

# Fragments in Hard Voyages

*by Lynnenne*

The silk tablecloth was smoothed and laid out for the Tarot reading. Long, red-nailed fingers traced patterns of vermillion and cobalt, woven so tightly no mind could follow. But the Tarot reader knew all the paths, knew where every thread began and where it would lead, followed them until they twisted back upon themselves to begin again. Even in the tallow-lit tent, she could see everything.

“It’s very pretty,” said her guest, young cheeks flickering pink and gold.

The reader smiled. “It’s been in my family for ages.”

The guest shifted in her seat. “I’ve been having dreams. About the past. Not even dreams – I don’t know what to call them. They’re so real. Like I’m actually right there. One minute I’m in my college dorm, and the next I’m back in Denver, playing in the back yard with my sister when we were kids. And then wham, I’m back in my dorm room again.” The chair squeaked nervously under the girl’s weight. “My doctor thinks I’m having hallucinations.”

The reader’s head moved from side to side as she shuffled the cards. “I don’t believe in science. There’s truth in the fragments. They tell a story.”

“Can you help me?” the young woman quivered.

The reader smiled in the dark. She passed the deck over to her guest to cut the cards. Then she began.

Bone-white hands turned the cards, pages of a book written in tongues. Ancient and familiar, the secrets of children and sages. But as the Tarot reader laid the pieces out, she could see something was wrong. The language was strange and indecipherable. Words in the wrong order; some sideways, others upside down. Some broken into tiny pieces, shattered like egg shells. No matter how she arranged the cards, they would not tell the story properly.

(the lovers slithered and split into kings and fools, judgement reigned over all while the emperor ate the world)

“No,” she intoned. “No, this is all wrong.” The threads were unravelling, the crimson in the cloth bleeding into the table and onto the floor.

“What? What’s wrong?” asked the frightened rabbit voice.

“No!” The Tarot reader stood, gripped one edge of the table and flung it away, candles gasping against the force of wind and fluttering silk. Fangs burst through her face and her guest screamed. Such a lovely sound, jungle birds and chaos, like the music she and her William used to make so long ago.

She lunged for the girl’s neck, blood splashing across the inside of the tent and her own white dress. The brilliant silken cloth that had covered the table caught the edge of a candle flame and blazed into bright, burning gold, before guttering to ashes on the floor.

Drusilla let the girl’s body slither to the ground and turned her face to the unseen sky. The end was coming, and it was time to go home.

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Spike was bored.

He sat in the lobby of the Hyperion, tapping a pencil against a notepad, watching Angel polish weapons that hadn’t been used in weeks, it seemed. Out patrolling every night, and

the baddest thing they'd come across was a cult of Ozzie Osbourne wannabes obsessed with biting the heads off chickens. Spike had seen a lot of disgusting things in his day – had caused most of them – but the stink of feathers flying around that warehouse had ranked up there on the list of memories he'd most like to forget.

Couldn't account for the quiet. Los Angeles seemed like a heavy funk had settled over it – even the celebrity mags were dull and boring, passing time with baby photos while they waited for awards season. Demonic activity was at an all-time low. Spike had had to resort to more peaceable methods of amusement: drinking, movies, the odd poetry slam. Snuck off those nights, never telling Angel where he was going.

Angel had followed him once. Sat at the back in a rowdy, smoke-filled corner where he couldn't be seen or heard or smelled. Just Spike's luck, it was the one night he'd decided to recite a particularly gooey and sentimental piece in honour of strong, steady hands that fashioned beauty out of chalk and clay. Angel had sought him out and hugged him afterwards, all beered up and maudlin with tears in his eyes. Spike had growled and punched his lights out.

It had led to some spectacular make-up sex. Spike grinned to himself at the memory.

He watched as the hands in question polished the same weapon for the third time. Spike sat with pencil and paper, tapping the notepad as he pondered a rhyme for "sword." The lobby hummed quietly around them, electricity and warmth, fires crackling in old hearths.

"Think you're taking the finish off there, mate."

Angel held up the blade, examining a chip in the metal. "I need a new one," he muttered.

"Could get you one for your birthday," Spike said. Then his forehead creased into a wrinkle. "When is your birthday?"

"Don't know," Angel said absently. "We didn't celebrate birthdays when I was alive."

"Huh." Spike stared at the opposite wall. "Could always take you back to Ireland, look it up in the church records. Might be a good time for a holiday, seeing as it's so dead around here."

Angel turned to look at him. His smile was fond, nostalgic. "That might be nice, actually. We've never had a real vacation before."

"Not one that didn't end in a bloody massacre, at any rate."

Angel returned to his task. "We could stop in New York for a few days on the way. Visit with Connor."

"No need," said a voice from the doorway.

Spike turned to see Connor stepping lightly down the stairs, travel bag slung over his shoulder, hair falling into his eyes. His smile lit up the lobby, and Angel's face along with it.

"Hey!" Angel smiled broadly, putting down his weapon. He got up and gave Connor a hug, squeezing just a little too hard judging by the huff of air that Connor let out. He winked at Spike over Angel's shoulder. It made Spike duck his head like a high-school kid.

"Hey, College Boy." Spike stood, giving Connor a punch on the shoulder once Angel was done being all papa-bear. "What brings you to demon alley?"

"Scouting mission." He turned to look at Angel. "I'm thinking of coming back here for grad school. My grades were ace this year, so I have a good shot at a scholarship. Came to check out some potential colleges."

Angel's face broke into an excited grin. "That's great!" He turned to Spike. "You hear that? His grades were ace!"

Spike rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. We all know the kid’s smart. Obviously doesn’t get it from you.”

“Don’t get too excited yet,” Connor said. “I’m checking out schools in New York, too. I haven’t made up my mind where I’m gonna go.”

“Shoulda told him you were here to kill things, then.” Spike put his hand on Connor’s shoulder, walked him into the middle of the lobby. “He’ll be wanting to follow you to every campus, threatening all the deans to take you in or die horribly.”

Connor laughed. “I’ll sneak out during the day. I’m unnaturally sneaky.”

“This is so great!” Angel was still grinning uncontrollably. “You can stay here, for as long as you want.” His face softened, the smile giving way to the proud glow of a parent, love and sappiness shining through his eyes. He looked in danger of coming over all beer and maudlin again, and Spike had to kick him in the shins to keep from embarrassing them all.

“Ow!” Angel yelped. He turned an annoyed look Spike’s way, and Spike feigned innocence. Connor barked out a laugh.

“You hungry?” Angel said to Connor. “We don’t have much food in the house, but we can go out. Get dinner.”

“More like breakfast.” Connor turned towards the window, looked at the early morning grey that was slowly creeping its way into the street. “My flight was delayed. I thought I’d be here hours ago. I have a meeting with a department head at UCLA in - ” he looked at his watch “ - less than three hours. I gotta take a shower and change. My old room still free?”

“Always is.” Angel smiled again, his face fairly split with excitement, and Spike thought he might be in real danger of morphing from Batman into the Joker. He chuckled to himself at the thought.

“The bed’s not made, though,” Angel continued. “Here, I’ll do that for you while you’re getting cleaned up.” Angel took the bag from Connor’s shoulder and they trotted up the stairs. Spike grinned wickedly and made to follow. The sight of Angel making a bed for someone else was something he wouldn’t miss if the world were ending.

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“Yeah. Okay. Call me if you remember anything else.” Buffy hung up the phone and wandered back into the kitchen of her flat, to where Dawn sat at the breakfast bar.

“Who was that?” Dawn asked around a mouthful of eggs.

“Willow.” Buffy settled herself into the seat across from Dawn and looked down at her plate. Her sausage looked like it was starting to congeal. After so many months living in London, the traditional English breakfast was beginning to lose its appeal.

“And, I’m thinking it wasn’t good news.” Dawn took a sip of orange juice. “You have weight face.”

“What face?”

“No, *weight*. As in, weight of the world? It’s not ending again, is it?”

Buffy shook her head. “Nothing that apocalypt. Just kind of - ” She shifted in her seat. “Willow says Angel has a son.”

Dawn put down her cup in mid-movement. “Okay. She does remember that Angel’s a vampire, right? Pretty much a non-breeder.”

Buffy pushed her eggs around her plate. “She says she had some sort of flashback – a really vivid memory of being at Angel’s hotel in L.A. She says she met Angel’s son. He was about 18 and his name was Connor and he was all hyped up with super-strength. Her exact

words were, 'Like a boy slayer, only with poutier lips.'" She shifted again. "She says Faith was there, too."

"Does Faith remember it? I mean the Angel's son part, not the pouty lips part."

"No, that's what's even weirder. Willow called her, but Faith doesn't remember him at all."

Dawn cut into a slice of tomato. "Willow's been doing a lot of inter-dimensional travel lately. That can really mess with your sense of space-time. Maybe it's just temporal jetlag."

"Maybe. But she sounded so sure. And kind of rattled. She said it was so vivid, like she was actually there, and then all of a sudden she wasn't."

"Did she call Angel?"

"She tried, but there was no answer." Buffy looked at the clock. "I'll try him again in a little while." She took a sip of tea but it escaped the edges of the cup and slopped onto her shirt. She went to the sink, turned on the tap and wet the edges of a tea towel, trying to rub the spot out.

Dawn came up behind her. "Buffy. Are you okay?"

Buffy kept rubbing at her shirt. "Yeah. It's just – If it's true, why wouldn't Angel tell me about something like that? It's kind of a big deal."

Dawn put her hands on Buffy's shoulders and turned her around. She took the damp towel from Buffy's hand, rubbed a bit of soap onto it and went to work on the spot.

"Hallucinations can be a side effect of certain spells. Maybe Willow's just imagining it."

"Maybe." Buffy chewed her lip at the prospect of an awkward overseas phone call.

"How am I even gonna ask him? I mean, what am I supposed to say? 'Hey, I hear you had a kid 18 years ago that you never told me about. Congratulations?' Maybe I should get him a –"

"– wedding gift. I mean, what you do get a girl who used to be a giant green ball of energy?"

Buffy looked up, and Dawn had vanished. Spike was leaning over the opposite side of the breakfast bar, looking at her as if he had just asked for the time of day.

"Spike?" She heard the word come out of her mouth, but couldn't feel her throat moving.

He stood up straighter. "What is it, love? What's wrong?"

Buffy looked wildly around the kitchen. The lighting had all changed, from hanging fixtures to pot lights. The paint on the walls was a different color. "What's going on? Where's Dawn?"

"She's in Scotland, getting ready for her wedding."

"Dawn's getting married?" Buffy's ears rang as if she had just been trampled by a herd of rhinos.

"We were just talking about it, remember?" Spike came around the bar, stood in front of her, a look of concern on his face. He didn't seem to have a clue that he had just materialized out of nowhere, not to mention the fact that he was supposed to be *dead*.

She reached up to touch the side of his face. It was solid and smooth. "You're alive," she whispered.

Spike's brow furrowed. "Well, not exactly. Vampire, remember?"

"You died." Buffy's other hand was on his cheek now, cupping his face in both hands. "You died in the Hellmouth. I saw you burn."

Spike took both her hands in his, pulling them away from his face. His fingers felt strong and gentle. His expression was a puzzle of worry. "Think we covered this already, pet."

About – what, eleven years ago, now? Twelve? You came to see me and Angel in L.A., remember?”

Buffy’s head felt fragmented, full of broken glass. She did remember. She had gone to the Hyperion to see Angel and found Spike there with him. Months, maybe years after he’d burned up in the mouth of hell, she couldn’t quite place it, and he had let her think –

Her fist freed itself from his grip and cut a furious blow across his face. Spike went flying backwards, crashing to the floor on the other side of the breakfast bar.

“You let me think you were dead!” She advanced on him like an army, battalions blazing. “You fucking son of a bitch!” Spike stayed on the ground, deflecting Buffy’s fists as she flew at him, but he didn’t hit back. “All that time, and you never – ”

“Buffy, are you sure you’re okay? You look kind of spacey.” She blinked, and Dawn was standing in front of her again, still holding the tea towel.

Buffy gripped the counter behind her to keep her knees from crumpling. She looked up into Dawn’s face, voice shaking.

“I need to go to L.A.”

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Connor headed off for his meeting, and Spike watched Angel’s face, a proud papa seeing his kid off to his first day at school. He stood in the middle of the lobby, staring at the swinging door, grinning stupidly.

“Be nice, having him around,” Spike said, coming up to stand at Angel’s side. “Like having a team again.”

Angel nodded, still staring at the door. “Better than that,” he whispered. “A family,” and Spike resisted the daft and completely girlish urge to hold Angel’s hand.

“Come on.” Angel turned to him with a wicked grin, mischief and mayhem. “We’ve only got a few hours till he gets back. I don’t want him to come home and find you tied to the bed.”

Spike shrugged. “Not like he hasn’t seen it before.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that,” Angel growled, and led Spike up the stairs to his – their – room. Spike still wasn’t used to thinking of it as theirs.

They tumbled together onto the bed, Angel crawling over him with fevered excitement, and Spike’s head spun. He still wasn’t used to any of this. Not the tenderness in Angel’s hands, not the full-body shudder he gave up when Spike kissed him. Certainly not the idea of them as a functioning family unit. Dysfunctional, sure – Spike could do that with his hands tied above his head and swinging from a hook in the ceiling. But the other – the loving, nearly normal kind – he didn’t have a bloody bugging clue.

Spike tried to be grateful for the miracle of new experiences after more than a century; yet it was the vertiginous terror of it, the feeling of balancing along the edge of a cliff, that made his cock harder than stone.

Angel’s weight pressed him into the mattress, his tongue digging against Spike’s, a kiss flavored with need and sharp teeth. Spike’s fingers wove through Angel’s hair, a tapestry of threads, maps of foreign lands, strange and unfamiliar. Somewhere along the path their clothes disappeared, and Angel’s naked skin pressed against his from throat to thigh. Words escaped Spike’s mouth, *Christ* and *god* and blasphemous things. Angel’s lips fastened onto his neck, fangs in skin like breaking bread, grails and communion wine.

“You taste like Bordeaux,” Angel rumbled against Spike’s ear, low and dark.

“Must be that stash I found in the basement yesterday.” Spike said. “Good year.”

Angel licked at the wound in Spike's neck, and Spike's eyes fluttered shut. "Not as good as the case I have hidden on the upper floors. You find that one yet?"

Spike shook his head. "Gimme time. Still haven't roamed all the nooks and crannies in this old place."

"Good. I'm saving it for a special occasion."

Angel took Spike's hands in each of his and lifted them above his head, till Spike's fingers curled around the headboard. "Keep them there," he whispered, tracing a path along the underside of Spike's arm with the point of his tongue. Spike's skin quivered and jumped to the thrill of it, vulnerable and exposed. Angel's fangs sank in and Spike yelped, the trickle of blood down his arm soft and wet, the most exquisite torment.

Angel nipped at the brand on Spike's chest, the mark Angel had given him to help rescue Connor from the clutches of Wolfram & Hart. "I love you," he muttered against the scarred skin, and Spike had to tense every muscle just to keep from coming at the words. They still rattled, bizarre and strange in his ears, every time he heard them; which was why, he knew, Angel insisted on repeating them. It was another form of torture, a knife edge of control; because listening to Angelus talk about love was like letting a black widow crawl over your skin and trusting it not to bite you.

More words, *Sire fuck please*. Spike's back arched, his cock digging against Angel's skin, fingers curling against the wood of the headboard. His body became a lightning rod, electricity arcing from his balls to the puncture wound in his neck and back down his spine. His palms tingled from the residual hum, belly fluttering from soft touches and rough teeth.

Angel's mouth was a quiet storm moving across his body, mapping out canyons and plains already known by heart. Spike gasped and growled and bled, animal and alive, crackling like thunder. Angel's lips closed around Spike's cock, sucking it to the back of his throat, and the headboard split under Spike's fingers.

He thrust up into Angel's mouth, as much as he could with Angel's hands pressing his hips into the bed, blood pulsing in every mark the old man had left in his skin. Sounds gathered but failed to form words, coming out instead in grunts and jungle growls, hips bucking and wood cracking and Christ, Angel's tongue was soft and wet and *gentle*, and lightning arcing again along his spine and when he finally came in a blinding flash the only word he managed to yell out was *Angel*.

He kept his eyes closed as Angel pulled away, as his hands pressed against Spike's knees, as his weight settled into the hollow of his hips and his cock pressed against Spike's arse. Then Spike's eyes flew open as Angel shoved in hard and fast and dry, which was something he hadn't done much of lately but was good all the same, and the ceiling looked different from the way Spike remembered it, and Angel was snarling and growling and the ropes chafed against Spike's wrists as he twisted to get closer, twisted to get away.

Where the fuck had those ropes come from?

He tipped his head backwards and the headboard was made of cast iron, not wood, and the ceiling was Victorian plaster instead of Spanish stucco. The room was lit with kerosene lamps and the curtains were heavy velvet, and he recognized the fireplace as the one in Darla and Angelus's bedroom in London.

Angelus, whose hair tumbled over his shoulders into Spike's face and who was fucking him fast and hard. Who came with a grunt, pulled out of Spike without ceremony and slapped the back of his thigh.

"Christ, boy, you have the tightest arse in the British Empire." He rolled onto his back, leaving Spike tied to the headboard, mouth agape.

Spike snarled, planted his feet against the mattress and levered himself up until the ropes snapped.

Angelus raised an eyebrow at him. "Impressive. Never seen you pull that trick before."

"What the hell is going on?" Spike was on his feet beside the bed, fists curled, body a coiled spring. He looked wildly about the room. Red and gold wallpaper. Hardwood floor. An oriental carpet. "What the fuck have you done to me?"

Angelus laughed, a sound like bodies breaking. "I'd think after all these weeks you'd know what to call it."

"Where's Angel?"

The smile faded from Angelus's face. "That kick to the head earlier must have rattled your brain harder than I thought."

The smell of kerosene filled Spike's nostrils, Darla's perfume and Angelus's cigars. Something shiny on the dresser caught his eye. He took three long strides towards it, picked up a silver-handled hairbrush.

He recognized it as Darla's. Dru used to nick it every morning before bed to brush her dolls' hair, till Darla went looking for it again the next evening. It had a spot of tarnish on the back, one Dru had never been able to get out no matter how hard she rubbed.

Darla had just been here – an hour ago, maybe less. Her scent was still fresh. Her dress was draped over the back of a chair. Blue velvet with a white brocade. Spike recognized the fabric, from somewhere or some when – bloody hell, *think*, you stupid sod –

The Mayor's ball. The first year he was turned. Later that night, they would go to the ball and Spike would feed on the wrong guest. When they got home Darla would try to knock his teeth out, and when Spike bit her Angelus would –

Spike whirled around and threw the silver brush at Angelus's head. It connected with a satisfying *thwap*. Angelus growled and fanged out, leaping off the bed, but Spike's punch sent him sprawling to the floor.

"Tell me how I get back to L.A.," he snarled.

"Have you been doing spells with Drusilla again? You've gone as dotty as she is!" He hauled himself to his feet, long hair tumbling about his shoulders. He stared at Spike, his face twisting into a quizzical sneer.

"Apparently you lost more blood than I thought." Angelus walked around to the far side of the bed, reached down to the floor and hefted up a dead weight, dragging it in Spike's direction.

It was a boy, about 12 or 13 – a street urchin they'd lured back to their rooms with the promise of food. Thin and bones, limbs too long for his frame. His eyes were fluttering blue, loose brown hair flopping down into his forehead. Pink skin drained down to pale white. He wore Spike's teeth marks in his neck.

Spike's stomach flipped over with hunger and horror. The child's eyes stuttered as Angelus hefted him up: he could barely stand, but Spike knew that if he bit again, he could still manage to make the boy scream.

"Here then. Have another drink."

Angelus shoved the boy at him and he toppled forward. Spike reached out to catch him, but when his fist closed the flesh under his fingers was as cold and dead as his own.

He was back in Angel's bed at the Hyperion, looking up at the stucco ceiling. Angel was fucking him fast and needy, and Spike yelped at the shock. His hips tightened and Angel cried out, coming hard with Spike's name on his lips.

"Angel?" Spike's hands scrambled against Angel's shoulders, grappling for something solid.

“Yeah.” Angel pulled back to look at him, his expression warm and sex-softened. Spike searched his face. “Where’d you go?”

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Angel handed Spike a glass of whiskey, and Spike nodded his thanks. He sat on the couch in the hotel lobby, picking at a loose thread on his jeans. After his trip to the dark ages, he needed to get out of Angel’s rooms, away from splintered wood and the fresh scent of blood.

“You didn’t notice anything?” Spike asked.

Angel shook his head. “How long were you there?”

“Not long,” Spike said. “A minute, maybe two.”

“Was it just you and me?”

Spike thought about mentioning the food lying tied up on the floor, but Angel looked worried enough already; no point in adding to his considerable burden of guilt. “Yeah. Only I wasn’t me the way I was back then. Still had my soul. Still had short hair, I think. But you didn’t seem to notice.” His voice felt ragged, rattled.

“And I looked like I used to, back in 1880?”

Spike took a sip of whiskey. Hoped Angel didn’t notice the way the liquid trembled in the glass. “Annoying Irish brogue and all.”

Angel studied the wall beyond Spike’s head. “Could be a spell,” he said after a minute. “Someone trying to mess with you. We can do some digging, see if you’re the only one affected.”

“He’s not.” Connor’s voice entered the lobby accompanied by a squeak of doors. He descended the short flight of steps, wearing a face that mirrored Spike’s unnerved expression. His hair flopped over his forehead, and Spike felt a drop in his stomach like plunging into an abyss. Connor looked like the boy in his trip down memory lane, the one with Spike’s teeth marks in his throat.

Spike paced away from them both, nearly knocking his drink over in the process; away from the ghosts of his past that suddenly seemed to envelop the room, panicked and smothering. He stood by the garden doors, listening to Connor and Angel talk, and fought the urge to run.

The furrow on Angel’s brow grew deeper. “What happened?” he said to Connor.

Connor shook his head. “No clue. One minute I’m sitting in the department head’s office talking about their master’s program. The next I’m in an alley with Holtz and Justine, and she’s getting ready to stab him in the neck with an ice pick.” He looked at Angel with a sheepish expression. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“Well, you always said you didn’t kill him, but I never really believed you. So. Sorry. For, you know, locking you in a box and stuff.”

Angel crossed his arms. “I’m over it,” he said softly.

“So anyway,” Connor went on, “I grabbed the ice pick from Justine and punched her lights out. The next thing I know, I’m back in the professor’s office, and I’m holding this.” He pulled an ice pick out of his back pocket and laid it on the lobby desk. “The nice department head called security to escort me off campus.” His voice sank into a discouraged mutter. “Guess I won’t be getting an offer there.”

Angel put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Connor shrugged. “There’s other schools around.”

Angel picked up the ice pick. Tapped it against his fingers. “So we’re dealing with something that can trigger memories at will, and also manifest stuff.”

“They’re not memories,” Connor said. “Believe me, I’m an expert on recovered memories.”

Now it was Angel’s turn to look sheepish.

“I wasn’t there when Holtz died,” Connor went on. “I never saw Justine kill him. Whatever this thing is, it’s taking us to other times and places. It’s like we’re being shifted out of time, somehow.”

Angel looked at Spike, who was still standing by the garden doors. “That sounds eerily familiar.”

Spike opened his mouth to utter the name they were both thinking, but before he had a chance a dozen demons materialized out of nowhere in the middle of the lobby, wearing what looked to be mediaeval armour and swinging very mediaeval weapons.

“Shit!” Angel yelled, upending a couch just as a sword swung into it. He began hurling furniture at their attackers, giving Spike and Connor just enough time to run for the weapons cabinet.

Connor seized a broadsword for himself and threw one to Angel. Spike grabbed Gunn’s old axe and came around swinging, neatly taking off a head in one move. Two more attackers came at him. He sliced off the sword-arm of one and his opponent went down howling, but on the next swing his axe got stuck the demon’s armor. Spike cursed, trying to yank the axe free. He knew he should have sharpened the fucking thing before he put it away. He ducked as a sword came at his head.

“Connor!” Spike heard Angel’s yell, and in the next second his attacker’s weapon clattered to the ground along with his hand. Connor stood behind the demon, sword dripping blood, then spun in a swirl of hair and lean limbs to run another one clean through. Spike wrenched his axe free and decapitated an attacker coming up behind him.

Against the three of them, this pissant crew didn’t stand a chance. Spike swung his axe at the last one, severing his head, and watched it roll across the floor with a surge of satisfaction. The whole fight had taken five, maybe six minutes.

Connor was breathing hard. “Okay. Where the hell did those guys come from?”

Angel bent down to examine the armor they were wearing. On the breastplate, there was a symbol of a multi-armed creature with its arms enfolded, holding a sceptre in one hand and a weapon in the other. Spike remembered seeing a drawing like it once before, in a book in Wesley’s office at Wolfram & Hart, on a day when the world changed.

“It’s her.” Angel looked up into Spike’s face. “Illyria.”

“Her army of doom?” Spike asked.

“Well, she did warn us that she’d start rebuilding.” Angel stood. “She must be using the Senior Partner’s dimension as her new staging ground.”

“I don’t get it,” Connor said. “I thought Illyria’s goal was to rule the world. This is a pretty puny invasion party.”

Spike nodded. “Testing our defences, maybe?”

“She wouldn’t need to,” Angel said. “She lived here for months, she’s fought beside us hundreds of times.” He looked up the stairs, swept his gaze around the expanse of the hotel. “Hell, she knows this place better than I do.”

“And how come she can suddenly yank us back and forth through time again?” Spike asked. “Thought Wes sucked all the juice out of her with that ray gun of his.”

“I don’t know. Something doesn’t add up.” Angel poked a dead demon with his foot. “But I do know I want these bodies out of my lobby.”

“Agreed,” Spike said. “They stink like hell.”

“We’ll get some rest tonight, do some research tomorrow. Maybe we can figure it out.”

They hauled bits of dead demon to the sewers, scrubbed up the leftover goo and headed up the stairs. Connor turned down the hallway to his room with a wave and a yawn. Angel ushered Spike into his room, closing the door behind them with a snick that sounded unreasonably loud in Spike’s ears.

“You hungry?” Angel asked.

Spike shook his head. The bed sheets still stank of sex and his own blood. It made him feel vaguely ill. He sank into a chair.

Angel headed for the bar. “Never did get to finish that drink. I’ll fix you another one.”

“Don’t bother,” Spike said, fingers curling into the leather arms.

“You sure? I have some single malt - ”

Spike shoved himself up. The chair teetered but didn’t fall over. “Don’t need your bloody mollicoddling.”

Angel put his hands on his hips. Stared hard at him. “What the fuck jerked a knot in your ass?”

Spike paced. Ran a hand over the back of his head. “Nothing. Just... knackered, is all.”

Angel didn’t move. “Yeah. Me too.” He nodded at the bed. “Get some sleep. I’m gonna go wash up.” Then he headed for the bathroom.

Spike bristled at the tone in Angel’s voice, the way he still barked out orders like Admiral Nelson fighting the French. He snorted to himself at the image. The great Irish git would seethe at the comparison to an English war hero. Spike had half a mind to call him Horatio just to brass him off, but he was in too pissy a mood to enjoy it.

He peeled off his demon-spattered clothes and pulled back the covers. Eyed the sheets, still stained with blood. Spike ripped them away from the mattress with an angry yank, nearly tearing the fabric. Threw them into a ball at the foot of the bed.

He grabbed an old blanket from the closet, flopped down on the bare mattress and threw it over himself. The coarse wool itched against his skin. He kept his eyes closed as he heard Angel’s footsteps approaching.

“Why are there no sheets on the bed?”

Spike pretended to be asleep.

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The next morning, the three of them spent several hours poring over Wes’s old books, plus a few other tomes Angel had managed to smuggle out of Wolfram & Hart in the days before the last one. It was slow going – Spike’s Latin was pretty rusty, and some of the languages none of them could decipher. He stretched his neck out, trying to work the kinks. Even vampire stamina was starting to reach its limits.

“We need that freaky files and records bird. She could give us all the answers with a roll of her eyeballs.”

“Or those books you could talk into.” Angel flipped a page without looking up.

“You guys are wimps.” Connor grinned. “Compared to cramming for my calculus exam? This is like reading Harry Potter.” His grin faltered, and he shifted in his seat. “Not that I – read Harry Potter.”

Spike lifted an eyebrow. “Throw on a pair of glasses and you could be him.”

“Shut up, Spike.” Angel still didn’t look up.

Spike sighed. “Face it, Angel, we’re spinning our wheels, here. There’s nothing in any of these books about Illyria or the Senior Partners’ dimension. Not like they’d leave the keys to their summer home lying around where any of their employees could use it to steal the silver, now, would they?”

Angel finally raised his head. “Okay. Let’s go over what we know.” He stood up, paced over to the lobby desk. He picked up the ice pick Connor had dropped there last night. “Connor, when you got sucked back in time – You said you stopped Justine from killing Holtz. So does that mean Holtz is alive?”

Connor shook his head, his voice soft and full of something like regret. “I kind of snuck out of the house after the demons attacked. Went to find Justine. She still remembers killing him.”

“And I still remember being sunk to the bottom of the ocean for it.” Angel turned the ice pick over in his fingers. “So where did this come from?”

Connor shrugged. “Temporal hitch-hiker?”

“Maybe.” Angel headed back towards them. “See if there’s anything in these books about time shifts. Illyria might be using them for something bigger. If there’s a pattern, maybe we can figure out – ”

“Who’s Illyria?”

Spike froze. For a minute he thought he was having another episode, because that couldn’t possibly be her voice coming from the doorway. Until he looked up, and it was.

Buffy and Dawn stood in the lobby entrance with bags slung over their shoulders and hard, tired looks on their faces.

“Buffy.” He heard Angel’s voice, but it sounded very far away. Spike stood up, moved like an automaton towards her, then stopped, rooted to the spot, still-open book clutched stupidly in his hand.

She came down the stairs with her eyes fixed on him, jaw ticking. Stood within arm’s reach. He could have lifted his hand and touched the side of her cheek; smoothed out her hair, which looked untidy from long hours of travel.

“So it’s true,” she said, her voice quiet and wire-tight. “You’re alive.”

He nodded, and they stared at each other for a long second. He would have thought she would hit him. Or kiss him. Lots of different ways, he’d imagined this reunion, but he’d never thought she’d find him here, like this, in Angel’s –

And then suddenly he found himself in a fierce embrace, an armful of Dawn sending his book tumbling to the floor. He buried his nose in her hair, inhaling the scent of California sun, and felt tears sting his eyes.

“You stupid vampire,” she muttered against his chest. Then she shoved him away, hard enough to make him stumble. “Why didn’t you call us?”

Buffy put a hand on Dawn’s arm. “We can talk about that later, Dawn,” she said softly. Buffy looked at Angel, then Connor, and her jaw ticked again.

“Angel. Aren’t you going to introduce us to your son?”

Angel’s mouth opened twice before any sound came out. “How did you - ?”

“We’ll talk about that later, too.”

Connor shrugged and stepped forward. “Hi. I’m Connor.” Buffy shook his hand and introduced Dawn.

Then Connor stepped back and closed ranks with Angel, and Buffy and Dawn stood facing them, and Spike was certain he’d fallen into some inter-dimensional rift where parallel universes smash into and annihilate each other. His only hope of survival was for a black hole to open beneath his feet and swallow him whole.

But a black hole on its best day would have choked on Buffy Summers. In a flash, she was all business.

“So. Anybody want to tell me why I’m remembering things that haven’t happened yet?”

\*

Spike let Angel take the lead on bringing them up to speed, and then there were stories: fantastical tales about a mystical pregnancy and a kidnapping and a boy raised in a hell dimension, and a spell worked by an evil law firm to make everyone forget. About a vampire brought back as a spook to haunt the walls of said law firm, and a battle that was meant to end all battles but didn’t. About a mad scientist Angel and Spike had both adored, consumed from the inside by a megalomaniacal god-king who then went on to kill the Senior Partners and ascend to a higher plane.

Somehow, Angel managed to leave out his own part in helping said god-king enter said higher plane in order to rescue said son from said law firm. But Spike was too spun to bother mentioning it. Except for a few words about his ghostly tenure and the aftermath, he barely managed to say much of anything.

Instead he watched Buffy’s face as she listened to it all with rapt attention, her mind processing all the implications, now and then interrupting with questions.

“So Wesley just took him?” Her eyes were wide and soft, fixed on Angel’s face. “Angel, why didn’t you tell me?”

Even with Connor safe and sitting beside him, Angel’s mouth contorted with the agony of the memory. “You were recently undead at the time.” He shrugged.

“I’m so sorry.” There was pain in Buffy’s voice, something beyond empathy that spoke of the deep connection she shared with Angel even now. It made Spike’s insides twist with something ugly. He paced over towards the garden door, staring out into the darkness while Buffy gently prodded Angel to continue.

Spike looked over at Connor, watching his eyes as the tales unravelled. The boy kept his own counsel, listening to the whole story as if he hadn’t actually lived it, his face not betraying a single emotion except curiosity about his origins. When Angel mentioned Connor’s adoptive family, though, he got up and left the room. Spike followed him out into the garden, only too grateful for the chance to excuse himself.

The night air was uncharacteristically clear for Los Angeles at this time of year. Connor was sitting on a bench, looking up at the sky.

“You okay?” Spike asked.

Connor nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Just missing my other dad, is all.”

Spike sat next to him, not knowing what to say, how to comfort him. Instead he asked, “How’s your mum doing?”

“Okay.” Connor smiled, something small and quiet. “She had a date last week. My sister teased her about it for days afterwards.” His smile faded. “But when I go home on weekends, I hear her crying at night sometimes. Really softly. She doesn’t know I can hear her.” He tapped his ear. “It’s so weird, you know? There’s all this stuff she doesn’t know about me.” Connor looked at his hands. “She doesn’t even know that my dad was killed because of me.”

Spike shook his head. “He was killed because of Angel, because Wolfram & Hart had a grudge against your Da. Don’t ever blame yourself for that, Connor.”

“I know.” He kicked the ground with his shoe. “In some ways it’s easier being out here. At least you and Angel know all my deep dark secrets. But the thought of leaving them...”

He sighed. “Mom’s hoping I decide to stay in New York. Go to school there. It’s like I have two families, one human and one demon, and I don’t know which one I fit into.”

Spike put his hand on Connor’s wrist, ran his thumb over the pulse point. His skin was soft and warm. “You feel pretty human to me,” he smiled.

“Spike.” Buffy’s voice behind him. Connor turned, and Spike stood.

“It’s late,” she said. “Dawn’s tired.”

“Where you staying?”

“There’s a Slayers’ compound, here in L.A.”

Spike nodded. “I know it,” he said without thinking. “Last year, when – ” He trailed off.

“Last year?” Buffy’s voice was weary; incredulous. “You were *there* and they didn’t...?” She shook her head, folded her arms. “Never mind. I’m going to get the council working on this, see if we can find out what’s causing these time shifts. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Spike nodded, wishing again for that black hole.

Buffy and Dawn said their goodnights, and Connor went upstairs to his old room, and Angel and Spike were left standing in the middle of the lobby, looking at each other as if they’d forgotten each other’s names.

“Well, that was about as much fun as being eaten alive by giant beetles,” Spike said after an interminable silence.

Angel nodded and sat, slowly. “Even less, I’d say.” He looked over at Spike, meeting his eyes for the first time since Buffy had walked through the door. “You okay?”

Spike sat on the seat opposite, the lobby like a chasm between them. “Can’t say as I am. You?”

Angel folded his arms. Shrugged. “I wasn’t the one who got yanked back in time yesterday.”

Spike frowned. “That’s not what I meant.” Angel made no reply.

The walls echoed with the groans of the old hotel, lights humming, plumbing hissing quietly. Spike stared up at the ceiling. There was a long crack in it, running from the front door to just past the middle of the room.

“Look, Angel.” He looked down at his hands, picked at his nails. “I’m thinking I might head back to my place tonight.”

Angel nodded. “Probably a good idea.” He looked relieved; because the only thing more awkward than having Buffy here between them was having Buffy not here between them.

Spike climbed the stairs to his – *their* – room to get his coat and keys. The bed was still unmade; the headboard sporting a hairline fracture where Spike’s fingers had cracked it two nights ago. The smell of blood still lingered, potent and deadly.

He shut his eyes, trying to conjure up the words Angel’s voice had whispered to him in the dark. Instead he saw a dying child’s face being thrust towards him, tumbling forward on the rasp of an Irish accent and the echo of mocking laughter. He shuddered, remembering the heady scent of the boy’s blood, how easy it would have been to sink his fangs in and drink him down if he’d stayed stuck in that time loop one minute longer.

He fished in his coat pockets for a smoke and his lighter, but came up empty. Didn’t feel like hanging about for a search. Sod it. He’d get it later.

He trotted back down the stairs. “See you tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder on his way out.

“Goodnight, Will,” came the reply, and a shiver ran through him like spider legs crawling up his spine.

\*

He slept in fits and starts, waking now and again to the roar of a motorcycle weaving through rush-hour traffic, to motorists cursing and a siren chasing the biker down the street. Daylight moved on outside, but in Spike's apartment time seemed to run backwards, back to a time when Fred was alive and Buffy thought Spike wasn't and Angel couldn't care less if he lived or died. Bloody hell. Why couldn't the time shift have dragged his arse back to those days and dumped him there?

The knock came as soon as the sun went down. Spike's throat felt tight as he opened the door, mouth dry, palms sweaty. He'd rather face a barrage of Illyria's fists than the wrath of Buffy.

"Come on." She tossed him a sword. In her other hand she held her shiny red axe. "We're going patrolling."

He nodded mutely and followed.

"So the council dug up some dirt on Illyria," she said. "We think we know what's making time go all slipstream on us."

"Yeah?" Spike stumbled. Looked behind him to see what he'd tripped over. It was a foot, attached to a tramp sleeping in the sidewalk.

"Should watch where you're going," Buffy muttered.

Spike nodded, stupidly.

"Illyria hijacked the Senior Partners' dimension to take back some power thingy they stole from the Old Ones, back in the days of the primeval ooze. It lets her manipulate time, among other funky features. Only once she got there, she found out there was a fail-safe on it."

"Fail-safe? Like, this ball of energy will self-destruct in 15 seconds?"

"Something like that. Wolfram & Hart must have figured that someone would try to steal it back someday."

"Well, they're lawyers," Spike said. "They'd have contingencies on their contingencies."

"Giles thinks she's trying to use this time-machine mojo for some nefarious purpose, but with the power dialled down it's not working right. It's creating cracks in the timeline, and people are getting swept up in it."

"And her soldiers? Where do they fit in?"

Buffy shook her head. "We're not sure yet." She looked down a side street, holding her axe, listening for movement, but it was just some cats rustling around an aluminum garbage pail. "The council has some seers looking into it. They have connections to some of the old Wolfram & Hart offices. Not much left of them since Illyria kicked them out of paradise, but the ones still around are suddenly on our side. They want her dead as much as we do."

"So the time shifts we've all been experiencing... they're just random breaks? No pattern to them?"

"Apparently so." Buffy stopped in front of him, looked him square in the face. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Spike clutched his sword in one hand. The point of it scraped lightly against the ground. He wished fervently for a random attack, but none came. *Demon interruptus* never happened when you wanted it to.

"Spike, we were just starting something when you -" She broke off. "Didn't you even think about picking up where we left off?"

"Thought about it." He shifted on his feet. "Was afraid you'd tell me to go back to the hell I came from."

Her eyes were wide, incredulous. "Why would you think that?"

There were a dozen reasons, all flavored by the taste of human blood in his mouth, the snap of bone under his hands.

“Because you deserve better than me.”

Buffy let the head of her axe clunk on the sidewalk. Her mouth was open, and for a moment she looked like she finally was going to hit him.

“Great. Just great. First Angel leaves town because I deserve to skip through the sunlight with someone who can have children, and isn’t *that* the pretzel of all ironic twists – ”

“Buffy – ”

“ – and now you decide to play dust pan walking because you think you know what’s best for me?” Her eyes on his were hot knives, pinning him in place. “You know what? I *do* deserve better. I deserve to not be treated like a witless female by a couple of arrogant, older-than-thou little boys in vampire clothing!”

“I didn’t mean to – ”

“To what? Make all my decisions for me? You think you know something about life just because you’re older than the light bulb? You think you know anything about love?” She shoved him, and he stumbled back. “I loved you!”

He looked in her eyes, shining and wet. He wanted so much to take her hand, draw her close, hold on and never let go. Her skin would be soft and warm under his touch, while his would be taut and cold.

“You really didn’t believe me, did you?” Her voice was soft, now, an undercurrent of hurt beneath her anger. “When I told you?” She pursed her lips. “And here I thought you were saying that just to get me to leave.”

Spike looked down at his sword hand. “Never claimed to be noble or selfless, Buffy.”

“No.” A corner of her mouth quirked up. “Just kind of a moron.”

And damn it if that didn’t make Spike laugh.

Buffy laughed, too, and it warmed him inside. Her smile could light up the dankest, stinkiest alley. “You wanna go for a drink?” she asked.

Spike raised an eyebrow at her. “You asking me out on a date?”

A smile played around the corner of Buffy’s lips, flirty and almost coy. “Maybe. We never had a real one before.”

“Think a demon bar’s the only place we could get into with what we’re packing.” Spike hefted his sword.

Buffy’s smile grew wider. She shouldered her axe. “Lead the way, then.”

\*

Most of the regulars scurried at the sight of a young woman packing hardware. With all the baby Slayers running around, it wasn’t that uncommon a spectacle. The denizens who stayed behind braced for a fight. When none came, they just stood there, fists balled and tentacles waving, baffled at the sight of a Slayer sitting down to table and ordering a mojito.

“Don’t think they serve cocktails here, pet. Beer and spirits about your only choices. ‘Less you want blood in your Bloody Mary.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “You are just as gross as ever.” She grinned. “I kinda missed it.”

Spike ducked his head and smiled. The bartender brought their drinks – beer for Spike, rum and diet Coke for Buffy – and they drank. Then they sat, in silence, neither of them having a clue what to say.

“Not very good at this dating thing,” Spike said after three sips of beer. “Haven’t had much by way of practice. Or, any.”

“I’m a little out of practice myself.” Buffy looked around the bar. “So. You come here a lot? Isn’t that the standard opening line?”

Spike smiled. “Not really. Used to, before I started working with Angel and his crew. Then they started dragging me to human bars like a real boy.”

“Seems weird, to think of you and Angel working together. Like an undead buddy-cop movie.”

Spike shrugged, hoping it looked casual. “Not the first time we’ve teamed up. Even if we do annoy the piss out of each other. Rest of his crew got to seem like family, after a fashion.” He looked into his beer. “Specially Fred. She was a sweet bird.”

“I’m sorry,” Buffy said, and Spike nodded.

“Angel called me,” she went on. “After Cordelia and Wesley –” Buffy played with the edge of her paper napkin. “He sounded so broken.” She had that look on her face, the one Spike liked to call Angel-worry. He knew that look from the inside.

“Took a lot out of him,” Spike said. “Losing them all. But he’s doing better these days. Helps when Connor’s around.”

“Did he – Did Angel tell you about Connor?”

Spike shook his head. “Found out by accident, after that business with the Black Thorn.”

“It’s so bizarre. I can’t believe he’d keep something like that a secret from me.” She looked wounded, and Spike couldn’t decide whether to be jealous or just stake the git for upsetting her.

“He was just trying to protect the boy. You too, I’d wager.”

Buffy made a sound, not quite a laugh, short and bitter. “Yeah. He does that a lot.” She looked up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t ask you here to talk about my ex.”

*We’re talking about my current,* Spike thought suddenly, and the feeling of vertigo swept through him again.

“So what mischief have you and Dawn been getting up to in England?” He hoped his desperation to change the subject didn’t sound as blatant in his voice as it felt in his head. But his cunning plan worked: Buffy spun out tales of his homeland couched in California-speak, amusing stories of Harris making weapons and training Slayers and Dawn trying to cast spells and accidentally blowing things up and Giles making tea and sighing in a very English fashion.

They stayed talking and laughing through a few drinks, until Buffy started to yawn. “Sorry.” She grinned. “You may be all creature of the night-y but I’m still on London time.” Spike walked her back to the Slayers’ compound.

They were almost at the door when a young vampire gang jumped them, apparently hoping for a taste of Slayer blood. Why any vamp would be stupid enough to hang around outside a dorm full of Slayers – Oh, who was he kidding? Spike would have been exactly that stupid, back in the day.

It was no epic battle – a few swings and it was done – but it was enough to make Spike realize how much he’s missed fighting at Buffy’s side. She was glorious and powerful, light and life, armed with a shiny red axe and an unshakable faith that the good guys would win. She could turn monsters into men.

Buffy let out a yelp as the last vamp sunk its teeth into her upper arm just before it dissolved into dust. She examined her coat. The new red leather was bitten clean through.

“I just bought this jacket!” She grimaced. “Fucking asshole.”

Spike's face cracked into a huge grin. He made a tsk tsk noise. "Language, Slayer. You kiss your sister goodnight with that mouth?"

Buffy looked up at him, one hand still on her arm, chin tucked. Fluttered her eyelashes, and smiled. "I've always had a dirty mouth. You should know that better than anyone."

Spike stilled, a sharp, sudden breath. His cock stiffened, squeezed tight against the inside of his jeans.

She took a slow step towards him, then another. Reached up and cupped the side of his face. "I'm still mad at you." Her hand slid around the back of his neck. "Maybe by the second date I won't be." Then she kissed him, and Spike's hands groped helplessly for her hips, pressing her strong, small frame against him in a dizzying embrace that wouldn't, couldn't end.

She gently pried herself loose from his grip, turned and walked through the door, leaving him stranded in the street, legs boneless and the rest of him – not so much.

He didn't even remember going home.

\*

He woke up several hours later to a knock. He knew from the weight of it that it was Angel's fist against the door, and that he was not in a good mood.

Spike sighed, rubbed his face and pulled on his jeans. Staggered towards the door and opened it, not bothering to turn the light on.

"Where the hell have you been?" Angel loomed into the middle of the apartment like a shadow, dusk and doppelganger, and right away it pissed Spike off.

Spike straightened his spine. "With Buffy."

"I know that, dumbass. I mean where'd you take her?"

"Went to a bar, is all. Then walked her home."

"How quaint! Spikey, you're getting so suburban in your old age." Angel prowled up close to him, leaned in close enough to scent. Spike's feet were bare. It made Angel taller than usual, and that pissed him off even more.

A grin crossed Angel's face, sex and sin. "You tell her about me?" He leaned in closer. Spike looked over Angel's shoulder at the bare wall. "Did you tell her about all the nights you've sat up in bed, writing poetry about dead hearts and angel's wings?"

Spike shoved him away, and Angel laughed.

"Or about all the nights we *haven't* sat up in bed?"

Spike's eyes glittered in the dark. "Girl's got a dirty mind. Maybe she'll wanna join in."

"Ooh, just like old times."

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. Spike's vision clouded with an image of Drusilla squirming in her daddy's lap, sharp white teeth grinning over her shoulder like malice itself, broken bones and crooked bodies. Spike reared back and head-butted Angel in the face.

"Fuck off, Angelus."

Angel rubbed his nose. "Ow," he muttered. "Okay, that? Was taking it too far." He started to advance on Spike, then apparently thought better of it. He stopped, let his shoulders drop. Looked at the ceiling and sighed. "Get your shit. We're going home."

Spike looked at the naked wall again. There was a hole where the drywall had come loose, the remnant of a long-vanished picture. He really should get another one to hang there. Make the place more homely-like. "No, we're not," he said quietly.

“What?” There was a note of unease in Angel’s voice – small, barely there, but it made Spike do a double-take. Angel actually looked thrown, like someone had tossed the script away.

“I’m not coming back to the hotel.” Spike patted his pockets, but came up empty. No cigarettes, no lighter. Bloody hell. “Gonna stay here for a while. Need to figure a few things out.”

Angel stood in the middle of the room, arms hanging still at his sides, confusion written on his face. He looked lost, disoriented, and for a minute Spike wanted to take back the words.

Then Angel’s hands curled into fists, his face like a gathering storm. “You fucking little shit,” he ground out. “You really think you have a shot with her?”

“This isn’t just about her.”

“The fuck it isn’t.” Angel barrelled towards the door, not even bothering to hit him. For some reason that pissed Spike off more than anything. Angel yanked the door open, then turned. Pointed a finger at him like a stake. “Enjoy being the consolation prize, Willie. She never would have touched you if I hadn’t left town. I was gone and you were just there.”

The words echoed like a punch to the ears, but Spike didn’t let on. “Not my fault you’re too stupid to hang onto a good thing when you’ve got it,” he shot back.

Angel stood in the doorway, coiled and still. Looked Spike up and down. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

He spun in a whirl of trench coat, the door rattling off its hinges behind him.

\*

Spike was used to Buffy coming at him with a closed fist. Didn’t have a bloody bugging clue what to do when she approached him with an open hand.

They were sitting on the beat up old couch in his shitty apartment. The end of their second date, if that’s what you could call it – the word still sounded alien to Spike’s ears. He felt embarrassed by the coarse fabric of the sofa, the cheap particle board furniture surrounding them. He wanted to wrap Buffy up in silks and the softest linens, lay things fine and smooth against her skin.

Instead, she laid her hand upon his cheek. Spike reached up to take her hand in his, turned it to kiss her open palm. Buffy let out a silky little sigh, and he leaned in and kissed her with his whole soul.

She stood up and held out her hand. Spike stared at it with wonder, as if he were being offered the keys to heaven; it seemed about as likely. Yet here she was, smiling at him in a way she’d never done, guiding him to the bedroom, laying herself down like spun glass. It whirled his head around, turned everything upside down, as if he had never killed or tasted blood

(you treat me like a man)

or failed her in any way.

She crawled on top of him, kissed him like a quiet fever, all the power and strength in her body throttled back into her lips, her hands. Spike surged against her, the weight of her small frame on top of him, her hips pressing into his. The mattress was soft against his back and her sighs were soft in his ears. It struck him they’d never done this on a real bed before. But this was nothing they’d ever been or done, not rough or bruising or buildings falling down. It was fragile, tender, a porcelain gift wrapped in ribbons and cotton and laid lovingly at his feet.

She undressed him slowly; wriggled out of her clothes with a grace that left Spike stupid and open-mouthed. Christ, she was so beautiful; her skin warm and golden, her smile shining. She looked at him with wonder in her eyes, caressed his cold skin as if it breathed life.

She fingered the scar of the Black Thorn on his chest, and he almost pulled away.

“Where did you get this?” she whispered.

“Had to do a ritual,” he said. “To save someone.” It wasn’t a lie.

She ran her hands down his arms, over the muscles in his stomach. His belly fluttered.

“No scars anywhere else.” Her voice tremored. “No burn marks.” She looked up into his face, and her mouth quivered. “I missed you so much,” she whispered.

“God, Buffy.” He pulled her up and kissed her again, his hands encircling her head, her hair whisper-soft under his fingers. She pressed the whole length of her naked body against his, skin touching everywhere, and the feeling so overwhelmed him he nearly sobbed with gratitude, with the incredulity that she could want him in this new, miraculous way.

He caressed her thighs, palmed her breasts, wrapped his arms around her waist. She rolled them until he was on top of her, let him thrust into her soft and slow like a lover, kissed him as they made love face to face.

“I love you,” she whispered, and Spike was falling, flying apart, scattering in a thousand pieces on the ground.

\*

The Slayer’s compound had a courtyard where the sun shone in from morning until around mid-afternoon, and Dawn decided to take full advantage. She carted her armload of books out to a stone picnic table, letting them tumble open with a thump, then turned to the one entitled *A History of the One Ones*. There was a picture of Illyria in her native form, looking like a folded up giant squid.

“Yuck. I can see why you wanted to hijack a human body. That’s enough tentacles to supply every sushi bar in southern California.”

She was halfway through reading the first page when Buffy walked in, cell phone glued to her ear.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay, that’s great. Keep me posted. Thanks, Giles.”

Dawn looked up as Buffy flipped her phone shut. “Any news?”

Buffy nodded. “These soldiers with the squiggles on their armor? They’re definitely Illyria’s acolytes. She’s been amassing them into an army, getting ready for an invasion from her dimension into ours. But time works differently on her side of the border. From her perspective it looks like they’re all rushing in at once, but from ours it’s just a slow trickle.”

“Like watching a movie in slow motion?”

“Exactly. Illyria was counting on her ability to manipulate time to make up for the difference, but with her powers limited she can’t control it.” Buffy sat down across from Dawn. “This is a huge break for us. All we have to do is watch where her soldiers appear, and we’ll know where the front lines are going to be.”

“Except we have no way of knowing when her ickiness is going to slip through the cracks.” Dawn turned the book around so Buffy could see the picture. “When she starts waving those arms around she’ll be able to knock planes out of the sky.”

Buffy grimaced. “Giles has his seers still working on it. They might be able to dig up some clues.”

Dawn looked at Buffy's unkempt hair, her smudged eyeliner. "Like the clues that an observant sister might use to conclude that you didn't come home from your date last night?" She smiled brightly. "Notice how I slipped that into the conversation?"

Buffy nodded, one corner of her mouth turning up. "Very subtle. Like Brie cheese."

"Brie's too fattening. I was thinking subtle like... Oh! The hint of pear in that Pinot Grigio I'm not old enough to drink here. Stupid California laws." Dawn squiggled a little in her seat. "So, spill. I want every detail, including but not limited to tongue action and penis size."

"Dawn!"

"What? I'm old enough to say penis. Anya used to say it all the time."

"Anya used to decapitate men for fun!"

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Fine. Not like I haven't seen Spike nearly naked anyway. The way he used to strut around his crypt? Didn't leave much to the imagination."

Buffy's mouth opened in a horrified gape, and Dawn laughed with delight. "You are so easy to wind up when you're dating." Buffy went to smack her hand, but Dawn yanked it away. Buffy's fingers landed with a light-hearted slap against the open pages of the book.

"You look happy." Dawn smiled.

Buffy smiled too, her head down. "I guess I am. I mean, it's still kind of early and we could all die horribly once Illyria gets ahold of us with those – god, what are those, pincers? But assuming we survive, it's nice to have something to look forward to."

"I'm glad. I haven't seen you this happy about a guy since before Angel went all evil stalker on us."

Buffy's smile faded. "I guess I should tell Angel about me and Spike."

Dawn huffed. "Angel needs to get over it."

"Dawn..."

"I'm serious, Buffy. He dumped you, like, years ago. It's none of his business who you date now."

Buffy tapped her fingers against the book. "Some things you never get over."

Dawn sighed. "Yeah, I know, epic romance, doomed relationship, blah blah, you'll always love him."

"I love them both," Buffy confessed, and her eyes were kitten-wide, quiet and vulnerable. It wasn't a look Dawn got to see very often. She took Buffy's hand and squeezed, and Buffy squeezed back.

"Well, that's clearly out of the question." Dawn released Buffy's fingers with an extra dollop of drama. "Spike and Angel hate each other, so there goes your chance for whacky threesome fun."

"Dawn!" The aura of melancholy that had been settling over Buffy evaporated. "I should wash your brain out with soap!"

"Oh, like you don't dig the idea of two hot vampires fighting over you."

"Maybe," Buffy admitted. "But there's only so much jealous crap I can take. They both make me crazy enough already."

Dawn smiled, her face warm with affection. "I think the crazy might have been in you before they were ever in the picture."

\*

Buffy arrived at the Hyperion to find the lobby empty. She called out for Angel, but the sound echoed in the cavernous space, lonely and unanswered. She was rummaging behind the lobby desk for a notepad when she heard a clanging sound coming from the basement.

She headed to the weapons cabinet, took out a sword and crept down the stairs. When she got to the bottom there was a flash of metal and a blade clanged into hers, then abruptly pulled away.

“Whoa.” Connor lowered his sword and stepped back. “Sorry. Didn’t know it was you.”

Buffy flipped her hair out of her eyes. “It’s okay.” She let her weapon drop to her side. “Pretty impressive sword arm. I’m guessing you inherited some super-strength from your parents?”

Connor nodded. “And super-hearing. I’m usually better than this at hearing people come in. Guess I was too distracted with practicing.” He tapped the side of his nose. “Super-smell, too.”

“I’m glad I showered before I came over, then.” Buffy grimaced. “Is Angel around?”

Connor shook his head. “I think he’s out killing stuff.”

“In the middle of the day?”

“In the sewers, probably.”

“Naturally.” Buffy walked across the basement, to where a big cage stretched from floor to ceiling. “You guys keep demons in here?”

Connor shook his head. “Nope. Just Angel.” Buffy stared at him. “Long story. Did you find out something about Illyria?”

Buffy relayed the information that Giles had passed on.

Connor nodded. “Those demon guys popped up in the middle of the lobby. It sounds like this’ll be one of their first points of attack.”

“That’s what we think, too. Connor, can you think of any reason why Illyria would make this one of her first targets?”

“Yeah. I can, actually.” He paced over to the steps, sat down on them. “The Senior Partners had this thing called a liaison. He was like, made from them or something. Angel drank from him right before the big battle. Killed him. The guy’s blood was all juiced up with this ancient power. It helped Angel win the fight.”

Connor dug the point of his sword into the bottom step and leaned against the hilt. “But after the battle, Wolfram & Hart kept coming at him. Mostly through me.” His eyes flicked briefly to the floor. “They kidnapped me a while back. Sent me off to a holding dimension. But it turned out, Angel had just enough of this liaison’s power left in his blood to open a portal to the Senior Partners’ dimension. Portal open, Senior Partners destroyed, and I was set free.”

Buffy rubbed her forehead. “I don’t get it. I thought Illyria destroyed the Senior Partners.”

Connor nodded. “She did. See, there was this catch. A rule, that only a god could enter the Senior Partners’ domain.”

Buffy felt the color drain from her face. “A god like Illyria.” Her fist tightened around the hilt of her sword. “Angel made a deal with Illyria. He’d open the portal, she’d ascend to this higher dimension and kill the Senior Partners – ”

“ - in return for getting me out of jail,” Connor finished. “He does stuff like that,” he added softly.

Buffy nodded, her head feeling numb. “Yeah. He does.” She paced around the basement, trying to clear her brain. “Okay. So if Angel’s blood can open a portal to this other dimension, can we use that to get to Illyria?”

“Not sure. There might not be enough juice left in him, after all this time. And even if there is, there’s that rule about only gods being able to enter.”

“But Illyria still sees Angel as a threat. Otherwise she wouldn’t be sending her soldiers into his hotel.”

“Maybe he is. We just need to figure out how.”

They were interrupted by the sound of a grate sliding open. Angel crawled through the opening leading to the sewer access. He climbed up without looking at Buffy.

“Angel,” Buffy said. “We were just talking about – ”

“Yeah, I heard the whole thing.” He threw his weapon on the floor and headed up the stairs. Buffy followed, still holding the sword in her hand.

“Well, it’s nice to know that spying on me is still one of your favorite pastimes,” she said when they reached the top of the stairs.

Angel kept walking, not stopping to look back at her. “Super-hearing, Buffy. Oh, and about that super-smell thing. Showers? Don’t make that much of a difference.”

Buffy grimaced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

“Really. Just come by to gloat, then?”

“I came by because I thought you should hear it from me.” She followed him into his office, where Angel made a show of shuffling some papers around his desk.

“Fine. I heard it. Now get out.”

Buffy gripped her weapon, exasperated. “Angel, I’m sorry you’re upset. But you knew there was something between me and Spike. This can’t come as a surprise.”

Angel looked up at her, eyes flashing like a wounded animal. “That was before your whole cookie-dough speech,” he bit out. “Is this your life choice now, Buffy? You’re gonna walk off into the sunset with someone whose ass is gonna fry the minute he sets foot in it?”

Buffy tapped the point of the sword against the marble floor, the tension building in her muscles like a slow burn. “So that’s it. You push me away so I can live in happy-normal-land, and now you’re angry because I’m with somebody just like you.”

“He’s nothing like me!”

“It doesn’t matter! You don’t get to decide who I love and who I don’t! God, the way you just make decisions for me, for Connor, for the whole damn world – Angel, you made a deal with Illyria and now the whole world could end!”

“Oh, like you’ve never made the same call.”

“But I wouldn’t do it again. I’m not the same Slayer who jumped off that tower to save Dawn. Even she understands that.”

Angel thumped his hands on his desk. “And she’s not your daughter! Buffy, you have no idea what it’s like to have a child of your own.”

“Don’t you dare throw that back in my face,” she ground out. “The only thing you know about me and Dawn are fake memories, like the ones you crammed into your son’s head. You were gone for the part that actually *happened*.” Everything inside her tensed, and she fought back the urge to hit him. “You’re the one who walked away from me, remember? God, I *begged* you to stay and you still – ” She broke off, unwilling to let him see how much the memory of it hurt her, even now.

Angel’s voice softened. “Buffy, you know why I had to leave.”

“Why? Because of a stupid curse that could never *possibly* be an issue anymore?”

“Because I nearly killed you!”

“And you leaving did so much to keep me alive!” Buffy’s jaw worked like she was swallowing back the words. She hefted Angel’s sword, turning the blade over, watching it glint in the bare office light. “All the things you did deliberately, to hurt me. To hurt the

people I loved. And I forgave you for all of it.” Her voice was battle-charged, low and deadly. “It’s the things you did to protect me that I still haven’t forgiven you for.”

She laid the sword down across his desk and walked out, not stopping to look behind her.

\*

Angel waited until he heard the lobby door close behind her, then picked up the sword and hurled it as far as it would go. It sliced clean through the wall between his office and the lobby, landing with a clatter against the marble floor. A huge hole in the plaster gaped open-mouthed at him, the splintered lathes poking through like crooked-toothed laughter.

He heard Connor coming up from the basement, a handful of weapons rattling under his arm. He stopped in the lobby, leaned over to pick up the sword that had just come flying through the wall. Then he walked up to Angel’s office and poked his head through the hole.

“Want me to call a contractor?”

Angel shook his head. “We’ll deal with it later.”

Connor came around, walked through the door. Laid the pile of steel on Angel’s desk. “Thought I’d clean them for you, before we put them away.”

Angel thumped his body into the chair behind his desk. Every part of him felt rusty and heavy, creaking like old metal.

“Connor, do you – Have I ruined your life?”

Connor fixed him with a look that said, *Are you on drugs?* “Dad, you saved my life. More than once. I’d have never had a chance at normal, if you hadn’t done what you did.”

Angel looked down at his desk. There was a chip in the wood where the weapons had clattered against it. “I wanted to give Buffy a chance at normal.”

“Yeah, but having someone else try to run your life? Easier to deal with when it’s your folks. I think there’s some sort of clause in the birth certificate or something.” Connor smiled, the kind of bright, playful grin that was enough to make Angel believe every choice he’d ever made in his stupidly long life had been worth it.

His mind skipped back to Connor’s earlier conversation with Buffy. “Why’d you tell her about Illyria?”

Connor sat in the chair on the other side of the desk. “She’s gonna have to fight this thing. She should know what she’s up against.”

“We were doing just fine without her.”

“She’s got an army of Slayers. You’ve just got me and – ” Connor broke off. “Well, just me, now, I guess.”

Angel ground his teeth together. “Spike’s made his choice.”

“You sure?”

He laughed, the irony bitter in his mouth. “Oh, believe me, this is one time where it was *not* my decision.”

“He ran off before,” Connor said softly, “and that all worked out okay.” Angel was struck by a sudden memory of white, tangled limbs, and it made him dizzy with a longing for home, ache and comfort all at once. He shook his head.

“This is different. When the love of your life shows up and wants you back...”

“You follow her,” said a voice like glass falling on pavement. They both turned to see Drusilla standing in the doorway, dressed in gauzy white. “To the end of the world.”

\*

If it took one long-lost love showing up unexpectedly to pry Spike out of the Hyperion, it took another to drag him back in again. Nothing else could have persuaded him to abandon his unyielding and very prudent plan of avoiding Angel.

“What the hell is he doing here?” was the invective that greeted him on walking through the door.

“I called him,” Connor said. “Buffy, too. She’s on her way back.”

Spike was dimly aware of Angel’s continued cursing in the background, but the noise was drowned out by the quiet hum Drusilla made when she saw him. She glided towards him as though her feet were three inches off the ground. Her eyes were wide, clear pools, more lucid than he’d seen in years; but then she’d always been able to see into his heart. She reached up to touch the side of his face, running the back of her hand down his cheek, and her countenance greyed.

“My poor Spike,” she muttered. “Cracked down the middle, and when the twain shall meet it will shatter you.”

She turned away from him and her eyes settled on Connor. She drifted towards him and Spike followed, keeping her within arm’s reach in case she decided to unsheathe her claws. She tipped her head to one side, then the other, staring at Connor the way a child might stare at a butterfly. She looked between him and Spike, then back again.

“This was strange chance,” she said to Connor. “A narrow lane, an old man, and two boys.”

There was a sound behind them, and all eyes swung towards the door, where a rush of air followed Buffy into the hotel. Drusilla let out a cat-like hiss at the sight of her.

“Oh, come *on*.” Buffy descended the short steps to the center of the lobby, authority radiating off her in exasperated waves. “What is this, exes on parade? All we need is for Riley to show up with a TV crew and we’ll have an exciting new Fox reality show.”

“She just wandered in a little while ago, talking in riddles about the end of the world,” Connor explained.

Buffy turned to face Dru, hands on her hips. “You know something about what’s going on with Illyria?”

“I’ve seen the picture, but it’s all upside down,” she said, her voice catching with musical phrasing. “Like stained glass pieces put in backwards. They told me to come home before the castle falls down.” She swayed and began to sing: “Ashes, ashes...”

“Great.” Buffy’s mouth was tight. “Very helpful.”

“You know something about the time shifts, Dru?” Spike laid a hand on her arm.

“It’s all in shards. Fragmented glass.” She inhaled a long sigh: “Oh, but there’s one piece.” She bent down to pick up a chunk of plaster lying on the marble floor. Spike looked around to see where it had come from, and noticed a gaping hole in Angel’s office wall.

Drusilla stood and held the plaster piece up to eye level, turning it over in her hand. “It whispers a story.” She closed her eyes, listening to some hidden song. “Tomorrow midnight, at the building where the lawyers played Kingdom Come. If you stand in the ashes, you can stop the Phoenix from rising.”

“What’s going to happen tomorrow at midnight, love?”

“The scientist breathed in the ancient mist, and the god spread all through her.” She closed her fist around the plaster, watching it crumble into dust. “It’s all going to happen again.”

“There’s going to be a time shift?” Angel asked. “Back to when Illyria first took over Fred?”

Dru nodded. “If you stand in the rubble, the fragments will bear you back across the voyage.”

Angel’s eyes widened. “That’s it. That’s it, we can go back! Back before the Black Thorn, and Illyria – We stop it all before it starts!”

Dru made a scolding gesture with her fingers. “Bad Daddy. Trying to rewrite the story. You need to smash it, not glue the pieces.”

“What do you mean by ‘smash,’ exactly?” Buffy asked.

“Cut. Crush.” Dru made a stabbing motion. “Kill the vessel before the god infects her.”

Angel shook his head. “No. No, we are *not* killing Fred. This is our chance to save her! We can get her out of there, bring her back with us.”

Buffy ran a hand over her forehead. “We may not have time for that, Angel. The flashbacks we’ve experienced have only lasted a few minutes.”

“So I grab her and hang on like hell until it’s over.”

“It could work,” Connor said. “I came back with an ice pick in my hand.”

“Didn’t stop Holtz from dying,” Spike said. “Sides, an ice pick is one thing. Bit harder to drag a human being out of time.”

“Spike’s right, it’s too risky.” Buffy looked at Angel. “What if you end up back here with an armful of nothing? Angel, I’m sorry, I know you want to save her. But killing Fred before Illyria infects her is the only way to make sure she doesn’t rise.”

“Buffy, I let Fred die once to save the world, I’m not doing it again!”

“She’s already dead, mate,” Spike said softly. “Least this way she’ll die without unleashing an unholy power on the planet.”

Angel snarled at him. “Oh, of course you’d take your girlfriend’s side. Doesn’t matter if you have to sell out your friend’s life to do it.”

Spike took a menacing step forward. “You bloody, fucking...”

“Shut up, the both of you!” Buffy shoved them apart. “One more word out of either of you and I will rip out your tongues and feed them to Drusilla.” Dru clapped her hands in delight. “Now this is the plan,” Buffy continued. “We are going to that pile of rubble at midnight tomorrow. We’re going to stand there until the time shift happens, and we’re going to do everything we can to stop Illyria from rising. And if that means Fred has to die, I’ll kill her myself. Understand?”

Angel turned to Buffy, looming over her. “I’m not gonna let that happen.”

“And I am not going to let you risk the whole world to save someone you love. Again.”

“Shards of glass, lodged in each other’s hearts,” Dru said. She turned to Spike, put her hand on his chest. “And in yours too, my William.”

Spike took Drusilla’s hand in his. “You’re in here too, love,” he said softly.

Dru nodded. “Always cutting,” and her voice was sadness and memory. She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Don’t fret, dear heart. The tides will grind me into sand before long.” Then she turned and left, her long dress floating behind her.

Buffy turned away from Angel. “You’re just going to let her walk out of here?”

“We might need her again,” Spike said, still watching the door.

“All the more reason to keep her here. She should be downstairs in that cage, not out roaming the streets, killing people.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Spike offered, moving toward the exit.

“We can worry about Dru later,” Angel said to Buffy. “Right now we need to focus on *saving* Fred.”

Buffy’s eyes glittered, sharp and indestructible. “Fine. We’ll try it your way. But I’ll be standing in that pile of rubble tomorrow night. And I’m bringing my axe.”

\*

Spike followed Drusilla out of the Hyperion and down the street, watching her drift like deadly poetry along the sidewalk. She stopped to examine a teenaged girl with a cardboard sign that read, "Travelling. Broke. Need money for food." A German shepherd sat at the girl's side, and it let out a low growl at the sight of Drusilla. Dru growled back.

Spike came up behind her, took her by the shoulders and spirited her away, around the corner into a quiet side street. "Sorry, love. Can't let you go about snacking on the locals."

Drusilla made a quiet hum. "Darla fed me lawyers and shopgirls."

"Darla's gone, pet." He spun her around to face him, slowly. Kept a firm grip on her wrist.

"Hmmm. Met her destiny at Caritas." She looked up into Spike's face, a solemn expression, the nun she was intended to be reciting her prayers. "That's Latin for mercy."

"I remember." Spike tipped his head to one side. "Why are you here, pet? Helping us?"

Dru's eyes were filled with something like sorrow, a certainty in them that made Spike's blood creep. Mysteries and visions, a foreshadowing knowledge of everything that would ever be, to the end of time.

"The earth is calling to me," she said. "To come home. Dust to dust. My time in this world is nearly over."

He let her arm drop. Stepped back in surprise. A coldness swept over him, dread and calm and something like the release of breath. Once, her words would have sent him into a blind panic, a frantic attempt to move hell and earth to save her. Now...

She put a hand on Spike's chest. "Don't fret, my darling. It won't be you." She caressed the front of his shirt. "You tried to kill me once, but you failed. I always knew you couldn't."

Spike thought about that. If Dru were at Buffy's throat, he wouldn't hesitate. She'd disintegrate in his hands and he wouldn't even feel the need to wash. But here, now, with her standing in front of him, smelling like home and memory and infinite sadness in her eyes...

"Nothing's inevitable, love," he murmured. "You can go. Get out of town before whatever it is comes down."

She shook her head. "We can't run from our fates, Spike. You keep running from yours, farther and faster, but you always trip and fall. Your master will find you."

Spike bristled. "Don't have a master anymore, pet."

"Silly Spike. Love is your master." She looked up at him with wide animal eyes. "It's been cruel to you. Kicked you so often, you don't trust it when it tries to pet you. So you bite. Rrrrruff." She snapped at him. "Then you slip your leash and run away."

Spike felt the truth of it worming under his skin like the first itch of fangs. "S'pose I have you to thank for that," he ground out.

She let her hand fall from his chest. Smiled at him, vicious and proud. "I was a poor role model."

She turned her face toward the moonless sky. "But new families rise to replace the old. Like stars, they are." She looked back at him, and Spike could almost see the heavens whirling in her eyes. "The families I knew are gone forever." Her voice was a dirge, sadness and funeral bells.

She turned to go, and Spike watched her glide away, not quite ready to say goodbye to a part of himself that he knew was best left behind.

\*

The following midnight came, muggy and close, threatening rain. The small group picked their way through concrete and ashes, slouching girders and twisted steel. Angel could still smell the carpeting that had covered his old office from wall to wall.

“Geez. Even if Wolfram & Hart’s out of business, you’d think the city would have come and plowed this stuff away by now,” Buffy said.

“The place reeks of magic,” Angel said, his sword clanging against the remains of a filing cabinet underfoot. “The workers probably won’t go near it. Unions are a superstitious bunch.”

“Ow!” Spike yelped as his foot slipped on a plastic wheel, no doubt knocked loose from an office chair. Angel had objected to bringing Spike on this mission using the most colorful words he could think of in a dozen languages, but Buffy had insisted they needed all the fighting power they could get. Angel acquiesced, hoping Spike might decapitate himself on a stray piece of sheet metal.

“Time?” Buffy asked.

Connor looked at his watch. “Should be happening right about – ”

There was a yelp, and Fred was standing right in front of Angel, hand held up to her face. “Oh my gosh, Angel, you scared me. I didn’t even hear you come in.” Angel looked around quickly, took in the white walls and the myriad of instruments. Fred was wearing her lab coat and smiling.

She looked past Angel’s shoulder, to where Buffy was standing, and moved towards her, hand outstretched. “Hi. I’m Winifred Burkle. I’m in charge of the science department. That’s – a lovely axe you have there,” and she looked back at Angel, her face faltering. “I didn’t know they made them in red.”

Angel reached out for Fred’s arm and gripped it, hard. “Fred, we don’t have a lot of time, so you have to listen to me, okay?”

She nodded, her eyes wide and trusting. “Okay. What’s up?” Her voice was light and full of concern; her skin was warm. Her hair smelled like wide Texas sky, like every friend Angel had ever loved and watched die.

“Where’s Connor and Spike?” Buffy asked.

Angel looked around the room. It was just him, Buffy and Fred, and a big sarcophagus sitting in the middle of the lab. His grip on Fred’s arm tightened.

There was another smell, something sour and reeking of lies, outside in the hallway. It faded momentarily then came back, stronger than before.

“Fred, it’s Knox,” Angel said. “He sent the sarcophagus, he’s going to – ”

He looked towards the door just in time to see Knox firing at him with some geek-ray sort of rifle, and a bolt of something – magic, electricity, or some combination of the two – ricocheted through Angel like a giant static charge. Every muscle in his body froze up, and he tumbled in a twitching heap to the floor.

“Knox, what are you doing?!” Fred yelled. Buffy swung at him, her axe slicing through the gun, the pieces flying out of Knox’s hand. Angel made a frantic grab for Fred’s ankle but she was already out of reach.

“Fred, get down!” he yelled, just as Knox barrelled into her. Fred tumbled over backwards, her hands flailing against the sarcophagus. Her right hand connected with one of the jewels, and the coffin opened with a sickening sound like the world ending.

Fred reeled back, coughing and spitting, just as Angel leapt to his feet. Buffy advanced on Fred, mouth grim, axe raised and aimed at her slender neck. Without thinking, Angel

grabbed Fred by the arm and flung her out of harm's way, and Buffy's axe came down on him with the full force of a killing blow, embedding itself halfway through his chest.

"Angel!" Buffy yelled, her eyes gaping with horror, and Angel crumpled to his knees in the middle of the lab. Somewhere in a corner, Knox was crawling away, and Fred was still coughing.

Then the blackness overtook him, and the last thing he saw was Buffy's agonized face, sending him to hell with his eyes wide open.

\*

They rematerialized in the middle of the rubble, Angel collapsing against a heap of concrete, Buffy rushing to his side.

"What happened?" Buffy heard Connor's panicked voice behind her, saw Spike moving towards them, but it all blurred into a roar inside her head, like seeing her mother's body lying in the sun.

"There was, um - " Buffy faltered. "Some guy. In a lab coat, pushed Fred into the coffin. I swung at her, but then Angel - " She looked at his chest. God, there was so much blood.

"Angel decided to jump in and play chopping block, I'm guessing," Spike said. He knelt down to examine the wound, running his fingers through the gush of blood. "He'll be alright. I've seen him with worse injuries." He stood up, grabbed hold of the axe handle, put his foot on Angel's chest and levered the blade out of his body. Angel let out an animal howl, like the last breaths of wildebeests being eaten alive. Buffy's stomach somersaulted and churned; she crawled over to an ash-filled corner and threw up.

She heard the sound of fabric tearing and looked back towards the makeshift triage. Spike and Connor were both ripping their shirts into bandages. Angel's eyes were closed. Buffy sat back on her heels, staring into the midnight rubble, her arms shaking with the vibration of the axe thudding into Angel's chest. The sense memory of running him through with cold steel was too much to bear.

The first-aid continued, murmurs and movement. They got him bandaged and bound, and Connor hefted Angel to his feet. Buffy rushed to help, and the three of them half-dragged, half-carried him back to the Hyperion. They maneuvered him up the stairs and into Angel's room, and laid him out on the bed. The springs made a sickening squeak as his weight thudded back against the mattress.

"He'll need blood, and plenty of it," Spike said to Connor, but his eyes remained fixed on Angel's face. "Other than that, he should be right by tomorrow." There was an odd expression in Spike's eyes, a bizarre mix of worry and worship that Buffy had only ever seen directed at her, and it confused her; but the events of the evening overwhelmed any attempt at puzzle-solving or anything resembling thought. She sank into a chair next to Angel's bed, her legs unable to support her any longer.

"Can I get you anything?" Connor asked.

Buffy shook her head. "Um... If it's okay with you, I'd like to just sit with him. For a while."

Connor nodded. "Sure," he said. He turned to look at Spike, who was still staring at Angel. "We'll just be downstairs."

Buffy didn't hear them leave. She curled her legs up under her, pillowed her head against her arm, and leaned into the chair, staring at Angel's unbreathing form.

After a few hours, he stirred, his eyes fluttering open, his head turning to look at her.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” she whispered.

He held out his hand towards her, and she crawled onto the bed. She pillowed her head against his bandaged chest, laid down her cheek, and sobbed: long gasping breaths that shook her body like a storm.

“Shhhh,” Angel whispered, laying his hand against her head. “I’m okay. Shhhh.”

He caressed her hair, kissed the top of her head. She felt flooded, wrung out, an old photograph of herself floating away on the tide.

At length she sat up, wiping the tears from her cheeks. Her nose was running and she sniffled, looking around for a tissue but finding none.

Angel shifted, and Buffy propped up some pillows for him. He sat up, wincing slightly, and she went to the kitchen to get him a glass of blood.

“Thanks,” he said, and she sat on the edge of the bed, watching him drink it all in one long gulp.

“Is Connor okay?” he asked, after he finished. He put the red-stained glass down on the bedside table.

Buffy nodded. “He and Spike are downstairs. They weren’t affected by the time shift.”

“Seems strange.” Angel’s brow wrinkled. It made Buffy smile.

“We don’t really know how these things work. Maybe they just weren’t standing in the right spot at the right time.”

“And we were.” Angel looked at his wounded chest. “Lucky us.”

“Lucky us,” Buffy whispered. She put her hand over his. “Angel, I’m sorry you couldn’t save her.”

Angel shrugged one shoulder. “I knew it was a long shot. It’s just – ” He pulled his hand away from hers, and the air in the room seemed to cool. “I’ve lost a lot, lately.”

“I know,” she said. She eyed the makeshift bandage around his chest, reached out to touch it.

“You should probably change that.” Her fingers alighted on a scar, rising like a half-moon over the top of the bandage. Angel flinched and brushed her hand away.

“What’s that?” Buffy asked.

Angel shifted on the bed. “Circle of the Black Thorn.”

Buffy frowned. “Spike has one just like it.”

“Yeah, I know.” Angel’s face darkened. “I gave it to him right before we rescued Connor from Wolfram & Hart. It was part of the ritual.”

Buffy looked at Angel’s face. There was a bitterness there that went beyond anything she’d ever seen in him. “So Spike was in on the deal with Illyria?” she asked.

“Yeah. He was. Funny how he never told you that part, isn’t it?”

They sat, unmoving, not touching, and the silence of the hotel settled around them.

“So I guess this means nothing’s changed,” Angel said.

Buffy rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know. I’ll have to call Giles, ask him to get the seers working on it. But my guess is, Illyria’s still waving her tentacles in some parallel universe, plotting the death of humanity.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Buffy didn’t answer. She got up off the bed and retrieved the empty glass. She walked back to the kitchen, opened the fridge and poured some more blood. There was a six-pack of beer, a loaf of bread and some smoked meat in the fridge. She didn’t remember Angel having that much of a taste for human food.

She brought the glass back to his bedside and set it on the nightstand. “Get some rest,” she said softly. “We’ll talk tomorrow.” Angel didn’t look at her as she left.

Buffy closed the door softly behind her. Her clothes were still stained with Angel’s blood.

\*

Spike walked her back to the Slayers compound in uncharacteristic silence. She watched his face glow and fade under the passing street lights, a mystery that kept presenting itself and then fading out of reach.

“Spike, why didn’t you tell me about the deal with Illyria?”

He stopped and looked at her with surprise. “Angel tell you about that?”

“No. Connor did.”

Spike shifted from foot to foot. “Wasn’t a deal, exactly. She was on our team at the time. Helping us. Wasn’t until after she entered the promised land that we found out she’d hijacked the place.” He looked down at the sidewalk. “Though Angel suspected going in that’s what she’d do.”

“And he didn’t let that stop him.”

Spike shrugged. “Not sure as I would have, either. Was worth it, to get the lad outta there.”

“Worth putting the whole world in danger?”

“World’s not ended yet, is it?” He looked around the street. “We’ll handle it.”

“Spike, I’m the one who’s handling it. You should have told me.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t think it mattered much how she got there. Can’t undo it now.”

Buffy looked at him as if he’d just shed his skin like a Morpho demon. “I don’t get you. One minute you and Angel are at each other’s throats, which – okay, is in the world of the normal. But the next minute you’re all defensive and trying to cover for him.”

“I’m not defensive.”

“Really.” She took in his stiff posture, the way he shoved his hands deep into his pockets as if searching for a weapon. “You look like an alley cat hissing over a pile of garbage. There’s something you’re not telling me.”

He stared straight ahead, as if scanning the street for an oncoming attack. “It’s just... Connor’s a good kid. Can’t blame the old man for trying to save him, even if his methods are a bit suspect.”

Buffy watched Spike’s face, knowing there was more hidden behind his eyes than he was willing to share. But the weariness of the evening left her with little energy for more digging. She’d figure it out later.

“It sounds like Connor means a lot to you,” she said gently.

Spike’s voice was low and quiet. “He’s family, Buffy.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

\*

Buffy called Giles when she got home – it was already afternoon there – and he confirmed her fears about Illyria. She needed to figure out their next move, but the exhaustion settled over her like a blanket, heavy and still. Rest first, then planning.

The house was stirring with the sounds of other Slayers: water running, teeth brushing, yawns and coffee. The door to Dawn’s room was still closed. Buffy dragged her bones into

her own bed, stripped off her ruined clothes and tumbled into a restless sleep, until the sun invaded her window a few hours later with a merciless glower.

She came down the stairs rubbing her face and wandered blindly out into the courtyard.

“Wow,” Dawn said. “You didn’t even put on eyeliner. What happened, did the demons win?”

“Something like that.” Buffy yawned. “Is there coffee?”

“I’ll check.” Dawn went into the kitchen and came back with a steaming cup in her hand.

Buffy sighed with gratitude. “You are the best sister in the history of siblings.”

“I’m gonna make you put that in writing for the next time I spill red wine on your sweater.”

Buffy took a sip, and turned her face up towards the sun. “Keep making coffee like this and you can have all my sweaters. I need new ones, anyway.”

“I didn’t make it. Vicki did. But I’m gonna make you put that in writing, too.” Dawn sat. “Giles called again. He said some more of Illyria’s henchmen popped up out of nowhere. Somewhere around the Cotswolds? Wherever that is. There were a lot of them, this time. He practically had to send a whole battalion of Slayers out to fight them.”

“What’s in the Cotswolds?” Buffy savoured the taste of hot coffee on her tongue. It really was outstanding. She’s have to ask Vicki what kind of blend she used.

“No clue. He’s looking into it.”

Buffy nodded. “I’ll ask Spike. He and Angel seem to know more about Illyria than – ”

“You know that’s not it.” Buffy blinked, and Angel was standing in front of her, in a place that looked, felt, smelled familiar. The sun, the coffee, her sister were gone.

She looked frantically around the dim little room, trying to orient herself. There were no windows.

“How can we be together if the cost is your life, or the lives of others?” he was saying. There were weapons hung on the walls, an ivory carving in the corner. An iron grate elevator behind Angel’s shoulder.

“I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t sure - if I could do it if I woke up with you one more morning.”

“My god,” she whispered.

(You’re human for like a minute and already there’s cookie-dough-fudge-mint-chip in the fridge)

No.

“The Oracles are giving us back the day.”

(We’ll make another one like it tomorrow)

“No!” She reached for Angel’s wrist, battling to hang on, but when her hand connected it was with a coffee mug, the sound of ceramic smashing on concrete like a sob in her ears. She was standing in the courtyard, Dawn staring at her with frightened bird eyes.

“Buffy, what’s wrong?”

She leaped over the bench and began to run.

\*

Angel was in his room, about to sit down with a book, when he heard a hurricane of feet coming up the stairs. He turned towards the door just as Buffy burst through it, her eyes an inferno of pain and rage.

“You were human!”

She shattered the door into the wall behind it, the hinges breaking and giving way under the force of her assault, plaster rattling down from the ceiling. Buffy flew at him from across the room, sending both of them smashing to the floor. Her fists were a typhoon against his face, howling and blinding, her voice a roar through the gale.

“You son of a bitch! You gave it all away!”

She ripped open Angel’s shirt, gaping at the bandages that he’d just changed an hour before. She pressed her ear against the white gauze, and now there were tears against it, a hot torrent of fury.

“I felt your heart beat,” she sobbed. She reared back and clawed at the wound, scratching and digging as if she could bring his dead heart back to life.

When she suddenly, violently smashed her lips against his, he believed that maybe she could.

Angel wrapped his hands around the back of her head – so small, he could fit her skull in the palm of one hand – and she gave up a moan like wolves howling, graveyards and nights under the moon. Her hair felt like straw in his fist, her mouth like a bruise, animals rutting in a crumbling barn. He angled her head, plunged his tongue deeper into her mouth and tasted his own blood on her lips.

Her nails scratched his skin as she scrambled for his belt, yanking at his clothes and hers until the fabric tore. His own hands moved to help but she gripped them hard, pinning them to the floor above his head. Buffy sank onto his cock in one hard thrust and he howled from the heat, from the searing vice grip of her. He was caught, immobile in her grasp except for his hips that bucked up into hers and the lips that strained towards her mouth but couldn’t reach. “You son of a bitch,” she sobbed again, refusing to reward him with the taste of her kiss, punishing him instead with the clench of her thighs, with the reminder of everything he had given up in a futile effort to save her.

Her fingers left marks around his wrists, the backs of his hands burning against the rug. Sharp teeth, sharp nails, and this was nothing they’d ever done or been, not tender or playful or kisses in trees. It was perverse, inverse, Angelus and Darla in a fractured mirror and when Angel came he roared Buffy’s name around a mouthful of fangs.

“Fuck,” Buffy moaned, “you fucking *bastard*,” and came hard, her hands steel cables binding him to the floor.

She let go of him and collapsed on top of his chest, her face pressed into the white bandage, a spot of red seeping through the gauze. Her hands lost their fury, curling from deadly weapons into tiny fists, falling like a child’s against his shoulders, his arms. She gasped in great, hiccupping sobs against his skin. “You gave it all away,” and the tears stung at Angel’s eyes.

“Buffy, I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

She laughed, a sound like swords clanging. “No you’re not. You’d do it all again.”

He didn’t argue. He was sure he couldn’t, not with what he knew now. But it didn’t matter. It couldn’t be undone.

She rolled off him and sat up, wiping her face.

“You remember everything?”

She nodded. Wouldn’t look at him. He took her hand, but she pulled it away.

“Then you know why I did it.”

She nodded again. Her fingers shook as she smoothed down her hair, straightened her clothes. She looked as if the weight of one remembered day had aged her a thousand.

“Don’t go,” Angel whispered, but Buffy just stared at him with brittle eyes.

“I love you, Angel,” she said, her voice weighted and weary. “But this isn’t forgiveness.”

She got to her feet, finished pulling on her clothes. Angel stayed on the floor looking up at her. Even in her anguish, she was unbearably beautiful.

Buffy stopped, her eyes fixed on a point on the floor. She bent down to pick up something lying just under the edge of the bed. Angel followed her gaze, watched her come up with something small and silver. She flicked the top open.

Spike's lighter.

*Shit.*

Angel sat up, reached for it, but it was too late. She batted his hand away, her eyes widening as she read the inscription on the side. Then her face tightened and clamped down.

"Well. Things are finally starting to make some sense around here."

"Buffy –"

"Save it, Angel." She tucked the lighter into her pocket and headed for the exit. "Sorry about your door," she called on her way out.

Angel let the back of his head smack against the floor. He laid there, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling.

\*

The knock on Spike's door was tired and tentative, and for once he couldn't tell who was on the other side. When it opened, Buffy was standing there, hair dishevelled, clothes frazzled, looking as if some beast had got the better of her.

"Buffy, what –" Then the scent hit him, and the words died on his lips. His vision went grey and he had to pace away from her, away from the urge to plunge his teeth into her neck and drain her dry.

She followed him in, talking to his back. "You left this in Angel's room."

Spike turned around in time to see a flash of silver flying at his head. He snatched it out of the air, the metal smooth and cold against his fingers except for the brush of engraved lettering. *I love you. Angel.*

Spike hurled the fucking thing across the room. It flew wide of Buffy's head, embedding itself in the opposite wall. Bits of drywall fluttered to the floor.

Buffy grimaced. "Do you believe him when he tells you?"

"Did, some days," Spike snarled. "Was just stupid enough to."

"So you trust Angel but not me?"

"Oh, that's rich, with you standing there reeking of him!" Spike flung an arm in her direction. "Was a bloody fool to ever trust either one of you!"

"You are such a hypocrite! Here I've been pouring my heart out to you for days, and you conveniently forget to tell me that you and Angel are –" she sputtered – "whatever you are!"

"So this is what, then? Payback?"

"No!" Buffy sat, looking like her legs were dead weights. Spike tried not to think about what she'd been doing with them. "Look, I know you and Angel have this twisted history that I – am sure I don't want to know about. And maybe you're used to bizarre love triangles, but I'm not usually this big with the free love!" Buffy ran a hand over her brow, and her fingers trembled. "What happened with Angel – it had nothing to do with you. It was about our own twisted history and his perpetual, pig-headed martyr complex."

"Right. Because it's always about Angel with you, innit?" Spike headed for the door.

“That’s not true.” Buffy stood. Blocked his way. “Spike, I love you.” She put a hand on his arm. “I know you don’t believe it. Right now I can understand why. But I swear, it’s the truth.”

Spike looked into her face, laid open and bare. Even now, she could slice him open with nimble fingers.

“Maybe you do.” He pried her hand loose from his wrist. “But I can’t do bizarre and twisted with you, Buffy. Not again.”

He left her standing in the middle of the room, staring at a hole in the wall, and the door closing behind him was the sound of their last chance falling to pieces on the floor.

\*

After several days of research and brooding and drinking, respectively, Illyria’s armies attacked again.

This time they struck at night, materializing in the Slayers’ dormitory, a dozen demons to a room. Buffy happened to be up late in the courtyard when the swarm materialized in front of her. She grabbed the glass of wine she’d been sipping on, smashed it, and used it to slice open the throat of her nearest enemy. He went down with a howl and she yanked the sword out of his hand, fending off all comers one by one until she stood, surrounded by a heap of steaming bodies. She leapt over them and ran up the stairs to Dawn’s room. It was empty.

Down the hall, she could hear the clang of weapons and the war cries of young women. The living quarters were a battlefield, the two or three Slayers who shared each room taking on the hoards that surrounded them. The fight raged until every last demon was an oozing mass of severed heads and limbs, Slayers cut and bleeding.

“Where’s Dawn?” Buffy asked, voice snapping like an order.

“She and Vicki went to the movies,” replied a short young woman in pigtails and yellow pyjamas. She had a voice like gun shots, rapid-fire and buzzing.

Buffy sat on the floor amid the carnage, legs wobbling with relief. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Melissa.”

Buffy nodded. “Melissa. That was a neat move, when you stabbed that guy in the throat with the pointy statue.”

Melissa nodded her thanks at the praise, efficient and no-nonsense. “I got it when I was backpacking in Borneo. Always knew it would come in handy.”

They went through the compound room by room, assessing the damage. Buffy lost half a dozen fighters. Some of them had been slaughtered in their sleep.

When Dawn came home, Buffy handed her a cell phone.

“Get everyone together,” she commanded. “We’re ending this now.”

\*

They gathered in the courtyard, a war council by moonlight, flies buzzing around rotting demon corpses in mediaeval armor. It reminded Connor of drawings he’d seen in history class of kings holding court on the battlefield. Slayers flanked the walls on all sides, slouching, sitting, some with arms folded, others chatting, some chewing on their hair.

Buffy stood on a concrete bench in the middle so she could be heard above the buzz, with Dawn beside her at ground level. Angel took up a position in one corner, his back

against the brick. Connor fell in beside him, taking note of Angel's folded arms and stiff posture. Spike stood in the doorway, as far away from either of them as he could get, hands on his hips, pacing incessantly. The three of them made up a quivering arrow head of tension.

"Illyria's attacks are getting more frequent," Buffy began. "At first it was every few days, now it's down to every few hours. I think it's safe to say the first wave is over and the second is on its way. That means Illyria will be making an appearance any time now."

"Do we have a location on the front line attacks?" Angel asked.

"The latest reports have her men entering our dimension at strategic locations: here, the Hyperion, some major cities, and the Cotswolds."

"The Deeper Well," Angel supplied.

"Right," Buffy nodded. "The well was Illyria's prison for thousands of years. We think her men were trying to seal it off – take it out of play so we can't imprison her again."

"It's not an option anyway," Angel said. His voice carried over the crowd, and the various heads turned between him and Buffy like spectators at a tennis match. "I tried to use the recall spell when she first escaped. It would have dragged her out of Fred's body and into every human being between here and the well."

"Which is what we call unacceptable risk," Buffy answered. "So here's the plan. We're going to dig a new well, right under Illyria's feet."

"How you planning on doing that?" Spike asked, still pacing.

"With some major mojo," Dawn supplied. "There's a group of magi, funky guys in robes. They specialize in ancient magicks. Giles has them on standby."

"The problem now is, we need to know exactly when and where Illyria's going to materialize in our dimension." Buffy looked out at the group. "Anyone have any ideas?"  
Silence fell.

"Can you give us a hint?" asked a girl with purple hair.

"We have seers working on a location," Dawn said, "but they're not getting much. Just vague impressions of a confined space and three shadowy figures."

"A narrow lane, an old man, and two boys," Connor muttered.

"What?" Angel asked.

"It's what Drusilla said to me back at the hotel. She looked at me and Spike and said – " The pieces started to fall into place. Connor gestured towards Angel. "She was talking about us. And the narrow lane – "

"Is the alley behind the Hyperion." Comprehension dawned on Angel's face. "Illyria spent months patrolling that territory, she knows every square inch of it. Better than any of us. She'd want to fight a major battle on her home turf."

"Spike, go find Drusilla," Buffy ordered. "Get her back here, see if she can tell us when Illyria's going to make her move."

Spike made for the door, every inch the dutiful lieutenant.

"Angel, we need any information you have about the area – street maps, architectural drawings, secret trap doors – anything. Get it and bring it back here."

"There's some fire escapes in that alley. We used them when we fought the Black Thorn to gain the higher ground. We can position people – "

Buffy cut him off. "We can talk strategy when you get back. You know the area best, you can help me put a battle plan together."

Angel shot her an irritated look, but acquiesced, heading for the exit.

“Everyone else, start gathering weapons. Not just your own. Strip everything you can off these demons bodies. And we may need to hit up some gun shops. We’ll need as much firepower as we can get our hands on.”

The troops dispersed, buzzing around the area on nerves and adrenalin. Connor was just about to follow Angel back to the hotel when he felt a hand on his arm.

“Connor,” Buffy said. “I have a mission for you.”

\*

The alley smelled the same as it had the night of the Black Thorn. The air was muggy and close, the skies dark with clouds. The rain threatened but blessedly refused to fall. If Angel inhaled, he was certain he would catch a whiff of Gunn’s blood.

He raised his eyes skyward. All along the rooftops stood the silhouettes of human bodies, backlit by the moon, sailors lining the rigging of a tall ship sailing into battle. They took up every position from ground to sky, a net ready to close on a giant fly. Angel thought of the insect colonies Illyria used to keep in the hotel, and smiled behind his fangs.

Buffy and Dawn approached with a small posse of Slayers, wheeling something stone and heavy in front of them. Angel recognized it as Illyria’s sarcophagus.

“Where’d you dig that up?”

“Your old office,” Dawn chirped. “Apparently even your former bosses don’t have enough mojo to blow it up.” She rapped her knuckles against the stone. “When the well opens, we just pfft –” she made a shoving motion with her hands – “and Illyria falls in after it. Mix one spell, let simmer, and presto: hellgod casserole.”

Angel’s lips quirked up at the corners. Dawn managed to make life and death situations sound like a fun time at the movies.

He turned to Buffy. “Any reports from the field?”

Buffy nodded. “Her armies are materializing all over. We have troops in place in the major centers, but they’re outnumbered. Once we take Illyria down they should stop coming. Cut off the head –”

“And the body dies with it.”

He raised his eyes towards the mouth of the alley and saw Spike approaching, leading Drusilla by the arm. She was dressed in gauzy white, her eyes wide and silver.

“How’d you convince her to help us?” Angel asked.

“Didn’t have to,” Spike said, shouldering his sword. “She says the earth is calling to her.” There was a melancholy behind Spike’s eyes that Angel couldn’t fathom, and it made Angel want to comfort him somehow. He bit down on the urge.

“It rumbles,” Drusilla sang. She walked a few paces from where they were standing, turned, and knelt down to touch the ground. She slid her hand back and forth across the asphalt, a child playing in sand.

“Is that the spot?” Buffy asked.

Drusilla closed her eyes and nodded. “It wants to eat a little wormy me.”

“Get the magi,” Buffy hollered down the alley. “Tell them to form a circle around this spot.” She turned back to Drusilla. “How much longer?”

“Moments.” She stood, her voice fluttering. “She’s nearly here.”

“Dawn, go home,” Buffy barked.

“I thought I was gonna get to push the coffin in.”

“I’ll push you in if you don’t get out of here right now.”

“Fine,” Dawn huffed, and flounced down the street. Drusilla’s eyes followed her as she passed, and Angel let out a low growl to warn her off.

Buffy looked between Angel and Spike. “We should take up our positions.” Her eyes glinted with determination. Even in the darkness, light seemed to shine around her. The red edge of her axe gleamed as she turned it over in her hands.

“Good luck,” Angel said. She caught his eyes, and even though she hadn’t touched him, he could almost feel the warmth of her hand in his, her fingers against the small of his back.

“You too,” she said, her voice a whisper of contained strength. Then she marched towards the mouth of the alley.

Angel headed towards the fire escape to begin the long climb, but Drusilla stopped him as he passed. She reached up to run her fingers through his hair. “Goodbye, Daddy. Play nicely with my William.”

He was suddenly struck with the urge to kiss her mouth, to drink from her smooth, white neck. “Bye, Dru,” he said, then he watched her glide towards Spike. She leaned in close, and for a second Spike pulled back in surprise; then he curled his fingers in her hair and kissed her, slow and full of longing. Angel watched as Spike pressed his body tight against hers, dark against light, and for a moment time spun back a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand years, and everything was as it was always meant to be: a home built to last for all eternity.

Angel shook off the ache and headed for the stairs. When he reached his position, he turned and took up arms on the landing. He scanned the alley, but Drusilla was nowhere to be seen.

Below him, the magi formed a wide circle, leaving enough space for Illyria’s considerable bulk. It’d be bad news if she materialized right on top of their heads. The landing where Angel stood was about two-thirds of the way up the building, just about where Illyria’s eye-level would be. Spike was at the same height on the opposite side, and Buffy stood on the ground at the mouth of the alley surrounded by Slayers, the first line of defence between the god and the wider world she was determined to conquer. Together they formed a tripod around the spot where she would rise.

He looked across the empty space at Spike, who caught his eye. A battle grin spread across his face, death and bloody murder. Angel’s fangs descended at the sight, and his mouth watered with the taste of copper.

And then there was a huge, looming darkness blocking his view, and Illyria was right in front of him.

\*

Her roar shook the landing of the fire escape, rattled the windows in the building behind Spike’s head. A black arm swung towards him like a giant boom, knocking the fire escape loose from its moorings and sending him teetering dangerously towards the edge. He swung at the appendage, but it was like trying to carve up a whale with an exacto knife: his sword barely left a scratch.

She swung at him again and the fire escape plunged to the ground. Spike leapt off just as it fell away from beneath his feet, and he landed on what he hoped was one of Illyria’s eyes. Bloody hell, they should have given an anatomy lesson before they started this battle.

He let out an ungodly yell and thrust his sword into the round, spongy flesh with all his strength. Whatever he hit, it must have been a soft spot, because she reared back with a

teeth-rattling bellow, flinging her head so violently that he was thrown clear and sent plummeting to the pavement below.

He landed with a bone-cracking thump, rolling away just in time to avoid a huge sucker coming down on his head. Spike pushed himself to his feet and found himself face to face with one of Illyria's henchmen. He spun around and kicked the demon in the wrist, sending his sword clattering to the ground. Spike scooped it up and sliced off the fellow's head in one move.

"Yeah!" he hollered at the top of his lungs. "Take that, you stinking pus bag!"

All around him the magi were chanting, breaking the circle in places to avoid Illyria's waving arms. From close quarters he smelled blood – rich and familial – and he spun around to see Connor standing among the magi, sarcophagus at his side, knife in hand, holding out his bleeding arm over the pavement.

"Connor! What are you doing?" Angel's frantic yell came from somewhere above them.

There was no time for a reply. Beneath the place where Connor's blood fell, a hole was spinning and growing, a whirlpool in the earth. The ground beneath their feet began to shake and shudder.

Above Spike's head, the battle raged. A line of archers along the rooftops fired arrows into Illyria's skin – flaming, exploding, whatever they could use to pierce her rubber-like hide. It didn't deter her. Illyria moved towards the mouth of the alley in great, thundering strides, where Buffy and her forces fired on her with artillery: bombs, rocket launchers, armour-piercing bullets. Some of it stung her; a few shots made her recoil and take a step back. Mostly it just seemed to make her mad.

More demons came charging at Spike, trying to break into the magic circle. He spun his sword through one after another, slicing off limbs and heads, cutting into necks as if they were Sunday supper. Easy pickings, but they were cannon fodder, disposable; there to give Illyria enough time to destroy her real enemy, who was currently bearing down on her from the mouth of the alley, axe in hand.

"Keep firing!" Buffy yelled. "Don't let her advance!"

Behind Spike, the whirlpool in the earth spun larger. There was a grinding sound of stone against pavement, and the sarcophagus fell away, plunging toward the center of the planet. Connor backed away from the hole but his foot seemed to slip; he fell to the ground and appeared to struggle to get back up again. One of the magi gave Connor his hand and pulled him up.

A sword whizzed past Spike's ear and he ducked, barely escaping decapitation. More demons hurled themselves in his direction and something blunt and cold connected with his face. His vision blurred out and he stumbled back, disoriented. Something else struck his wrist and the sword dropped from his hand. There was a moment of panic as he groped in the dark for a weapon, his punches and kicks connecting with soft tissue that seemed to rebound like a trampoline. He didn't know which way he was facing or what he was fighting, only that he was losing.

"Spike!" He heard Angel's voice and spun towards it on instinct. He reached up his hand and felt something solid connect with his palm. His fist closed around the hilt of a sword and he sliced through whatever was on him, hearing it fall to the ground with a high-pitched death squeal.

Angel fell to the pavement in front of Spike, apparently having lost the higher ground. He leaped to his feet and swung his sword in a wide arc, cutting through everything in his path. Spike fell into step behind him, and they stood back to back, mowing down the forces of hell like a machine gun.

The whirlpool was in front of Spike now, and he had a clear view across it. It had widened to fill the whole street, leaving Connor, some of the magi and a few Slayers stranded with no way out of the alley. On Spike's side of the chasm, Illyria was still waving her tentacles, heading for the exit. She was halfway there when everything around them began to shake. Spike looked up, and saw the buildings start to crumble.

"Get everyone off the roof! Now!" he heard Buffy yell from behind him. The archers above dropped their weapons and ran like hell.

Debris rained down on them from overhead, concrete, plaster, lots of dust. Spike coughed and waved in front of his face, his vision limited to a few feet in front of him. He kept swinging. He could still hear the clang of Angel's sword behind him.

The fog of dust lifted on the updraft from Illyria's waving arms, spinning into the atmosphere. Through a clearing, Spike could make out a slim figure on the other side of the chasm grabbing some sort of rope and tying it around his waist.

More demons. More swords. The chaos whirled around them, the noise of Buffy's artillery whizzing overhead. Spike kept one eye on the other side of the chasm.

When the dust cleared, he saw Connor face down on the ground, his fingernails digging frantically into the pavement, as if swimming against the tide. Spike realized with a sickening fear that some invisible force was pulling him into the well.

"Buffy!" he yelled. "You have to stop the spell!"

But there was no response. Just the continued barrage of gunfire from the mouth of the alley. Illyria still thundered towards it, apparently unmoved by whatever force was meant to be drawing her back into the earth.

At Spike's panicked yelp, Angel turned and saw Connor desperately trying to claw away from the well. The tether around his waist was stretched taut along the ground, the secured end tied to a fire escape. Connor hauled on the rope with all his might, his face straining with the force of the effort; but he was being pulled into a black hole, irresistible and inevitable.

A building came crashing to the ground, and the fire escape tying Connor to this world went with it. The whole apparatus slid towards the well, sending up great sparks against the pavement, rushing towards the opening like a car crash.

"Connor!" Angel yelled, and leapt towards him. But in that instant, Illyria swung a giant appendage and swatted Angel out of the air like a fly. His bones cracked like kindling and Angel landed in a crumpled heap. Spike knew from the sound that Angel had broken both legs and several ribs besides.

"Dad!" Connor yelled. The fire escape was wedged between two mountains of concrete, and Connor dangled helplessly inside the mouth of the well, a thin line of rope the only thing between him and oblivion.

Panic roared in Spike's ears. "Buffy! You have to stop!" he screamed. "We have to close the well!" But the sound of the guns was his only reply.

Spike raised his sword and flew at Illyria with a bellow that rivalled the crash of buildings around them. He stabbed at her feet, her suckers, any piece of flesh that presented itself. "You bloody, fucking, murderous, hellbitch! Would you get! In the bloody! *Hole!*"

And finally, miraculously, Illyria began to oblige.

Her huge body bent itself in half, curving backwards in a slow, majestic arc. Her tentacles waved frantically, grasping at the crumbling walls around her, sending dust and concrete spinning downwards into infinity. Bits of rock pelted Connor's head as he dangled over the precipice.

Illyria's tentacles came down in earth-shaking thumps as she tried to resist the force drawing her down into the earth. Her massive arms spanned the perimeter of the well, her body a great, serpentine bridge across the chasm, and Spike saw his chance. He sprinted across her prone form to the other side of the well, to where Connor swung like a pendulum.

Spike raced towards the twisted fire escape holding the other end of the rope. "Help me!" he yelled to anyone around, and the Slayers who weren't busy fighting for their lives ran to answer the call. Together they hauled on the rope like sailors, tugging it up inch by agonizing inch.

In front of them, Illyria's body was stretched concave over the well. One of her arms lost its grip, and a wall of earth tumbled away. The rope frayed.

"Keep pulling!" Spike yelled to the small team around him. And he took off running for the edge, all his vision a blur except for the tiny bit of string that tethered Connor to this world.

There was rubble all around the perimeter of the well: concrete, wood, building materials of all shapes and sizes. Spike dug through it with frantic fingers until he found what he was looking for: a line of electrical cable strong enough to hold him. He tore off his coat, tied one end of the cable around a felled concrete pillar and the other around his waist, and belly-crawled towards the mouth of the well.

When he looked over the edge, he saw Connor's face, white and wide-eyed against a backdrop of black nothingness, stretching all the way through the earth.

Spike thrust his arm down as far as it would go. "Grab my hand!" he yelled over Illyria's screams.

Connor reached up, but his fingers missed Spike's by inches. His hand fell back again, pulled by an unseen force.

"I can't – I'm not strong enough! It's the well, it's draining me somehow!"

"Well, it's not gonna drain me!" Spike snarled. "Hell tries to drink me down, it'll spit me right back up again, now *grab my hand!*"

Connor strained, his face contorting with effort, arm stretching out of its socket, inching ever closer until he connected with Spike's fingers. Spike's fist closed in a searing vice, his skin fusing into Connor's, and no power in this world or the next would have compelled him to let go.

"I've got him!" Spike yelled to the team of Slayers behind him. In seconds Spike was being hauled face-down across the rubble, hands pulling on his legs until his joints popped, arms stretching like elastic bands as Connor held on. More hands tugged on the cable around Spike's waist, threatening to saw him in half. His body was a taut line, ready to snap, a rope in a mystical tug of war between the force of the well and the strength of Buffy's army.

There was a scream like the death throes of the universe, and the well turned Illyria inside out, her supple, squid-like form stretched into a long, grotesque line towards the center of the world. She hauled the earth in after her as she finally released her grip on this reality, toppling into a deep, pitch blackness that swallowed her whole.

"Close the well!" Spike heard Buffy's frantic command from the other side, and the magi began the chant to seal the grave they had dug. Spike and the Slayers hauled Connor out of the well just as the edge of it crumbled away.

\*

Buffy pushed through the rubble of the Hyperion, looking for the basement entrance, and instead found a hole in the floor where the stairs used to be. She jumped down through the opening, landing lightly on her feet, and quickly surveyed the damage around her. The space was more or less intact. A marble column had crashed through the ceiling from the lobby above. It lay in several large chunks strewn across basement floor, but the rest of the room stood as before. The cage in the opposite corner remained secure, with it prey tucked safely away.

“Dawn!”

“Buffy!” She heard Dawn’s panicked yell just as Melissa’s face buzzed in front of her.

“Thank god you’re here. I need help moving this column.”

Buffy scrambled to where Dawn lay pinned beneath a large chunk of marble. She and Melissa heaved and groaned as they levered the downed pillar off of Dawn’s trapped leg. Dawn scabbled away in seconds, and they let it fall back with a crash. The floor beneath them gave a shake but remained in one piece.

“Can you stand?” Buffy put her arms around her sister’s shoulders and gently lifted her.

Dawn nodded. “I think so. I might be hopping on one leg for a while but I can limp out of here. Did we win?”

Buffy nodded. “It’s over. Illyria’s down the well.”

Dawn sighed with relief and hugged her tight.

“Little dolly’s all mended,” sang a voice from inside the cage.

Buffy turned to look at Melissa. “Where’s Vicki and Selena?”

“They went up to join the fight,” Melissa said. “Once we got Lady Madness here in the cage, it was kinda overkill to keep a whole posse on her. Didn’t expect the building to come down around our ears.”

Dawn looked at Melissa. “Can I have a sword next time? Just because I’m the bait doesn’t mean I can’t have a weapon.”

“Next time there will be no baiting,” Buffy bit out. “Ever.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Spoilsport.”

“Pretty family, all cozy.” Drusilla approached the bars of the cage and fixed Buffy with a hypnotic stare. “Not like the other. All in pieces.”

“Yeah, sorry, I don’t speak crazy vampire,” Buffy snapped.

“You’ve come to send me home.” Drusilla’s eyes closed and her head swayed. She took a step back, until she was standing in the center of the cage. She let her arms fall peacefully to her sides.

“Thanks for helping us with Illyria,” Buffy said, and picked up Melissa’s crossbow from the floor. “Give her my regards.” Then she fired, and the arrow flew true, clear through the bars and straight into Drusilla’s unbeating heart.

\*

The rest of the Hyperion was in ruins, the lobby a gaping shell open to the skies. Spike gave Connor the keys to his apartment and then made himself scarce. Connor dragged Angel there with the help of some Slayer muscle, and laid him out on Spike’s bed until his legs healed.

Angel was up and walking again the next morning, and the first thing he did was try to squeeze all the breath out of Connor’s body.

“Dad,” he choked as Angel enveloped him in a smothering bear hug. “Non-vampire lungs, here.”

Angel pulled back, his hands still on Connor's shoulders. "Sorry," he said, and his face twisted into a death mask. "Every time I close my eyes I see you hanging there, and I couldn't –" His shudder was like the groaning of the earth, the yawning of the well beneath Connor's dangling limbs. "I crawled on my elbows but I couldn't get to you."

Angel sank onto the sofa, his newly mended knees giving way under the weight of it, the horror of having come within a hair's breadth of losing everything.

Connor sat next to him and put a hand on his father's shoulder. "It's okay, Dad. I'm right here."

Angel looked at him with a child's eyes, wide and frightened. "You wanna tell me what happened back there?"

Connor settled back against the sofa. "When Illyria sent her goons into the hotel... It turns out it wasn't your blood she was worried about. It was mine."

"Why yours?"

"There was this catch, see. About the well. The legend was that the Powers That Be opened the Deeper Well thousands of years ago to contain the Old Ones. We needed another power to dig a new well." Connor tucked his chin into his chest. "I'm the closest link we have to the Powers That Were. Guess a big hole in the ground can't tell the difference between Jasmine's blood and mine."

Angel looked out into the center of the room, the information settling over him like a shroud. "Did Buffy ask you to do this?"

Connor nodded.

"How did she know about your link to the Powers?"

"I dunno," Connor said. "She's got this whole network of seers. They must have figured it out. It's like having the CIA read all your e-mails. Except in this case it's brain-mail, or... something."

Angel stood up, paced around the room. "Did she know the well would try to pull you in?"

"No." Connor watched Angel, worried. "We knew there'd be side effects, but we didn't know what, exactly. Buffy offered to have those wizards teleport me out of there as soon as the well opened, but I wanted to stay and fight." He flexed his fist, remembering the tired weight of his limbs, how he'd barely been able to lift his arms, let alone a weapon. "Didn't know it was gonna turn into giant sucking hole of Kryptonite."

Angel continued his pacing. "I can't believe she'd let you take that kind of a risk, without knowing –"

"It was my choice, Dad. She asked and I said yes."

"She never should have asked!" Angel's spun on him, his eyes flashing gold, face shifting from father to monster. "She had no right to put that on you!"

Connor stood, stared Angel down. "It had to be done," he said, his voice calm like the eye of a storm.

They faced each other across the expanse of a tiny apartment, staring down the horror of the day, and Angel's face crumbled like falling pillars. His fangs melted away. Connor took a step towards him, laid a comforting hand on Angel's arm.

"I didn't want the world to end, Dad," he said softly. "There's a lot of people in it that I love, and I want them to go on living. No matter what it costs me." He looked up into Angel's eyes. "I learned that from you."

Angel buried his face in Connor's shoulder and sobbed: relieved, terrified gasps that went on and on, and together they sank to the floor, Connor murmuring comforting words in his father's ear.

\*

Spike was camped out in an abandoned warehouse when Buffy found him, a half-empty bottle of scotch at his side. How she always managed to sniff him out without the benefit of vampire nostrils, Spike could never figure. Yet here she was, standing before him with her hands at her side, eyes looking down on his sprawled form as if he were a dowry bum she were about to poke with her dainty little foot.

“Well, well,” he drawled. “Come for a celebratory swig, have you?” He sat up, looked at her blearily. Handed the bottle towards her. “Right in the nick of time. Was just about to polish this off.”

“Spike – ”

“Go on then. You deserve it. Big battle won, saved the day. ‘Course, you nearly let Connor swing from the hangman’s noose to do it, but hey? What’s one more soldier down?”

“Connor volunteered for this mission,” Buffy said, her voice rough and steady as granite. “He knew there’d be risks. We all did.”

“You saw him fall,” Spike bit out. “Heard me yelling for help. Don’t deny it.”

She didn’t. “Closing the well wasn’t an option. I can’t call a time-out in the middle of a battle to save one person, no matter who it is.”

“Notice you didn’t put your sis in the middle of the brawl.” Spike took a nasty swig in her direction.

Buffy folded her arms, looked at the ceiling. “Would that have made you happy? If I’d put Dawn in danger instead?”

Spike let the bottle fall from his lips. Wiped his mouth. He knew when his bluff had been called. Only time Spike ever won at poker was when he cheated.

“Anyway, Dawn had a different mission,” Buffy said quietly. “Drusilla’s dead.”

The bottle tumbled out of Spike’s hand. “How?” he whispered, knowing the answer before the question left his lips.

“I couldn’t let her walk out of that alley.” Buffy fixed her eyes on his. “You know that.”

“She was helping us!” Spike staggered to his feet. “She wasn’t hurting anybody!”

“And how long do you think that would have lasted?” Buffy’s shoulders made a quiet question mark. “Five minutes? Ten? She followed Dawn out of that alley with every intention of making her a midnight snack.”

Spike stared, watching the world spin off its axis. This wasn’t happening.

“We locked her in the cage until we sure we wouldn’t need her anymore. When the battle was over I dusted her.”

Spike’s hands began to shake. “No.”

“She’s a killer, Spike. It had to be done.” Her arms unfolded, fell to her sides. “I’m sorry.”

“No!” He swung wildly, punched Buffy in the face. She staggered back, and before she could come at him again he took off running for the hotel.

\*

The bars of the cage shadowed his eyes like pillars. He knelt against the concrete floor as if in prayer, running his hands through the dust, a child playing in sand. Drusilla’s ashes mixed with the dirt and debris of the fallen building. There was no way to tell which part of it was her.

He heard the footsteps behind him, heavy and familiar. The scent of Sire rushed over him in a wave, and a hunger filled Spike's belly deeper than any well.

"Will."

Spike whirled on him in a rush and sank his fangs deep into Angel's neck, burying himself in the taste of home.

Angel let out a loud curse in Gaelic. He flopped to the ground, legs giving out from beneath him, Spike climbing on top of him as if he could dig his way inside. He moaned at the taste of memory and ashes, of dark hair and smooth, white skin that split like moonlight. Angel's blood was a novena in his mouth, rosary beads and white lace, dances under burning night skies. He swallowed it in great, sobbing gulps, communion wine and ancient mysteries.

Angel yanked Spike's coat away from his shoulder and sank his fangs in through the fabric of his shirt. His teeth scraped against bone and it was perfect, whips and leather, rope burns against Spike's flesh. Angel grabbed Spike's hips and flipped him face down onto the concrete floor. Spike's teeth tore free of Angel's neck with an audible rip, the taste of blood still hot on his tongue.

Spike lifted his hips, scrambling to undo his belt, and Angel yanked his jeans down hard enough to jerk Spike's whole body towards him. Angel thrust into him on nothing but blood and grief and Spike howled and bucked and hammered his fists against the floor. The dust flew up into his nose and he choked on it, coughing up tears and remains. Angel pounded into him, sank his fangs into Spike's arm and Spike needed it, needed the weight of Angel's body on top of him, the burn of fangs in his flesh, the merciless thrust of Angel's cock tearing him up. It was comfort and belonging and never enough.

He felt Angel bearing down on him, felt the hard snap of his hips, hurtling towards oblivion, and when Angel shuddered it triggered something in Spike, some Pavlovian response programmed deep into his brain that told him to let go (*now*, boy) and he came in a gasping, heaving rush, his body jerking and twitching, a live wire sparking and spending its last bits of energy across the floor.

They lay face down among the ashes of their past, listening to the ghosts of the old hotel swirl around them. Spike's tears fell on the concrete, mixing her remains into mud, and Angel comforted him with quiet growls.

After a moment, Spike gave a loud sniff. Shoved his hips up, and Angel rolled off him. Spike hauled himself to his feet, hitched up his pants. Buckled his belt in silence.

Angel sat up. Took hold of Spike's hand.

"Thank you," he said. "For saving Connor."

Spike nodded. "You're welcome." He let go of Angel's fingers. Straightened his coat. "Now go back to your girlfriend."

And he walked out, leaving Angel sitting among the ruins.

\*

Dawn was bored.

Her foot was in a cast, so she couldn't drive. Buffy still had that weird phobia about getting behind the wheel, so anywhere they went had to be within hobbling distance. Shoe shopping was out, obviously; and clothes shopping was too slow and awkward. That left research; and since battle was over, there was none.

Buffy spent all her time on the phone with Giles and Willow and all the various Slayer locations around the world getting status reports. Illyria's soldiers has stopped pouring over

the border shortly after she took the plunge, so it looked like they'd be heading back to England soon. Job done, world saved. Yay us.

So very bored.

It was evening, late enough to be dark, but not late enough to go to bed, at least not if you were a soon-to-be-no-longer teenager who was old enough to drink in any civilized country. So Dawn decided to revive an old habit, and do what she'd always done back in Sunnydale when she wanted a bit of excitement. She picked up her crutches, put on a jacket and hobbled the not-so-few blocks from the compound to Spike's place.

She ran into him on the sidewalk a few storefronts from his apartment. He was dusting off his hands and tucking a stake into his pocket.

"Little late for you to be out on your own, Niblet," he said with concern.

She looked around at cones of light emanating from passing cars, the midday glow of neon signs. "It's Saturday night. The bars aren't even closed yet."

"Planning on going clubbing, are we?"

"I would, but Buffy made me leave my fake ID back in England. Customs officers are picky about those things."

Spike chuckled.

"Actually, I wanted to come and see you." She shifted her weight back and forth on her crutches. "To say I'm sorry. About Drusilla."

Spike's eyes dropped, his face collapsing into something sad and nostalgic. He reached into his coat pocket. Pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "S'okay," he said softly, tapping one out. "Had to be done. 'Spouse I should be glad it wasn't me had to do it."

He fished around for a lighter, patted himself down. Apparently he didn't have one on him, because he huffed, threw the unlit cigarette on the ground and shoved the smokes back in his pocket.

"Look, why don't we go sit?" he asked, gesturing at Dawn's bound foot.

"Thank god," she breathed. She waved one of her crutches around. "These things make my armpits itchy."

They crossed the street to a small park, Spike holding onto Dawn's elbow. She hobbled over to a bench, and they sat.

"I heard what you did," Dawn said. "Saving Connor from that well. That was pretty cool." She grinned. "Woulda sucked if he'd ended up like Timmy on *Passions*."

Spike laughed, a genuine smile stretching his face, eyes crinkling in the corners. It made Dawn feel all fuzzy-sweater inside.

"I'm glad you're not dead," she said. "I mean, at least you're all-in-one-piece dead, not ashes-at-the-bottom-of-the-Hellmouth dead." She squeezed his hand briefly, then swung it free. "Even if you were a moron for not calling us."

He grimaced. "Sorry."

"You're forgiven. I mean, you can't help it if you're a moron."

"So I'm told." Spike's expression was one of restrained fanginess. It made Dawn giggle.

His face softened. "I missed you," he said.

"Likewise. Buffy did, too. Even if she is all mad and upset again about something she won't tell me about." Dawn grimaced. "I swear, the next time she refuses to tell me what's bugging her? I'm gonna threaten to steal stuff all over town and tell the cops she did it." Her face split into a Machiavellian grin. "She'll never be able to go shoe shopping in L.A. again."

"You're unnaturally sneaky."

"Thanks."

She watched a group of teenagers across the park. They were smoking, probably pot. She'd have to try that, one of these days.

"Anyway, I have it all planned out," Dawn said with conviction. "Next week, I'm gonna engineer a fake kidnapping where I'm put in mortal danger. Then you and Buffy will have to work together to rescue me. She'll be so grateful to you for saving my life that she'll forgive you for everything, and we can all move into a big house together where I'm treated like a spoiled princess and you guys can have whacky sexcapades all day." Her smile faltered. "Just, you know, at the opposite end of the house where I can't hear you."

Spike looked at her, horrified. "Right. Those are not thoughts you should be having. Ever."

"I'm thinking I might get Connor to help with the fake kidnapping part." She wiggled one eyebrow, the way she'd seen Spike do lots of times. "I wouldn't mind him holding me hostage."

"That's enough," Spike growled.

"What? He's cute."

"One more word out of you, young lady, and I'm turning this bench around and we're heading back home."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Fine. We can skip the fake kidnapping part. Just as long as you and Buffy promise to kiss and make up and get on with the happy familyness."

Spike sighed. "Little more complicated than that, Bit."

"I don't see why." Dawn shrugged. "I mean, Buffy's miserable without you. And you're clearly miserable without her."

He shook his head. "There's other stuff going on."

"Stuff like Angel?"

Spike tipped his head to one side. "What did Buffy tell you?" he asked.

"Nothing. But I know she and Angel still have the big never-ending drama love. And he's sorta your family. That's gotta make things majorly awkward."

Spike snorted. "Majorly." He looked at his boots. "Feel like a bloody third wheel."

"You know, I never got that metaphor," Dawn said. "What's wrong with a third wheel? Everyone knows three wheels are more stable than two. That's why little kids ride tricycles." She shifted in her seat. "Your problem is you're a wheel that keeps breaking and falling off and rolling away."

Spike gave her a confused look. "What are you on about?"

"You're not securely fastened. You're..." she waved her hand in the air, latching onto the thought with a triumphant snap. "You're insecure."

Spike's back stiffened like a posturing cat. "Am not!"

"Oh, please! You think pretending to be dead is a better idea than picking up a phone? Self-esteem issues, much?"

"So it's all my fault, is it?"

She shrugged. "Not everything. I mean, Buffy's been known to fly off the handle sometimes, and..." She paused. "Though I guess on a tricycle, the wheels aren't on the handles..." Dawn's face began to collapse in rhythm with her metaphor. She waved it off. "My point is, if the wheels are all wobbly and broken, then the tricycle will be too." She tapped the heel of her cast against the ground. "And I know that once upon a time when you were a little vampire, you had a tricycle with three really bent and twisted and evil soulless wheels." She caught his eyes. "But Spike, you and Angel aren't evil anymore. And Buffy's not Drusilla."

Comprehension unfolded on Spike's face, the Big Bad Wolf suddenly realizing he'd just been led into a very clever trap by Little Red Riding Hood.

"Unnaturally sneaky," he repeated, equal parts annoyance and admiration.

Dawn grinned at him in the dark. "I learned that from you."

He sighed. Leaned back against the bench. Shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "How'd you know?"

"It was kinda obvious," she said gently. "You look at him the same way you look at her."

Spike gave a quiet huff. "Till I fell off and wheeled away." He leaned over, put his elbows on his knees. Looked down at his hands, still covered with a fine dust of dead vampire. "I hurt him, Dawn," he sighed. "Never been able to do that before, not really. It scares me."

"So you screwed up. Everybody does. You guys can work it out." Dawn reached out, took hold of his hand and squeezed. Spike turned to look at her. "That's what you do with family," she said. "You just keep saving the world together and fighting over shoes and dishes and who gets to wear the pink blouse and making each other insane until you die."

Spike grinned, a hint of evil behind his teeth. "Angel can wear the pink blouse. More his color."

Dawn laughed. "See? You're learning how to share already."

Spike squeezed her fingers. His hand was almost warm. "And how'd you become such an expert on relationships?"

"Um. Because I'm not using my hindbrain?" Dawn gave him a *dub* look. "Love and logic? Diametrically opposed. To me it all looks easy. It's only once you're in it that it makes you stupid."

\*

Spike walked Dawn back to the Slayers compound, the germ of an idea blossoming in his brain. By the time they reached the front door, it was almost fully blown. It would never work, of course. Stupid to even think it. And yet the excitement of it, the possibility, had him bouncing on the balls of his feet.

He hugged Dawn goodnight and headed for Buffy's room. She was leaning back against the bed reading a book. She put it down as he closed the door, sat up and looked at him.

"First off, I'm sorry for hitting you," he said, taking in the faded bloom on her chin.

She nodded. "Okay."

Spike took off his coat, threw it over the back of a chair. "Second..."

He paused. Shook his head. Paced the length of the room. Stopped, opened his mouth, turned and paced again. His fingers played against the edge of his lip, worrying the words over like a stone.

"Is this a mime thing?" Buffy asked finally. "Because they kinda creep me out."

His boots scuffed against the cheap dormitory carpet. He ran a hand over the back of his head. Turned, at last, and looked at her. Buffy's eyes were wide and expectant.

"Stay with us," he blurted out.

"Us?"

"Me and Angel."

Buffy's shoulders slumped, just a little. "Spike, you can't be serious."

"Yeah. I am."

"I thought you'd had enough of twisted love triangles?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. “Figured maybe we could have a nice stable one this time. The kind with the –” he made the shape of a triangle with his fingers – “the sides that are all the same length. What do they call those?”

“Equilateral.”

“Yeah. One of them. Never was much for geometry.”

Buffy gave him a little smile. “Right. We’d just be a happy little harem, wouldn’t we?”

“You’d have the best-looking harem of any queen in this dimension.” He ran a finger up her arm. “Can’t tell me you never thought about it.”

She smiled, batted his hand away. “Stop it.”

“I’m serious.” Spike sobered. “Look, me and Angel – I know we’re not the easiest blokes to live with. But we both love you. And you’d always come first with us.”

“But you’d never come first with me.” Buffy sighed. “Spike, don’t you get it? Someone you both love almost died because of a call that I had to make. If you hadn’t been there...” She looked down at her hands. Rubbed one palm between her fingers. “Saving the world... it’s kinda my number-one priority. Angel puts the world in danger on a semi-regular basis to protect the people he loves.” She looked up into his face. “And when it comes to him and Connor, I think you’d do the same.”

Spike couldn’t deny it. He reached up to run a finger through her hair. “Do the same for you and Dawn.”

“And I’d have to stop you.”

They sat, and the truth of it settled over them like twilight.

“I’ve booked us a flight,” Buffy said finally. “We’re leaving tomorrow.”

Spike held her hand.

“Are you going back to him?” Her voice sounded sad, as if she were afraid of the answer.

“Don’t know if I’m ready for that.” He looked down at their entwined fingers. “But I’m not ready to give up on him, either.”

Buffy ran her thumb along the back of Spike’s hand. “At least I can leave here knowing you two won’t kill each other.”

Spike huffed. “Do feel like killing him, most days.”

“But when it comes right down to it, you won’t.” Buffy’s eyes glistened, her voice a flickering candle. “I don’t have that luxury.”

Spike leaned back against the pillows on the bed, and Buffy crawled into his arms. They held each other until the day threatened. She whispered “I love you” as she kissed him goodbye; and this time, he believed her.

When he got back home, Spike pulled his lighter out of its plaster tomb in the apartment wall, turned it over in his fingers, and put it back in his pocket.

\*

Angel was in a motel down the road from the wreck of the Hyperion when Buffy found him. She showed up at the door with a travel bag slung over her arm. The sunlight from the street tumbled in behind her, and Angel had to step back to keep from getting singed.

“This where you’re staying?” She poked her head inside to look around.

“For now.” He waved her in. “Connor’s out apartment hunting.”

It wasn’t the typical roadside dive. The curtains were clean, the walls painted a light, neutral shade. The bed was soft.

“It’s nice,” Buffy said. “For a crash pad.” She closed the door behind her.

“Figured I’d pick someplace new this time. Makes a nice change from living among the ruins.”

Buffy turned to face him. “Dawn’s outside. We’re on our way back.”

“Back to England?”

“Yeah.” Buffy shifted the bag on her shoulder. “Angel, I wanted to say I’m sorry. About what happened at the well.”

Angel ran a hand over his forehead. “I can’t talk about that yet, Buffy.”

She nodded, sadness around her mouth. “Okay.”

He looked towards the window. “Spike going back with you?”

“No.”

“Good,” he grumbled.

She sighed. “Angel...”

“Buffy, if you’re here to plead his case, I don’t want to hear it. It’s just too fucking – ” he waved his hand around “ – weird.”

“I’m not. Spike can make his own decisions.” She gave him a penetrating look, one that reminded him of Dru. “And for some reason, you always seem to let him.”

“That’s because he’s a stubborn asshole,” Angel griped, but he couldn’t keep the note of affection from creeping into his voice. Dammit. “No one could ever make Spike do anything.”

Buffy laughed, softly. “No. They couldn’t.”

She walked up to him, leaned in close. “I also wanted to give you this.” She slid her hand up around the back of his neck, drew his face down to hers and kissed him, full of love and longing; and despite everything, despite Connor and battles and unacceptable risks, time fell away, back to a moment when old gods still slumbered in the ground and blood thumped in Angel’s veins. Buffy’s skin was warm and alive and he sighed into her mouth, inhaling her scent as if breathing were the most natural thing in the world.

“What’s that?” he asked as her lips left his.

“Forgiveness.” She rested her forehead against his, laid her hand on his chest. “I hope you can start to forgive me, someday.”

He nodded. “Someday.”

She reached up to touch his face. Her cheeks were wet with tears. “I’ll never forget,” she whispered.

Then she pulled away and was gone.

\*

Spike picked his way through the rubble of the Hyperion. He tried his best to be quiet, but the crunch of wood and broken glass beneath his boots sounded in his ears like cymbals crashing. Bloody hell. This was useless.

He and Connor had been out killing things every other night since the big battle. It was especially good hunting, lately. Illyria’s brief sojourn into this world had set all the demon whiskers twitching, and the denizens of L.A. were an even rowdier bunch than usual. Every bar they went into ended up in a brawl. Spike hadn’t had so much fun in ages.

On off nights, Connor went out and killed things with Angel. He joked that it was part of the custody agreement.

But tonight was their on night. Connor had called Spike and told him to meet him at the hotel. There were vamps nesting in the ruins, he said. Spike hoped the kid would have better luck than he was in sneaking up on them.

He heard a sound behind him and whirled around. An axe came at his head, but the swing was slow and Spike had plenty of time to catch the handle in one fist. Then he noticed who was wielding it.

“Oh, look,” Connor said. There was a dark shape looming over the kid’s shoulder. “It’s not a nest at all. It’s just Spike.” Connor pulled the axe away and gave a Machiavellian grin.

Behind him, Angel was glaring at Connor with a look that said, *If you weren’t my son I’d yank every appendage off your body.*

Connor looked at Angel with a supremely smug expression, then back at Spike.

“Well. See ya.” And before Spike could blink, he was gone.

Unnaturally sneaky.

They stood staring at each other, eyes caught, fingers twitching. The moon shone down through the hole in the roof. A car horn honked in the distance.

Spike dropped his weapon to the ground, and Angel’s followed.

Spike threw the first punch.

“That’s for fucking my girl.”

Angel rubbed his jaw, shook it off. He hit back.

“That’s for fucking *my* girl.”

Spike punched him again, a hard left hook. Angel swung at him, but Spike dodged, landing another hit in Angel’s stomach. He doubled over, and Spike kned him in the face. “That’s for making Dru insane.”

Angel head-butted Spike in the chin, knocking him off balance. Angel spun around and kicked Spike square in the teeth, and Spike hit the floor. “That’s for making *me* insane.”

Spike came up with a piece of broken pipe in his hand and connected with the side of Angel’s head, sending him spinning to the ground. “That’s for the Mayor’s ball!”

Angel flipped to his feet. “That was a hundred years ago! Get over it!”

The hotel groaned and decayed under their blows, wood and marble crunching under the weight of dead bodies, ruined pillars toppling as they flew into them. Plaster rattled to the ground, concrete shook and crumbled, while overhead the lights of the city yawned down on them through the gaping roof, casting orange shadows on teeth that bit and drew blood.

Spike was on the floor now, and Angel was on top of him, blows flying in his face. His cheek was bruised, and he could feel his lip swelling. He tried to hit back, but his shoulders slipped on the rubble and his head was starting to blur.

A right cross to Spike’s jaw, and his vision went gray. “That’s for leaving me!” Angel stood up, kicked Spike in the ribs, hard. “You left me, you fucking little shit!”

Spike rolled onto his side, cradling his bruises in his hands. Angel’s shoulders dropped, deflating all in a rush. Spike’s vision cleared just in time to see him walking away.

He rolled himself over, staggered to his feet. Angel was sitting on what remained of the main staircase: elbows on his knees, head in his hands, staring down into infinity. He looked more defeated than he had after their night at the opera.

Spike’s chest clenched. Hurting Angel had never been among his very long list of regrets. He’d always looked on it as something between a delight and a duty. Until now.

“Came back, didn’t I?” he said softly.

Angel squinted at him in the dark. “Is that what this is?” He made a vague gesture with his hand. “You coming back?”

Spike limped over to the steps, sat down beside him. “ ‘Spose that’s up to you.”

“I trusted you.” Angel stared out into the rubble. “I trusted you and you...” He looked at his hands, rubbed his palm. “And you still don’t trust me. If you did you never would have left.”

Spike shrugged. “Might’ve done. Seems all bets are off when it comes to her, even now.”

Angel sighed. “Seems so.”

“But you’re right,” Spike said. “And – I’m sorry.” He tried to remember if he had ever uttered those words with respect to Angel before, but came up empty. “Shook me up, seeing what we were. Not like I ever forget, but – ”

“But it’d be so easy to go back to that.”

Spike nodded, slowly. “Was simpler back then. Easier to hide.” He looked at the floor, at the pile of dirt and ash beneath his feet. “I have to fight myself every day, Angel. Just to keep from smashing us both to pieces.”

“Me, too.”

“Don’t always get it right.”

“Me, either.” Angel looked around at the ruins of the hotel, the broken archways, the crumbling walls. Shook his head. “Are we ever gonna fix this?”

Spike followed Angel’s gaze. “Dunno. But the way I figure it, we spent a hundred years hating each other. We oughta give this loving-each-other thing a try for at least the next hundred, ’fore we call it a day.”

“Another hundred years with you.” Angel let out the longest of long-suffering sighs. “I really am cursed.”

Spike took that as the beginnings of forgiveness, and smiled. “ ’S’a hard voyage, mate.” He let his knee fall against Angel’s, and was grateful when Angel didn’t pull away.

“You wanna drink?”

“God, yes.”

Angel got up and walked through the ruins, wood and plaster crunching under his feet. It took him a few minutes to find what he was looking for, but he finally came up with an old wooden crate. He carried it back to the foot of the stairs, dropped it at Spike’s feet, sat down and pried the lid off.

The smell of old, aged wine hit Spike’s senses like a force of nature. He could practically taste the earth of the French vineyards where it had been grown. The contents were cracked, some bottles broken and leaking wine over the bottom of the crate, but most remained intact. There was a corkscrew rattling around loose, and Angel used it to pry open two bottles, after much cursing at the quality of nineteenth-century Gallic smithship.

Angel handed one to Spike, who raised an eyebrow. “Thought you were saving this for a special occasion?”

“It survived all this in one piece.” He waved his hand around the ruined temple of the hotel. “More or less. I’d say that’s special enough.”

Spike smiled, raised his bottle. “To hard voyages, then.”

They drank, and the wine went down smooth, scented with ancient blood and earth and the flavor of home.

**END**

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