to visit, you know."

"I didn't say a thing. Hmm…looks like Slayer's mum is awake. I wonder if her pop ever made it back from Egypt? I suppose we could stop by and say hi…it's not that late. We can give her the artsy stuff we decided not to keep from that wanker's house while we're here. She did say to bring you by to the gallery sometime. She wanted to meet you two."

"We don't want to impose."

"If it looks like we are we'll just say our hellos, hand over the stuff and leave. I don't want to be a bother to her. I like Joyce. She's good people."

"This is the woman that clocked you in the head with an axe the first time you met, right?"

"Yeah." Spike agreed reminiscently with the faintest hint of a grin in his voice. "A mum like that is worth 'er weight in gold. Fierce. Primal. Protecting her cub from the big nasty, not afraid if she lives or dies. Yeah. She's a keeper, that one."

They grabbed a couple of the art pieces to show Joyce and headed up to the front porch. After Spike knocked a few moments passed and then the door was opened by a familiar man.

"Oh, hello. So you did make it back in one piece. Good. We were wondering about that."

"Hank? Who is it?"
"Um…that friend of Buffy's. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

Joyce peeked around from behind Hank's shoulder.

"Oh, Spike. You're back from your vacation? Oh, and these must be your nephews. It's so nice to meet you both. Hank, don't just leave them standing out there. Come in." Tom and Harry both eyed him from the corner of their eyes as he grinned like an abashed schoolboy for a moment, before remembering himself and wrapping his 'big bad' persona around him like a shield. It didn't come off quite the same given how he was dressed--one really needed the duster and the stompy boots to properly pull it off.


Spike looked down at himself and smiled sheepishly, looking slightly embarrassed.

"I didn't pick this out. Darla and Cordelia did. I tried to tell them it wasn't really my style, but they're a couple of ladies used to getting their way. Nearly stripped me in the middle of the bloody store, they did."

"It looks very nice."

They all settled in the living room, Joyce smiling in welcome, Hank eyeing all of them like they were an interesting puzzle.
Spike noted Joyce was wearing a wig and smelled faintly of medicine.

"I take it you went to the hospital?"

She patted her wig self-consciously and tried to smile.

"I was in the hospital for an operation. Brain tumor. The doctors said it was early enough. I should thank you, really. I'd been getting headaches on and off--something I don't normally do, and yet I was ignoring them. If you hadn't of urged me to go see someone about them… I had an episode of sorts. I already had my surgery lined up. I hadn't told Buffy yet. I really scared her. For a second, I didn't know who she was or where I was or how I got there. Frankly, I kind of scared me too."

"But you're alright now? It's been taken care of?"

"So they say. I'm feeling more like myself these days and so far no more headaches. Seems like a good sign."

"I'm really glad to hear that." Spike said sincerely. Joyce smiled at him.

"So. You've all been on vacation, huh? Where all did you go?" Hank wondered.

"Where didn't we go would be a better question. We started off in L.A. with the family reunion. Oh, wait, we've got photos. I've got a few of Dru."

"Drusilla? Oh good. I always wondered what she looked like. So…I hear she's human now?"

"Yeah. Bit a mohra demon after having a vision. Apparently their blood does that. I'd never even heard of such a thing before. They're quite rare, apparently. Ah, here we go."

"Oh! She's really quite lovely. You two look sweet together."

"Yeah, I guess we do. We always seemed to fit. Even now, when we're quits and have been for a
while. We were together a long time. Some of that still lingers in spite of everything.”

Hank and Joyce briefly looked at one another, smiled slightly and turned back.

"Yeah, we get that."

"Are you sure we should be doing this? I mean, won't your friend get mad?"

"He's not my friend...he's just a guy I know that I occasionally play pool with and run from cops with...forget you heard the last part. I just happened to be at the chop shop when it was raided. I didn't do anything wrong. Those cars weren't even stolen, they were just gathered up." Xander looked at the two boys, shook his head and sighed. "Shutting up now."

"Wow. You lead such an exciting life."

"They kind of have a point. It seems rude, you know, just going in someone else's place and hanging out." Tara pointed out.

"It's not like he'll ever find out, and anyway he owes me. He was the roommate from hell. He always talked through all my favorite shows, left blood-crusted mugs lying all over and ate all my snack food!"

"Um...blood crusted?" Jonathan asked nervously.

"Oh, that. It's no biggie. He's a vampire."

"Uh..."

"No, it's okay. He's a good vampire...well, not really good, but only just sorta naughty these days and not so much with the big scary evil. He had a chip in his head that wouldn't let him bite people."

"So...he can't eat us if he finds out we were here? That's good."

"Well...he doesn't have the chip anymore. I'm not real sure of the details, but he traded it in for a soul and gave the chip to this other vamp he knows so she can try not eating people. It's this whole thing. The whole family is nuts."

"She's a big ho-bag, and she doesn't want to be good, she wants to get smoochies from my soul mate!"

"Um, Buffy? Wasn't she with him for like, a really long time?"

"A hundred and fifty years." Anya agreed.

"And um, so...maybe she sort of has dibs? You know...in a manner of speaking?" Willow said hesitantly.

"No! There are no dibs!"

"There might sort of be dibs."

"No. End of subject."

"Can we just go watch the damned movie already?" Jonathan wondered.
"Yeah, come on." Xander led the way into the mansion and then into the living room. Jonathan and Andrew both squealed in delight at the big screen tv that dominated one wall.

"Oh, wow...Mark Wahlberg is going to be practically life size!" Andrew swooned.

"So will the killer apes." Jonathan pointed out.

"This is true...but still...Mark Wahlberg." Buffy agreed.

"I wonder if Deadboy Jr. has any beer left?"

"Or snacks. I'm a little hungry." Tara wondered.

"Me too, actually." Willow agreed.

Jonathan got the movie prepped while Xander, Willow and Tara went in search of food and drinks.

"This place is really cool...kind of bare though."

"It was just redecorated before he left on vacation. He hasn't really had a chance to put in any personal touches." Anya explained.

"That's a good thing. Spike's idea of ambiance is coffins, skulls and chains...and candles. He likes candles. I think he steals them from churches. It's always the big beeswax ones that smell like church. He's such a criminal." Buffy scoffed.

"Actually he steals them from demons attempting rituals. Now, granted, they probably stole them from a church..."

"What demons? What rituals?"

"The ones he's been taking care of." Anya sighed.

"Yeah, right. If he'd been off doing stuff like that, he would have come around to brag about it."

"He did. To me. I told him I wanted first dibs on any magical paraphernalia he came across. He doesn't like magic, so he agreed readily enough. The Magic Box buys select items and he has money for blood and other things. Why do you think he hasn't been bothering Giles as much? He still needs to eat, that need didn't just go away just because everyone was getting annoyed at his constant presence. I suppose it's lucky he's resourceful or he'd have died a slow, painful death under your care, and as a mummy. That's a terrible way for a vampire to go, and once it reaches a certain point they really can't come back from it, even if they have a chance to feed regularly again."

"Um, hello? Vampire slayer, not vampire rescue hotline! I allowed him to live, that was plenty magnanimous enough!"

"I suppose, but still, taking someone into your protection implies a certain level of upkeep. You all expect him to be on board to help out whenever you go bother him about it, but scoff at his need to eat regularly at the same time. He can't stay in fighting trim and actually be useful if he's hungry all the time."

"We have beer and snacks!" Xander announced.

"And juice boxes if anyone wants to go the non-alcoholic route." Tara added.
Jonathan started up the movie and then shrieked when the sound boomed out around them.

"Whoa! Too loud." Xander winced.

"Surround sound? Awesome!" Andrew cheered.

"Why the hell does evil dead have such nice stuff? I don’t have nice stuff and I work for a living!"

"You don't have two wizard nephews."

"They're not actually his nephews, remember?"

"Sure they are. They decided it was true, that's good enough for me."

"But they're not actually…"

"Vampire families are made not born. He claimed them, they're his. That's how it works with them." Anya noted.

Andrew suddenly squeaked and choked on his juice box, and Jonathan paled and his eyes widened in panic.

"Um…guys?"

"Is there anything other than grape juice? I don't like grape juice."

"Guys?"

"Is there anything else to eat besides this stuff?"

"GUYS!"

"WHAT?" the rest shouted back.

Andrew and Jonathan, whose eyes were riveted on the doorway just pointed. The rest turned their heads and screamed. It was Joyce, flanked by Hank and Giles. They looked bizarrely cozy and threesome-y…they were also vampires, and had their fangs out.

"Buffy, good news! Your father and I have gotten back together…and Mr. Giles has decided to join us. Come here so I can make you part of the family. We'll all be together forever. Doesn't that sound nice?"

As one the Scoobies all screamed in horror.

The three vampires popped and revealed Spike, Harry and Tom. Spike and Harry were laughing uproariously. Tom was snapping pictures of everyone.

"Ha! You should have seen the looks on your faces!"

"You bastard!"

"You are so dead!"

"I thought you had a soul!"

"Funny, I thought the same about you lot, and yet look what we have here--breaking and entering, robbery… I'd never bloody well hear the end of it if I pulled something like this while one of you was out of town. You deserved it."
"It was Xander's idea!" Jonathan pointed.
"Yeah. We even asked if you'd be mad." Andrew agreed.

"Oh really? Goodness Whelp, you're really getting into the whole life of crime, aren't you?"

"What the hell are you talking about, evil dead?" Xander spluttered.

"We stopped by to visit Guido on our way back from L.A. He had a really interesting story to tell about Tony."

Xander's eyes widened in panic and he slanted a look at Buffy who was looking confused and pissed off.

"What the hell are you babbling about, Spike? Who the hell is Tony?" she demanded.

"Wait…do you mean Tony's Parts and Repair? That was you? Wow." Andrew said with shocked awe.

"Tony's Parts and Repair? You mean that place that…burned down…a few weeks ago…XANDER!"

"He had it coming!"

"He's human!"

"Evil! He was an evil human!"

"That's what the police are for!"

"He had them on his payroll! He was using you as a heavy so he could be a criminal! Guido's got fourteen children!"

"I can't believe you!"

As the original Scoobies all began arguing, and Tara tried to intervene and make them stop, Spike, Tom and Harry moved into the room to grab drinks and snacks and settle into their seats.

"So, what are we watching anyway?"

"Planet of the Apes with Mark Wahlberg."

"Yeah? I'd been meaning to see that."

"We were talking about who would win if a caveman and an astronaut fought"

"Caveman."

"In the scenario that was presented, that would be entirely possible. Jonathan suggested this movie might help settle the issue."

"Yeah? Alright then. Primal warriors for the win."

Andrew burst into nervous laughter. His cheeks were slightly flushed and he hadn't taken his eyes off Spike since he'd entered the room. Spike caught his eye and raised an eyebrow. Andrew jumped and hurriedly turned to face the television when he realized he'd been caught staring.
Spike stifled a sigh and leaned back to concentrate on the movie.

That boy, Andrew or whatever he said his name was--it was like looking in a really pathetic mirror of himself 120 years ago. The kid was all soft underbelly, heart on his sleeve, practically begging to be hurt. He hadn't yet learned that there were nasties out there that would look at him and see 'willing victim' written all over him--folks that would hurt him and hurt him just because they could, play on the worshipful affection he handed over so readily, and laugh when he came back for more. And if he wasn't just the most pathetic sod ever--there was a part of him that saw all that in him and wanted to be the one to hurt him, and another that wanted to shield the little blighter from it as much as he could. He knew from painful experience what was in store for that kid if he didn't learn to hide his vulnerabilities from the monsters out there.

He hated this. What had he been thinking? He'd rid himself of all his pathetic William-y baggage and become the man he wanted to be--dangerous, someone to be reckoned with--and yet here he was, once again being consumed by all he'd left behind. He couldn't even blame anyone--he'd done this to himself. He could have done quite a lot of damage, even with the chip. He'd given up on trying far too quickly. It wasn't like he hadn't met obstacles before. He'd traded in his chip for a bloody soul and look at him now--Peaches 2.0, brooding and thinking about protecting soft, weepy little brats from the big bad world. He was pathetic.

He slid down slightly in his seat and stared sightlessly at the telly.

"You're brooding." Stormcloud whispered so only he would hear.

"I'm entitled."

"What happened to 'primal warriors for the win'?"

"Not feeling too primal at the mo'. Sorry."

"Don't let yourself lose it. Remember, primal astronauts beat everybody."

"Don't feel much like a bloody astronaut either."

"It's early days yet. Once you find your center again you'll be alright."

Spike downed the rest of his beer and said nothing.

He tried to focus on the movie, but he became aware of whispering, just on the edge of hearing. He looked around, but the Scoobies had finished their argument and retaken seats, and the others were watching the movie. He relaxed and tried to let his senses sharpen a bit so he could make out whatever it was he was hearing--if there were yet more folks breaking in to his bloody home tonight, he wanted some forewarning. All at once he was hit with a flurry of images, and the whispering sharpened into words.

"BLOODY HELL."

He felt a pang for his poor, lost Dru--even knowing he was taking her visions, actually having one had still taken him by surprise and he was a bit thrown by the whole thing. How frightening must it have been for her as a young human girl, trying so hard to warn the world of what was to come?

He came back to himself and found some of the others were looking at him oddly. They must have thought he was commenting on the movie, but there wasn't much going on at the moment, hence the odd looks.
"Slayer. We need to head downtown. A pack of dogs or something is going to go tearing through there and cause a bunch of traffic accidents. About twenty five people are going to die if they're not stopped."

"Uh-huh. And you know this how?"

"He's a seer now." Tom explained.

"What the hell? Is there a seers-are-us outlet in L.A. or what?" Xander demanded.

"Cordelia got her visions from a half-demon named Doyle just before he died. He passed them on to her so Angel wouldn't lose his link to the Powers. Spike has Aunt Dru's visions."

"Drusilla's dead? Nice. Couldn't have happened to a nicer lunatic ho-bag." Buffy chirped cheerfully.

"Fuck you, Slayer." Spike growled, his eyes flashing gold, at the same time Tom and Harry both glared at her hatefully.

"Wow. You really are a bitch, aren't you?" Harry laughed in disbelief. "Where's the fucking compassion? I thought you were supposed to be a champion?"

"Excuse me? How dare you? Who the hell are you to come into my town and criticize me?"

"A human being. That should be enough. Merlin, woman. Do you have any idea what was done to her?"

"Angel said he did stuff to her while he was evil." she shrugged indifferently.

"He killed her entire extended family--parents, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, you name it. One by one. She had the sight, so she saw it happen twice--once in her visions, and once when they found the bodies. She spent months trying to warn them what was coming, but they were a devoutly religious, superstitious bunch, and they blamed her for it. Angelus pretended to be a priest in the confessional when she went there to confess and beg for help. He told her she was a devil child who was indeed making it all happen, and that God hated her. After her family was gone, her neighbors, her parish priest--anyone she could conceivably go to for help or comfort-- she fled to a convent in the hopes that God would save her and wash away her sins. She had a brief reprieve, but on the night she was set to take her final vows, Angelus came and slaughtered all the nuns and painted the church with their blood. As a finishing act, he raped her on the ground in front of the altar and positioned her in such a way that she could stare at the cross and see that God wasn't coming to save her--he wasn't even looking at her. When her mind finally broke under the strain, he made her a vampire so that her suffering would never end. She's mad. She's been mad since that night, and being what she was she could never recover. No matter what evils she might have committed in her unlife, she's not responsible for any of it. She's human now, and seized on the chance to rid herself of the visions that have caused her nothing but pain her whole life. Somewhere in the broken shards of her mind the young girl who loved her family, loved God and wanted nothing more than to be good and pure is still there, and she wants to be free. Her visions formed the cornerstone of her madness. She has a chance now to get better someday--though whether she actually will is another story. What kind of person are you that you can have infinite compassion for the guy who did it to her and none for her?"

A painful awkward silence was left behind.

"Um, hey! Rampaging dogs, people dying, much badness afoot. Shouldn't we you know, go do the saveage thing?" Willow spoke up in a tiny voice.
"I'll grab the van." Tom offered, heading out.

"Van? We have a van now?" Xander demanded.

"I have a van. Get moving."

"We'll need weapons."

"Closet by the door. Take your bloody pick."

"Whoah. Extended cab twelve passenger van. Nice. Who'd you steal it from, dead boy?"

"Didn't steal it, Whelp." Spike growled, before prowling around to the driver's seat. Buffy glared at Andrew who was trying to get in the front passenger seat, before claiming it for herself. The rest piled in to the back, Tom and Harry claiming the first row, much to the chagrin of those remaining.

"You want us t-to fight a bunch of wild dogs? They might be rabid…and even if they aren't they have teeth and claws and stuff. I'm not sure I can do this." Andrew whimpered from the back seat.

"If you don't think you can fight the dogs, don't. You'll just get in the way if you're panicked. Try to clear the area, keep people from running in front of cars…call an ambulance if there are any crashes. Do either of you know first aid?" Spike asked.

"No." Jonathan answered glumly.

"That's fine. If anyone does crash, let them know help is on the way, talk to them to try keeping them alert, find out what, if anything hurts, keep them calm and don't let them move around too much. When the ambulance gets there, tell them what the people said about where they're hurt--just a list, no need for a speech, and then get out of their way. The rest of us will be there too, so don't worry." Xander assured them.

Spike pulled in to the area he saw in his vision and parked. The rest of them climbed out as well and looked around for some sign of catastrophe.

"Are you sure you had a vision and weren't just hallucinating?" Buffy asked archly, still stung by the smackdown earlier at the mansion.

"I'm sure. Quiet. I'm trying to listen."

"The mall's right there. Maybe they're in there?" Jonathan suggested.

"It would explain there being confusion enough to cause so many crashes." Anya concurred.

"I think you're both right. I just heard screaming."

"Let's go then."

Their progress towards the mall was hindered by a sudden mass exodus of screaming people. Tara nudged Jonathan and Andrew and urged them to spread out to keep the panicked people from running into traffic.

"Side entrance!" Buffy urged, before taking off at a run. Those who hadn't broken off to do crowd control followed her.
There were more people fleeing out the side entrance, but Spike marched forward shouting "Animal control! Get out of the way! Move aside! Let us through!"

Between his barked orders and his and Buffy's super strength, the group managed to push through to the center of the mall. Inside, all was chaos--screaming people running every which way, large dogs with rows of sharp teeth running and slavering and savaging anyone in reach. Here and there they could see dead people, missing limbs and bleeding out.

Willow and Xander whimpered and hefted their axes a bit higher.

Tom nudged Xander and Harry pulled Willow along with him. "Just stay close. I'll immobilize, you stab. Let's go."

"Hear that? We're doing the same. Come on."

Buffy and Spike had already ran out onto the floor, dodging screaming people and fallen bodies. Buffy hefted her battle axe and went to work. She glanced over to see how Spike was doing without a weapon--there hadn't been any left in his closet by the time the rest of them had grabbed stuff--but she saw him pull a gold rod from inside his duster, twist the end. A long sharp point shot out of the end. He twirled the thing and stabbed the closest dog--hell hound, actually--and ran it through, before moving on to the next. Buffy ignored him and focused on her own battles.

The last hellhound dropped with a meaty thunk to the floor and the previously full mall became eerily silent. Buffy straightened and flicked her eyes over the others. Willow and Xander were huddled together in the center of the room, looking sick at all the carnage. The two stupid wizards were walking among the bodies, flicking their wands around. They both hurried towards one of the bodies and dropped down next to the person and began medical treatment. Only one left alive. Not good odds. They might have save twenty five from car accidents if the others had done their jobs, but there was at least a dozen dead people lying around. Not exactly a perfect victory. There was so much blood… One would never think a human body could hold so much--there was buckets of the stuff, puddles and splashes and splatters galore. There was a foul smell in the air and the mangled remains, and dismembered parts were making her feel lightheaded. Her stomach churned in disgust when she noted there was a faint gleam of gold in Spike's blue eyes.

"You've seen Angel react similarly to blood and you always felt sympathy. Spike hasn't had his soul very long. Maybe you should give him a break?"

She wavered for a moment and then hardened her heart against any such thing. Spike was no Angel. Angel was good, a hero. Spike was just an annoyance with a defective soul. It had to be, right? He was no different, beyond being a bit quieter than usual… of course, he'd been quieter than usual last time he was in town too, and that was before the soul. Forcibly she pushed the whole train of thought out of her head.

"Come on. We should get going before the cops or anyone gets here."

"We should alert any ambulances that come by that there are people in here still alive."

"People? As in more than one?"

"Three to be exact. They'll suffer some lasting damage, but they should live now that we've patched them up. The ones that survived were mauled, the ones that died lost limbs, had their throats ripped out or were eviscerated and bled out. They were already dead when we got here most likely."
"We should head out the side. I see flashing lights."

"Let's go then."

They hurried outside, and the whole group breathed deeply of the night air, trying to clear away the scents of blood, gore and death that clung to all of them. Headlights flicked at them as they exited. Anya had moved the van to the parking lot out back when the authorities started showing up. Tom and Harry helped everyone clean up and tidied the weapons before they were stowed in back. The weary group started back towards the mansion.

"They were hell hounds. I've seen them before." Buffy spoke up as they got back on the road.

"Hell hounds? Wow… I wonder if my brother is back in town?"

The others turned to look at Andrew, who shrunk under everyone's regard.

"Tucker is your brother? The psycho that set hell hounds loose on the school prom?"

"Um, yeah. That was him. He couldn't get a date and wanted vengeance or something. I tried telling him if he'd just try being nicer…” he trailed off miserably.

"That was the second time he put you in the hospital, wasn't it?" Jonathan muttered bitterly.

"He just doesn't know his own strength…and he gets mad sometimes. I'm sure he didn't mean it."

"Just like he never meant all the bruises you were always getting too? Your brother is a creep."

Andrew didn't answer, he just hunkered down in his seat and stared out the window.

"So what…Tucker's around and he's now pissy about people shopping?"

"I don't know. I didn't know he was back. He left town after the whole thing with the prom. I haven't seen him since then."

Spike pulled the van up outside a pizza place that was still open. "How many of us are there?"

"Um…ten."

"Alright. Who's hungry?"

"ME!" Everyone answered together.

"Three pizzas sound about right?"

"Yeah. That should be good."

"Preferences?"

"Get one half pepperoni, one ham and pineapple"

"I don't like ham and pineapple"

"So don't eat it. One onion, green pepper and sausage."

"Don't forget diet coke."

"Regular coke."
"Sprite."

"No, Mountain Dew. It's the drink of the gods."

Spike sighed and glowered at all of them and stalked into the pizza parlor to place the order.

"You know…I'm kind of digging Spike with a soul. Angel never treated us to pizza."

"Angel also never called everyone names or used stupid British swear words at us."

"He also never offered to fix my car or played pool with me. Plus, I have a feeling that, if I was with Angel when the chop shop got raided, he would have left me there."

"He would not!"

"Yeah, right. You know how I met Spike the first time? It was during parent-teacher night. Angel grabbed me in a headlock and drug me inside to offer me up to Spike to eat."

"He did not!"

"He did so. He offered for them to share me, but Spike punched him and said Angel was his Yoda and called him uncle Tom."

"Seems sort of ironic in retrospect." Tara giggled.

"Best not tell him that. He gets all growly when people compare him to Angel."

"Who's Angel?"

"That would be the other vampire with a soul. He lives in L.A. now with Cordelia."

"Cordelia's dating a vampire?"

"No. Cordelia is a seer now and gets visions of people in trouble that Angel goes out and helps."

"Seriously?"

"She's changed a lot since high school."

Spike came back, hopped in the van and pulled out.

"Hey! Where's our pizza?"

"It's going to be delivered when it's finished, you nit."

"How long is that going to be?"

"I dunno, half hour, hour? However long it takes to make it. What are you asking me for? I'm a vampire, remember? Shouldn't you human kiddies know this sort of thing?"

"You eat food!"

"Spicy buffalo wings, blooming onions, English brekkies made by Stormcloud, Thai and Indian food, 'cause it's spicy, breakfast cereals--but only Wheetabix, shredded wheat and stuff like that, because the sugary crap you people eat all tends to dissolve into mush as soon as it hits the blood and it's disgusting. Red's cookies too…when she lets me have one.” he ticked off on his fingers. "Little marshmallows in hot chocolate. That's about it…oh wait…I had a lot of stuff in France. I
like French cooking; they don't overcook the meat. Harm liked that one too."

"Harm?"

"He used to date Harmony." Willow explained.

"Harmony?! Harmony Kendall!"

"She's a vampire now."

"We ran into 'er and Sam while we were doing our Whirlwind cultural tour of France. We'd split up earlier 'cause she wanted to shopping. We went to some little place in the artists' district, drank a whole lot of wine and then went to the Moulin Rouge to take in a show, took one of the boat tours of Paris. It's quite a sight these days, everything covered in lights when you're drifting down the river. Of course, Paris was always alive at night, full of light, but not like it is now. Like fairyland. Dru would love it."

"It sounds lovely. I wish I could see it." Tara commented.

"You can. We took lots of pictures."

"You have vacation photos?"

"Tons. We can show you when we get back to the house. We might as well. We don't want to start up the movie again, it'll just get interrupted when the food arrives."

When they got back to the mansion, most of them headed back to the living room, whereas the two wizards disappeared elsewhere.

"Where'd they go? I thought we were going to see vacation pictures."

"Stormcloud needs to get his computer. He put together a slide show. I've got some prints too, but they were mostly intended for framing, except for the ones I was going to send copies of to the girls. You're all in luck, he took more when we was off rescuing Dru, so you'll all get to see Pylea, and the other bird we rescued while we was there. 'er name's Fred--Winifred Burkle. She was a physics student at UCLA, got sucked into a portal or sommat, got enslaved and told she was a cow, escaped and lived in a cave for five years. She's near batty as Dru is, though I think once she understands again that the life she remembers from before was real and not a hallucination to escape the horrors of her present life, she'll be fine."

"I see. You seem to have a crazy chick magnet thing going on…most people, they go through their whole lives without meeting many crazies…you seem to trip over them."

"It's a gift." Spike remarked dryly.

Jonathan suddenly shrieked, sending everyone jumping from their seats.

"What? Vampires? Demons?"

"That stuff…it just…appeared." Jonathan pointed.

There was a pile of miscellaneous things in a neat pile in the corner of the room that had indeed just appeared.

"Oh, that's some stuff we got during our trip. I guess Stormcloud's getting antsy to start decorating
or something." Spike wandered to the door and peeked out into the nearby rooms, then returned, nodding.

"There's a lot of stuff, and he has it slated for the different rooms. I guess he figured he'd clear out the stuff while he was fetching 'is computer or something. The cabin was getting a bit packed."

The boys showed up a few minutes later, and Harry busied himself hooking the computer up to the television. The food arrived while he was setting up.

Everyone had a mouthful of pizza when the first photo came up and froze. It was a big group of blood-splattered demons, with their arms around each other, surrounded by piles of dismembered bodies, all of them hefting large, dangerous looking weapons.

"Oh, don't worry. They're actors. The bodies are zombies made from already dead people. We went to one of their shows while we were in L.A. They're called the Dire Warriors. They were quite good. That fellow in the center there could make a stone weep. I was quite impressed with the lot of them. That guy on the end? He played Odin. He was the ultimate villain of the piece. It ends with all of them in hell, but it was a surprisingly uplifting ending nonetheless." Harry explained.

"Yeah, we were real lucky to get to see it. They only perform it every sixty years or so 'cause it takes so long to make all the zombies they need for the battle scenes." Tom agreed.

"Sixty years to make zombies?"

"Well, it shows a thousand years of vengeance, doesn't it? You need a lot of zombies for that. I saw it performed once, oh, about five hundred years ago, in Norway. It really is a memorable piece. Odin keeps trying to have it shut down, because he feels it portrays him in a bad light, but the actors are all under Loki's protection, so they've been able to continue. It's a good thing, too. The state of the arts would be the poorer for its loss." Anya commented thoughtfully. "Wait a minute…how did you two get in? You're human!"

"Oh. We just did this."

There was a ringing silence as the two wizards changed into their animagus forms and then back. Harry saw that Willow, Jonathan and Andrew all looked to be eating their hearts out.

"Ah. That would explain it."

"Wow. So you can just turn into stuff whenever the heck you like on top of everything else you can do?"

"I can turn into that. It's my animagus form. And I can do it whenever I like now…before that, it took me a year of work to make it happen, and that was with getting pointers from my godfather and my transfiguration teacher. Tom, the smug bastard, got it sooner and without help."

"Your transfiguration teacher?"

"Professor McGonagall."

"O. M. G." Andrew said in awe. "You're Harry Potter! Wow. I can't believe I'm hanging out with the Harry Potter."

"A Harry Potter. My life was a lot different from those books. In fact…hang on a sec. He tapped
at the computer a bit and a new photo appeared on the screen. It was Harry standing with another
Harry—though the second was a few inches shorter, a lot thinner, though the Harry there was
hardly heavy, had paler skin, dark circles under his eyes and looked rather waifish and
woebegone.

"This guy here, those books showed his life up until the summer between third and fourth year.
We ended up in his world by accident when we were trying to get back to our own and
intervened. What that means is there’s at least one other out there who’s actually gotten stuck with
the crap life depicted in those books, and all because he never escaped Dumbledore’s thumb.
Merlin, I hate that guy."

"You hate him? How about me? Without you escaping his influence, I end up a flayed baby
gasping for air and suffering eternally with no hope of reprieve."

Andrew squeaked like a small mouse that had just been spotted by a hawk and then giggled
nervously as he stared at him.

"S-s-so w-w-what s-s-should we call you, Mr. he-who-should-not-be-named sir?"

"Tom is fine."

"Oh. So…um…you, uh, got over all that?"

"I had help." Tom smirked, tilting his head towards Harry.

Harry queued up the slide show again. The next photo showed Darla, Drusilla, Harmony and
Yuki on the stage at Caritas, singing 'We are Family'—Darla singing lead while the rest did
backup. The next showed the girls and Lorne doing a Spice Girls number together. They had all
jokingly referred to him as 'Scary Spice' for the rest of the evening…though they all thought Yuki
was a better fit. She had a bit of an anger problem, that one. The next showed Sam—he'd chosen to
do the Frank Sinatra rendition of 'French Foreign Legion' after his chat with Spike. He'd sounded
pretty good too.

"Scary vampires do karaoke night. Now I've seen it all."

The next couple were of all of them dancing in different combinations—they'd all danced with
each of the girls at least once. Harry had gotten stuck talking to and dancing with Yuki more than
once. It hadn't been very much fun, what with her going on and on about how she was going to
drink all his blood and eviscerate him once out of the sanctuary for being human scum. In the end
he'd felt a bit sorry for her. She was obviously trying too hard to hide how conflicted she was. It
seemed to be a theme with that particular family of vampires.

After that was a group shot of all of them.

"W-wait! Angel was at this reunion? With all the evil, unsouled, unchipped vampires, including
one who used to be a slayer and he just let them all go?"

"Oh, no, he wasn't there. That's just an illusion. They all thought it was a shame that he wasn't
there to be in the picture when the chances of everyone being together like that again were pretty
slim—especially as Spike and Yuki were going to fight as soon as the party was over and one of
them was going to die. I just made a shadow clone that looked like him so he could be in the
group photo."

"He does a surprisingly good impersonation of him." Spike agreed.

The next photos were of Spike and Yuki fighting, and Sam lopping the head off an ugly demon
while Yuki was trapped under a wrecking ball and being fed off by Spike in the background.

"You bit her! You're so disgusting!"

"I had to. The bint did a real number on me. I'd 'ave been weeks recovering if I hadn't!" Spike protested. "She was wicked strong, that one, and I was a bit worried she was gonna get out from under the wrecking ball, to be honest. Taking 'er blood strengthened me, weakened her. Besides, her whole plan was to first take out me to avenge the annoying one, and then head here to resurrect the Master. I never ended up looking like that fighting you, so really, I did you a hell of a favor."

Buffy lapsed into uncharacteristic silence, remembering her nightmares about the master and about becoming a vampire—a slayer-turned-vampire who wanted to resurrect the Master was a nightmare scenario she could do without.

"Thanks."

Spike eyed her suspiciously for a bit and then subsided. "You're welcome." he replied gruffly.

More photos followed—Paris by night, all of them including Sam and Harmony dressed up and kicking up their heels. Spike and the Pope, Spike still in his bishop's outfit and holding up the proclamation stating he'd won Vatican City while a large group of Catholic clergy stood around looking befuddled. Shots of Rome, one of Spike, Angel and a slimy chaos demon posed with the dead body of a weedy, pimply looking demon.

"That's the bloody Immortal, can you believe it? Bloody ponce."

"Who's the slimy guy?"

"Dru's ex, strangely enough. He was being held prisoner 'cause he tried getting the Immortal for violating his new girlfriend and her whole family. We set him free and he helped out."

"Angel was in Rome?"

"No, it's another shadow clone."

"Knew he'd be pissy if he wasn't in on the whole taking down the Immortal to avenge Dru and Darla, so we put 'im in the picture. Of course, Peaches being Peaches, he keeps trying to take credit for all of it even though he wasn't even there. Bastard."

Photos of Greece, several of the nagas.

"They're the ones responsible for the freak storm in L.A. Turns out Wolfram and Hart sent an assassin team to teleport into their lair. They followed the spell back and unleashed a storm to punish those that did it. It's okay though, last we heard they sent a group out to propitiate them and they got a sanctuary spell out of it, along with some other stuff they wanted. I wonder if they're going to reopen the Oracle at Delphi now. They stopped it because humans kept attacking them when they didn't like what their futures held."

Photos of Egypt followed—pyramids and tombs, the banks of the Nile, the city of Cairo by night, the three of them in desert wear atop camels, Harry battling Anck-su-namun, Spike vs. the Scorpion King, the photo of Spike and Hank that had been sent to Willow.

Africa was next—tree-climbing lions and gorillas, several types of monkeys, chimpanzees and elephants, several small villages, a car race, Spike and Darla hand in hand, limned by moonlight and looking oddly zen-like and at peace, the two of them and a creepy demon with glowing eyes.
"Oh, Lloyd! He looks great." Anya commented.

"This would be the soul-mojo demon shaman?" Xander asked.

"Yup, that's him. His trials are really a bitch. Darla was real glad she didn't opt to try once she got a look at me when I was done. She figured if it was that hard for me, she'd have been dust right quick."

Some shots of the hotel in L.A. were next–Wesley, Cordelia, Gunn and Angel, Angel and Darla, Wesley and Spike, both wearing glasses and reading large books.

"YOU STILL WEAR GLASSES!" the Scoobies all shouted in glee.

Spike scowled at all of them and slumped down in his seat. "Only to read, and not always then. We were trying to figure out how to rescue Dru. I didn't want to screw up just 'cause I couldn't see what I was reading."

"Is there something wrong with needing glasses?" Harry asked, his voice cool.

The Scoobies all turned a sheepish glance on Harry and shook their heads.

"No. Not at all. Glasses are cool."

"Hey, why do you need glasses anyway? With all the stuff you can do, can't you just, you know, fix them?"

"Well, no, because there isn't anything wrong with my eyes. I have goblin heritage and I have eyes like them--I have excellent night vision, I can spot movement, I can differentiate small changes in an underground tunnel, that sort of thing. All the goblins that do paperwork need glasses. There's filters on the glass to cut down on certain frequencies of light and a bit of magnification to help us focus on and read text. There's nothing to fix, because nothing is broken."

"Oh."

The slideshow continued–Fred and her cave, the palace and village, Drusilla in her princess outfit, demons and humans battling in the streets, the Groosalug in the square calling for order, a pink and blue demon battling in a field, and then nuzzling each other.

Spike laughed out loud. "You got pictures of them like that? Brilliant."

"Who like what?"

"That's Angel and Darla. Pylea's weird. Sunlight doesn't hurt, you have a reflection, but when you try to go fangy you end up like that."

"So…that's what you guys really look like?"

"I guess. I had thought we'd all end up looking like bat-face eventually, but as you can see, he had a really long way to go, even with all the mojo he did to speed up the process. You can see there and there where the bat-face came from, but there was a lot more to come. Since the demon was in control, 'e was little more than an animal. I went full demon too, to rescue Dru, and even concentrating as hard as I could to remember I needed to get us away to protect 'er, it was hard, real hard to think, and the longer it went on the harder it was to remember myself at all. Of the three of us, Darla had the most control. She couldn't talk or anything, but she seemed to have the most sense of self. Of course, she's both a lot older than us and doesn't have a soul to muck up the works. If I live to be a few thousand years old I might look like that someday, but no sooner. Sorta
neat though, innit?"

"A few thousand years? Really?"

"Yeah. Not many make it that far. It takes us a really, really long time to 'grow up' so to speak. At a hundred and twenty I'd probably be classed as a bloody embryo when it comes right down to it."

"Did they give each other orgasms while they were like that?"

"Psh. What do you think?"

"Hmm… I wonder if they'll be able to reproduce because of it? Vampires who fully transform gain the ability to have children if they can find another like themselves. Like you said, it really happens very rarely, but there have been times. If I'm not mistaken, two of the current demon species on earth are the result of such matings. I don't know if this transformation is enough to count though."

"Huh. That'd be something wouldn't it? If I'd a known, I might've given it a go in my demon form. Of course, it's probably better I didn't. Dru's still crazy. She can't be trusted with pets, so she certainly can't be expected to take care of a baby. Too bad. I wonder if Darla and Peaches will end up expecting? I guess we'll all hear one way or another in a few months."

Buffy, who had been scarily silent for the last few minutes, abruptly rose from her seat and shambled from the room, blank-faced and moving like a zombie. Everyone froze, then Willow cursed and hurried after her, looking worried. Tara, and Xander were right behind her.

"Um…what's with her?" Andrew asked timidly.

"She and Angel used to date, even though as a vampire slayer it was her duty to kill him, not date him. They had this whole angsty, star-crossed lovers thing going on for a while, then they slept together, he lost his soul and went evil, spent months stalking her and her friends, and being a big jerk while doing so, then he tried to suck the world into hell. Buffy stopped him, by sending him into the hell portal he opened. Sadly, he had his soul back by that point. He came back from hell a few months later and they tried to get back together, but the whole no sex thing got to be a bit much, so he went to L.A. to be a vampire detective and help hopeless or something. He got back together with his old girlfriend Darla after she was resurrected by a demonic law firm. She's having a bit of trouble dealing is all. I suppose she's now wondering whether her whole soul mate scenario was just her being pathetic, because she was only ever a replacement for Darla" Anya explained.

"Short answer yes, long answer, no." Spike interjected.

"as well as having to confront the fact that the guy she gave her virginity to was not a big hunky slab of Irish beefcake, but a blue demon with horns." she continued.

"Again too simple. He's a vampire, which means he's both. Duh. Anyway, I don't know what she's getting so bent out of shape about. I mean, hey, she was able to look at this" There was a crackle as his game face came forth "and think it was sexy, and seriously? Usually only other vampires think that."

"not to mention the idea that her beefcake-y former honey and his former-now-current honey might be having a baby, while she, the human one, has found that normal life has so far escaped her grasp."

"It's a lot to take in, I guess, but seriously, if she wants to get knocked up she should at least wait till the other bird gets out of prison. It's not like the nasties are gonna stop trying to bring on the"
apocalypse just cause she got swollen ankles and is the size of a house."

"Well, I know that and you know that, but Buffy, well, she seems to have difficulty with absorbing these sorts of lessons." Anya sighed, before grabbing some more pizza.

"To be fair, it's easier to see if you're outside the situation."

"Well, yes, I suppose that's true. Even so, they broke up almost two years ago. She's dated other people since then, one of them seriously. She needs to let go and move on and stop pining for the perfect love that, honestly? Wasn't so perfect from where I'm standing."

"Yeah, seriously. I mean, come on, I've managed to move on from Dru, and we were together a hundred and twenty years!"

"Really? You've managed to move on?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh? I'm not even sure exactly when it happened. Now, granted, a part of me will always care about her, I'll always help her if she needs it, but, yeah. She asked if she could come back with me, you know. I said sure, because hey, Dru, right? I didn't think it was a good idea though and I told her as much, so she stayed in L.A. with Angelus and Darla. Truthfully, I'm not sure that's really a good idea either, but I figure Angelus owes it to her to try to make things right for her, and Percy, Cheerleader and Charlie-boy should keep him in line enough that he doesn't go messing with her head again. That's what I hope, anyway. Nah…Cheerleader and the others will get her out if it looks like he's losing his mind or going evil. Regardless, it's out of my hands now. More folks around to help up there. If she'd come here, Slayer and your boy would've been taking pot-shots at her and I wasn't having that."

While they were talking a few more photos flickered by: one of the entire Whirlwind, reunited for the first time since Angel had gotten his soul, one of Cordelia arguing with a large, green, bearded demon, while Lorne stood between them, holding them apart and looking panicked, and other demons of the same kind looked on, one of the group that had gone to Pylea and the two they'd rescued, posed in front of the van they'd taken, one of the Initiative battling demons at the Best Western, taken from the car, and finally one of Spike, Guido, his wife and fourteen children.

"That's where we were just before we got back to town. I spotted him walking down the street on our way back from L.A. He's got new digs, seems to be doing fine. I gave him a couple of cars I came into possession of on our travels. That was real nice what you and the Whelp did for him."

"Xander's idea, if you can believe it. I was really proud of him."

"Me too. If I'd a known meeting Guido would have such a positive effect on the boy, I'd a taken him with me long since."

"The others still aren't back, so I guess we shouldn't start the movie up. Does anyone want to help me decorate?"

"Oh! I will!" Andrew volunteered. "I was saying how bare the place was when we first got here."

"Great. I guess we should start in here."

They had gotten the living room, dining room and billiards room done by the time the others returned, though Buffy wasn't with them.

"We're gonna take off. Sorry about the movie, guys. Maybe another time?"
"Oh, sure. The rental is for a week."

"Great. Come on, Ahn. Let's head out."

"Oh, fine. Goodnight everyone."

"We're gonna go too. Good night." Willow apologized.

"Slayer ran off?"

"Yeah. She was all depressy-angsty Buffy. She wasn't in the mood to hang out and watch movies anymore."

"Her loss. I dunno why she lets him have that much power over her even now. Guess he succeeded more'n I realized when 'e was running amok before. Dru did say he wanted to hurt Slayer like he'd hurt her, and we all know how Dru turned out…and he did it without even offing anyone she really cared about."

Willow looked slightly ill, waved awkwardly and hurried out. Tara waved and hurriedly followed her.

"So…it's just you that lives here, and you two while you're visiting?"

"Yeah. When I lived here before it was me, Angelus, Dru and a half dozen minions, and we only used the downstairs. The rest of the place was filled with leaves and cobwebs and we mostly stayed out of it. Too many windows. Stormcloud here went on a cleaning kick and fixed the place up after I moved back. I was in a crypt over in Restfield Cemetary until just a few weeks ago."

"Can I live here?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Uh…"

"I won't take up much room, really. I'm still living with my parents and they've been kind of making noises about me moving out…and if my brother is back in town I don't really want to end up in the hospital again…not that I would, since I'm sure he didn't really mean it and it was probably an accident…"

"Sure, fine. Go ahead. Might be useful, really. If you're here, this place'll have a threshold, and no random vampires can just wander inside. I don't use the upstairs really. You'll have to chip in for food, help with the chores, and there'll be house rules as soon as I figure out what they are. Just go pick out a room or something, and stay out of the downstairs and we'll be fine."

"Can I live here too?" Jonathan wondered.

Spike sighed again and nodded, waving them both off. "Sure, why not. We'll start a bloody fraternity. Just call us Delta Tau Chi."

"Toga! Toga! Toga!" Andrew chanted while bouncing on his toes. "I love Animal House…although, if we're going to be a fraternity, I think tri-Lambda is the way to go. They partied hard, and kept their g.p.a's up."

Spike glowered at him. "We're not naming ourselves for a bunch of nerds. Big bad, here."

Andrew ignored his spluttering, and fixed him with a disturbingly dewy-eyed stare. "Wow. We are so in synch. It's like a Vulcan mind-meld…without the melding…or the Vulcans."
"Who are the Tri-Lambdas?" Tom asked curiously.

"Fictional fraternity of nerds that get revenge on their oppressors."

"That doesn't sound so bad to me. Smart guys that get pushed around, refuse to stay down and get their vengeance on. Primal astronauts, remember? Sounds fitting--we've all been those guys who got pushed around at some point, we're all also very smart. Sounds like a good fit to me."

"Exactly! Tri-Lambda for the win!"

"Do you have a car? 'Cause…I don't know how I'm going to move my stuff." Jonathan interjected.

"Oh, hold on. We've still got a couple of SUVs. You can collapse the rear seat, so they'll work better than the big van we were in earlier. You'll find them in the garage, just let me unshrink them first."

"Wow. This is the greatest night ever."

"Wait till you lose your virginity."

Hank and Joyce watched as Buffy paced and ranted. They'd both been rather alarmed when she'd returned from her night out with her friends looking so woebegone. It had taken a bit of prodding, but she finally began telling them about her evening.

"…and now they're back together, even though she doesn't have a soul and is still evil and they might be having an evil demon baby together!"

She finally wound down from her rant and collapsed on the nearby chair, looking exhausted and miserable. Hank sighed, rubbed his head and cast a look at Joyce, who shrugged and smiled with wry understanding. She knew exactly how he felt. She'd been in the know for a few years now and she still had trouble sometimes. It certainly wasn't the life she'd imagined for her sweet baby girl when they'd brought her home from the hospital--but it was her life, whether they liked it or not.

"So…this Angel…what kind of name is that anyway? I thought he was Irish or something? Who names their son "Angel"?"

"It was Angelus when he was evil. He shortened it after he got his soul back. I don't know what his name was when he was human. I never thought to ask. I like it." she added defiantly.

"Yeah, this Angel…how old were you when you started dating him?"

"I met him when I was fifteen."

"And how old was he…before he became a vampire or whatever."

"He was twenty six when he died."

"When he died. That just sounds so wrong…wait, twenty-six? And you were fifteen? Bastard. Maybe I should go see this guy, introduce him to my favorite golf club…"

"DAD!"

"Father's prerogative, sweetie." Hank replied, voice hard. "Twenty-six, and he was chasing after
you when you were fifteen. Jesus…and that's without counting whatever years have passed since then. Sweetheart, I don’t’ say this to be cruel…but a guy that age, chasing after a girl your age, they're not looking for a soul mate, they're looking for a toy."

"It wasn't like that!"

"Really? Then tell me what it was like. What did you two do together on an average day?"

"He would show up and tell me about stuff that was going on, hellmouthy stuff, I mean. He'd help me patrol sometimes. I used to visit him at his apartment. He spent a lot of time alone, brooding about his evil past. I would try to cheer him up. He was always so…" she trailed off, sighing dreamily "So smart, so sophisticated, so mysterious… He read philosophy…in French" she added pointedly "and he practices tai chi, sword fighting…"

"Quite a fellow, I'm sure. What's his favorite color?"

"Um…well…he wears a lot of black…and dark jewel tones…so…black, I guess?"

"What's Willow's favorite color?" Joyce asked.

"Pink, Lavender."

"Xander?"

"Yellow."

"Mr. Giles?"

"Green."

"Spike?"

"Red. Wow…I hadn't realized I even knew that."

"This Angel's hobbies…"

"Just Angel, dad." Buffy huffed. "Um…well…Oh! Drawing. He likes to draw."

"Okay. So he has hobbies."

"One hobby. That and brooding, I guess."

"Sounds like a fun fellow. Favorite food?"

"He doesn't eat. People food I mean…just blood. Pig's blood, because he's good now."

"Yeah." Hank grimaced. "Sense of humor?"

"Not so I ever noticed. He was always very serious, very mature and focused."

"Goody for him. What did you two talk about? I doubt you had much in common."

"All sorts of things…his evil past and how remorseful he was, patrols, upcoming evil, sometimes he’d try to explain the stuff he was reading, but I didn't usually understand it…” she trailed off, shook her head and faced her parents once more. "We talked about lots of stuff."

"What did you fight about?"
"We didn't really...except about the fact that we couldn't be together, and that wasn't really arguing, it was just badness."

"Uh huh. Cryptic and mysterious, always sitting around being tragic and sophisticated, and you never fought." Hank sighed again, looking a bit ill. "Honey, that doesn't sound like a relationship, it sounds like a predator setting the stage to turn the head of a young, inexperienced girl."

"I'm telling you, it wasn't like that! We were in love!"

"I'm not doubting the validity of your feelings, honey. He was your first serious boyfriend, right? I'm sure you felt very strongly about him…but it seems like there was lots of bits of fairytale fluff, not a lot of substance."

"There was substance! We were all about the substance!"

"He ever hang out with you and your friends?"

"Well, no. It was usually just us, except when he'd come by to help out."

"So, every time you saw him, he was brooding, reading French philosophy, or being Mr. Kung-fu…probably with his shirt off, am I right?"

The flush on Buffy's cheeks was answer enough.

"So, you never walked in on him watching mindless television?"

"Angel doesn't watch television…or listen to music."

"Never told stupid stories to gross each other out? Never told jokes or horsed around? Never walked in on him doing anything embarrassing like dancing around his apartment singing?"

"I couldn't imagine him ever doing anything like that."

"Does the guy have super senses?"

"Yeah. Strong, fast, good hearing, good sense of smell."

"So he always knew when you were coming and had a chance to set the stage, so to speak."

"I think they have to concentrate on it to use it, otherwise I doubt Spike would've been painting his nails, watching Dawson's creek, or dancing around singing to the Ramones when I'd come into his crypt." Buffy snorted.

"A guy sitting around brooding would be more likely to hear you coming." Joyce pointed out. "Tell me Buffy…if he were to show up at the door right now, no more curse, no more bar to your relationship…how do you picture things going?"

"Like they did before."

"So…serious all the time, him brooding, or telling you about stuff you don't understand or aren't interested in, just the two of you--no hanging out with your friends, no television, no radio."

"Well…no…that's…" Buffy trailed off. She couldn't actually picture Angel there in the house with her, doing normal everyday stuff. Angel washing dishes? Watching t.v. together late at night? Hanging out at the Bronze? They'd never had any of that, and she couldn't even picture it. "It probably wouldn't be like that. He was different, last time he was here. Weird."
"How do you mean?"

"Well…okay…he and Spike went out to get alcohol, which was weird already--Spike drinks like a fish given the opportunity, Angel, I've never seen him drink anything but blood, not even a Shirley Temple the few times he was lurking around the Bronze. When they came back, we heard them arguing, like loud, you know, screaming at each other out in the street. We could hear them from inside. When we went out to investigate, thinking something was wrong, they acted all shifty and avoidy and Angel was all like 'Oh, it's no big, just theoretical, don't worry about it'. Naturally, I wasn't having that, and I demanded answers. They were arguing about who would win if a caveman and an astronaut got into a fight! I mean, have you ever heard anything so stupid?"

"Did the astronauts have weapons?"

"DAD! Geez, you're as bad as the rest of them. Half the group spent the night arguing about it… And Angel was right there with them, and he and Spike were all banter-y, and downing shots and… It was weird."

"Him acting like a normal person is weird, and makes you uncomfortable."

"NO. It's just…he just… He was always a normal person, just a serious, sophisticated person, not a drunken Xander in leather. EW."

Hank and Joyce watched as several expressions flitted across her face and then exchanged a look. They seemed to have gotten through to her--pushing further might actually hurt the progress they'd made.

"Coffee?"

"Sounds great…but let me do it. After that scare earlier…"

"Scare? What scare? No one said anything about a scare. What was it? Demons? Zombies?"

"Aneurysm. The start of one, anyway. Spike heard something wonky in the blood flow or something…I'm not actually too clear on that part. He asked his nephews to take a look. They fixed an aneurysm that was in the process of forming. I'm going to head back to the doctor's tomorrow to see if there's anything else I need to worry about. They said everything checked out, but while magic might be all very well and good, I really would prefer a second opinion from a trained medical professional, though to be fair they suggested as much as well."

"It's a good thing they were here. It could have been fatal. That's if they were telling the truth."

"Given the looks on all their faces, I believe them. I wish I didn't, really."

"None of them said anything."

"They probably didn't want to worry you. It's nothing. It's all taken care of." Joyce assured her, before she and Hank headed to the kitchen.

Buffy slumped back in her seat and wondered if it was some kind of sign. Riley had been kidnapped and thought dead for a few days, and she'd spent that whole time obsessing over Angel. Her mom had nearly died tonight, had been suffering from a brain tumor before that, and she hadn't noticed, because she'd been obsessing over Angel…. Who had moved on, or backwards, depending on how you looked at it, and who may or may not be expecting a child… demon baby thing…in the coming months…or days. How long did it take a demon baby thing to gestate anyway? Would it be blue? Or would it just look like a regular vamp but tiny?

She pictured a chubby baby wrapped in blankets, with a mouth full of razor sharp teeth and
bumpies and shuddered.

"Wait a second…Spike was hanging out here? With my parents? What gives?"

When Spike wandered upstairs that afternoon, he found the mansion transformed from minimalist with antique furniture to geek paradise. There were now several large bookcases in the living room, filled end to end with DVD box sets --sci-fi and anime mostly with a smattering of other genres. There were Star Wars, Star Trek, Doctor Who, Battlestar Galactica and other action figures lovingly displayed wherever there was room for them. There were computers and robots and gadgets and magical paraphernalia. There were books as well--magic, sci-fi, tomes in dead languages, demon languages and Klingon, fantasy, mythology, fairy tales, history, computer programming and "The Art of" books for several sci-fi and fantasy series. Doctor Who was playing on the telly, while the boys--all four of them, laid around on the couches, reading, eating, watching the show, or in Andrew's case, painting a Tri-Lambda sign to hang by the front door.

"Hi! We're all moved in. The kitchen is stocked too. I got some blood from the butcher's while I was out. Pig and cow…I wasn't sure if it made a difference. We were talking earlier about doing culinary experiments, but you'd have to agree, since you'd have to drink the stuff. Do you think apple juice would taste good in pig's blood since apple sauce tastes good on pig's meat or would it just curdle it and make it icky? Oh, and also, we need a motto. I was thinking 'sit vis nobiscum'."

"NO." Tom, Harry and Jonathan all answered together without looking up from what they were doing.

"None of us are Jedi, remember?"

"How about semper ubi sub ubi" Jonathan snickered.

"Won't work. I go commando." Spike disagreed.

Andrew squeaked, and then coughed to cover it up.

"How about…"

"Oh…hey guys. I wasn't expecting to see you both…here. Wow. What happened to this place?"

Xander greeted everyone cheerfully.

"Harris. Don't you people ever knock?"

"I did. No one answered. So, what'ya doin?"

"Coming up with a latin motto for the house."

"The entries so far are "may the force be with you" and "always wear underwear"

"How about sic gorgiamus allos subjectatos nunc"

"Ah yes, a classic." Jonathan nodded.

"That's from the Addams family, right? You trying to get me staked, Harris?"

"Huh?"

"We gladly feast on those who would subdue us. Think about it."
"Ah, yeah. Probably not a good motto for the home of a vampire. I don't know what you're worried about though. Buffy doesn't know Latin."

"Old Rupert does."

"How about…hmmm…Utinam barbari saptium proprium tuum invadant." Spike suggested with a smirk.

Everyone but Xander snickered. Xander looked around at the rest and frowned.

"Okay…translation for those of us not fluent in Latin?"

"May barbarians invade your personal space."

"I like it."

"You two have any suggestions?"

Tom smirked at everyone. "Vah! Denuone Latine loquebar? Me ineptum. Interdum modo elabitur"

Harry snickered and kicked him lightly in the side. "You are such an ass."

Xander sighed.

"He said 'oh, was I speaking latin again, silly me, sometimes it just slips out.'"

"Wow. I feel so inadequate right now."

"Isn't that normal for you?"

"So not helping."

"I wouldn't, really. Tom and I had it zapped into our brains by magic. Spike went to school at a time where it was a standard part of the curriculum. Jonathan and Andrew are just special like that, I guess."

"Alright, Stormcloud, what's your suggestion?"

"Do you want something silly or a real suggestion?"

"Try a real one. Be unique." 

"Mine was a real suggestion." Andrew complained.

"No." the rest replied in unison.

"Okay…how about Viam aut inveniam aut faciam."

"Hannibal, right? Yeah, I like that one."

"I'll either find a way or make one." Tom answered before Xander could ask.

"I like that one too. It's a good motto, but if you really want to up the geek factor, maybe you should make it something like lupDujHomwlj luteb gharghme"y"

"Bloody hell, Harris, you dying or something?"
"You speak Klingon." Andrew and Jonathan gushed in unison.

"What's it mean?"

"Um…*my ship is full of eels.*"

"Yeah, that's a right useful motto."

"It's no worse than *may barbarians invade your personal space!*"

"If you go for Klingon, shouldn't it be the Klingon motto? *Today is a good day to die?*"

"I vote no. We're on the hellmouth. Saying stuff like that tends to be a bad idea."

"I guess put it to a vote? I vote for my suggestion."

"I still want *may the force be with you.*"

"I don't speak bloody Klingon, so I'm voting with Stormcloud."

"I rather liked *always wear underwear, myself*. You have to admit it would be amusing to see people's faces as they read it."

"You know what? It really would. I vote for that one too."

"It was my suggestion, so I vote for it too."

"I'm voting with Spike. He's scarier than either of you."

"That means a tie. Someone's going to have to change their vote."

"Hey, I'll just call Ahn. She can be tie-breaker. Hang on a sec."

Xander dug out a phone from his pocked and dialed the Magic Box, then put it on speaker so everyone could hear.

"Hello, Magic Box, can I help you?"

"Ahn, great. We're trying to decide between two latin mottos, and we've got a tie. You get to be tie breaker."

"Alright…let's hear them."

"The first one is *always wear underwear*, though in Latin, obviously. The second is *I'll either find a way, or make one.*"

"The second. The first is a stupid motto. Myself, I always go commando. Was there anything else?"

"Wow. Your girlfriend is the most awesome girl ever."

"No, Ahn. Thanks for your help, but for future reference, remember our talk about not over-sharing?"

"Stupid human rules." They heard her mutter before hanging up.

"Wait, Anya is a demon or something?"
"Used to be. Vengeance demon. Her specialty was cursing men who upset their girlfriends. It sometimes amazes me that I sleep at night."

"Just take it as props. You must be a really awesome boyfriend if you got her over that."

"I never thought of it that way," Xander admitted, before puffing up his chest a bit. "The Xan man rocks."

"Is something burning?"

Andrew jumped to his feet with a shriek and scurried from the room. "My cookies!"
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Spike and the boys are back in Sunnydale.

To: QueenC@angel-investigations.org
From: BigBad@hellmouth.net

Hello Cheerleader,

Well, we're back in old Sunnyhell again. You might want to drop word to the broody one and Darla that we spotted those bloody Initiative boys out in force not too far from your neck of the woods. They were battling demons at a Best Western, for some reason. No accounting for taste--demons these days don't have any pride or sense of tradition anymore.

We've finished fixing up the mansion, and I've acquired a couple of roommates as well--you'll know the one bloke, Jonathan. I believe he went to school with you lot. The other fellow no one seems to know, though he says he set a trio of flying monkeys on a school production of Romeo and Juliet. His brother, Tucker, seems to be more well known for having set hell hounds on the prom or something. He sounds like a real blighter from the little Andrew has said about him. He seems to have fled town after the prom incident, though it appears he might be back--someone set a pack of hell hounds loose on the mall. There were casualties, but not nearly as many as there could have been, thanks to a vision I received. It seems the rigmarole with the Groosalug and Dru worked. I'm apparently a seer now. Hoo-bloody-ray for me.

In other news, the bunch of us watched a recent remake of Planet of the Apes. Tell Peaches a consensus was reached, and cavemen win.

Pass the email address on to the rest of the girls, if you would. I've acquired a phone as well. The number is 867-5309. Pass that on too.

Oh, and before I forget, I'm enclosing a list of books I recently acquired. The boys have agreed to make copies of any of them Percy wants for your collection. I figured I'd give him first dibs as Rupert's got a fairly extensive collection already.

Spike

To: BigBad@hellmouth.net
From: QueenC@angel-investigations.org

Hey Bleach boy,

Okay, first off…Hellmouth.net? I always knew the internet had to be evil. Thanks for the update on the Initiative, but I'm sure I'd get a vision if they were going to interfere with any of the resident vamps, so don't worry. Secondly, how the *hell* did you end up rooming with Jonathan and that other guy? I really can't picture it. The Best Western thing, I can explain somewhat--they're all demons that fled the freak storm here. I guess they decided they liked it there or something…but yeah, not exactly with the ambiance and hellmouthy vibes, is it?

So, you're a seer now too? We should start a club or something. Since it was my idea, I get to be president…nah, Queen, definitely. You can be my faithful squire, and feed me grapes.

As for the books, I hope your nephews are feeling up to it. Wes has been drooling over the list
As for the books, I hope your nephews are feeling up to it. Wes has been drooling over the list since I gave it to him. I'm thinking just send us the whole lot with our sincere thanks.

Finally--still with the cavemen? What is it with you two? Darla tells me you've been having variations on this argument for a hundred and twenty years. That's just sad...and though I hate to say it, because it's depressing, really, to think about too hard, I always kind of thought that would be the case, under the rules we all agreed on--caveman wins. In real life though, it's astronauts that slowly pull ahead-- Sunnydale showed me that much. They were always faster, stronger, scarier, hungrier...we were smart and worked together and we won. It's hard to see the victories in the day to day, but when you look back over the long view it's obvious. Sorry, bleach boy, but I'm with Angel on this one--astronauts for the win!

Cordelia

To: BigBad@hellmouth.net
From: wyndham-pryce@angel-investigations.org

Spike,

I just wanted to tender my sincere thanks for the windfall you sent us. Several of the tomes have already been of great use in recent cases. I daresay I now have a collection to rival, if not exceed, Mr. Giles. Don't tell him I said that. He's a bit touchy about his collection. Don't tell him I said that either. In any case, thank you, sincerely. They will, I'm sure, continue to come in handy for some time to come. The helpless of Los Angeles thank you as well, or would, I'm sure, if they had any idea.

That out of the way, I feel I must object to the supposed consensus on the subject of cavemen vs. astronauts. I rented the film last night, and I'm afraid I shall have to respectfully disagree. The film's plot didn't match any of the purported scenarios we had agreed on, and what's more, the planet of the apes was just that--alternate evolution on a *different* planet. The odd twist at the end means nothing--the conqueror of planet earth was a caveman who was an astronaut, which we agreed, as in the case of the Klingon empire, made him a primal warrior and not a fit representative for the purposes of the argument. I will continue to stand by my view that the astronaut would in fact triumph over the savage, superstitious cave man.

Regards,
Wesley Wyndham-Pryce

Hey there big brother,

First things first--Dru's gone to England to join a coven of witches. One of them had a vision or something, or they did a spell...not too clear on that. They apparently specialize in redeeming the formerly evil or something. She seemed excited about it, and they apparently have a few among their number that are good with mind healing. She said she'd write. I'll give you her contact information as soon as I know it. As you can imagine, Angel was none too keen to let her go, but we convinced him it's probably for the best, all things considered. We haven't missed her as much as we might have otherwise as Fred is still here. You remember her, right? The girl from Pylea? She's very Dru like--waifish, babbling, not making a lot of sense.

In other news, it seems you didn't actually have to skedaddle as quickly as you did. Angel had no idea you left. He spent half the night watching the door, and then when it started getting late, ranting about having to go find you and rein in the chaos before it leveled the city. He was really
flummoxed when we told him you'd left. I think you hurt his feelings, actually. We keep telling him to just call you already, but you know him.

By the way, those blood recipes you sent are actually quite tasty. You've really gathered up an interesting bunch of humans.

Wow, that typing tutor game Cordy gave me has really been a help. The last thing I tried typing took me forever, but here I am, moving right along. There was never much call for typing skills in the Order.

Darla

P.S. So glad the caveman/astronaut argument has finally been resolved. I told Angelus when he first rose that all we were informed all we would become. Humans evolved from cavemen, and that's still in there, whether or not modern man likes to acknowledge it. Of course, at the same time, the addition of a human mind to the primal urges of the demon is what makes vampires apex predators. I always thought you were both only half right, but no one asked me. If you had I would have told you to forget the caveman and the astronaut, because a vampire--who is or could be a blend of both--would eat both of them and continue on his way. This could have all been resolved long ago.

To: Darla@angel-investigations.org
From: BigBad@hellmouth.net

Evening luv,

So, Dru's back in the old country, kicking up her heels with a coven of witches. Sounds like just her cup of tea, really. She always was a fey child, our Dru. I'm sure she'll be right at home--and I'll admit it puts me at ease to know she's far away. Angelus was always good at breaking things, not so much with putting them back together. She's broken enough, and deserves a chance to put all her pieces back together without interference--well meant or not.

It doesn't surprise me somehow that the old sod is playing innocent and bewildered. Tells me I've overstayed my welcome, tells me to stay away from Dru, bristles all indignant and self-righteous, and he's surprised? Bloody bog-trotting berk. I don't have the patience for him and his games right now. The soul still stings and it's taking most of my available resources to keep moving. I can't do that and deal with him at the same time, not yet. It's alright though--my boys are still here and I wanted them to myself for the time remaining.

As for your postscript, your point is well made. It actually came up during the last round of the argument, with Klingons as the representative primal astronaut. I think you're wrong about the vamp getting the best of the other two though. Chances are they'd team up to take out the vamp before settling their own differences--they'd both recognize a predator when they see one, and an enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that rot. I think it's really rich you complaining about us not consulting you on matters though--every time we started up, you'd get annoyed and kick us out, or you and Dru would leave for a bit until we got it out of our systems. If you had just weighed in instead of shrieking at us and chucking vases, maybe it would have been settled, who knows? Of course, being the contrary lad I am, chances are, I would have just sided with one of you against the other and tried to convince Dru to as well. Might have been fun…

One last thing before I go. Stay seated, take a deep breath. I'll preface this by saying it's a possibility, but I don't know how much of one.

Remember Anya? She was a vengeance demon for over a thousand years. When we were looking at the vacation photos, she told me something I didn't know, though maybe you do. She said if a vampire lives long enough to get a full demon form, they gain the ability to have children, so long
as they find another like them to have them with. Apparently two of the demon species currently on earth were started in just such a way. Seeing as you and Angel were shagging like a couple of rabbits hopped up on X, I thought it moot to at least warn you of a possible bun in the oven. She's not sure the transformation on Pylea was enough—it's kind of unprecedented. Do with the knowledge what you will.

Spike

Darla read through the message once, and then a second time, but it still made no sense to her. She was a vampire. She couldn't get pregnant. End of story. It was ridiculous. It was absurd. It was a thing that should not be.

Bad enough she'd willingly crippled herself to live with an abomination, helped another of her line also become an abomination, and that the last member of their little family was now food, but this really took the cake.

She could feel the walls closing in on her. It was too ridiculous to even contemplate. What the hell would she do with a baby? How could she even have one? She was dead. That was a pretty big bar to overcome.

She normally would have just laughed, rolled her eyes, told everyone what an idiot Spike was so they could laugh too…but there was a terrible fear growing in her that it was all too real. It would be just her luck—everything was going so well, and now this.

She rose to her feet and stumbled from the office, feeling vaguely panicky and ill. The walls were still closing in on her. She needed air—didn't breathe, but she still needed it.

Angel spotted her and hurried towards her.

"Darla? What?..." only to recoil when she lashed out at him and pushed him back.

"Stay back! Haven't you done enough already?" she hissed at him before stumbling towards the door.

Bright sunlight streaming in around it changed her mind and she turned to head down to the basement and the tunnel access.

"I need…go…too much." she muttered to herself as she stumbled away.

The rest of them stayed out of her way and exchanged a bewildered glance, not sure if they should try to follow her or not.

"What's wrong with her?" Gunn wondered.

"I don't know…she was just checking her e-mail. Maybe that will give us a clue." Cordelia replied.

Wesley and Angel were already hurrying to the office.

"Oh good, her e-mail is still open. Seems to be a message from Spike."

"What did he do to her?"

"Let me read and we'll…oh."
"What is it? Nattering about Dru, typical…"

He trailed off when he realized he was simply celebrating that Dru was far away from him, for fear he’d break her again, even with a soul. Well, that explained Wesley's sudden nervous tension.

"Bog-trotting…that little shit! Next time I see him, I'm staking him. Can you believe him? I told him I didn't mean it that way! And look at that, he's still trying to convince everyone it's the cavemen when we all…"


Angel read through the last few lines, blinked, and read them again.

"I'm going to be a daddy?"

"You're what now?" Cordelia demanded from the doorway. "I thought you said nothing happened between you and Buffy! Also, I thought vampires shot blanks, you know, on account of being dead and all!"

"Vampires can get humans pregnant? Man, I so did not need to hear that." Gunn agreed.

"Not Buffy…Darla. Because of Pylea."

"Everyone settle down. We don't know that anything of the sort even happened…and if it did, we don't know if it continued. We don't know how Darla reverting to human form, let alone traveling between dimensions might have affected things. There's also the small matter of, if against all logic and sense, such a thing did in fact happen…what kind of a child will it be? Will it be a miniature vampire, a small lavender demon with horns, or something else?"

"Lavender?"

"Well…you were blue and she was pink. Makes sense if you think of it." Cordelia allowed.

Angel slowly sank down on the nearest chair.

"Lavender. What the hell would I do with a lavender son? I really don't know how I feel about this."

"Angel, do settle down. We don't even know if it even happened. If even the knowledgeable thousand year old ex-demon isn't sure… We need to research. I'm not sure what we should research, as by all accounts this would be something of a singular, unprecedented situation. We might not be able to tell one way or another for some time now…or it might very quickly become obvious. We don't know what the child is going to be, if it even exists…we have no idea what sort of gestational period to expect either."

"Yeah…I guess we'll have to examine Darla…Darla! Damn. I need to go find her."

"Where would she go?"

"I don't know. She likes a good view…though if she's worrying about all this… Lorne. She knows he's a seer. She probably went to Caritas."

Cordelia grabbed the phone and dialed the club, waiting impatiently for Lorne to answer.

"Hey, it's me. Is Lorne available? Lorne! Heard me, huh? Listen…if Darla comes in, could you stall her on the readings till we have a chance to get there? Yeah, she's a bit freaked out. We think
she might be…"

Her words cut off as Angel suddenly lunged forward and covered her mouth.

"Is he in his office?"

Cordelia glared at him till he let go.

"Lorne? At the bar, huh? Nevermind. Just stall her if she shows up? Wes, Gunn and I are headed there now. She went out through the tunnels. Angel's going to follow her trail and bring her if she didn't just go herself. Thanks, Lorne."

After she hung up she crossed her arms and glowered at the hulking vampire.

"Vampires don't have children, Cordy, not regular ones, which makes this a miracle…or a curse, depending. The thing is, there will be someone, somewhere that will hear about it and want the baby for some reason. I'd prefer we kept this whole thing under wraps as much as possible till we know what, if anything, we're dealing with."

"Gotcha. I wasn't thinking."

Angel just nodded and started for the tunnels. "I'll see you all at Caritas."

"I can't believe Tara ditched me to go hang out with Anya." Willow pouted before licking away the foam moustache from her cappuccino.

"She's allowed to have friends of her own, right? Anya's been around for a while, but she's not really our friend…well, she is, but"

"She's mostly Xander's girlfriend, and if Xander and she were to break up, she probably wouldn't be around anymore…like Cordelia."

"Yeah." Buffy agreed. "Although, you still seem to talk to Cordelia, which is weird when you think about it. You were the one who objected the most to her being around in the first place."

"She changed…and it helped that she and Xander weren't dating anymore."

"Xander, huh? Still? I thought you were over all that, and you know…gay now."

"Xander is Xander. He has his own category. We've been friends forever and…I don’t’ like sharing him. I never have."

"Um, didn't you two used to hang around with that other guy, Jesse?"

"Yeah, but that was Jesse. The three of us had been friends forever, so it was different with him."

"You guys never really mention him."

"It's one of those things. You never really knew him, neither did Giles. We mention him sometimes when it's just the two of us, but not usually even then. Xander dusted him and I think he still hasn't forgiven himself for it. We didn't know about vampires with souls back then. I tend to not bring Jesse up because I know Xander wonders if we could have had him back if he'd just survived as a vampire for another year…and then he thinks about everyone Jesse would have killed in the meantime, and the fact that even if he came back he'd have superpowers and Xander wouldn't and he hates himself just a little for being glad he dusted him when he did. It's
"I'm that predictable, am I? Yeah. It is and I wish it wasn't. God...when I got home the other night, I was just so... and my parents, and it's still so weird to say that--parents, not just mom--sat me down and made me spill and I just started talking and couldn't stop. It was awful, Wil. Mom always gets this look on her face whenever Angel comes up. Now my dad gets it too. I have a feeling, if my dad had been around when the whole Angelus thing went down and knew what was going on...that he'd have gone with Giles to the factory to beat Angel with a flaming baseball bat. He said a guy that much older wasn't looking for a soulmate by going after someone my age, they were looking for a toy.

"It's not quite the same thing. H-he's a vampire! They get really old, but not old like humans do."

"He was twenty six or twenty seven when he was turned. That was the part my dad was talking about. The bicentennial part just made it that much worse. He also said, by the sound of it we didn't have a real relationship, just a carefully constructed front put together by a predator to turn a young girl's head. And part of me hates him for it because, I know it wasn't like that, I know he loved me...but ever since he said it, there's part of me that keeps wondering."  

"Oh, Buffy, no! He did! He did and you did and... He's a dad. They see things differently. He wasn't there, he doesn't know him. All he knows is he made his baby girl unhappy. Of course he hates him--it's his job!"

"It's more than that. It was always very clear to me: there was Angel--good, a hero, the man I loved, and there was Angelus--evil, a demon, the thing that hated me. They weren't the same and had nothing in common and... Is that even true? Was it always Angelus, but sometimes with a conscience, and he loved me when he had it and hated me when he didn't? I believed that...but now Spike supposedly has his soul back and he's no different than he ever was--he's still snarky, and curses and smokes and drinks, and he doesn't seem to feel bad about anything...and why is he even here? His stupid vampire family is all back together and playing happy families. Why isn't he still in L.A. with the rest of them? He certainly seemed cozy with Darla, the stupid ho-bag."

"My parents and I went out for dinner. We were on the terrace, overlooking the street and Spike, Darla, Cordelia and the wizards drove by in a convertible. They looked like a couple--he had his arm around her and she had her hand on his leg and they were all smiling and laughing. Cordelia was in the back seat with the two boys."

"Maybe that's just how they operate? I mean, it's not like we know much about how vampire families are when it's just them...we were always just concerned with dusting them quickly. Also, up until now, we never really got the impression that there was really anything between them. I mean, yeah, he was off living with Spike and Drusilla when he lost his soul, but..."

"Yeah. He dusted Darla and never batted an eye, Spike teamed up with me to take him down... there didn't seem to be any loyalty or feeling there. That doesn't seem to actually be the case though. Those pictures...the regular ones, not the icky demon ones--they were so surreal, weren't they? They just looked like people--drinking, dancing, talking, singing karaoke, goofing around. And what is up with the stupid nephews? They seem human, but they hang out with a whole pack..."
of vampires--for hours by the look of it--and no one seems to have tried to eat any of them. They were dancing with them, camped out in Africa with them while one got a soul and the other a chip, go shopping with them. It doesn't make any sense!"

"Well, they're not just human, remember? Maybe that makes enough of a difference?"

"I guess."

"And for the other stuff…maybe we should just ask Spike? I mean, he was all evil vampire, and now he's got a soul. He should be able to answer whatever questions you have about Angel, and about vampire families and stuff."

"Maybe we should. It's still daylight, but he's probably awake and watching his stupid soap operas right now."

When Buffy and Willow arrived at the mansion, they spotted Giles pulling in to the drive and then getting out of his car.

"Giles! Hey! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello girls. I came by in hopes I could speak to Spike about his soul, see the 'vacation photos' I heard so much about--especially those of the vampires in their true forms. The only one I've ever seen like that was Kakistos. I was also hoping for more information about the battle with the hell hounds at the mall that I had to hear about from Anya, since my Slayer didn't see fit to inform me of it."

"I was going to. I just got distracted."

The three of them slowed to a stop when they reached the door. There was a sign by the side of it--three lambdas in a triangle formation, with a latin motto beneath it.

"When did this place become a frat house? The Tri-Lambdas? Do they even have a chapter in Sunnydale? Why is it here and not at the college?"

"We'll either find a way or make one. Interesting. A plural variation on a Hannibal quote."

"Hannibal Lector speaks Latin? Well…yeah, I guess he would, being all creepy psychiatrist cannibal guy… Doctors know Latin, right?"

"Not that Hannibal." Giles sighed.

"He was a Punic Carthaginian military tactician and commander. He's considered one of the greatest military commanders in history."

"Oh. My bad. Just ignore the idiot college student."

"I don't get it…if this place is a fraternity now, where is Spike living? I mean…did they just come and kick him out of the house and take over or what?"

"Let's find out." Buffy decided, before throwing open the door and marching in.

Willow shrieked as someone suddenly lunged around the wall with a glowy stick in their hands and whacked Buffy over the head. It took her a second to realize it was Tara. Luckily, for all involved, Buffy reacted quicker. Her fist stopped a half-inch from Tara's face. She tended to react
quickly when attacked. Tara let out a small shriek as well as Buffy's slayer-powered fist stopped before impacting. Buffy relaxed, looking shaken and dropped her fist. Tara, looking shaken herself, backed off a few steps and ducked her head nervously.

"S-sorry about that…I thought you were one of the others."

They all became aware of an odd sound interspersed with periodic clashes coming towards them and turned to look. Spike and Andrew, who also had glowy sticks they were using as swords, were slowly edging into the room—or rather Andrew was as he was being driven back by Spike. Andrew shrieked and pressed himself flat against the wall when he was disarmed.

"I-If you strike me down…I'll return more powerful than you can possibly imagine." he squeaked out, knees shaking.

Spike relaxed his stance, put his hands on his hips and glowered at the boy sourly.

"You can't say it like that! You sound like you're about to bloody well burst into tears! STAND UP STRAIGHT, FIRM YOUR WOBBLY JAW AND SAY IT WITH CONVICTION!" he barked.

Andrew squeaked and tried his best to comply.

"If you strike me down..."

The others were momentarily distracted by another battling pair briefly passing by the open doorway to the upstairs hall, and by Tom peeking around the doorway across from them.

"...I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine!"

"I dunno. Curly? What do you think? Did you believe him?"

"Not for a second. You need to work on your delivery."

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!" Buffy barked irritably.

"I think we'd all like to know that."

"Strange…I was right nearby, and I didn't hear a single knock." Spike said instead of answering them.

Buffy glared, crossed her arms and began tapping her foot. Willow, who was standing nearest, knocked on the door sheepishly.

"Oh, Red, Rupert, fancy seeing you here."

"Spike. I do hope we're not intruding." Giles replied, voice wry.

Buffy's eyes narrowed and her knuckles whitened as her fists clenched.

"Nah, I think our little training exercise was about winding down."

While the others talked, Andrew sidled to a large white board that was posted across from the front door that said "House Rules" at the top. So far there were two: 1)Spike is in charge, his orders must be obeyed without question, and 2) always question authority.

To this, Andrew added number three: Buffy needs to learn how to knock.
Spike let out a piercing whistle, and the faint sounds of clashing light sabers elsewhere in the house ended.

"Would either of you like something to drink?" Spike offered.

Buffy let out a growl at being ignored and lunged forward to punch Spike in the nose. She was surprised and shaken to find her arm twisted behind her back, which was now pressed firmly against Spike's front, and a hand at her throat.

"No, Slayer. We're not going down that road again. It's not just me living here anymore. I will not have you kicking in my bloody door night or day, whenever you feel like it and breaking my nose because you're in a snit. You'll either behave in a civilized manner, or you're not invited."

Spike growled as he marched her out the front door and then closed it in her face. He turned and stalked off without a word towards the kitchen, after a brief detour to scrawl "I know your mum raised you better than that" on the whiteboard under rule #3, leaving a stunned and shaken Giles and Willow behind.

Giles peeked in the kitchen and found one of the wizards and Jonathan making sandwiches and piling them on a large platter.

"Oh, um, hi, Mr. Giles."

"Just Giles is fine, Jonathan. You're not in high school anymore."

"Did anyone else come with you? We might need to make more sandwiches."

"Willow did, and Buffy… I'm not sure if they'll be back or not."

"We should probably make a few more just in case."

"I thought Spike came in here?"

"He did, but he headed off to the study. If the Slayer was here, I guess that explains his bad mood. Through there, end of the hall."

"I see, thank you."

Giles left seeking Spike. Harry and Jonathan continued making sandwiches. A few minutes later Xander and Anya wandered in.

"I thought I just heard G-man."

"You did. He's in the study with Spike. I think Buffy and Willow were with him. I'm not sure, but I think Buffy and Spike got into an argument. She either left or was shown out. I assume Willow went after her. I don't know if they're going to be back or not."

Xander frowned and headed for the front door without a word. Anya watched him go and sighed. "Do you two need any help?"

Giles found Spike in the study--this place seemed to have it all. There was a computer on the desk
that looked and smelled brand new. The walls were lined with floor to ceiling shelves, many of which were filled—everything from trashy romances to books of magic and prophecy. His fingers itched to examine some of the tomes, many of which he'd heard of but never had a chance to study himself, but his attention was drawn away to a series of three hanging scrolls decorating the wall above the fireplace. He recognized one of the girls depicted from a photograph he'd seen once, and could guess at the other two. A feeling of fury began clawing at his gut and he tore off his glasses before confronting the vampire that was ensconced in a chair in front of the fire, watching him placidly.

"What sort of sick game are you playing at?"

"Really Watcher, don't make yourself overwrought."

"How dare you? How dare you display these young women as trophies?"

"Climb off your high horse, Rupert, and look again. Do they look like trophies? They're a memorial to fallen warriors. Xin Rong, China, 1900. I didn't know her name till a few years later when her brothers came along to avenge her death. They each knew enough English to tell me who they were and why they were there. They wanted to make sure I knew, you see. I gave them her last message before I killed them. I didn't know what she said, but I know what it sounded like. The boys know Chinese, told me what she said. "Tell my mother I'm sorry." Can you believe that? Silly bint. Like I was gonna go hunt down her mum, even if I knew what she'd said…or that she'd want me to. She was young, and she was already tired of the grind, you could see it in her eyes, but she still gave it her all. There was no other choice for her but to keep fighting if she didn't want to shame her family. The whole area was a chaotic pit of despair—humans killing humans, fire everywhere…and our little band of miscreants was hardly the only vampires that had come to enjoy the party. Nikki Wood, New York, 1977. Fought like Buffy, played like Faith, had a little boy she took out with her at night and hid behind a trashcan. She was a fierce one, older than any of the others I came across. And of course, Yuki…she was young too. Just a child, and sent off to face the Master. He gobbled her down, made her a vampire. She was a little crazy, but she fought like a wildcat. Frankly, if that bloody wrecking ball hadn't of been close by I wouldn't have survived that one. Strong, fast, nigh untouchable. She was made in the early 1800s. Who alive remembers these girls really? Nikki's Watcher might still be around, perhaps her son if he didn't get eaten, but they're the only ones, and chances are I'll still be around after they're gone. I fought these girls one on one, warrior to warrior, and I triumphed. This is me remembering them as the warriors they were."

Giles stared coldly at him a moment longer and put his glasses back on to take another look. He was correct—no lurid displays of their final moments, no signs of them in defeat. Each of the girls was displayed as a proud, fierce warrior at the height of her power—Nikki wearing the coat that had become Spike's trademark, Xin Rong wielding the blessed sword that had scarred his eyebrow, in the center Yuki, back to back with a shadowy image of her vampire self in game face, clawed hands raised threatenedly. Each was bordered with roses, entwined with stakes and crosses—an odd choice of decoration for a vampire to have utilized, with their names inscribed across the bottom. They were lovely pieces really, and a fitting memorial.

Giles sighed, and the knots in his shoulders slowly unwound. It would seem that, much like Buffy, he'd been taking out his fury at Angelus out on the creature before him. It was a rather sobering realization. Even before his chip, Spike had been a very different creature than Angelus. He really should have remembered that.

"Ah, my mistake."

He wasn't going to apologize to a vampire, even if he supposedly had a soul these days. Spike's mocking grin and glittering eyes told him he'd heard the unspoken thought, but he let it slide.
"So, what brings you here to my humble abode, Watcher?" he asked before rising to pour himself a measure of whiskey from a bottle on the desk. He held the bottle up in question, and at Giles' nod poured a second glass.

"I was hoping you could tell me about your experience with the trials and your soul."

"Storytime with uncle Spike, is it? Well then… I guess I should begin by assuring you that, when we headed for Africa I had no intentions of getting a soul, but asking for advice on fixing Angel's…I didn't want a soul. Seemed like a nuisance if you ask me. It certainly hasn't done Peaches many favors--he's a miserable sod, and his demon is crazy. But, fool that I am, I went off an fought for it anyway, so's Darla could seek a happy ending with Peaches. Isn't love grand?"

"So…are we going to sit out here all night? It's just…they were making food when I came out here and I'm kind of hungry."

"I'm not knocking."

"So ring the bell."

"What bell? There is no bell."

"There is now. It's kind of cool, really. The wizards installed it. There's a little bell in the hall on the second floor and another in the basement, and the one connected to the pull here" he pointed to a short length of rope hanging beside the door. "They did some kind of spell on the other bells, so that anything that happens to the one near the door happens to them as well, so even though they're just hanging there and not connected to anything, if you ring this bell, the others will ring too. How cool is that?"

"I could do that, you know, if I wanted to." Willow complained.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not ringing any bells either, even if they're magic bells." Buffy complained, her lower lip jutting into a pout. "It's Spike! Since when do I take orders from him?"

"He's not the only one living here anymore, Buffster. Jonathan and Andrew moved in earlier. He's kind of got a point."

"So…you never knocked at his crypt? Isn't that…I don't know…kind of rude?" Tara asked hesitantly.

"It was a crypt! Who knocks at a crypt?"

"Um, well, I would have, if I knew someone was living there."

Buffy turned to Xander and Willow for help. "You wouldn't have knocked, right?"

"I never visited his crypt. If I had…well…I don't know, I might have knocked. Vampire, right? No sense walking in to something weird if you don't have to. I mean, who knows what he gets up to while he's alone? When he was still soulless, I mean. Harmony was living with him for a while, wasn't she? So I might have walked into something freaky--you know, manacles, chains, torture
and blood sports or something. Which is why I never was really keen to go visit." Xander replied.

Buffy sighed and pouted some more.

"He mostly was just painting his nails, watching Dawson's Creek, and singing along with the radio"

"Oh. That's…almost disappointing. I just figured he was behaving himself while he was living with me." Xander complained.

"I probably would have knocked. Possibly knocked while pushing open the door, but I never visited. Maybe I should have. I feel sort of guilty now. We should have a house warming. We can get them a plant or something." Willow fretted.

Xander pulled Buffy to her feet and gave her a gentle nudge towards the bell pull.

"Go on, Buffster. There's yummy yummy sandwiches on the other side."

Buffy pouted some more, but seeing no help from the others, gave a yank on the rope. They could faintly hear jingling bells through the door. A few moments later Andrew answered, flinched slightly at Buffy's stony expression and opened the door for them. Buffy marched in, glanced up at the white board and huffed, before marching over and grabbing the marker to scrawl "Leave my mom out of this" under Spike's message.

"There you two are! We've been here for over an hour! Did you two get changed? That's not what you were wearing earlier."

Cordelia scolded the moment Angel and Darla arrived at the club.

"We ran into some trouble in the tunnels. We went back to clean up. On the bright side, we sold the demons we killed."

Darla looked marginally calmer, though there was still a shocky look in her eyes. Angel hovered protectively at her side, hand on her shoulder, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of her neck.

No one was on the stage at the moment, but there was music playing on the sound system and a few people out on the floor. Angel shifted awkwardly under his friends' gazes before gently steering Darla out onto the dance floor. Behind, at the table, the three humans' jaws dropped. They were still unused to seeing Angel doing normal things like hang out, let alone dance. Always before, when invited to social functions, he tended to lurk in dark corners or hide out in the kitchen.

"I've only ever seen him out on the dance floor once before, with Buffy. She ended up going to the senior prom alone. He only showed up for the last dance."

As they watched, Darla buried her face in Angel's chest.

"She's really scared, isn't she? I don't get it. She's a pink demon under the pretty outside, and don't care that she is. Angel's a blue demon and hates it. Them having a little demon of some sort…I'd think he'd be the one freaking, not her." Gunn mused.

"She's been unchanged and unchanging for four hundred years. She's trying to change already… having this extra change dumped on her on top of the rest might have just been too much."
Wesley replied.

"I'd say so, yeah. Finding out something like that the first time when you're human is scary enough, and it's part of the expected package."

"You know, I take it back. I think the big guy is freaking. He's just hiding it better."

"I guess he's trying to be strong for her. She essentially made herself vulnerable and put herself at his mercy, trusting that he'd take care of her. It would seem he's trying to live up to that."

The song finished, and the two vampires headed over to Lorne. As the humans watched, they saw Angel balk, shaking his head 'no', while Darla dug in her heels and drug him to the stage by the hand.

"They're both going to sing? This should be good."

"Or not. According to Buffy and Faith Angel can't sing."

"Let's hope blondie drowns him out then."

As the music started, the three of them grinned. After all, it wasn't every day you got to see two of the most fearsome vampires in history do a duet to Sonny and Cher's 'I got you babe'.

The vampires had only gotten a few lines into the song when Lorne shook his head and muttered "It's a thing that should not be."

One of the demons sitting nearby at the bar stiffened and shrieked "The Qu'artoth! It's still coming?" and ran shrieking from the room. Other demons, not sure what was going on, but startled by the shriek, exchanged glances, and stampeded out of the club as well.

Lorne, hearing the noise, turned and saw all his customers fleeing. Angel and Darla trailed off looking gobsmacked and worried. Lorne's shoulders slumped and he glared at the two vampires and three humans equally.

"I'm starting to really dislike you guys."

At Cordelia's look of offense, he softened somewhat. "Don’t mind me…I seem to be channeling my mother. I'm going to need a bit of a lie-down after this."

"It's true then? I am pregnant?" Darla whispered.

"It's going to be lavender, isn't it?" Angel added, sounding depressed.

"Lavender? No…peaches and cream more like. A little human boy with superpowers. It's not supposed to happen…but then your family doesn't do anything by halves, do they?"

"Human? The baby is going to be human?"

"More or less…that's what the packaging looks like. You're going to need to up the blood supplies on hand, lovey. You're going to be hungry. I'd add in some regular people food to your diet to help balance the worst of it. I get that you're scared…but I can tell you this much. You'll experience a love that transcends all others."

Darla just stared at him, saying nothing.

"Thanks, Lorne. Sorry about your customers."

Lorne waved off their apology. "Not your fault. Maybe I should set up a private area for
consultations after folks sing. I really wish that damn Qu'artoth thing would resolve itself already though…it's really hell on the old pocketbook, you know?"

"Oh…we totally forgot to tell you, didn’t we? So much has been going on recently…"

"Tell me what?"

"The Qu'artoth. According to the Watcher's Council, it's the two wizards who were with Spike." he explained what little they knew.

"I guess it's damned lucky I was reading him, not them…my head might have exploded. Any inkling on why this old one took a personal interest in blondie?"

"I think it's exactly what they said--they're on vacation, they met Spike and more or less finagled him into being their tour guide, he took a liking to them and adopted them. Given the interference from the Powers when we tried seeking them to convince them to leave this world, we think they were brought here for some purpose, though what that purpose might be we have no idea."

"I don't know either…but if I had to hazard a guess, it would be to do just what they've been doing. The balance see-sawed so much in recent weeks that it's now spiraling--a new sort of equilibrium, if you will. My powers haven't changed much, since I read individual destinies, but I know several mystics who've had some difficulties recently because the future is all clouded for them. The eternal game between the various powers has been reset to a new level. We might not really know the full scope of what that means until the wizards are gone."

"It's still hard to believe those two could affect things so much. They're so harmless."

"Not so harmless as all that. Curly was a dark lord for several decades, a dark wizard, necromancer, messing about with soul magic. He had followers and started a civil war back on their home planet. Stormcloud fought in a war in the arctic of a world he once visited, and due to his actions there, he's probably got a death toll as high as ours."

"What? How?"

"He destroyed several dozen warships each carrying hundreds, if not thousands of soldiers on board. He blew up several military bases, passed information to the rebels so they could more effectively target bases, and trained a little band of child warriors to go into battle with him. They're sweet, I'll give you that, but not harmless."

"Man…I knew he was a hella crazy white boy, but damn."

"That damned Slayer is going to ruin everything, just like she always does. I mean, you saw what happened."

"I don't know what you're complaining about--your stupid dogs worked just fine. It's me who should be complaining. I was expecting lots of carnage--plenty of parts, you know?"

"Yeah, but this is the second time she's killed a pack of my hell hounds. I didn't get my slaughter at the prom, I didn't get my slaughter at the mall. Stupid bitch."

"Like I said--no parts. She's ruined things for me before too. My buddy Chris came to me and asked for my help to raise up his older brother as a frankenstein. He came to me, and then he got cold feet and turned into a whiny, whimpering little bitch just when things were getting good. I never got to complete my work."
"Would you both shut up and help me here?"

"Why are you even messing with that freaky ass robot anyway?"

"Yeah, man, it's all fried."

"I replaced some of the circuits that were blown. I think I can get it running again."

"Why bother?"

"Because unlike your dogs or your zombies, we can program the thing to take out the Slayer and get her out of our way so we can take over."

"I thought you were going to build robots?"

"I am. This place had plenty of parts lying around. The thing is, it'll take time--this thing is already built. Ah, there we go...let's see...yes! Success!"

The robots eyes began to glow and it sat up, flexing its hands.

"My thanks humans. I was trapped in this shell."

"Um..."

"Trapped you say? Who are you?"

"I am Moloch, the Corruptor."

"Really? Say...you ever hear of the Slayer?"

"It was she that trapped me."

"You don't say? Well, I think we can help each other. We want the Slayer dead, so do you."

"Yeah, man, it's win-win."

"I need no allies such as you. I am already functional. What is to keep me from doing this" his hand shot out and grabbed the nearest boy, Eric "and just killing you all?"

Warren shut down the robot's power grid. As the thing went slack, Eric managed to tear himself from its hand and stagger away, gasping.

"Dude! What the hell?"

"Okay, so it needs a little work...but still, I think he's a real possibility."

"We want the Slayer dead, not us, dumbass!"

"Gentlemen, please. I am the tech master here, not you. How was I supposed to know the thing had a personality or was possessed or whatever the hell is wrong with it? Now that I do know, we can use it."

"Keep your damn robots. I'm gonna go kill some people and raise them as zombies."

"What for?"

"What do you think, man? I'm gonna have them rob the bank or something. A big pile of cash..."
sounds pretty good, don't you think?"

"Sounds real good."

"Fine, you doofuses do that, I'm going to work on our Slayer-killer."

"Something wrong?" Giles asked curiously as Spike grimaced and rubbed his head.

"Some little ponce is gonna kill a few people tonight so he can raise them as zombies."

"What sort of demon?"

"A human."

"That's not really our purview. That's a job for the police. If he succeeds and the people rise as zombies, that's when it becomes our problem."

"Fine, I'll call it in then."

"Best use a payphone. You don't want them coming by here and asking questions. There are people in the know among the police force."

"Prolly a good idea. I don't want the boys in blue paying too much attention to me."

"Where are these killings to take place?"

"West side of town, near the docks. They're big guys, all three of 'em, and he's a weedy little berk. He guts them and leaves 'em lying there. They never see it coming. He looks harmless."

He rose and grabbed his smokes and lighter.

"I'd best go find a phone. The kid's gonna strike soon. Maybe if they get there soon enough none of those men will end up dying. I wouldn't count on it--chances are they'll check in with the mayor's office and the city council before moving, just in case one of them has something in the works they don't want any interference in."

"Well, if any zombies end up running amok in a few days, we'll know."

"See, if I was still evil I could have just gone and broken the little blighter's neck. No more problem. Stupid soul."

"That's the price of being good while living in the world. You need to have lines you don't cross, even when it seems the most expedient thing."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm heading out to make the phone call, aren't I?"

Giles sighed once he'd gone and stared into his glass of whiskey. It really would be more expedient to simply end the young man and stop his killing, but he didn't want to chance blurring the lines too much for Spike, especially in these early days of adjustment. As a demonic creature, souled or not, he would always find it more difficult than a human would to stay within those lines. Buffy had been as successful as she was because she'd always held very firmly to hers--she was too strong and too dangerous to risk it being otherwise; Faith had shown her that much.

First hell hounds, now zombies. He didn't like how this was shaping up. Bad enough this town was overrun with murderous demons, without the humans hereabouts getting in on things. If it
continued… Well, if it continued, he might need to do the expedient, rather than the heroic thing or the law-abiding human thing.

He had faced down his own darkness and mastered it. He knew exactly where his lines were and when he could cross them and still come back. He wouldn't risk Buffy, or Spike's newly won and still somewhat uncertain soul…but he could risk his own without consequence. This little blighter, whoever he was, had better hope he saw sense before he had a chance to come for him.

It took Spike a moment to realize his new cell phone was ringing. Cursing, he dug it out of his pocket and answered with a curt "Hello, Spike here." only to hear silence on the other end.

"What the hell? You called me, so start talking."

"I didn't call you."

"Peaches? I didn't call you, you called me. You need to learn how to use your phone, mate."

"No, I mean, Cordelia called you. She handed me the phone, shoved me in the office and shut the door."

"Why would cheerleader do that?"

He heard a mumble, but couldn't make out the words.

"You'll have to speak up, luv. I didn't hear a word you said."

"She wanted me to tell you Darla's pregnant. We're waiting for the furies to come to put up a sanctuary spell on the hotel to protect her and the baby till it's born. She said my pacing and babbling was driving her crazy."

"It really worked? Well, damn. I guess I know where to go on vacation if I ever have the urge to become a daddy. I guess congratulations are in order. What's it gonna be?"

"A human with superpowers."

"Yeah? How's that work then? You're both vampires"

"I don't know. Lorne called him a 'thing that should not be'…and it's true, isn't it? We're dead. We shouldn't be able to produce life."

"Life from death? That sounds familiar… Do you think this is what your shanshu thingy was talking about?"

"The Shanshu? How do you know about that?"

"Percy mentioned it when we were looking for a way to rescue Dru. He was all agog and wondering if she'd stolen your reward. I told him becoming human when you are who you are wasn't really much of a reward. You'd be dead within a week…and that's if you were lucky. Dru, Darla…notorious, yeah, but chances are the forces of evil wouldn't be coming out of the woodwork to hunt either of 'em down the way they would you. The thing is, it was a weird word, from what Percy said--means life, death, live till you die, life from death. It's real uncertain. He translated is as you becoming human, but what if it's not that? What if it's the baby? Life from death, right? It'd be a damn sight better a reward than turning human and having to be on the run 'cause you're everybody's meat, yeah? So, is it a boy or a girl?"
"A boy."

"Good, now I'll know what sort of prezzies to get 'im."

"You don't have to get him presents."

"Sure I do. I'm his uncle, aren't I?"

"You're not his uncle."

"Yes I am. Darla's my little sis, that makes me his uncle."

"I'm your grandsire, which makes him your uncle."

"I like Darla more'n I like you. I'm his uncle."

"What's up with that anyway? Since when are you and Darla all buddy-buddy?"

"Since you left us back in China. She was in a bad way. I had to step in to be man of the family and whatnot. She was with us another twenty years after you left, before rejoining the Master."

"She was? I just assumed…"

"Shows what you know. She didn't want to live underground. Part of why she turned you, innit? Big strong fellow to steal her away from 'er daddy so she could see the world and have a bit of fun. Once he knew you was gone for good, he got insistent and she went back. Travelled to the hellmouth with him, and then the stupid blighter got trapped. Worked out for her--she was able to go above ground, but she was stuck in Sunnyhell 'cause 'e hadn't given 'er permission to leave. We didn't get to see 'er at all in that time, 'cause we weren't welcome…well, I wasn't, and Darla warned me from taking Dru too near. Said he'd want to keep her. I was desperate when Dru got hurt so bad by the mob in Prague, but didn't dare go near the hellmouth until we heard he and Darla were both gone."

"Yeah, so you could kill me to make her better."

"Wasn't my original plan, I'll have you know. Silly me, I thought you'd let her feed off you a few times, till she got better. Instead, you were teamed up with the Slayer and looking to destroy us. It was only when I realized we'd be getting no help from you that I started researching the ritual."

He heard a distant thump and realized Angel must have sat down.

"I wasn't looking to destroy you. I saw Dru the night you first arrived in town. I told her to get you and leave. I hoped you would. I didn't want to have to choose. I'd done it once and it haunted me, even with a handy replacement right to hand, because she wasn't Darla, she was Buffy and beyond being small and blonde, they were nothing alike and she couldn't really take her place."

"Well of course not. You can have someone who takes another's place in your life, but you can't replace a person. It doesn't work like that."

"Yeah."

Companionable silence reigned for a moment, while Spike climbed up and found himself a perch on a convenient rooftop. This conversation was looking to be longer than he was initially expecting.

"So, what are you doing now?"
"Heading off to find a pay phone."

"Why? You've got a phone."

"I need to call in a vision. Perp's human. Watcher doesn't want me to get involved."

"What is he going to do?"

"Gut a trio of dockworkers so he can raise them as zombies. It's so bloody stupid. Half of me says break his neck, no more problem. Other half is all 'oh no! Can't kill the humans!'."

"Yeah." Angel sighed. "Welcome to life as a souled vampire."

"I take back every bad thing I ever said about you having a soul mate. It really sucks."

"It gets better. Well...sometimes it's better."

"I've been lucky, I know that. I've had people with me since it happened to talk me through it, and I already had your example for some idea of what was coming before it ever started...plus, since I asked for it, I knew it was coming. It wasn't just a big painful surprise like it was with you."

"More lucky than you can really comprehend."

"I'd better start walking again. The little sod's gonna strike soon."

"Where are you?"

"Rooftop. I just need to head towards the gas station. There's a payphone there."

"You're not going to come here and try to help raise the baby are you?"

Spike snickered. "I don't know the first thing about taking care of babies. I was born and raised in Victorian England, if you'll recall. Women in those days didn't talk about the mechanics, they went into confinement and couldn't really mix until they were churched and made all clean again. Children were to be seen and not heard, and it was unseemly for a gentleman to be too involved with such woman's work. I was an only child on top of that. I've seen babies...many of them being eaten by Dru. The ones I was up close with when I was human were usually in their bassinets. I'd tell them they had a lovely son/daughter, shake the bloke's hand, and we'd retire elsewhere to talk about manly things--like hunting, which I didn't do, or to gossip about the neighbors, though the fellows never called it that. I'll leave the raising to you. I'll visit once in a while and be the cool uncle, give him presents and let him know he has someone to complain to when you're getting on his case about things."

"You'll be a bad influence."

"Will not. I can behave myself if I want to...I just usually don't want to. Hang on a sec. I'm at the payphone."

Angel could hear the sounds of Spike dialing and then speaking to the dispatcher in a dorky American accent.

"That's done then. I'd best head back before the kiddies eat me out of house and home."

"Kiddies? What kiddies?"

"I've a full house again--Scoobies, adjunct Scoobies, Watcher, and my boys--all four of 'em."
"Four? They're replicating now?"

"What? No, you nit! Andrew and Jonathan. My new roomies. Got myself a threshold now to keep at least some of the nasties at bay."

"You've adopted more boys?"

"More or less. It's nice to know the house won't be empty when Curly and Stormcloud are gone. Oh, what have we here?"

"What?"

"Little pup in the alley, half starved, no collar. Reminds me of Sunshine."

"Sunshine?"

"You know, the little dog Dru brought me for dinner."

"Oh right. You kept her, didn't you?"

"Yeah. She was a sweet little nipper. I wonder what happened to her? That's right, come a little closer, pup. Aha! Got you!"

"You're going to have another dog?"

"Yeah, why not? I'm sure the boys will like her too. She needs takin' care of. Poor thing's all bones. I guess I'm gonna need a detour, get 'er some food and a bowl and whatnot."

He turned his steps from heading back to the mansion towards the grocery store. Being Sunnydale it was open all night, and they had a pet aisle, which is what he needed right now.

"What are you going to name it?"

"Moonbeam. More fitting for a vampire's dog, plus she's a bit lighter than Sunshine was."

"You've always been a very strange vampire."

"You used to drag us to the ballet and sob like a baby, and I'm the weird one."

"You liked it too." Angel said defensively.

"Didn't cry though."

"No, you saved that for the theatre...and the opera...poetry readings too, now that I think of it. You cried a lot for a "big bad"."

"I have a sensitive soul. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"You didn't have a soul back then."

"Still had the unbeating heart of a poet. Same difference."

"It's no fun to taunt you when you agree with me."

"Oh, well, so very sorry to ruin your fun."

He could hear the sound of an automatic door open, then the distant hum of voices.
"Ah, here we go…what kind of food do you want, eh Princess? Well, aren't you a smart little nipper. You should see her, Peaches, wagged her tail when we got to the food aisle. She's a smart one. Knows I'm gonna feed her. Why the hell are there so many? Oh, here we go…Puppy chow. Full of good things for baby doggies. What the hell? Little girl doggy or not, I'm not getting you pink bowl. Here we go, nice little silver one, just right for a little Moonbeam. Pink collars. What the hell, is there a poof convention in town? All the nancy-boys and their toy poodles shopping at the local and looking for pretty pink collars to coordinate with their fabulous outfits or what? Here we go. Black. Now you can proudly show all the other puppies that your daddy is a big bad vampire, right sweetness? Heh, she's wagging 'er tail again. Comfy little beddie-bye for you to sleep in…ooh, toys. You like that, don't you?"

As Angel listened to Spike's shopping monologue, he had a sudden vision of him popping in to L.A. every few weeks, truckload of presents in tow. His son was going to be the most spoiled miracle baby on the face of the planet. Somehow, in the hundred years apart, listening to the soul castigate him on the evils of his former life, he'd forgotten a lot of what made Spike tick. He remembered the recklessness, the brattiness, the cock-sure attitude, and the viciousness. He'd forgotten the rest. His patience with people he cared about, with animals and broken things. He'd forgotten a lot of the tenderness, the romantic notions, his tendency to snuggle with anyone who'd sit still long enough, his boundless loyalty…how easily he was hurt, and how quickly he recovered to try again.

It had been hard to hold on to the positives all these years, to remember there had been positives in the first place. All the years alone had twisted his memories of the past into parodies of themselves. All the quiet moments had gotten buried beneath the blood and gore. It really was no wonder he'd gone a bit mad there for a while. Having them around again had brought all that back to the fore, eased some of the pain. They were what they were--vampires. Demons in human packages, with humanity laced through their demonic hearts like the sweet filling in a jelly roll. Neither monsters nor men…or women…but something else that was a strange mix of the two. If Darla and Spike could change, it meant that he could too--did, was, would continue to. He could feel a knot loosening deep inside him, feel some kind of shift taking place--like he was settling more comfortably into his skin. It made the world around him seem a little clearer, a little brighter.

He heard the sound of the automatic doors again, and then the distant sound of traffic.

"Now that we got all the rest out of the way, how's Darla doing?"

"She's fine."

"Scared out of her gourd, more like, and probably being touchy as a wet cat because of it."

"Yeah." Angel admitted with a sigh. "I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Ride it out. Don't take the snarls personally. It's all bravado on her part. When she can't deal anymore, she'll fall apart. Be there when she does. Dig yourselves in for a day or an hour, however long it takes, listen when she rambles, don't get angry or defensive at her…and let her know you're scared too, but it's alright, 'cause you've got each other's backs and you'll get through it. When she's feeling more like herself and gets snarky, don't get hurt and bristly--that's how she works. She was always a tough as nails broad, that one, had to be with the life she led. She doesn't like being scared, doesn't like being vulnerable, doesn't like being weak. Snark back at her, don't mention her crying on your shoulder, don't treat her like delicate china, and shag her good and proper. If she gets clingy now and again, just let it happen, give 'er a hug and then go on with what you were doing so she doesn't start feeling foolish. Set her to work, give her something else to focus on. Let her be the accountant or something. She's always been good with money, organized, has a good head on her shoulders. Use it. She won't want to feel like dead weight--it'll
remind her too much of her human life, where her whole purpose in life was to shag whoever was paying the bills. Send her and Cheerleader and the Mouse out to get their hair and nails done. Leer at her, especially when she starts getting chubby. Buy her presents--doesn't have to be fancy, just little things that show you were thinking of her…but you know all this already, mate. You're just letting fear cloud up your enormous frontal lobes."

"Yeah. Yeah. I can do this."

"I know you can, mate. You just needed to remember that."

The sound of a door opening and closing, then the sound of teeth grinding. "Sodding Slayer."

"Buffy? What?"

"Just got home. Got house rules posted. Slayer left me a message."

"What are the house rules? And what message?"

"House rules are as follows: number one, Spike is in charge, his orders must be obeyed without question." He ignored Angel's snort. "Number two, always question authority."

"You've always been an idiot."

"No, I'm a rebel, and I don't want my boys being a bunch of automatons that can't think for themselves. Rule number three: Buffy needs to learn how to knock. I wrote "I know your mum raised you better than that" underneath. She added "Leave my mum out of this". Next time I saw it, I wrote 'no'. She added 'yes'. I ain't putting up with this in my house. "

Angel could hear faint squeaking.

"There."

"What did you write?"

"You're not the boss of me."

"That's right."

"Too right it is."

"That would be me."

"Sod off."

"Make me…oh, that's right. Tried, didn't you? Fought like a wildcat. Couldn't beat me. That makes me the boss of you… and you like it that way."

"What're you smoking, mate? Must be good stuff."

Buffy rounded the corner, high heels clacking on the floor, a look of suspicion on her face. She looked him up and down, and her eyes narrowed.

"Where have you been? You've been gone a long time for a guy who just needed to make a phone call. You killed him didn't you?"

"Well, hello to you too, Slayer. Missed me did you? I don't recall signing up for a nagging wife along with the house and kiddies."
"Nagging…AH! As if! In your dreams, bleach boy."

"Sorry to disappoint, Goldie Locks, but no."

She bristled for a moment in affront and then glanced at the white board, reading the latest addition to the rules. Scowling, she snatched the marker from his hand and scrawled. "I so am" under "not the boss of me". Spike snorted and glowered at her, swiping the marker back and scrawled "Big Bad here, no bosses" underneath. She raised an eyebrow at his assertion that he was the big bad and gave him a mocking look that had him grinding his teeth again. She noted the phone he still had held up to his ear and eyed it a moment. "Who are you talking to? And where were you? You never answered my question."

"None of your business, and hmmm…also none of your business."

Moonbeam took that moment to peek her head out from where she'd been tucked beneath his shirt, sniffed the air and let out a little doggy bark, complete with wriggling and dangling tongue when she saw Buffy.

Buffy crossed her arms and grinned at him. "Cute puppy…Mr. Big Bad"

"She is, isn't she?" He scooped her out and dropped her in Buffy's arms, before grabbing the bag he'd left by the door and heading for the kitchen.

"You two were bantering. Why were you bantering?"

"No banter here, luv. You're imagining things. I'm gonna let you go. Can't give Moonbeam her bath if one of my hands ain't free. Bye."

"We are going to talk about this."

"Nothing to talk about. G'night, Peaches."

"Goodnight."

"Oi! Slayer. Where'd you go with my bloomin' dog?"

"I'm in the bathroom. She's all dirty."

"Don't wash her in the tub, you dozy bint! You'll drown her! Put her in the kitchen sink!"

Hank and Joyce looked up from the t.v. when the door slammed.

"Buffy?"

"Hi mom. Hi dad."

"Buffy…whose shirt are you wearing?"

Joyce twisted around in her seat and found her daughter wearing a black t-shirt, obviously a man's given how large it was on her. It was nearly as long on her as the short skirt she was wearing, leaving just a few inches of it to be seen from beneath.

"It's…well…Spike's."
"And why are you wearing Spike's shirt?"

"Because mine got ruined. He actually had the nerve to complain when I took this one. He even made a new house rule. Jerk."

"Why did your shirt get ruined?"

"Because I was washing his dog…puppy really. She's cute. Half starved and all pathetic and fluffy. He found her in an alley scrounging for food and brought her home with him. I gave her a bath because she was all dirty, but my shirt got all wet and covered in dog hair."

"And what was this about a house rule?"

"Don't go downstairs unless you want to be shagged or eaten. He's such a pig."

"Well, it's a rule isn't it? Can't wear a man's clothes unless there's shagging involved…especially if you're just going to waltz into his room to take it."


"That is so not a rule…it's just Spike…and it was his stupid dog. He owed me."

"Then maybe you should have asked."

Buffy scowled and crossed her arms. "It's just Spike." she repeated. "He made another house rule about me having to knock. No one else, just me."

"Do the others knock?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Tara probably does."

"Get yer arse in gear, Slayer. I'm not getting any younger out here."

Buffy spun and shouted at the door. "Shut up, you jerk! I'll be right out! I'm talking to my parents!"

"Evening, Joyce. Evening, Hank."

Hank raised an eyebrow and looked at his daughter, who fidgeted and shrugged.

"What? He's going to patrol with me, but he told me to change first, because he doesn't want two of his shirts getting gunked up in one night…"

"And because you don't need to be giving the nasties a free show. Get a move on."

"You're such a pig!"

"I'm not the one wearing a miniskirt to go kicking vampires in the face."

She flung open the door and glared at him.

"For your information, I wore this to school today!"

"And now you're going out to fight vampires. Would you just get changed already? The boys are having a Dr. Who marathon. I don't want to miss all of it."
She slammed the door shut and stomped upstairs, only to return a few minutes later, in black pants, a red sweater, with her hair freshly brushed and a new coat of lip gloss. She grabbed her long leather coat from the closet and threw it on, then grabbed a few stakes from the chest, before flinging the front door open again.

Spike, who was sprawled indolently against the porch railing, raised an eyebrow at her. She huffed, stuck her nose in the air and flounced past. He rolled his eyes and unfolded himself from the rail, grabbed the door handle.

"I'll have her home safe as houses." He promised, before shutting the door and following after her.

Hank and Joyce sat in silence for a bit after the two blondes were gone.

"How worried should I be?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's barging into his house, stealing his clothes…washing his dog…and dressing so they match."

"It's not what I want for her…but he might be the best thing for her."

"He's a punk that smokes and drinks and…"

"Like you were any different in college." Joyce laughed.

"You're not helping."

Joyce giggled some more before growing serious.

"After she and her last boyfriend broke up, she kind of laid things on the line for me. She dated that Angel fellow, called him 'the man that was a monster’…she tried dating the regular guy in college, and the last fellow was part of a military demon-hunting black ops group—the regular guy with super powers. All that's really left is the monster who's a man. That's Spike all over. Even when he was evil, he never hurt us, and he helped save the world. She needs someone like him in her life, to fight beside her, watch her back, and make sure she comes home again. He's not who I'd have chosen for her, but I'm beginning to see that what I might have chosen for her wouldn't have been what she needed. He's rough around the edges, but he's got a good heart under it all. She could do worse, really."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."
Chapter Summary

Spike and the boys have a housewarming party.

"Angel, Darla, good. You're up. You each got a package in the mail. Come open them. I've been
dying of curiosity since they got here."

"Oooh, a package? Gimme." Darla demanded.

She took the plan cardboard box and shook it while she went into the office to open it. Angel took
his own package with a frown and sniffed at it suspiciously before rattling it to see what was
inside.

"Who'd be sending me a package?"

Darla opened hers and lifted out the book that was on top, "A New Mom's guide to Pregnancy".
She flipped through it idly before setting it aside. Underneath was a long thin velvet box and
something cloth wrapped in plastic. There was also a letter. She set the letter aside and opened the
plastic, unfolding a gauzy white apron with flowers embroidered across the front and pockets. She
gave the thing a dirty look and set it aside, then opened the velvet box.

"Oooh, pearls!"

"Oh, they're gorgeous."

Angel glowered at the pearl necklace and earrings that Darla was happily adorning herself with
and made a mental note to go get her some diamonds first chance he had. He opened his own
package while Darla began reading her letter.

In his box was a box of cigars and a pair of slippers, as well as a "Guide to Being a Good Father"-
-written by Bill Cosby under the auspices of the National Institute for Fatherhood. He flipped
through the book and then noted there was a thin, paper-wrapped package at the bottom with a
letter on top. He unwrapped it and found tiny blue footed pajamas with a baby wolf wearing
sheep's clothing curled up in a ball asleep embroidered on the front left side. He held it up and
grinned at how tiny it was, and saw Darla staring at it with an odd look on her face before going
back to her letter. Angel opened the letter in his box and found a short note in a familiar hand:

Peaches,
Congrats on the happy event. READ THE BOOK. I'm serious. Read it.
Spike.

He glared at the note, and then glared at Darla's letter. She was on page four and still reading.

Hank got out of the car and looked over the place with a raised eyebrow.

"Punk boy lives here?"
"Yes."

"Huh. Maybe he's not as bad a choice as I thought."

Joyce hefted the casserole she'd made and they headed to the front door, only to see other guests just ahead of them.

"Ah…"

"I was assured the demons here were the non-violent sort." Joyce assured him.

"I can't believe I'm going to a housewarming party for a vampire."

"It takes some getting used to." Joyce commiserated.

They were greeted by a short boy that Joyce vaguely recognized as one of Buffy's classmates.

"Jonathan, right?"

"Yeah, hi. You're…"

"Buffy's parents."

"Oh. Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Summers. Welcome to our humble abode. You can put that in the dining room, just through there."

"Thank you. I'll be right back." she told Hank.

Hank wandered deeper into the room and looked around at the odd assortment of guests--humans and demons--that were mingling and chatting. He saw a giant white board on the wall and started reading.

1) Spike is in charge. His orders must be obeyed without question.
2) Always question authority.
3) Buffy needs to learn to knock.
I know you're mum raised you better than that.
Leave my mom out of this!
No.
Yes.
Not the boss of me, Slayer.
I so am.
Big Bad here. No bosses.
4) Don't go downstairs unless you want to be shagged or eaten.
4a. Andrew, stop going downstairs.
4b. There will be no shagging or eating by Spike. He's supposed to be good now… well, he has a soul. Not sure about the rest.
4c. Bugger off, Monkey boy. You don't even live here.
4d. This is an order of ascetic monks now? I'm finding a cooler fraternity.
4e. Me too
4f. Can I eat and shag?
4g. Not if I can't, short stuff.
4h. What about me?
4i. Andrew, see rule 4a. 'Nuff said
5) The Slayer must always be naked while in the house.
5a. You're a pig, Spike.
5b. That's clearly Red's handwriting.
5c. No it's not! Really! You believe me, right Tara?
5d. She's lying Tara. Really.
5e. No one asked you, Anya!
5f. Rupert is no longer allowed to forge Red's handwriting.
5g. I wasn't going to dignify this idiocy with a response, but, you're a pig, Spike.
5h. Why am I the only one that has to be naked? So unfair.
5h.1. Notice she's not objecting to the nakedness. Just being the only one!
5i. All women must be naked while in the house.
5j. I like this rule. This is a good rule.
5k. You're a pig, Xander. Plus, you don't even live here.
5l. Keep it up, and you might have to.
5m. It wasn't me. Giles forged my handwriting. Bad Watcher, no cookie.
5n. There's two Slayers. Addendum to rule 5: the Slayer(s) must be naked while in the house.
5o. Like she'd object. Wow… meow. Go me!
7) Don't touch Jonathan's magic bone.
a. I thought he was allowed to shag.
b. Not that kind of bone.
c. Oh. He should specify.
d. You all have such dirty minds.
e. Yeah, like you weren't thinking the same thing, Glinda. Can't fool us. We see the wicked glint in your eyes when you think no one's looking.
f. Hey! Stop macking on Tara. She's my girlfriend.
g. No harm in looking.
h. Keep it up, I'll give you funny syphilis.
i. Vampires are immune. So there.

Hank read through the whole board and shook his head, before picking up the marker to add a new rule.

8) There will be no nakedness involving my daughter or you answer to me. Yes, Spike, I mean you.

He jumped slightly when Joyce sighed in his ear after reading his addition. She suddenly got an impish smile on her face and stole the marker from him.

8a. Our daughter is over 18. If she gets naked it's no longer our business. Spike, behave yourself or I'll brain you with an axe again.

Hank read through Joyce's addition and choked on his laugh. "Again?"

"That's how we met."

"We have such strange lives."

They peeked in the living room and found a whole mess of small demon children watching the t.v.

"Those must be Guido's kids." Joyce decided.

"Guido?"

"Demon. He used to run a car repair shop or something in town. He was the one that was run out by crooked cops, and Xander burned the other guy's place down. Buffy was ranting about it a few nights ago."
"I must have lost track. She seems to rant most nights."

"This is a good thing. She has a terrible tendency to bottle things up. I never knew what was going on in her life half the time."

"Ah. I see. Ranting is good. Gotcha."

"I guess we should get something to eat. Keep to the stuff on the red tablecloth. Everything on the green tablecloth is demon food. I don't know what most of them eat so…"

"Good food red. Bad food green."

"You'll get the hang of it in no time."

There were lots of guests in the dining room, chatting and perusing the buffet. Hank looked around while they waited for the red table to clear a bit. Fresh paint job, antique furniture, large family photos on two walls, though the second was all young men.

He recognized Spike and his two nephews from having met them previously. The other was the little guy who'd answered the door. The last was a skinny blonde kid who looked like a younger, nerdier Spike. Little brother maybe? Did vampires have little brothers? Though he supposed if they could have nephews it wasn't out of the question…

"Who are all of them? Do you know?" he indicated the first photograph.

"Oh. The tall dark haired guy in the center is Angel."

"The souled vampire that goes evil sometimes? Buffy's old boyfriend? Why does he have that guy on his wall?"

"They're related somehow. That's Spike's vampire family. Angel, his uncle Sam, old girlfriend Drusilla, little sister Darla… I don't know who the Asian woman is…and the last is one of Buffy's old classmates. I hadn't realized she and Spike were related as well. Small world. And of course the two nephews."

"They're not vampires."

"Still part of the family, I guess."

The crowd cleared a bit and they got themselves something to eat, and wandered back out to find someone to chat with. As they passed, they saw some new lines had been added to the white board:

8b. Mom, Dad! You're both so embarrassing!
8c. Wrong vampire -- good attitude though. That'll be real helpful if Angel ever loses his soul again.
   But really, no worries--your daughter isn't much for rules, as one can tell by the fact that she's not currently naked even though she's supposed to be.
8d. Wait, your mom's a Slayer too? I thought it was just you and your ex-girlfriend, Faith.
8e. I haven't seen your daughter naked, I swear!
8f. What do you mean my ex-girlfriend? I was never dating Faith!
8g. Everyone knew about you two, who are you kidding? She used to come and draw hearts on the window and then you'd giggle, hop out the window and run off with her. People saw you at the Bronze too…Xander and Willow eating their hearts out in jealousy…the football team drooling…the AV club making plans to try to get you on tape… I mean, it's not like it was a surprise or
anything. You went to the Homecoming dance with Cordelia as your date, showed up late and were all mussed up.
8h. We went Slaying! That's all! Really! And Cordelia? NO! A world of NO. She was not my date, we were kidnapped and had to fight off bad guys!
8i Sure, Slayer. We believe you.
8j I'm telling the truth!
8k. Sorry, Buffster. I'm with the others on this. There was a vibe. You two were very vibe-y. Faith, I mean, not Cordelia. Cordy had a yen for some Xan-Man…so did Faith for that matter. The Xan-Man rocks!
8l. Faith was a cleavage-y slut bomb who wrestled alligators naked. What would Buffy have ever seen in someone like that? Never happen.

Joyce added her two cents to the bottom of the board.
8m. There was a vibe, but I believe you Buffy.

Hank read the comments and blanched.

"There was a vibe?"

"A little one, yeah. I just assumed she was experimenting."

"Please stop telling me these things."

After they wandered off, Anya drifted past, read the newest additions and huffed in annoyance before grabbing the marker and adding a new comment of her own.

8n. I would appreciate it very much if you would stop touting your past sexual exploits on this public forum, or I may have to find someone new to have orgasms with.

She capped the marker, nodded in satisfaction and wandered off as well towards the crowd she could hear gathered in the billiards room.

"There you are. It's rude to ignore your guests, you know." Buffy said from the doorway of the study.

"I'll be out in a mo', Slayer, I just had some things to take care of." Spike explained as he typed a bit more on the keyboard of his new computer and then started shutting it down.

A happy yip drew Buffy's attention and she smiled and crouched down as Moonbeam tumbled out of her bed near the fire and trotted over to her, tail wagging.

"Hello sweetie. You look much better now that you're all clean and have a few meals in your belly, don't you? And look at your fur, all silky smooth!"

"Andrew's doing. Spent over and hour brushing out the tangles and trimming the ragged edges after Stormcloud and Curly put something on the sores she had, checked her for fleas, ticks and worms and the like. She seems to like you."

"I like her too. She's adorable."

She scooped up the puppy and rubbed her behind the ears a bit, then dropped her on the desk Spike was seated behind and grinned in amusement when the little dog trotted from end to end, sniffing everything, before going to Spike, who was watching the dog's progress on folded arms,
and laughed when she enthusiastically licked his nose and face, tail wagging all the while. Spike grimaced a bit, but didn't reprimand the dog, he just lazily scratched her behind the ears.

Buffy took the time to look around at the study and marvel how strange it was that Spike seemed to fit his surroundings so well—not at all what she'd ever imagined for the punk vampire. She was surprised by the number of books, most of them well-worn from use. Her gaze fell on the three Slayers over the fireplace and she stiffened in outrage, before spinning to face him, stake extended threateningly. She was rather insulted when he just sighed and rolled his eyes at her.

"Bloody hell, you and your Watcher share a brain, don't you? Really look at them, Slayer. Does any of it look mocking? It's a tribute, one warrior to another, nothing more. The boys are actually making another to hang elsewhere in the room that has all the Slayers I've faced over the years in a row. I think they're still working on that one."

"There were others? Besides these three? Why aren't you dust?"

"Because I fought them and we stalemate. They were eager to live, eager to keep fighting. I am quite dangerous when I'm well fed, motivated and at the top of my game, but there's a reason I'm known for fighting and defeating Slayers one on one like I have. No sane vampire ever tries to face a Slayer like that if they can help it—the odds are decidedly not in the vampire's favor, unless they're really old buggers like the Master or Kakistos.

Darla is probably as strong as a Slayer, but she's never been a fighter. Times she grew up in, women just didn't, and for most of her lifetime she was hampered by corsets and long layers of skirts. Same with Dru, really…it's why I was so surprised when you told me she'd killed a Slayer. They were both always dangerous, just not in the way I was, or Angelus when he actually stuck around to fight someone.

You see, Slayer, the ones I bested were all stronger than me…a lot stronger, if you must know, especially that first one, the Chinese Slayer. I was a baby vamp when I faced her. She had a sword, I had my fists and fangs. She lost focus, I got lucky…and she wanted it to end. She was young, but it was already getting to her—the endless battle, night after night. Her whole city, the whole countryside, really, was in turmoil and burning down around her ears…and there were vampires everywhere who'd come to enjoy the carnage--tourists, on top of whatever vamps called the place home. She was out battling the undead, and meanwhile humans were killing humans in the street. She welcomed her end, you could see it in her eyes. She could have rallied, could have won…but in the end, she just went limp in my arms, asked me to tell 'er mother she was sorry.

Nikki…she still had the will to fight, believed in 'er mission…enough so that she came back to it, even after 'er Watcher sent 'er into hiding so she could raise 'er kiddie in peace. She was tired too. Being a mum is a full-time job all on its own, and she had her calling on top of it. What's more, she was left in charge of New York. Big, sprawling city, full of slums, high-rises, miles upon miles of subway and underground tunnels, and let's not forget millions and millions of people. You think watching over the hellmouth in ol' Sunnhell is bad? Try patrolling a whole city night after night.

Yuki…she was a sheltered Japanese girl turned in the early 1800s. One day she was handed a stake and sent off to face the Master, who was in the area for some reason. Sixteen, hardly ever out of the house in her whole life, and never on her own. You at least had some experience, not to mention grew up as a modern, independent girl…and it was a hard enough transition for you, wasn't it? So there she is, terrified out of 'er bloody mind, doesn't want to die, can't leave or she'll shame herself, her family, her Watcher…Master turns her instead. She was conflicted, even as a vampire. Part of 'er still knew, intellectually at least, that she'd horribly shamed everyone, most especially herself…it's just really hard to care about stuff like that anymore. It was still there, a little niggling stone in 'er shoe even so. Her Watcher committed ritual suicide. Disembowed
himself and then someone cut 'is head off, in order to expiate the shame of her failure. It's why she knew she couldn't even run away…she knew she was dead either way, though I think girls are expected to stab themselves in the throat or something…after they tie their ankles together so they don't fall in an unladylike sprawl once they're dead."

Buffy stared at him in horrified disbelief.

"The wee part of her that was still the Slayer was a sad little voice lost under the bloodlust, but it was still there. I think it was that part of her that held her in place just long enough for the wreaking ball to catch 'er…she was certainly fast enough to have avoided it, and that was my ploy of last resort. I couldn't have fought her any longer than I did. I think that small, mostly ignored part of her was glad it was over at last."

The hand holding the stake fell to Buffy's side and she shuddered just a bit.

"I had nightmares about it…being a vampire, I mean. They started after I was told about the Master."

"That would've been Yuki then…she's the only one I've ever heard about, at least. So, memories of a sort do carry over from Slayer to Slayer then? I had wondered…there was a couple of times, I thought I saw recognition on a Slayer's face, even if it was the first time I faced her."

"I've never dreamt about you." Buffy asserted disdainfully.

She faltered then and frowned.

"Though I did have a dream about Drusilla once. I could swear she was really there, and could see me. She staked Angel and told me 'Happy Birthday, Buffy'. That happened the night before he lost his soul."

"Wouldn't surprise me, really. Dru has always been in a class of her own. She was not only a true seer, she had a mystical background on top of it. Her madness seemed to make her a natural at magic and rituals, and she picked up all sorts of mind arts from the Master when she was presented to him. Darla and Angel kept the fact she was a seer from him. They were afraid he'd try to keep her, and neither of them was keen to live in a hole in the ground."

"Presented to him?"

"Yeah. It was required. Each time a new vampire was made, they were supposed to be presented to the Master for approval. If he didn't think the vamp was a fitting addition to the ranks, he'd stake 'em. Frankly, I'm lucky I managed to live as long as I did. The others were all convinced I was going to be staked about five minutes after we arrived. I was still quite young, see, and I hadn't met any demons at that point, and I'd never met any vampires without a human face before. I was a bit…startled…when I met the Master."

Buffy's eyes glinted with amusement and a small smile quirked her lips. "What did you do?"

Spike looked slightly embarrassed and scratched at his nose before grinning back sheepishly.

"I might have screamed and punched him in the face. He just stood there. Didn't even rock him back a bit. The others just froze, Darla looked ready to sink into the floor. Angelus looked like he was fighting to keep a smile off his face. Dru, she clapped and giggled and told me I was a naughty boy and started dancing around. In the end, he seemed to find me amusing, but he also said I wasn't allowed in any town he and the Order were at because I was too disruptive. I was really bored. They just sat around chanting and doing rituals all the bloody time. Frankly, it was a relief to get away from ol' batface and his lackeys."
Buffy snorted in amusement in spite of herself. She could actually picture the scene all too clearly. She could sympathize with his reaction—goodness knows she was pretty freaked by the Master herself the first time she got a good look at him, even if it was only a dream.

Thinking about the Master, and Angel, and Spike's story about the Slayers he'd fought made her wonder a few things. Spike leaned back in his chair, Moonbeam on his lap wriggling as he scratched her belly, and watched the expressions that flitted across the Slayer's face in interest.

"What's got your knickers in a knot, luv?"

"When we first heard you were in town, Angel told me to stay far away from you because you were too dangerous for me to face. This was after I'd already faced and defeated the Master. Was he afraid I was just going to give up and you'd kill me…or was he afraid I was going to kill you?"

Spike raised an eyebrow and shrugged philosophically.

"A little of both, I'd imagine. I crossed paths with the old boy a couple of times after he got his soul…didn't know that was what had happened, I just thought I kept catching him in a bad mood or something. The Angelus I remembered was a jolly soul, for the most part. He had his black moods, where'd he'd brood, drink a lot and such. It was best to just avoid him at times like those…the same when he had a new obsession. He got testy if he felt you were getting in the way. The rest of the time, he was full of fun. Wanted to devour the world, he did. Surrounded himself in luxury, dragged us off to the ballet, the opera, fancy balls, you name it. We'd live it up in an area for a bit, till we started getting restless and then we'd move. Called ourselves the Whirlwind for just that reason--life was a big party, and we traveled wherever we wanted to."

"I thought you were the Scourge of Europe?"

"That's what humans called us, it's not what we called ourselves."

"So you think he'd didn't want either one of us dead?"

"I guess. He told me he ran into Dru when we first rolled in to town, told 'er to take me and leave. You say he warned you to keep your distance…seems like he just wanted us all safe and not killing each other. Like I said, I ran into him, and while he didn't go out of his way to be helpful or anything, he didn't kill me and at least once took steps to see I wasn't in a position to be captured or killed, so yeah, looks that way."

Buffy nodded and her face crumpled just a bit. Spike studied her a moment and sighed.

"Tell me something, Slayer. Captain Cardboard…was there anything you actually liked about the boy?"

Buffy frowned at him, confused by the weird change of subject. "Why?"

"Just answer the question."

"Yeah, there were things I liked about him. He could be funny…he could be sweet and considerate. He helped on patrol. He had a sort of innocent, awkward thing about him that was sort of endearing."

"So, he was your replacement Peaches…but he wasn't him, couldn't really take his place, and yet you cared about him on his own merits?"
Buffy nodded.

"It was likely the same for Peaches with you and Darla. He was with her for a very long time, and then he was alone for a very long time. You're both small, blonde, strong and a bit bitchy when the mood takes you… but other than that, you're two completely different people."

Buffy looked slightly chagrined at how easily he read her sometimes, but relieved all the same.

"I'm…" she waved vaguely towards the door.

Spike just nodded and sat back to watch the show. Buffy opened the door and jumped back as Xander and Willow tumbled into the room and landed at her feet, and Tara and Anya landed on top of them. She looked up and found her parents, Giles, Jonathan and Andrew in the hallway as well. They'd all obviously been listening at the door. Buffy turned back to Spike, who was grinning in amusement and glared at him.

"You knew they were there, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Heard their heartbeats. Red and the Whelp arrived about thirty seconds after you did."

After the last of the guests left, the Scoobies remained behind to help clean up a bit, though they found their help wasn't really necessary when Tom and Harry could just flick their wands at a room to set it to rights.

"Was it just me, or did the demons all seem really jazzed when they left?" Xander asked suddenly.

"They were jazzed. We removed the chips from all those that had them."

"You did what?" Buffy squawked indignantly.

"They were all non-violent sorts, and none of them eats humans. Relax, Slayer." Spike interjected before Buffy could work herself into a lather.

"When did this happen?" Giles wondered.

"When all of you disappeared for a bit. We were chatting with Clem, and the subject came up. He rounded up all the others he knew of that were at the party and we removed them. There's apparently a few more in town that weren't here tonight. We're going to meet them at the bar they all hang out in tomorrow night to finish the job."

"Clem's mother was very relieved. She wanted him to move out on his own, but she was worried about something happening to him, apparently."

"Where did all of you disappear to, anyway?"

"They were spying on me." Buffy answered, casting a glower at her friends.

"W-we just wanted to know what you were doing, all closeted up with Spike in his study like that."

"With the door closed." Xander added.

"What, exactly did you think we were doing? You're all unbelievable!"

"I didn't really care what you were doing. I just don't like being left out of things." Anya spoke up.
"I-I was just curious when I saw everyone else gathered around the door. I just got there when you opened it." Tara defended herself.

Spike glanced over to the doorway when he heard Moonbeam growling.

"Oi, Curly, call off your snake, would you?"

"Hmm?" Tom glanced to where Spike was looking and sighed before hissing "leave the dog alone, Nagini. She's not for eating."

"But master, I'm hungry."

Tom flicked his wand and a piglet appeared, looked around and took off running, with both Nagini and Moonbeam in hot pursuit.

"Stay away fuzzy. That's my dinner!"

"The poor piggy! How could you?" Willow wailed, sounding upset.

"What? She was hungry. She's a big snake, she needs something substantial to eat. A couple of mice wouldn't really cut it."

"It was still mean!"

Tom just rolled his eyes and ignored her. Tara bit her lip and looked at Tom and Harry thoughtfully.

"We've seen you do a lot of rather impressive things with your magic. Can you fix a person that turned themselves into a rat?"

"What, some sort of animagus mishap?"

"We don't need their help. I'm sure we'll figure it out." Willow hissed.

"She's already been stuck like that for years from what you said. If they can fix her now, wouldn’t that be better? She's already lost years of her life, and who knows how much longer it will take us to figure it out? It's not really fair to her to keep her stuck like that just because you want to prove something."

"I'm not…that's not it. I just think we can do it."

"Willow…"

"What happened exactly?"

"It's a girl we, that is Buffy, Xander and I, used to go to school with. There was these demons… Hansel and Gretel. Their thing is to leave dead children lying around surrounded by vaguely occult stuff…it starts a witch hunt. All the parents in town got swept up and well, they tried to burn me, Buffy and Amy at the stake. Amy turned herself into a rat to escape. I captured her later. I've had her in a cage in my room ever since. She doesn't seem to be able to turn herself back… and so far nothing I've tried has worked either."

"Amy? Amy Madison? Is that what happened to her? I always wondered about that… She disappeared and I just figured she got eaten or something." Jonathan commented. "She's really been a rat all this time?"
"Yeah."

"We're certainly willing to take a look. If nothing else we can at least determine if you have the right rat." Tom agreed.

Willow blanched. "Gosh…I hope I do. What if I got the wrong rat? I mean…I was pretty sure I did, but what if that's been the problem all along?"

"What's with you, Stormcloud?"

Everyone turned to look at Harry who had an odd grimace on his face.

"This…rat girl of yours. She's not missing any fingers is she? Did she betray her close friends to death? Frame other friends for her crimes?"

"What? No!"

"Red heads with rat pets that are actually human seems to be something of a theme where you're concerned, huh?" Spike joked.

"So it seems."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Spike gets visions, bad guys are fought, the 'frat house' gets a new member. Tom and Harry go home.

"Jonathan, Glinda. How was school today?"

"O-oh, it was fine, thank you."

"So, I take it that's rat girl? Where's Red?"

"Yes, this is Amy. Willow and Buffy went with Andrew to Willow's parents' house to get Amy's stuff. Apparently, if your house sits empty too long around here it just gets sold, as it's assumed you were eaten. Willow managed to clear out all the stuff that was there before it happened. She's been storing everything in her parents' basement since she became a rat."

"We said Amy could move in here. There's still room, and she doesn't really have anywhere else to go."

Spike sighed and threw up his hands.

"Sure, why not. Let's invite the whole neighborhood, why don't we?"

"It's kind of a special case. We couldn't just throw her out on the street."

Spike sighed again and nodded.

"No, I suppose not, but no more surprise house guests, alright?"

"No problem. I don't really know anyone else I'd want to invite to live with us anyway. Hey, are we going to retake the group photo? Amy might feel left out, you know, since it's hanging on the wall and all."

Spike just looked at him and led the way back to the living room.

"Rat girl will have to wait a bit longer. Curly and Stormcloud are out at the mo'. Curly's getting rid of the last of the chips and Stormcloud is shopping for baby stuff for Angelus and Darla. I'm supposed to drop it off next time I visit."

"They'll be leaving soon, won't they?"

"Yeah, prolly tomorrow." Spike agreed, sounding despondent.

"W-well, they can always come back and visit, right?"

"Yeah. Said they would. Don't know when or how often though."

Spike fetched drinks for the two and they settled in to wait. Tom showed up next and settled down with them. Buffy, Willow and Andrew showed up next, and with Tom's help sent the many boxes
they had with them to one of the empty bedrooms upstairs. Harry showed up next with an infant car seat loaded down with newborn diapers, a couple of tiny footie pajamas, a set of blankets and a teddy bear.

Buffy stared at the stuff a long time and then disappeared into the kitchen without a word. Harry looked briefly chagrined.

"I wasn't trying to upset her."

"Don't worry about it. From what we've heard the baby is a reality, it'll be here in a few months and that's that. She needs to accept it as a fact and move on." Willow told him quietly.

Tom busied himself scanning the rat and nodded.

"It's definitely a transfigured human. She doesn't have her human mind at the moment. Chances are, when she comes out of it, she's not going to realize how much time has passed. It will probably seem like a moment to her. I would imagine it's going to be quite a shock."

"She doesn't have her human mind?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much what happens with us if we were to transfigure a human into an animal. It's one of the dangers of animagus training as well, which is why they say it should always be done with supervision. You might transform and get overwhelmed with the animal's mind and get lost."

"Well, now that we know it is indeed the girl in question, I suppose all that's left is to fix her."

Tom took the rat from the cage and set her down in the middle of the floor. The rat tried to run, but he managed to transform her before she got away.

Buffy, Willow and Tara all blanched when Amy reappeared, naked as the day she was born. Jonathan squeaked, Spike gave her a thorough once-over, Andrew just looked excited at the magic. Harry removed his robe and held it out to the girl while politely looking away.

"Um, Miss? You might want to put this on."

Amy looked down at herself and then around at all the people standing around and grabbed the robe, hurriedly wrapping it around herself.

"Amy! It's so good to see you again! I'm so sorry it took so long! I tried everything I could think of, but nothing worked!" Willow babbled while embracing her.

Amy patted Willow's back, while taking a closer look at everyone she recognized.

"You…all look really different. You said 'it's been so long'….how long was I stuck like that?"

"A-about two years. I'm so sorry! I didn't know how to undo it! I only just started studying magic right before you did that and well…stuff I try usually goes wrong. I really did try to fix you, I swear!"

"Two years?" Amy repeated numbly. "So…I missed graduation? I missed the prom?"

Willow bit her lip and nodded hesitantly.

Amy wandered over to the couch and sunk down looking shell-shocked. "I missed the prom? I was really looking forward to that. I was sure Larry was going to ask me."
"Um, yeah…about Larry. He, um, came out a little while after this happened. He took a guy to the prom. He's dead now. He was killed during graduation. The mayor turned into a giant snake, a bunch of vampires attacked and we kinda had to blow up the high school."

Amy blinked and then sunk back into the couch looking lost.

"What's that?"

"Huh? Oh, some stuff I got at the Magic Box earlier. I'm going to try scrying for dangerous beasts I can summon. The stupid hell hounds just don't cut it. Now be quiet, I'm working here." Tucker complained.

"Oh, sor-ry." Warren scoffed, holding up his hands. He went to sit beside Eric, who was brooding.

"What's with you?"

"We keep trying to get me parts and stuff keeps going wrong. I only got to gut one of the stupid dockworkers before the cops showed up the other night. Since when are 'Sunnydale's finest' so on the ball? Used to be, in this town, there was a massacre every night and no one cared. Geez."

"Oh, stop worrying about your stupid zombies. Once I get that Moloch guy up and running, he'll take out the Slayer and this town will be ours. No problemo."

The two boys winced when there was a sudden flash of light from the scrying crystal Tucker was using. They blinked the spots out of their eyes and then gaped at the ten-foot tall, horned thing with the giant hammer that was now standing in the middle of their lair.

"Olaf is hungry! Tell me little men, where do I find ale and babies?"

Eric grinned sadistically. "Babies, eh? Follow me, friend."

"Olaf."

"Olaf then. I can show you where to find lots of babies."

"Ah, excellent!"

Warren and Tucker scrambled to follow them. They found Eric pointing Olaf towards the hospital in the distance.

"See there? With the big cross on the side and the glowing letters? In there. Just ask for the maternity ward. There should be a dozen babies there, easy."

"Ah, this is good news. Olaf is hungry! Tell me, will there be delicious ale there as well?"

"Just babies, I'm afraid, but it shouldn't be too hard to find once you've eaten your fill. I suppose I should warn you…people are going to try to stop you from eating the babies. You should be able to swat them away easy enough with that hammer of yours."

"Thank you friend!" Olaf boomed, before striding off.

"Why the hell did you just send that thing to the hospital?" Warren asked out of the corner of his
mouth, wary of Olaf overhearing.

"You heard the man…troll…thing. He wanted babies. Eh, what's a few less squalling brats in the world? Just think of all the parts I should get from his rampage. We'll have to swing by the morgue later and pick them up."

"Cool." Tucker snickered.

Warren eyed his two companions and swallowed the bit of bile that was trying to make its way up his throat. He knew he needed to up his evil cred with these two and fast.

"Hey, maybe we can try out my mind control thingy while we're at the hospital, huh? A couple of nurses to take care of our needs around here sounds good, right?"

Eric and Tucker both grinned.

"I like the way you think man."

Spike winced as a vision tore through him and grimaced, sickened. It didn't help to know that, just a few short years ago, what he had just seen would have seemed like great fun.

"Uh, I hate to break up the party here folks, but there's a troll or something heading for the hospital. He's going to kill a bunch of folks on his way to the maternity ward and then eat all the newborn babies if we don't stop him."

There was a moment of dead silence and then everyone started scrambling for the door.

"I guess it's a good thing I didn't give the Watcher the bloody van yet." Spike muttered as he stalked after them.

They ran into Giles, Anya and Xander, all newly finished work, as they were getting inside.

"Climb aboard, kiddies, there's a troll about to attack the hospital. He's going to eat all the babies."

"Good lord." Giles muttered, as he climbed aboard. Xander was right behind him. Anya, however, was dragging her feet.

"Trolls are nothing to mess with. They're pretty dangerous."

"Ahn, get in. We can't let it eat all the babies!"

Anya grimaced and climbed aboard, squeezing herself into the remaining space and shutting the door.

"Wow. The Scooby gang has really been growing by leaps and bounds lately. I almost feel sorry for the forces of darkness." Xander joked.

"So…this is what you all do for fun? Run off to battle trolls?"

"Amy Madison! Goodness! I see Willow finally managed to untransform you. Well done, Willow."

Willow pouted and sunk down in her seat.

"Um, it was actually Tom that did it. Willow hasn't had any luck so far, and neither have I the few
times I tried helping. We asked them to take a look while they were still here." Tara explained.

"Oh, I see. Well done in any case. It's good to see you back with us, Miss Madison."

Amy smiled wanly and turned back to look out over the town of Sunnydale. It hadn't changed much, but there were just enough changes that it was getting harder to deny that she'd lost two years of her life because of her hair-brained escape plan.

Spike pulled in in front of the hospital with a screech of tires and everyone climbed out and began gathering weapons from the back.

"Shh…do you hear that?"

"Yummy yummy babies! You will fill Olaf's tummy! Yummy yummy babies are so good to eat!"

"He's already in the hospital!"

Buffy and Spike took off running to catch up, while the rest scrambled to chase after them. The whole group came to a stop just inside the door. The troll's pathway was clear to be seen. There were people groaning and clutching at broken arms, and a few lying in a pool of blood with a caved in skull scattered throughout the lobby.

"If anyone knows first aid, now would be a good time to start using it." Giles ordered.

"Shouldn't we go help Buffy?"

"Buffy and Spike both have superpowers. By the look of all this, they probably stand the best chance against the thing.

Olaf snarled and smacked Spike away as he came charging at him with the spear of Osiris. He was getting rather aggravated; he could smell a roomful of sweet, tasty babies just ahead, but the silly little people wouldn't let him past--worse, they kept getting back up when he knocked them down. Buffy lunged for the spear as it went flying, spun with it in her hands and managed to shove it through Olaf's chest.

Olaf looked her in the eye and glared at her.

"I will grind your bones to make my bread, little woman."

"Go to hell. No one's eating any babies in my town!"

The ground split open beneath them both. Buffy screamed and managed to catch hold of the side of the rift--sadly, Olaf did as well. Spike shouted and lunged for Buffy's hands. She grabbed hold, and kicked out, knocking Olaf loose. He tumbled down into the rift with a scream, the spear still embedded in his chest, hammer still in his hands. Spike glared at her--however effective, she had almost sent both of them tumbling in as well. He heaved and pulled her free--just in time, as the rift sealed itself as though it had never existed.

Slayer and vampire lay there panting for a moment.

"What the hell was that?"

"That was the spear of Osiris. I didn't know that trick worked on anyone but the Scorpion King. Bloody hell…my spear's gone. Thanks a lot, Slayer."
Buffy elbowed him and glared, before climbing to her feet.

"Thank you so much, Buffy, for saving me from the troll-guy that was throwing me around like a rag-doll!"

"You weren't having much better luck against him. Was my spear made the difference." Spike pointed out as he climbed to his feet as well.

"I had it under control!"

"Sure, Slayer, I believe you."

"I have a name, you know! Use it!"

"Buffy. It's an insipid name for a primal warrior, chosen to battle the forces of darkness. Now, if your name was Xena or something, I might be willing, but it's not, so you're Slayer. What's the problem anyway? I've always called you Slayer."

"Yeah, when we were enemies. It's my job, not my name."

"If it makes you feel any better, you're the only one I've ever really addressed that way. I never really spent much time talking to any of the others, of course, 'cept for Nikki that one time to scold her about her boy. It's a…term of endearment."

"Aw, does Spikey like little old me?"

"Actually, you drive me insane."

"Really? Go me." Buffy cheered.

They ran into the rest of the group when they reached the elevators.

"Oh, you're both here. Has the troll been taken care of already?"

"Yeah. Slayer ran him through with my spear and told him to go to hell. He did. Sadly, both my spear and his hammer went with him."

"Your spear sent the troll to hell?" Xander asked.

"It was the spear of Osiris. I didn't think that trick would work on anyone but the Scorpion King." Harry explained.

"I know. That was the same thing I said. Live and learn, huh?"

"Olaf's in hell? His hammer too? Damn. We probably could have gotten a lot of money for that. It was the hammer of the troll god." Anya lamented.

"You know the troll by name?"

Anya looked shifty and shrugged with a vain attempt at nonchalance.

"We ran into each other a few times."

Xander eyed her a moment. "Ahn…."
"What?"

"Why do I have the feeling there's more to this story that you're not telling us?"

Anya glowered a moment and then looked pouty.

"He was my husband before he became a troll."

"Your...you were married?"

"It was a thousand years ago. He was a troll-hunter. I found out he was cheating on me with all the local barmaids, stupid busty wenches! I turned him into a troll to punish him. It was that that got me noticed by D'Hoffryn. He came to see me while Olaf was rampaging around the village, renamed me Anyanka and made me a vengeance demon."

"He renamed you? What was your name before?"

"Aud."

"That's...strangely fitting." Buffy snickered.

"As fascinating as all this is...we should probably leave before the police and such start searching the rest of the hospital. We had to leave the emergency room because too many people were converging on the area. It's never a good idea to be caught at the sight of a massacre with weapons in hand."

"Too true. This way. We'll take the stairs. There's an exit out this way." Spike pointed, before leading the way.

They had just reached the van when Andrew suddenly gasped and flailed in fright.

"Oh no! How long have we been gone?"

"I dunno...about forty-four-five minutes. Why?"

Harry suddenly gasped as well.

"Our lasagna! Quick! Get us back to the mansion. It was already on for a little bit when we all left!"

"All our hard work!"

"Our dinner!"

"Calm down, kiddies, and hop in."

"Oooh. Lasagna? Yum. You've got enough for all of us, right?" Xander asked.

"Don't you people have homes?"

Tom sighed and patted Harry on the head. "You can apparate, remember?"

Harry smiled sheepishly. "Oh, right. Hang on, Andrew. This is going to feel strange."

There was a loud 'crack' and Harry and Andrew vanished.
"That's...a neat trick." Amy said numbly.

"I really need to get him to work on doing it quieter." Tom winced, rubbing his ear.

Buffy's stomach grumbled slightly and she turned a winsome smile on Spike and batted her eyelashes at him.

"You do have enough for all of us, right?"

"Bloody hell."

"Hey, everyone. Just in time. We just got everything on the table. The lasagna was slightly singed but otherwise okay. Smells good, doesn't it?"

"Oooh, it really does. Ah, is that garlic bread I smell?"

"Yup. We've also got Caesar salad with fresh parmesan, a bit of Italian wedding soup, and a nice side of asparagus for everyone."

"I love coming here." Xander cheered as he high-tailed it to the dining room.

"Is that a crack about my cooking?"

"Ahn, neither of us can really cook. That's why we have pizza and take out more often than not."

"Oh, we've got wine too. Fancy." Buffy commented as she took her seat at one end of the table.

The Scoobies formed up around her, their significant others next to them, while 'the boys' took seats at the other end of the table where Spike was seated at the head, leaving Amy and Giles to take the middle.

Spike eyed his lasagna with a grin and then drizzled half his cup of blood over it and the salad, before digging in.

"Ugh, Spike! Do you have to be so gross?"

"I'm a bloody vampire! What do you people want from me?"

Amy froze with her fork halfway to her mouth and eyed Spike warily. "You're a vampire?"

"Yeah. Didn't anyone mention that?"

"Heh. No. I'm pretty sure I would have remembered that."

"It's okay. He doesn't eat people anymore."

"Anymore?"

"Long story, pet. I'll tell you another time if you like. Let's eat up, yeah?"

Amy glanced around at the others, but no one seemed particularly worried about the vampire in their midst. She shrugged and continued eating.

After everyone had eaten their fill, Spike settled back in his seat and lit up a cigarette, after pulling the charmed bottle Tom had made from his pocket that sucked in the smoke.
"Wow. That is so cool." Andrew gushed.

"It's amazing. We've got bigger things to discuss. That vision I had earlier…the little berk that was going to gut a bunch of dockworkers was there. He's got two friends. They're all human. One of the blokes was doing some kind of mojo. He had a big chunk of crystal on the table in front of him. There was a flash of light and the troll was there. I think 'e was in the crystal. Mojo bloke and the other that was there backed up, but the zombie bloke took the troll outside and pointed him towards the hospital. He was hoping he'd leave a trail of bodies for 'im to make zombies from since his plan with the dockworkers didn't pan out like he wanted it to."

"That's…very troubling." Giles sighed.

"The crystal. What did it look like?" Anya asked suddenly.

"I dunno…about yea big, sort of off-white."

"The guy who had it. What did he look like?"

"Um…thin, of an age with you lot, short dark hair."

"Anya?"

"I sold a crystal to a young dark-haired guy earlier today. He said he needed to do some scrying. Don't look at me like that. I didn't know Olaf was trapped in there! I bought those crystals from a wholesaler. They were just general use chunks of crystal for magical purposes. It's not like I wanted him running around!"

"Andrew…you said your brother might have been behind the hell hounds. Do you have a photograph of him by any chance?"

"Um, yeah. Hang on."

When Andrew returned Giles had him give the picture to Anya, then Spike.

"It could be the same guy. The one in the store was older and a bit bulkier."

Spike took the photo and then tried to bring up his vision. He had gotten a good look at the kid's face for a moment before the troll appeared. He studied the picture and nodded slowly.

"It could be him. The face is certainly the same, but yeah he's older and bulkier than he is here."

"Why would my brother be doing this?"

"He's a creep. He's always been a creep. Now, it seems he's found some equally creepy friends." Jonathan scoffed.

"There's nothing we can do. They're human. We'll just have to hope the police catch up to them."

"They're committing supernatural crimes and leaving a body count, or trying to, wherever they go."

"They're human. End of story."

"Regular police aren't really equipped to deal with a trio of wizards, or whatever they are, bent on destruction."

"I have to draw the line somewhere."
"Then you're probably going to have a lot more casualties to come."

"We could just turn them into rats or something." Amy pointed out. "It makes for a very effective prison. I should know."

"Well, whatever you decide, it's your problem. We'll be gone tomorrow."

Spike sighed despondently and settled back in his seat with a moody look on his face.

"Oh. We should retake the group photo while we still have time." Andrew spoke up. Spike and the boys all looked at the photo of themselves on the wall.

"You know...we could just take a group photo of everyone else and put Amy in that. We do need something for the back wall."

The Scoobies all traded bemused glances.

While the boys were dressing up the Scoobies for their photo and discussing how to position everyone, Spike caught Giles' eye and pulled him aside for a conference.

"You're not seriously just going to let that trio of berks keep running amok are you? Slayer's bit about the police doesn't hold water and you know it, Rupert. If they're off holed up in their home or lair or what have you summoning beasties, the police might run across the beasties, but that doesn't solve the problem, nor does it give them anyway to connect them to the beasties running amok. Hell, the only reason we know is because of visions. Doesn't the Watcher's Council have any sort of protocol to deal with humans that cross over into supernatural crime? By the sound of it, hellhound boy already ran afoul of the Slayer once and she gave him a slap on the wrist, if that. The Whelp told me of zombies he'd run across before, as well as a duo of prats trying to make a Frankenstein or two. Same thing happened there. If these are the same blokes, they didn't just do something that went out of control all unexpected like. They didn't get scared straight or go on to live lives as productive citizens. These blokes, two of them at least, are working really hard to be evil and leave as big a body count as they can manage. Folks like that, who are being all persistent-like, shouldn't be getting a free pass on the 'they're human' card and you know it."

Giles removed his glasses and began cleaning them after casting a brief glance Buffy's way to be sure she was still occupied.

"There are protocols. The problem is, I wasn't around or in a position to enact any of them when Buffy encountered the specific culprits you mentioned. The problem was dealt with and the perpetrator, in both cases, fled town. I was mostly just relieved that the problem was dealt with and my Slayer intact, and there were no human bodies to try to cover up. Slayers that cross the line and start hunting humans are a problem. Something about the calling or the power, I'm not sure which, makes such an act anathema to most Slayers. Those that cross that line, even inadvertently, usually end up going off the rails and need to be dealt with. If you were able to locate this trio's lair---and not eating or killing any of them" he added pointedly "it would be a great help for when we do eventually deal with them. Honestly, Amy's suggestion sounds rather good to me. It would save me the trouble of having to deal with the council and trying to call up a team."

He left out any mention of him taking out the trio himself; Spike might decide if he could do it, he himself should be able to. That was definitely a pathway he didn't want the newly-reformed vampire travelling if at all possible. More to the point, he really didn't want to deal with all the tears, angst and recriminations Buffy would bring to the table. He'd had enough of that during the
whole Angelus debacle.

"I could probably track it down given time. I know the general part of town they must be in; it's just a matter of narrowing it down within that range. Actually, the boys might be able to help with that, so long as they're all in the same spot and haven't put up anything to push away magical surveillance. If Andrew's brother is say, living at home and goes back there at night, all we'll do is discover their parents' house, not the lair, but it's worth trying."

"I agree. When will they be leaving?"

"Tomorrow night, from the hellmouth, since that's where their portal opened up."

"Oh, that's right…the missing hellmouth. With everything else that's been going on, you know, I had quite forgotten about that. They didn't come through the hellmouth, I hope?"

"No, their portal let them out just above it and they nearly fell in. That's why they covered it up and hid it. They figured a giant hole leaking extra-dimensional dark energy was a bad idea to just leave lying around."

"Quite." Giles chuckled.

"Mr. Giles?" Harry called. "We need to get you dressed too so we can take the photo."

"Ah, yes, of course." Giles agreed.

He found Buffy eyeing him and Spike suspiciously and knew he'd be getting an earful later. He suppressed a sigh and held still so his tweed jacket, shirt and pants could be transfigured into a tuxedo to match Xander's, and the girls in their evening gowns.

"I thought Amy was going to be joining us?"

"We decided to retake our photo with her in it, since she'll be living here."

The Scoobies got into position--Xander, Giles and Willow behind the bench, Anya, Buffy and Tara on it in front of them. The boys had put up a sheet behind them and hit it with a few charms to color it. Everyone got into position and smiled and Harry snapped a couple of photos. He then widened the bench a bit and had Willow sit with the others and had the two men move to a more central position before snapping two more.

"It looked nice, but let's try something else…"

Tom and Harry conferred a moment and transfigured some odds and ends into pillars topped with cascading flowers, some taller pillars behind them and part of a balustrade, as though there were stairs behind them, and then positioned everyone with wineglasses in hand, as though they were lounging around the courtyard of an old temple or something. Harry snapped a few more photos and nodded.

"When we get them developed, you can all decide which you like better."

Tom undid the transfigurations and began setting up something new. A large wingback chair in black was set up with what looked like short steps to either side, and a low riser in front. Jonathan and Tom were given black suits and shirts with red ties, Andrew and Harry black suits and ties with red shirts, Spike was given a slightly gussied up version of his usual attire--black t-shirt, unbuttoned red silk shirt, short leather jacket--also black, and Amy was given a red evening dress with black beaded designs on the bodice.
Spike seated himself in the chair. Andrew and Jonathan took their places to either side, seating themselves on the lower 'step' and leaning their elbows against the higher step. Amy was seated on the low riser in front, and positioned so she was draped crosswise across the front of the photo, resting her folded arms on Spike's knee. Tom and Harry, once he'd handed off the camera to Tara, took their places to either side of the chair, behind Andrew and Jonathan, standing and resting against the wingbacks of the chair.

"No offense, but this looks like a mafia crime family's Christmas photo."

"That was more or less the effect we were going for." Harry offered cheerfully.

Tara positioned the camera carefully on its tripod and adjusted it till everyone was nicely centered.

"Ready? On the count of three...one, two, three."

The boys and Amy all smirked just as the flash went off.

Xander peered at the photo that appeared on the back of the camera and shook his head. "It's like the bizarro Corleone's of Sunnydale."

"Sounds like a keeper."

As the boys were cleaning up from the impromptu photo session, Buffy cornered Giles. She stared at him with an implacable gaze, crossed her arms and settled into a firm stance.

"So...what were you and bleach boy chatting about all secretive-like in the corner?" she demanded without preamble.

Giles sighed and gazed back firmly.

"He was merely pointing out something that I already knew. Human or not, these boys cannot be allowed to keep amassing a body count here in Sunnydale. He wanted to know if there were protocols for dealing with humans that venture into supernatural crime. There are, unfortunately as you and I are both on the outs with the Watcher's council, the chances of us being able to appeal to them for help are rather slim, to say the least. Moreover, as Riley is no longer here in town, chances are we won't be able to contact them for help either. More and more, I think Amy's suggestion is starting to sound quite reasonable--turn them into rats. They'll no longer be preying of the people of Sunnydale, and we won't be killing them."

"Giles, they're human!"

"Buffy, you're not a child anymore. Moreover, Tucker Wells at least you've already run afoul of once and let go, even though he was deliberately and with malice planning the massacre of the students of Sunnydale high school. Now, he's back, has not learned his lesson, and seems to be just as vicious and disturbed as he always was. If the 'zombie fellow' is one of the boys who was trying to make a Frankenstein monster, then he too is just as amoral and disturbed as he ever was...and he too ran afoul of you once and doesn't seem to have learned his lesson. He sent a troll to a maternity ward full of newborn infants, knowing they would be eaten. He went and stabbed several dockworkers so he would have fresh bodies for his experiments. These are dangerous individuals with no remorse that need to be stopped Buffy, the sooner the better."

"We don't attack humans."

"Buffy, sometimes we have to--not you, or any other Slayer. That never goes well. The Watcher's
council usually handles such occasions. Humans who have crossed over into the supernatural realms in order to create mayhem need to be dealt with by people like us who are in the know and equipped to deal with the problem—the regular police simply aren't able to deal with such matters.

In fact, that may be the very reason something like the Initiative was created, so that there would be some sort of task force equipped for such matters that ordinary law enforcement is unable to deal with. It's what Angel has been doing in Los Angeles. There are many other individuals worldwide who also act as on the spot supernatural police. It's always been that way. I mean, really Buffy, surely you didn't think the proper response would be to just let them go about their merry way and keep doing what they're doing?"

"Well, no…but it's not"

"It's not your job to deal with it. Like I said, Slayers versus humans never goes well. We're not going to kill them though—if our witches and wizards can manage it we'll be imprisoning them in a harmless form so that they cannot continue to wreak havoc on the community. It needs doing. Honestly, if I had been present when you'd faced these individuals previously, before they fled town, they likely would have been dealt with long since."

Giles stared at her a moment and studied her mulish expression.

"Amy's mother, who was also human, was running amok once upon a time. Now, granted, we don't know what her spell actually did…but you didn't seem to lose any sleep over fighting her."

"We weren't planning to kill her!"

"Really? What were you planning to do with her? She was a powerful witch, with no conscience given what she was planning to do to her daughter. She was knowledgeable and very skilled. Do you think an ordinary jail cell would have held her? If you did, I must say that was rather naïve of you."

Sighing again, Giles patted the girl on the shoulder and let her be. He could see he had given her a lot to think about. Maybe he shouldn't have encouraged their 'demons bad, humans good' mentality…but what could he have done instead? There were enough threats on the hellmouth that any hesitation could have spelled his Slayer's doom. However distasteful the idea, she really couldn't afford to let herself be distracted by philosophical issues—she was holding the frontlines night by night, mostly on her own.

He noted the others were gathered around the coffee table and moved to see what they all were looking at. He could hear Buffy coming up behind him. She was already over her brief crisis, it seemed, but then she'd never been a deep thinker, always preferring action to discussion, so he couldn't say he was surprised.

"I feel like James Bond."

"Yeah, Sean Connery rocks."

"I liked Roger Moore."

Spike sighed and gritted his teeth as Xander and Andrew started sniggering like a couple of hyenas at Jonathan, who was beginning to look decidedly pouty and put-upon.

"Would you nits be quiet!"

The trio froze in place, mid slap-fight and smiled sheepishly, before getting back to work.
"Whose idea was it for all of us to do surveillance from the same spot anyway? We should be
caping the place out from several angles so we cover all the exits at least. In fact, Whelp, start
making your way around to the far side there. There's a stand of bushes you can hide in. Sprite,
you head off over yonder. There's a fire escape on the back of the building there that you can use
to climb up on."

"I'm a Mountain Dew man, myself." Andrew objected.

"Not sprite like the bloody soft drink, Sprite, like a little elf or something. You're a bit of a fey
child."

"I could be Legolas!"

"You'll have to try working up to that, mate. Now shoo. Bite-sized, you stay here. Clem's mum
lives over in that building over there. She'll prolly let me hang out 'er window, but you she doesn't
know."

"Bite-sized! My nickname is bite-sized?" Jonathan whined. "Can't I at least be Frodo?"

"Bilbo, maybe. You're a bit of a fusspot. You'll have to work up to it too. You're bite-sized, live
with it." Spike scoffed, before vanishing over the side of the roof in a flash of leather.

He landed with a muffled thud down below and swaggered off with enough attitude for someone
twice his size. Andrew swooned, just a bit.

"He is so cool!"

"Easy for you to say. He doesn't call you bite-sized!"

"Still better than monkey-boy." Xander muttered resentfully.

"We should probably go. I don't want to get yelled at."

"I don't remember making evil dead the boss of me."

"I thought he was good now?"

"He seems good. He's nicer to me than my brother ever was…or my parents, come to think of it."

"Same here." Jonathan agreed quietly.

Xander said nothing, though honestly, once Spike had stopped trying to kill them all, he was
usually nicer to him than his dad had ever been. It was a sad commentary on his life…and on
Jonathan and Andrew's life, really. He wasn't sure whether he should admire them or pity them for
admitting to it so readily.

Xander and Andrew had only just gotten to ground level and begun to creep away from the
building to head to their new spots, when the door they'd all been watching earlier swung open,
sending a column of light across the sidewalk and freezing the two of them in their tracks.

"Hey, dweeb, what the hell are you doing here?"

Andrew froze in place, a fixed smile in place. He and Xander were both clearly illuminated by the
nearby streetlamp, loitering in the mouth of the alleyway.
"T-Tucker…wow…I didn't know you were home. What a surprise. Gee."

Xander watched the trio coming towards them uneasily. He could already tell Andrew wasn't going to be much help if a fight erupted. The mere sight of his brother had him collapsing in on himself.

"Who's your boyfriend, dweeb? Didn't I tell you I'd kick your ass if you went around being an embarrassment to the family? I'm surprised dad hasn't taken care of things already."

"N-no! No! You've got it all wrong. This is my friend, the very heterosexual Xander. He has a girlfriend and everything! A-and I keep telling you you're wrong a-about me. " Andrew trailed off into uneasy laughter as his brother continued stalking towards him.

"You're Tucker's brother? Huh. Small world."

Tucker stopped in place and turned to glare suspiciously at one of the guys with him.

"You know my faggy little brother, Warren?"

Warren held up his hands and smiled in a placating manner.

"Not well. We played D & D a couple of times."

The third member of the trio, who'd been standing back and watching idly, glanced at Xander and then did a slow double-take, his eyes narrowing as he did so.

"Hey, I remember you. You used to hang out with that hot little blonde, Buffy Summers, right? You still hang out with her?"

Warren snorted and glanced at him, tearing his eyes away from Tucker's barely restrained hostility with difficulty.

"Seriously, man? You're trolling for a date?"

The guy shot him a disgusted look in turn, before focusing on Tucker.

"You remember her, right, man. Buffy Summers? "

The two turned back to face Xander, their gazes sharp with interest.

"Who me? Nah. You know how it goes. You graduate, you go your separate ways. The tragedy of growing older."

"Yeah?" Tucker remarked idly. He and the other fellow traded a glance and turned back to them. "You know something? I think you're lying."

"Why would I do something like that?"

Tucker didn't reply to him, he just growled "Get them" and lunged.

"Uh, what?" Warren muttered, before trailing after the other two.

Andrew whimpered and scuttled backwards shaking his head at his brother, while Xander tried breaking past the two boys heading for himself.

"Why the hell are we attacking these guys?" Warren demanded.
"He's one of the Slayers sidekicks. He helped ruin things for me before. He's leverage, man, don't let him get away!"

Xander put up his fists and prepared to defend himself, when Tucker suddenly came flying back out of the alley mouth and crashed into them, sending all three of them to the ground. Xander shook his head, dazed, and tried to untangle himself from the others, when the weight of Tucker was suddenly removed from his back. He rolled free and stood, just in time to see Spike smash Warren and the other guy's heads together before letting them drop, unconscious beside Tucker who was already.

Spike dusted his hands and turned to face Andrew, who had crept out of the alley behind him.

"Starting tomorrow, Sprite, you're getting Big Bad lessons. You didn't even bloody well try to defend yourself!"

"Are you guys alright?" Jonathan huffed as he came stumbling towards them. "Huh, that is Warren. I thought so when I saw him from up above, but… he's been working with these guys?"

"You know this fellow?"

"They played D & D" Xander interjected. "That's what he said, anyway. Not that I'm not thankful for the help there, o evil dead, but, did you really need to go smashing their heads like that?"

Spike shot him a dirty look.

"They're alive and relatively unharmed, Monkey Boy. You should be damn grateful I intervened. Zombie boy here was planning on gutting the two of you and making zombies out of you. I had a vision before I even made it to Clem's mum's building. If I had let things play out, you both would have been bleeding out in a few minutes. Slayer would have blamed me for letting your stupid ass get killed and staked me. Then, D and D nerd boy here would have put the finishing touches on his killer robot and sent it and zombie you and zombie Sprite after the Slayer, who would have died because she was too shaken by the sight of you trying to kill her to put up a proper fight."

Xander reared back as though struck.

"What, seriously?"

"Yes. I saw it, didn't I? Idiot."

"So…what do we do with these guys now?"

"Turn them into bloody rats or gerbils or sommat so they'll stop running amok and trying to kill everyone."

"I'm not really a big fan of rats. Maybe we should make them kittens or something."

"Maybe we should stick with rats and feed them to Nagini."

"I don't disagree, but I doubt the Slayer will go for it."

"We could always say it was an accident."

"We're not feeding my brother to a snake." Andrew interjected quietly.

"Why do you continue to defend him? He was all set to put you in the hospital again."
"Because part of me really, really wants to feed him to a snake. I'm trying to be the bigger man here."

Spike sighed and pulled out his cell phone. A soft 'crack' sounding moments later and Tom appeared in their midst. He eyed the three unconscious young men curiously a moment.

"So, these are our culprits? Are you sure you don't want me to just kill them? Live enemies have a way of coming back to haunt you."

Spike looked torn, but a glance at Andrew's pale face decided him.

"Yeah they do, but we're aiming for the high road here."

"Alright, rats it is."

"Could you maybe make them gerbils or hamsters instead?"

"Do you have a preference?"

"Hamster. We can get them a little wheel and stuff."

Tom shrugged and drew his wand, flicking it at each of the boys in turn. Another flick, and a nearby empty bottle became a cage, complete with wheel.

"I don't know how long that will last after we're gone. You might want to get the cage Willow had Amy in and have the girls research a hamster spell just in case."

Andrew put the unconscious rodents inside and gathered up the cage.

"What am I supposed to tell my parents?"

"Either the truth or just let them think 'e ran off again. He did it once before, right?"

"Yeah and my parents were real torn up about it. He's the one they liked and were proud of."

The rest of them weren't quite sure what to say in response, beyond Jonathan's muttered "that's messed up".

"I don't suppose you can tell me which direction the Slayer is? Since we're done here, I might as well help her finisher 'er patrol."

Tom flicked his wand again and pointed. Spike nodded his thanks and strode off. Xander, who had bristled a bit at his question, scowled and stuck his hands in his pocket.

"What's with you?" Jonathan wondered.

"Buffy deserves better than a murderous bloodsucker."

"When Anya eventually dumps you because you won't stop panting after Buffy, is it okay if I ask her out?"

Xander scowled at Jonathan angrily for a moment and then sighed, rubbing a hand over his face wearily.

"No, you can't, because I'm not going to let that happen. No panting. It ends here."

"Probably a wise decision. Fantasizing about a girl with superpowers is probably a lot more fun
than the reality. She patted me on the arm and it really hurt. I'm almost afraid to know what might happen if you were, you know." Andrew nodded.

"Yeah. She might pop your wiener right off."

All four shuddered in unison.

"I have actually slept with a Slayer, not Buffy, but still. That didn't happen." Xander corrected.

As his mind flashed back to that night, he shuddered a bit, remembering. Faith had drug him inside, stripped him and pounced on him, and rode him like a pony till she'd gotten off. At the time, he'd been too caught up in the fact that he was getting laid by a hot girl to really fixate on the fact that, had he not wanted it, there really wouldn't have been much he could have done to stop her. He'd been pretty much raped, though the fact that he wasn't unwilling kept it from being traumatizing.

When she was done, she'd gathered up his clothes, shoved them in his arms and then shoved him out the door. He had still been so caught up in the whole 'just gotten laid by a hot girl' part to be hurt by that. It wasn't until later, when it was made very clear that he'd been well and truly used, that any guy would have done and meant as little to her that he'd been at all stung by the experience.

He let himself imagine being with Buffy, something that had been a long-held fantasy of his that he'd never really been able to let go of. In his dreams and fantasies, she was always dewy-eyed and all aflutter as he rescued her from bad guys, swooned when he swept her up caveman style to have his wicked way with her.

That would never ever happen in real life. Being with Buffy would mean being emasculated on purpose and by accident every minute of every day for the rest of his life. She was stronger than him, so much so that he couldn't even pretend to compete, for all that he was about three times her size. She was the one that saved everyone from bad guys, she would be the one dragging him off caveman style should she ever take it into her head to see him like that. He would never be able to be the big man for her. .. But he could be, in fact already was, for Anya.

"I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"I'm not disagreeing, though why exactly?" Tom wondered idly.

"Harry tried telling me. I've still been hung up on Buffy all this time, and yet I've already got everything I wanted with her with Anya. I was all set to go driving off Spike from even looking in Buffy's direction. If I kept it up… I really might have screwed things up with her, wouldn't I?"

"Yeah."

"Definitely"

"You certainly would have."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence there."

"It's just the truth. I haven't really been around the two of you for long, but it was pretty easy to see. You spend a lot of time watching Buffy..."

"Chasing after Buffy, worrying about Buffy..."

"Getting pissed off whenever her old boyfriends are mentioned, acting like a jealous ex…"
"Alright, alright. I get the point." Xander grumbled before sighing worriedly. "That bad? Really?"

The other three just nodded.

He'd been so angry at Buffy the last few days because of Angel...he'd been mad at her for a long time really, because of Angel. He'd been right there with the others, demanding that she just move on already... geez. Hypocrite much? It seemed Buffy wasn't the only one who needed to let go and just move on already.

For some reason, the freaky weird shared dream they'd all had after they called the First Slayer came to mind. It had been bizarre and unsettling and he'd tried to put it out of his mind once it was over. Spike had been in his dream. He and Giles were on the swings in the sunlight, and Spike had been dressed in tweed. They were watching Buffy play in a sandbox. Spike had told him that Giles was training him to be a watcher, that he thought he had the right stuff.

At the time he'd just put it off to it just being some sort of bizarro-horror dream logic... Spike was still unsouled then, and regularly telling all of them how much he hated them and wanted them all dead.

Here it was a year later and Spike had spent a good portion of the last month running around in the sun, he'd done a passable Giles impression so they could rescue Willow, he was getting visions, advising Buffy and helping her patrol.

Just like that, part of Buffy and Spike's conversation that they'd listened in to came back to him. They'd been talking about all the various Slayers he'd fought, and he'd asked if stuff passed down, because there were times he'd thought he'd seen recognition in the eyes of Slayers he'd never fought before.

Had the First Slayer been trying to tell him something?

Giles had told them again and again that they and Joyce gave Buffy, the girl, the human part of the Slayer, ties to the world and a reason to keep living, keep fighting. Did the Slayer, the primal warrior component, need a friendly face in the dark the same way the girl needed friendly faces in the sunlight? If so...was Spike, of all vampires, the thing she'd chosen?

"Well, crap."

That evening at midnight, Spike, Tom and Harry gathered near the hellmouth. The boys had already said their goodbyes to everyone else-even Drusilla. Apparation came in handy for stuff like that. All that was left was to make their portal and go.
Spike sighed despondently and kicked at the dirt.
"Spike, don't make this harder than it has to be. As much fun as we've all had, you know we can't stay. This isn't our world."
"Yeah, I know."
"I really would like to graduate Hogwarts sometime in the next century." Harry added.
Spike just pulled them both in to a three-way embrace, squeezed a bit, and stepped back again.
"If we can, we'll come visit some day."
"Yeah. You'll barely have time to miss us."
"Wouldn't count on that." Spike said quietly. "It's been a wild ride."
"Yeah, that it has."
"You take care now."
"You too, Spike. Don't let Buffy walk all over you."
"Wasn't planning to. Speaking of... What did you two say to her earlier?"
"Just laying down the law is all."
"Yeah. Family looks out for each other."
Behind them a large portal opened up.
"Looks like our ride is here."
"Goodbye."
"Bye, boys."

The portal closed, taking the boys and their familiars with them. Spike sighed, long and heartfelt and put his hands into his pockets.
"Damn it all."
He lit up a cigarette and started back towards the mansion.
He'd barely taken a dozen steps when the night lit up around him and he heard a familiar voice say 'OOF!', followed by a weirdly familiar "BLOODY HELL!"
Spike spun in place, ready for anything, only to freeze and gape at what he found.

"Uh, Stormcloud? I don't think we're in the right place."
"What makes you say that?" Harry Potter asked, while trying to shove his vampire traveling companion off his back, where he'd landed when the portal had dropped them off.
"Well, the fact that I seem to be over there watching us is a big clue. Damn, but I'm a handsome bugger. I always knew that, of course, but damn."
"Well, crap. I guess we need to try again."
Spike shook off his momentary shock and smiled brightly.
"No need to run off so quickly. Stay awhile. I think Andrew's making pork chops tonight."
"Yeah?" the other Spike asked in interest. "Wait, who the bloody hell is Andrew? And what the...do you have a ruddy soul?!"
"If you stick around, I'll tell you all about it."
"I could go for some pork chops." Harry mused.
"Yeah. That sounds a bit of alright." Spike the second agreed.

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