

6.5 Synthesis

By: Ros Fod

The Bayview Motel wasn't located anywhere near a bay, and the only view that Carl got from his window was of the motel swimming pool that resembled a black bean in both shape and color. He closed the door of room 321 behind him and walked along the creaking stairway with a toothpick between his teeth and a pair of Ray Bans hanging from his open collar.

He tossed the toothpick into the pool before he made his way across the four lines of broken pavement that separated the motel from the only other place on Los Feliz Boulevard that was getting any business that night.

The bus depot was bookmarked by storefronts displaying metal gates thinning with rust. It sat in a cone of fluorescent light, and the rest of the street shrank further back into darkness on either side.

Carl slipped his sunglasses over the bridge of his nose and lipped a cigarette out of the pack as he waited.

A local bus swung the wide turn into the depot and downshifted to a stop in a puff of diesel fumes and hydraulic pulleys. The door of the bus folded open, and the passengers began to file out: the usual mixed bag of transients and the transportation-poor. Two Russian girls with home-dyed hairdos drummed out a hollow tap dance on the bus's stairs with their matching patent leather boots. Through Carl's sunglasses, their fuchsia lipstick took on the color of dried blood.

He spared a few seconds to check them out but turned back to the bus, just in time to see a college kid step out in a pair of sneakers so new the white soles shone like silver. His khaki pants had starched creases down the front, and he was wearing a Davey Jones haircut that he'd probably kept since third grade.

Carl let the kid pass him, eyeing the messenger bag slung over the kid's shoulder. He watched him make his way to the bathroom.

"Bingo," Carl whispered, flicking his cigarette away. It cartwheeled through the air and landed next to a homeless guy wearing several layers of army green.

Inside the bathroom, the overhead lights flickered out a secret message in Morse code.

"Hey," Carl called out in a friendly-sounding greeting. He sidled up to where the kid was washing his hands and smiled just wide enough to show the edges of his teeth.

The kid looked up, and their eyes found each other in the film of scum on the mirror. The kid didn't say anything, didn't even turn around. But he turned the tap off and tugged a paper towel from the dispenser.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" Carl asked, tilting his head to the side.

In response, the kid crumpled the paper towel into a ball and tossed it towards the garbage can. He missed, and his jaw flexed as he gritted his teeth.

"Wait, wait, don't tell me. You're an actor right? Or a model?" Carl said, taking a step forward. "'Cause with a pretty face like yours, you gotta be a model or something."

At that, the kid finally turned to face Carl and cracked a smile of his own. There was something wrong with his eyes. They were tired and too old, and his smile faded too quickly.

"That actually ever work?" the kid asked. His voice stayed flat like he thought he already knew the answer.

"Does what actually ever work?" Carl took another step forward, still smiling. When the kid tried to

sidestep, Carl was right there, and they shuffled away from the sink in tandem. "We're just making conversation here."

"You're making conversation. I'm making an exit." The kid shouldered past him and somehow managed to push Carl out of the way.

"Hey," Carl said again, and this time his voice had an edge to it. He grabbed the kid by his arm and glanced down at his bag. "Connor."

Connor's eyes narrowed to vertical slats. Above them, the lights buzzed and sputtered. Something about the expression on Connor's face made Carl redistribute his weight back on his heels, but he was still holding onto Connor's arm.

"Your mommy do that for you?" Carl asked, as Connor's gaze fell. He let go of Connor's arm and traced the stitched name along the flap of Connor's bag. "That's nice."

"Let's not. I'm having a really bad week," the kid said. "And I don't want to hurt you."

Carl's laughter stayed in the baritone range, but it still rang in the close walls of the bathroom.

"A bad week, huh?" The distance between the top of the bag and Connor's hip was measured in mere centimeters. "Why don't you let Uncle Carl make it better?"

Carl didn't even see the punches coming. There was just the ellipse of blood that sprayed out of his nose as his knees hit the floor. Then Carl stared up at the water stains in the ceiling as he laid there, stunned into immobility. His sunglasses swung off one ear and both lenses clattered to the floor.

Connor's face and shoulders shifted into Carl's vision. Connor's hair was falling over his eyes as he looked down at Carl, a deep wrinkle dividing his forehead.

Outside, another bus was pulling into the depot with a screech of bad brakes. Right above that, there was the sound of Connor huffing out a sigh. Just before Carl rolled over on to his side, still grabbing his face, he heard the kid say something.

It sounded like, "Gosh darn it."

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"And *then*," Mrs. Percival exclaimed, one hand over the part of her Ralph Lauren cardigan that was covering her heart. "He just came out of nowhere. *Nowhere*, Mr. Angel. Absolute thin air, God is my witness."

"Now, Wilma," a second lady well into her retirement years chimed in. "We don't know that it was a *he*. It could very well have been a *she*"

"Mabel Altmann," Mrs. Percival said, inclining her head towards her friend. "I think I'm fully capable of telling the difference between a male and a female. Need I remind you that my husband is a veterinarian, because - "

"I'm sure Mabel only meant that it might be difficult to tell," Mrs. Wile offered, completing the trio of chatter. "Because of the horns."

"They were *not* horns," Mrs. Percival stated, her chin lifting as she readjusted the brooch on her collar. "I can't say for sure what they were, but they were most definitely not horns." She turned back to Angel for validation. "Were they?"

"Well..." Angel hesitated, looking from one curly head of blue hair to the other. "I think that if you would just hold on a second - "

Behind him, the phone began to ring. He put up his hands, palms facing outwards as he moved back one step.

"Oh my goodness!" Mrs. Altmann cried out as Angel took another step back, this time involuntarily. "We've totally forgotten to tell him about their teeth. Wouldn't that be important?"

Three wrinkled faces looked up at him with hope and excitement. Angel closed his eyes.

Behind him, the lobby of the Walden was running towards chaos and flirting with its maximum capacity numbers. A quick glance around revealed that Wesley was trying to herd several clients into one corner while more from another section of the room followed on his heels, trying to get his attention.

Illyria was standing on the first step of the staircase, watching the clamor. Her expression suggested that she was probably thinking up different ways to say vermin in half a dozen dead languages.

"I'm sure that the teeth are extremely important," Angel said, changing his tactic. The phone was on its eighth ring. He grabbed his sketchbook from the chair behind Mrs. Wile and flipped through the pages before handing it over to them. "And if you'll just make a little drawing of how it - "

"Them," Mrs. Percival said, nodding.

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"Oh, we haven't even told you the best part," Mrs. Percival continued, brightening. "It ended up that there were three of them. Three monsters! If you can just imagine."

"I...really can't," Angel said. In a more soothing voice, he tried again. "Which is why I think it would be wonderful if you'd draw it out for me." He pushed the sketchbook across the small space left for him to stand in and placed it in Mrs. Percival's hand. She took it but didn't seem too enthusiastic.

"You won't hand this over to someone unreliable, Mr. Angel, will you?" Mrs. Altmann asked. "These monsters are really *very* dangerous."

"I'll see to it personally," he promised.

"Oh, how wonderful," Mrs. Wile murmured.

That seemed to please the others as well, and Angel beamed them a smile as they finally turned to each other, still rattling off the details of their adventure.

He managed to wait until they'd stepped a foot away before he made a beeline for the phone, only to find that it was already being answered. His feet stopped moving, but his shoulders reared back in surprise.

"Angel Investigations," Connor said into the phone. "Can I help you?"

Angel stood only a dozen steps away, and even with his eyes towards the paper Connor caught glimpses

through his hair of the look on Angel's face. There was disbelief there before, vampire-quick, it hardened into something that looked like determination.

Connor squeezed the phone between his chin and his shoulder and ran his free hand through his hair. The pencil began to bend between his fingers, so he set it down and laid his palm against the paper before Angel could see his knuckles growing whiter.

It didn't take any particularly special powers to realize that Wesley had noticed Connor, too, that he had extracted himself from the throng of clients and started moving towards the counter. Wesley was halfway there before Angel took his first step. Angel still got there first. Connor was still listening to the guy on the other line.

"I'm sorry - fluorescent what?" Connor asked when the line went static-y for a moment. He nodded at Angel and Wesley and the guy at the same time. The guy didn't see the nod, so he was the only one who kept talking. Wesley leaned against the counter, while Angel folded his arms over his chest. Angel didn't need to strain to hear.

Eventually, Connor said, "No, actually, some forms of algae will turn water that color. Do you live near the ocean?"

Three pairs of eyes were on him, two set in blue. Connor noticed out of his peripheral vision that Illyria didn't bother moving towards him. Maybe to make up for her disinterest, Angel was giving Connor what could only be described as a full visual medical examination.

Angel's eyes stopped at the logo on Connor's t-shirt even though the word printed there was only partially visible between his unbuttoned oxford. He wrinkled his nose as if he smelled a profanity.

Connor turned his head slightly away, just enough to gauge what Wesley was doing, but he wasn't doing much, just watching. Taking notes without paper or pen, his eyes traveling over Connor matter of factly. He was wearing a turtleneck, and the ribbed material folded over at the same place where the tips of Connor's hair hit his own throat.

They stood there in the chaos of clients not receiving enough attention and listened.

After a while Connor said, "Yep, it sounds to me like you've got more of a simple bacterial problem in your plumbing than anything else. But I'll pass it along to the experts and have someone call you back. That sound all right?"

The leather of Angel's coat squeaked against the strain of his crossed arms.

Connor gave a final nod and jotted down the guy's - Mr. Fernandez's - number and address and put the phone back on the cradle. Angel's and Wesley's mouths opened at the same time.

"I thought I told you to stay away," Connor managed to say to Angel first. He ripped the paper along the perforation and handed the note to Wesley.

Angel blinked, and the motion cleared the grim line from his mouth. "This is my hotel," he said. He actually sounded confused. Connor smiled.

"Theater," Wesley corrected Angel. He scanned the note and then folded it into a precise rectangle, and then a square. It apparently wasn't a case worth pursuing at the moment.

"Yes," Angel said, and the emphasis he put on the word indicated that he expected Wesley's support on this matter, and part of supporting someone was sometimes gliding over the details. "Hotel. Theater. Office. City. The whole thing."

"I was pre-empting you," Connor explained.

"I get that," Angel said, words still clipped at the edges.

"It was supposed to be funny." His voice sounded worried, but the edges of his mouth were twitching. "It wasn't funny?"

"What? No - yes. Yes, it was funny." Angel actually leaned in as he tried to reassure Connor.

Connor laughed softly while Wesley pointed his smile towards the counter, and the atmosphere lost some density, even as it continued to get louder inside the lobby. Connor rested his elbows next to the phone and lifted his chin towards the crowd. "It's also a good thing I came by."

"Yeah, see, now we're getting back to the real issue," Angel said. "Which is that I very specifically told you to stay away. I know you remember it. A building was falling down around us at the time."

Connor leaned over until he could rest his chin on his hands. He watched Wesley's chest stay perfectly still. "And I did stay away."

"But you're here now," Angel pointed out.

"This is true," Connor admitted. Through the wedge of space between Angel's and Wesley's bodies, he could see more clients entering the confusion of the swarm. A couple of the groups of clients were banding together, their voices rising as they bonded over similar demon issues. Or maybe over the bad service. "Natives are getting restless. Quick version?"

"Any version," Angel said.

"I started thinking," Connor said. "These people, who wanted to hurt my family before... that guy? Cyvus Vail - "

Wesley made a slight gesture, as if he were brushing lint off of his personal space. "You needn't worry about him anymore."

"How can you be sure?" Connor asked, frowning slightly. He straightened into a standing position, and Wesley matched his movement, shifting his arms off of the counter.

"Because he's been dealt with," Wesley said, his eyes and his voice as steady as his posture. Connor waited until he got a small nod from Angel.

"Okay, well, still..." Connor said, tone lowering a notch in certainty. "It's not over, right? I mean, it's never over-over."

"That's what I keep trying to say," Angel seemed to offer to no one in particular.

"Right," Connor said. "So, anyways, I transferred. To be closer to my family. They need my protection."

"You left Stanford?" It was the first time Wesley's voice broke its monotone.

"Silence," Illyria's voice rang out, loud enough for her words to carry throughout the lobby. She had moved and was now standing in the midst of the largest group of clients. "This is not the proper way to show your respect to those who would protect you."

The noise in the room dropped to a hush, and Connor continued to stare at her until Wesley cleared his throat. When Connor glanced at him, Wesley shook his head at Connor, lips thinned.

"Yep," Connor said after a beat, voice lowered. He shrugged himself back into casual. "Now I'm a Bruin - see?" He pointed to his t-shirt at the blue logo bordered in gold. Angel stared at it again with, somehow, slightly more disdain. "Tagged and everything. And my scholarship requires me to have an internship and what should I happen to see on the work study bulletin board but a notice that *Angel Investigations* needs

an assistant."

Angel had apparently dedicated himself to giving this situation his full attention. "So what you're saying is -"

"It's a good thing I came by."

"No," Angel said, after he unclenched his jaw. "Bad. Very bad thing. You should be studying. And... seeing movies and having slumber parties and -" He looked in the general direction of the ceiling, searching. "And this is dangerous."

Connor glanced upwards as well, but only because his eyes were rolling. "Slumber parties?"

"Whatever," Angel said, determination creeping back into his voice as Wesley coughed. "My point is that you shouldn't be *here*." When Connor continued to stand exactly where he was, Angel turned towards Wesley. "Right?"

"Perhaps," Wesley said. He made another minimal gesture that somehow encompassed the whole room. "But if Connor's safety is truly still at stake, he'll be safer with us than out in the city all by himself. And in any case, he's right. We could use the help."

"Me? No, I'm totally safe -" Connor started to say and then stopped himself. He looked from Wesley to Angel. "What he said."

"I'm not getting double-teamed on this," Angel stated for the record. "And the thing with the clients might be temporary."

"Or it could be a side effect of the vacuum Wolfram & Hart have left in their wake," Wesley said. "Which means it's possible we might be this over-run for a while yet."

"Sometimes this happens," Angel countered, the exaggeration apparent in his voice. Seeing the matching creases of skepticism appear on Wesley's and Connor's faces, he hedged, "Okay. It happened just that once, but it did happen. And it's bound to stop."

The door rattled open, and the noise swelled back up as a new flood of clients poured in. Connor shuffled his feet before he looked at Angel and bit his lip.

"Right," he said.

The bar was evidently a L.A. hotspot, a place where sports memorabilia and chalkboards with whacked out phrases went to get down with their funky selves. No matter where Gunn looked, there was a shirt or a sign that read *Pirates* or *Steelers* in Halloween colors, with a random assortment out of Monet's oeuvre thrown in for good measure.

The lights were low enough to hide the traces of blood on their clothes and faces, and the booths were empty.

"Doesn't seem to be much demand for Angelenos needing to feel like they're in Pittsburgh," Gunn noted as they choose a booth towards the back. "Me - I've never been to Pittsburgh. And now I think I know why."

Sliding into the booth, he managed to keep back his wince by at least a whole ten percent. He folded his long body into the tight space while Spike slumped down into a tangle of exhaustion. He was facing the exit to the alley while Spike kept his eyes on the entrance. Grease stained the small spaces of the wall beside them that weren't covered with clutter.

"Evidently Pittsburgh's on the dirty side," Gunn observed.

He heard the snicker of a lighter catching a flame and looked up in time to watch the glow thrown across Spike's forehead. Drops of blood shone there for a moment, and then they were gone again.

"You look like a candy cane," Gunn said. He looked down at his own hand and drummed his fingers against the slippery surface of the glass. There was the scratch of the metal lighter sliding along the table before it ran into the ashtray, then the false note of cheap glass cracking.

"Yeah?" Spike said. "Well, you look like death warmed over. Least a candy cane still makes me lickable."

Gunn brought a hand up and pressed his fingers to the back of neck, checking to see that his skull only felt punched in. He had to force his eyebrows to unknit.

"I'm fine," he said, when he caught Spike watching him from across the table. "I'm also going to pretend you didn't just say that last part."

Their waitress walked over on sneakers that squeaked. Her name badge read Candice, and her apron was filthy.

"Bring me a scotch, will you, love?" Spike said. "Neat. Been a long day at work."

Candice was close enough that she couldn't miss the bruises on Spike's face. She just chewed her gum and wrote the order down.

"Whatever's on tap," Gunn said. When Candice's pen tapped the edge of her pad, he eyed her with the look of a man who didn't want to be making any choices right now. "Bud Light," he clarified.

Spike wrinkled his nose.

From one of the other three corners left in the bar, a badly tuned radio was playing snatches of something that sounded like Springsteen.

"Knew this boy once," Spike said, after he let the radio rasp out a full chorus. Candice set their drinks down on the table and squeaked her way back to the bar. The rim of Spike's tumbler glinted a fraction of light as he raised it to his mouth. "Used to share a few drinks sometimes, he and I."

"You are not allowed to start singing Patsy Cline," Gunn told him.

Spike's mouth bent into a smirk. The bottom half of him was sprawled under the table, and the top half him looked like it was about to crumple down towards the ground and join in.

"About your age," Spike continued, pointing the glass in Gunn's general direction. The skin under his left eyebrow was fighting a swelling and winning. "The boy I once knew."

"I'm not too tired to punch you in the face."

"Lousy fighter, this kid," Spike said.

"In the face."

"Not making a comparison, mind," Spike said. His shoulders were pushing dimples into the fake leather of the banquette.

"Then you're going on about some no good kid you once knew in ye olden times for absolutely no reason," Gunn said. "Just a guess - I'm betting he wasn't black."

"Didn't say he was no good, did I?" Spike's eyebrows were twin arches over the rim of his glass. "And

I've traveled, you know," he said, tone moving from suggestive to blustery in one blink. "Been to Africa and everything."

Gunn stopped swirling the dregs of his beer along the bottom of the bottle. "Before or after the soul?"

"Both," Spike said. He paused to smile at the waitress as she set another round of drinks in front of them. Her hand hovered over the table, and then she withdrew it while still looking at Spike. She didn't seem to realize that she was fixing her hair as she walked away.

Gunn shook his first beer bottle at Spike until Spike turned back to face him.

"What's your point?" Gunn asked.

"Didn't know I had to have one," Spike replied, starting in on his second drink.

"Moving on to the Lakers, then."

"Never could figure out why he kept fighting, either."

By this time, the radio was playing more static than music. Gunn scratched his forearm, and his fingernails came back ringed in red.

"Only one in the lot of us with a heartbeat left, Charlie," Spike continued.

Gunn shrugged. "So I win the lottery." "Got that dose of brain juice from Satan's Solicitors." Spike's voice was muffled by his glass, raspy with scotch. "Be easy enough to use your noggin for something other than marking tunnelways."

"Already have a book guy," Gunn reminded Spike. "Took the expressway from the dead and everything."

"Who hasn't?"

Gunn gave Spike a steady look. "I been doing this since I was a kid. Not stopping now."

"Why's that?"

Gunn smeared the rings of condensation on the table's surface with his finger. He wrote a name, the shape of four letters.

"Cause I got that dose of brain juice from Wolfram & Hart," he said, looking up in time to see that Spike was lowering his glass next to Gunn's hand. Gunn wiped the name away and picked up his beer, swallowing half the bottle with one tilt. "Means a whole mess of things, including that I think with words like *oeuvre* now."

Spike made a moue of distaste. "You're not getting poetical on me, are you?"

"Not getting anything on you," Gunn said, standing up and shaking himself straighter before he finished up with, "not tonight anyways."

"We're leaving, then."

"We are indeed," Gunn said in his best lawyer voice.

Spike took a final pull of his drink and slipped out of the booth. "Don't see as why we're bothering," he said, finishing off Gunn's beer for the road. "Nothing waiting for us but more of Angel hanging on every word of Bertie Wooster's."

"Then maybe we'll get some sleep tonight." Gunn slipped a few bills from his wallet and laid them on the

table. "This boy you knew. He have a name?"

"Xander," Spike said, rolling the *r*.

"He still alive?" Gunn asked as they made their way to the exit.

"Got one of his eyes poked out," Spike said, pushing the door open.

Gunn reached into his jacket and pulled out a crossbow. Spike stopped to light another cigarette, hand cupped around the flame. The puddles on the ground reflected the lights from the building around them. Gunn peered down the alley and started off towards the sound of traffic.

"That's not gonna happen to me."

"Excuse me," a client said, walking towards Angel, his shirtsleeve slipping from his wife's more patient fingers. He stopped in front of Illyria and tip-toed around her in a wide half-circle while she moved her head to follow his careful steps.

Angel watched Connor count the steps left between the nice man and the counter.

"All these people - this is a recent thing?" Connor asked, words rushing to meet the time crunch.

"It began this morning," Wesley informed him right before the client started tapping on Angel's shoulder.

"Excuse me," the client said again. "But we've been waiting for an awfully long time, and I was wondering -"

"This'll just be a moment," Angel said.

"He said that three hours ago," the client told Angel, pointing to Wesley before he shifted his ire in that direction. "Remember? We have that thing in our garden that we can't seem to get rid of, and it smells."

"Is it a hedgehog?" Connor asked.

"Um... no," the client said. He shook his head so vigorously that he had trouble stopping. "This gentlemen," he said, pointing to Wesley again, "said it was a hepkirin demon. And we were supposed to wait for someone to come back with us and take care of it. But that was three hours ago." His redundancy held a sharp note of accusation.

"Oh, hepkirin. Right," Connor said. He turned to Angel with a small smile. "I'm maybe a little rusty. But I'll get back into the swing of things."

Angel slipped his fingers around Wesley's elbow and started to lead him away. "Connor, why don't you take down... um..."

"Mr. Eliot," Wesley supplied.

Angel nodded, as though he'd known that. "Mr. Eliot's information, while Wes and I talk over the best way to handle a hepkirin demon."

Connor picked up his notepad with some hesitation, but he seemed to decide that going along with whatever Angel said was probably the best way towards winning him over.

As Angel walked Wesley towards a corner of the room, he could hear Mr. Eliot still trying to explain, enunciating each word with careful emphasis as he said, "No, no. I already gave all of my information to that Australian man. Three hours ago."

Angel stopped over by a stack of discarded movie posters and the defunct popcorn machine. "He can't stay."

"Why?" Wesley asked. "He's your son. He's eager to help. Why not encourage him to follow the right path? I know it's unusual, but given the circumstances I'm sure the others would understand."

"Yeah," Angel said, drawing out the word. "That's the thing. I kinda didn't tell anybody that I had a son."

"I beg your pardon?" Wesley moved as if to pinch the bridge of his nose but stopped himself halfway there and crossed his arms instead. "You didn't tell them."

"No."

"How could you not tell them?"

"It didn't come up."

"It didn't come up," Wesley repeated. He seemed to be concentrating very hard on keeping his eyebrows from hitting his hairline.

"Nobody asked."

"Rather insensitive of them. But perhaps we'll give them the benefit of the doubt and blame that on the memory wipe."

Angel peered at Wesley, trying to channel offended and failing. "What are you trying to say?"

"Angel," Wesley asked, his voice dripping with patience, "do you have any *other* sons born from miraculous circumstances that you haven't thought to tell us about?"

"No."

This time, when Wesley arched his brow, a corner of his mouth lifted up as well. "Daughters?"

"No."

"Nephews? Nieces? Third cousins twice removed?"

"You are not seriously asking me to start talking about my family tree."

"Small hamsters that you're particularly fond of?"

"You know, death has made you a lot weirder than you used to be."

Wesley stared him down. "Angel, this is important."

Angel reached out and fiddled with the heavy curtain hanging over the window to his right. He followed a groove in the velvet with his index finger before he tucked his hands under his arms. "I know. It's just that the less people know about Connor, the safer he is."

Wesley paused, his expression dampening.

"All right," he said, voice gone serious to match Angel's tone. "But Angel, there can be no more secrets. There is too much at stake. If we are to survive whatever the Senior Partners have planned, then you can't withhold information this way."

"I won't," Angel said. "I promise."

"All right." Wesley let his hands drop to his sides.

"But... I'm still keeping Connor under wraps," Angel said.

Wesley's mouth twitched, but he stayed quiet as his gaze glided over to the person standing just past Angel's shoulder.

"Looks like I'm still hush-hush," Connor said.

Angel gave Wesley one last look that went unnoticed, then turned around just far enough so that he could open up a space for Connor to join them. "It's not that..." he started to say.

Connor shrugged. He was still holding the notebook. "No, it's cool. It's... actually for the best."

"How so?" Wesley asked.

"Because there's probably an appropriate time to have the 'this is the son who tried to kill me and then destroy the world, but now he's cured, I promise' conversation," Connor replied. He looked around the room at the clients that outnumbered them fifteen to one and held up the notebook as some sort of proof. "I'm thinking this kinda isn't that time."

"Connor - " Angel said before Illyria made her presence known.

"You reek of the dead," she said.

She was standing directly behind them, watching them with interest. Her mannequin eyes gazed on Connor first, then Angel, and finally landed, and stayed, on Wesley. "The destroyed and the resurrected." She moved with heavy feet, her shoulders back and her arms held stiffly. "This can not end well," she intoned as she walked away.

The theater was a bloody disaster. Not literally, but still.

"Typical," Spike muttered as he veered through the crowd. "Should just stop saying things out loud."

"This is bad how?" Angel was walking towards him with a file in each hand. He kept judging the weight of each one. "And what are you nattering about?"

"Not nattering," Spike stated, voice skirting piqued. "Or lollygagging, in case you've been wondering where Charlie's been keeping me for so long. We were on a very demanding - "

"Skip it," Angel said, handing Spike the files in his left hand. He snatched it back and then gave Spike the other one. "This is your next case."

"Next case." Spike didn't bother opening the file. Instead he sucked on the fleshy part of his thumb and gave Angel a wounded look.

"Or you can wait until we have even more clients – and you're not listening to me even a little bit, are you?"

"Whoa-ho, what's this?" Spike non-answered, considerably more cheerful. He walked around Angel to get a better look at the kid manning the phones. "New temp?"

"No," Angel said. "Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

"What's to decide?" Spike asked. "Kid's already here. Doesn't seem to think the phone's going to eat him. Might bring that last one back, just to show him it's okay to pick up the receiver."

"He can handle the phone, yeah," Angel admitted. "Knows how to make an okay cup of coffee too."

"Which puts him ahead of you on two job skills," Spike said. He studied the boy. "Seems to speak English, too. Which - also an improvement. So what's the - wait a minute...;"

"What?" Angel's voice was too sharp.

Spike rotated in slow motion, shoulders turning before his feet. He waited until Angel dragged his eyes away from the kid. "I remember him. Back from when you thought we'd give working for evil a try. Again."

"We didn't *work* for evil the first time around; we *were* evil," Angel said, eyes scanning Spike's face as if he was trying to decide whether the other vampire had suffered a blunt head trauma. "There's a difference. And I haven't decided whether or not I'm - we're - the office is keeping him."

"Oh, we're considering keeping boys, now, are we? Didn't know that was back on the list," Spike said, looking at Angel from underneath his lashes.

"I'm not - What list?" Angel asked.

"The list," Spike said. "Of do-ables."

Angel stared at him. "Do *you* speak English?"

"Do-ables," Spike repeated. "Got yourself a proper girlfriend now, haven't you? Don't imagine wolfette's gonna let you taste a little salt on the side."

"That is the most - right." Angel actually touched his forehead as he seemed to remember something important. "He's not a side-dish. For *anyone*. He's too young."

"To shag?" Spike asked, eyebrows quirking in surprise. "Because coming from someone whose last dating pool was the high school crowd - "

"To *work* here," Angel replied. He stepped closer until the tips of his shoes were touching Spike's boots. "And he is not on *anybody's* list, got it?"

Spike hummed quietly, used to ignoring Angel's threats. "There's something wrong with him."

Something flickered in Angel's eyes. "There's nothing wrong with him."

"He's evil."

"He's not evil."

"He's demented."

"He's not - look," Angel punched out the last word. He moved until he stood shoulder to shoulder with Spike, their two bodies forming a line. The moment lengthened, but then Angel stepped away, and his voice was softer as he said, "He's not evil, and he's not demented, and he's not - he's not any of those things. He's a really good kid. He works hard. And he just wants to do the right thing."

"Who're you talking about?" Gunn asked, as he wandered by.

"New temp," Spike said.

"Oh no," Gunn groaned, flipping a file folder closed. "Angel, we do *not* have time for this. Let's get whatever beef you're going to make up out of the way so we can either hire or fire him and get on with the cases."

Angel watched Gunn carefully. "There isn't anything about him that bugs *you* at all?"

"Far as I can see he takes actual phone messages and doesn't make any of our clients run screaming, so no," Gunn replied. "Why?"

"Think Angel's a little twitchy because Junior over there is from the law firm days," Spike supplied.

Gunn frowned. "Employee or client?"

"Client," Angel said. "The good kind. It was a helping the helpless kind of thing. You were in the other dimension."

Gunn stared at Connor. "Is he evil?"

"No."

"Demented?"

"No."

"Convinced that the phone is about to eat him at any time?"

"No."

"I already checked all that," Spike added.

Gunn shrugged. "Long as he's got what we need, I'm really not seeing myself caring about the rest." He turned back to Angel for the final say. "But if you feel like throwing him out, man..."

Angel folded his arms, looking uncomfortable. "I'm not sure yet."

Connor hung up the phone and made a note near the corner of the page. Somebody had managed to find a few errant file folders, and he slipped the paper between the covers of one of the folders, pen between his teeth. His hair had lost some of its former shagginess, and he was sitting with his ankles crossed above the rim of his Vans. It was past midnight and finally quiet.

"Why're the Miss Daisies a priority?" Gunn asked.

"Going by these descriptions, Mrs. Percival and her friends were attacked by the same demons that two of our other clients were unfortunate enough to run into," Wesley said.

Connor looked up and found Angel watching him. He pulled the pen away and gave Angel a smile. Angel smiled back, then switched his attention to the group in time to add, "Attacking three of our clients in three separate instances. I say that calls for some attention."

"We've got nine vamp cases," Gunn countered. "I'm just doing the math."

"Fine," Angel said. "You look into those, set your priorities, and go after the big ones."

Gunn sat back in his chair. "You want me to go after nine vamps by myself?"

"No," Angel replied, stepping around Spike to hand Gunn a stack of files. He took just enough time to catch the knife that Spike was flipping through the air and toss it back to Spike. "I want you to go after one vamp and kill it. And then repeat as necessary."

"You gotta be kidding me." Gunn used both hands to take the files from Angel and then looked at them as

if Manila had just become his least favorite place in the world.

"I'm not saying do it all tonight," Angel said.

"Still - I wouldn't say no to a little help," Gunn said. "You could spare Illyria. Hell, I'll even take Spike."

"Spike's busy," Angel said.

Spike tossed his knife in the air one last time and used the handle of it to scratch his head. "I am?"

Angel offered him an incredulous look. "I gave you a file."

"Right," Spike said. "But then you went into babble-mode about the new temp, and I got so bored I lost my short-term memory. All sorted out now, though. Nasty case of Bracchial in Glendale. Got you."

When Spike didn't move, Angel waited for him to catch up.

"What - *now*?" Spike repeated.

Angel chose patience over pummeling and turned to Gunn instead.

"And if you can get Illyria to go with you, you're welcome to her," he said.

"So I'm on my own," Gunn said.

Angel slid his gaze back towards Connor and inclined his head towards Gunn in a question. Connor sat on the other side of the counter and blinked at him across the lobby, a study in quiet contemplation. Then he stood up and gathered his things in hurried, jerky movements.

"It's getting late. I gotta go," Connor said, sounding sorry. He stood there with his bag held up against his chest.

Angel frowned slightly, but the only thing he said was, "We've got forty-two more cases waiting for us. You can do this."

"But do I want to?" Gunn asked.

Wesley looked up. "You're headed back to Westwood?"

It took Angel a second to realize that Wesley was speaking to Connor. Wesley was skimming through the pages of six open volumes, the books spread out in a random patterns on the counter. He and Connor both had their shirt sleeves rolled up to their elbows.

"Yeah," Connor said, already halfway to the door.

Wesley pointed out some of the piles of notes that he had organized. "Angel, all of your cases seem to have occurred in or near Westwood. Mrs. Percival's group at Fairburn and Kinnard, the Burtons on Prossner Avenue, and Mr. Neal's unfortunate demise on Manning near the 405 freeway."

"Great," Angel said, gathering up his coat. "I'll drive Connor home, then."

Connor nodded and slipped under Angel's arm and through the open door.

"Angel - " Wesley called out, standing up.

"I got it, Wes," Angel said, walking backwards. "Three demons. Westwood. I'm on it."

Angel closed the door just in time to cut Spike off as he said, "Don't forget to tip the kid."

Connor watched the streetlights stream past his window and adjusted his bag more securely on his lap as Angel took the curve in the street at twice the recommended speed.

"Nice car," Connor said.

"Stealing is wrong," Angel replied.

"Okay." Connor waited until the Viper passed under two green lights before he asked, "Where's the other one?"

Angel gave him an inscrutable look. "Probably standing on concrete blocks in a garage someplace," he said, in careful tones.

"Too bad," Connor murmured. "I was gonna ask if I could borrow the keys."

Angel let out a chuckle as he slowed the car down for a stoplight. "You drive now?"

"A part of me does," Connor said. He was looking out the window again. There was hardly anyone in the streets.

Angel grimaced. "Yeah, about that - "

"You know there was a time when I was afraid of cars?" Connor asked. "When I broke through that dimensional rip and I was running from the hotel. All these metal giants flying past, quicker than anything else I'd ever seen. I thought they were monsters. "

"I had a moment like that once, too," Angel said.

Connor brought his hand up to his mouth and pressed the knuckle of his thumb against his closed lips. "What's wrong with Wesley?"

When Angel sighed, he made a sound, just like anyone else. "He's dead."

Connor edged his body sideways and stared into Angel's profile. "But he's not a vampire," he said with some measure of certainty.

Angel shook his head. "No."

"So he has a soul."

"I - yeah," Angel looked as though he hadn't ever thought about it. "I'm pretty sure, yeah."

Connor folded his hands over his lap and pressed his fingertips against his hands. "I'd kinda forgotten... how weird things can get. I mean, not *forgotten*, just...never mind."

Angel slowed the car down even though the light was green. "Look, if this is too much for you - "

"Fred's gone."

"Yeah," Angel said, and it was with some effort. "Illyria... took over her body." His hands on the steering wheel tightened. "She seems to have Fred's memories, though."

The strap of his bag made a small ripping noise when Connor pulled on it. He let go and pushed the bag down by his feet, tipping his head until it was resting on the window. "Who's Spike?"

"Oh," Angel said. A truck going in the opposite direction lit up his face, and then the shadow it left behind seemed to deepen the creases around his mouth. "You've met him before, remember?" When Connor didn't answer, Angel made a grimace before he said, "It's a really long, convoluted - there's a history with, you know, fighting and spending *way* too much time together, and you don't even want to get me started on the hot pokers and the chains, and it's just... "

Connor let Angel shift in his seat. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"What?"

The Viper's tires passed over the lane dividers before Angel got the car back under control.

"I was watching you guys before," Connor said. "Sometimes my girlfriend and I fight like that. And then we have amazing - um. And then we go out for amazing milkshakes."

Angel looked taken aback. "You have a girlfriend?"

Connor touched the tip of his tongue to the edge of his mouth. "Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Hey, you know what's a good story?" Angel asked, without missing a beat. "This time I was tortured for days by the Master. That's a fun story. Wholesome. Good for the whole family. Which... I guess makes sense since he's kind of my grandfather. But don't tell anyone I admitted that. It's not a gene pool I'm proud of."

"Because he was evil?" Connor guessed.

Angel blinked. "Oh. Yeah. That. Also there was this thing with his face which was just - ugh."

Connor laughed despite himself. When Angel glanced over he looked relieved. "I'm glad you made it through the big battle," Connor said.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" Angel asked.

"Maybe just a little bit," Connor replied.

Angel was doing a pretty decent job of studying Connor while still keeping his eyes on the road as he said, "You shouldn't be worried about this surge of demon activity. I'm sure it has absolutely nothing to do with you."

When Connor's knees bumped the dashboard, he winced and rubbed his palms against the bone. "Why do you say that?"

"No reason," Angel said, the car speeding back up to match the flow of his words. "You know, the last time this happened, you were all freaked out about it being your fault with the Beast and - "

"Turn here."

"I just don't want you to think that - "

"Only thing I'm worried about right now is how my microbiology midterm's gonna go," Connor said, his voice lowering. He shook his head and slipped another smile on to his face. "Seriously."

"Well... good," Angel said. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Yeah." Connor shrugged. "Always have before."

"Everything else - we'll just figure that out as we go along," Angel said. "Got plenty of time, there's no hurry."

Angel let go of the steering wheel with one hand and patted Connor's knee.

Right before the car spun out of control.

The bottom floor of the theater was dark when Spike ascended the stairs. A small slice of silver spilled out from under the closed door of Angel's office.

"For a guy who actually does have a pack of Dementors after him, your personal security system sucks," Spike said, shoving open the office door.

Angel wasn't there. Instead, Illyria was standing behind Angel's desk, methodically plucking books off his shelves and piling them up in neat little stacks. She didn't bother turning around.

"Angel ain't much for the classics, pet," he said, walking over to the weapons cabinet. It was also unlocked. "Yep, crack security he's got going."

Spike turned back to Illyria. She was still flipping through the pages of a hard covered volume faster than anyone or -thing could possibly read it.

"You probably won't find much beyond *Angela's Ashes* and maybe some Machiavelli with crayon scribblings in the margins," Spike warned her.

Old pages had a certain sound to them. The thin paper whispered over Illyria's fingers. Her head was bent forward, and she was standing with her feet a shoulder's width apart.

Spike shrugged and grabbed a Claymore from the cabinet. He tossed it hand to hand for a moment before nodding and placing it carefully next to him on the floor.

"All these stories end in the middle," Illyria said finally.

Spike noticed the pile of books on the desk was now as high as her shoulders.

"What's that, now?"

"These stories," Illyria said, gesturing with one hand toward the nearly empty shelves.

"Uh-huh." Spike grabbed two throwing knives. He ran the flat metal of them against the inside of his coat until they shone.

Illyria turned her full attention to Spike, her gaze steely and unblinking. Her eyebrows and mouth were set in a straight line. Somehow she managed to make expressionless appear annoyed.

"Your so-called heroes," she continued, when Spike nodded like he had some idea of what she was on about. "They fight in battles created by their own vanities and die. The stories all end with their deaths, as if their destruction held some meaning. You will explain this to me."

Spike stashed the knives, one in each coat pocket. Illyria's hair was starting to get a bit wild.

"Sure," he said, smoothing out his voice. "Battle's over. Story's done. Not exactly demon rocket science."

"Neither your explanation nor your humor satisfy me."

Spike hid his smirk by rummaging through the cabinet again. He lifted a double-bladed axe out of the cabinet. He held it out in front of himself as if to inspect it, twisting his wrist back and forth. "Lot of that going around."

"What of those who survive the battle?" Illyria insisted. She was holding her head askew, the perfect mimicry of confusion. "What about the things which come after? What happens to the story when the battle is done?"

Spike's smile faded. He hoisted the axe over his shoulder, and avoided Illyria's eyes when he said, "Yeah. That part I dunno."

Angel's lampshade had some sort of patterning on it that was supposed to make it look old. It threw strange shadows on Illyria that resembled symbols of an arcane language.

"Maybe you could write the sequel," he suggested, standing up. "*What I Did After My Summer Vacation in Hell, or I'm a God - Ask Me How.*"

When Illyria blinked, she looked almost amphibian.

"Wesley is different," she said when she opened her eyes again.

"Death'll do that to that to a bloke," Spike answered, but his voice was softer.

"The death of his mortal body is inconsequential," Illyria stated with confidence. She waved her hand as if swatting away flies. "He walks. He eats. He does not refuse me intercourse. Yet things are not the same between us. He... feels differently to me."

"You're still using that word to mean *talking*, yeah?" Spike asked, smiling. "Boy has got a lot on his plate these days, Lady Blue."

Illyria turned back to the shelf, apparently still dissatisfied. She pulled down another book and opened it to the last page.

"Besides," Spike said, "can't spend your whole life obsessed with one single person."

"I require answers," Illyria said. She sounded oddly quiet. And human.

Spike paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Might want to have a chat with Gunn, then. Bloke seems to have everything figured out."

Illyria closed the book and set it down next to the others. Spike watched her start a new pile as he shut the door.

The front tires of the Viper screeched an arc against the pavement. There was the sound of other cars going into similar maneuvers to try and avoid the Viper as it careened and then the report of a cheap bumper hitting an aluminum rim off of Angel's left-quickly-becoming-his-right side.

The city's lights kaleidoscoped outside of Angel's windshield as his right hand shot out protectively to hold Connor in place. As though they had planned the teamwork, Connor reached and jerked the emergency brake into a standing position. The car shuddered to a stop.

Angel glanced over to the passenger side. The edge of the seatbelt had left a welt against Connor's collarbone, and the boy had one hand splayed out against the window. Otherwise he seemed okay. Angel let him go.

"Let me guess. Wolfram & Hart want their car back," Connor said, his free hand rubbing his chest from where Angel had pressed too hard. The one remaining headlight from the Celica facing them was throwing a beam on his face, and it was making him squint.

"Probably," Angel said. "But this isn't how they - "

A meaty fist struck the passenger side glass, right into the center of Connor's palm. As the window splintered into a single sheet of cracked glass, Connor ricocheted back from the sound and swung his head to stare into the wall of opaque glitter.

"I can't see it," Connor said. He was fumbling for the latch on his seatbelt.

"I already did," Angel told him, opening his door. "It's the demon we're looking for. Or one of them anyway."

He launched out of the car, feet hitting the pavement mid-pivot, only to find that all that was left of the demon was a shortening shadow as it left the Viper facing the wrong way and a trail of pocked metal in its wake.

As the demon disappeared down an alley, Angel slammed his door shut at the same time Connor opened his and slipped out.

"That's an interesting coincidence," Connor said. His voice was thin. It sounded like a reed whistling a flat note.

"You okay?" Angel asked him, walking around the hood of the car. He held Connor by his shoulders and bent his knees to catch Connor's eyes. "Take the car. Go back to campus and you stay there."

"Wait," Connor called out when Angel started running.

Angel stopped in between strides, the bottoms of his shoes scruffing in the gravel. He turned back to find Connor loping up to him.

Connor's face had a pale shine to it, and his lips and fingertips were shaking as he stood in front of Angel. He looked almost blue in the moonlight, and his shirt was dark along the center of his chest where the fabric was sticking to his skin with sweat.

"You don't have to come," Angel said. "But I've got to go after them. You know that, right?" Angel cradled the back of Connor's neck briefly.

Connor's chin grew sharper, and he pressed his lips together. "I don't wanna play Jake Gyllenhaal to your Dennis Quaid," Connor said.

"I'm not..." Angel grimaced. "Okay, I don't know what that means."

"It means I'm coming with you," Connor said.

"You sure?" Angel asked.

Connor walked past Angel and towards the alleyway. His shirt-tails fanned behind him in the breeze. "It's getting away."

Rats skittered across the puddles in the alley as Angel and Connor crept along the close walls. In the distance, the squeal of sirens grew louder, probably arriving at the accident site.

"You're worrying about the car, aren't you?" Connor asked. He was walking two steps behind Angel.

"No, I'm not," Angel lied.

"Uh-huh."

"Not the stealthiest demon I've run across," Angel changed the subject as they passed by an upturned

dumpster.

"It's stopped breaking things," Connor said, tilting his head slightly so that one ear was pointing toward the ground.

"Yeah," Angel confirmed. He stopped by another dumpster and looked behind him.

"What's wrong?" Connor asked.

"Thought they came in threes," Angel said, moving forward again.

Connor frowned. "Maybe there's only one left."

"Somehow - " Angel broke off as three demons seemed to materialize out of the shadows. They were ugly, and Mrs. Percival was almost right. There were a ring of frills around their necks, high up near their chins. Each demon was the approximate size of a small dinosaur.

"This is what's most often referred to as a *trap*," Angel said.

"I'll write that down as soon as I get a minute," Connor replied, backing up.

The demons let out a battle cry that was doing a good imitation of cannon fire. Then they ran toward Angel... and right past him.

"Hey!" Angel said, turning just in time to see them all go after Connor. As Connor pressed himself against a wall, Angel grabbed two of the demons and flung them away. "Pick on someone your own size."

"You don't concern us," one of the demons said to Angel, as if that settled the matter. "It's the boy we want."

Behind them, Connor was making a good effort. Angel watched while Connor's fist hit the demon's chests, his hand bouncing off the surface with the clang of bone on metal. But Connor still came back with a left hook, which would have been great if the demon hadn't swatted Connor's hand away like a cobweb.

"Didn't they tell you?" Angel asked the demons. "There's been a change of plans."

He landed a blow that sent a demon head recoiling back with the crunch of breaking bone. He looked apologetically at the demon left standing in front of him before he reached out and twisted its neck. Two bodies slumped on the ground.

He stepped over them to find Connor's whole body twisting away to his right with the force of a blow. Connor managed to get his hand out to stop his head from hitting the wall, then grabbed a carton from a pile next to him and swung it as he twisted back out. He missed completely.

"Okay, that's enough," Angel said, turning the last demon around and punching him in the face before following that up with a roundhouse. Three bodies lay decorating the alley like weirdly shaped boulders.

Connor's hair was sticking to his forehead. He kept rubbing his neck as he looked down at the demons.

"You all right?" Angel asked for the second time in half an hour.

"Yeah," Connor said. He didn't sound it. "See, the thing is..."

"What?"

"That." Connor pointed as the bodies of the demons shook in seizures. The demons opened their eyes and stared up at Angel and Connor before they began to get back onto their feet.

"Okay, *how* did those old ladies survive these things?" Angel asked. "I'm guessing they ran," Connor replied.

"Good plan," Angel said as he grabbed Connor's hand.

"Crazy," Connor said, making his way around Wesley's seat for the third time. It was the first thing he'd said since he and Angel returned to the theater.

"The demons?" Wesley asked, looking up from his book.

Connor stopped pacing. "No. Me."

"You didn't do too bad for your first time back," Angel said in a tone which suggested he certainly might be lying.

"No," Connor said a little too loudly. "Me. I was crazy to think that I could just come back here and still have - I don't know. Something resembling normal."

"You are normal," Angel said. He gripped the back of a chair, bent his shoulders, and turned to Wesley. "Anything?"

Wesley sighed and put the volume down on the table next to him. He rubbed his forehead. "Not as of yet, I'm afraid."

Connor moved to pace the floor again, but Angel's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Maybe we should ask Connor," Angel said.

"Yeah, 'cause I was so much help out there," Connor answered, voice wavering between petulance and mockery.

Wesley picked up another book and set it on his lap, unopened.

"No," Angel said, "because those demons knew you. Want to tell me what that was all about?"

Connor didn't move away from Angel's grasp. He stood there, shoulders hunched, looking too young for his age. Wesley watched his chest as it rose and fell.

"I... I may have gotten into a few fights in Palo Alto," Connor said, finally, carefully.

"Fights," Angel repeated.

"Yeah," Connor said. "I just - well, after the whole end of the world that wasn't - I wanted to know. What I could do."

"Do."

"Are you gonna repeat everything I say?"

"Not necessarily."

"So, I went after these demons," Connor continued.

"Demons."

"You're doing it again," Connor said.

Angel's grip tightened the smallest amount on Connor's shoulder before he let his hand drop.

Wesley discarded the book he'd chosen and pulled another one closer. The spine creaked as he flipped through the pages.

"So I went after these demons," Connor started again.

The three of them were gathered near Gunn's desk with the rest of the theater shrouding them in half-light. Wesley stood up and walked to the nearest window while he turned a few more pages. He opened the curtains and looked out into the street.

"Only it turns out I couldn't kill them," Connor was saying.

"Well, that's to be expected," Wesley said. He reached as if to push his glasses farther up his nose before he dropped his hand back on to the page. He turned to find that Connor was looking at him.

"Are these your demons?" Wesley held up the open face of the book. Connor walked over and peered at the lithograph, then nodded. "They're called sha'dnak. They must be killed in a very specific manner. One must decapitate them directly below the ring of horns on their neck. Otherwise, they appear to die, but in reality - "

"Are just really pissed off?" Angel supplied.

Wesley's lips pressed together. "Rather."

"That's... gonna require some precision," Connor said.

"Also, swords," Angel said. "Wait. That explains why they're not dead, but not why they're *here*."

"As you yourself said, they're here because of Connor," Wesley said.

"Not again," Connor groaned. He paced the length of the floor between Wesley and Angel before stopping in the middle.

Wesley frowned as he looked from father to son and then back again. "Connor is, or at least he appears to be, a perfectly normal teenaged boy."

"He is," Angel said while Connor stared at his shoes.

"I believe that's the attraction," Wesley said.

"Oh my God," Connor said. He shot Wesley an alarmed look. His lips were slightly parted. "They want to - is this gonna be like that guy in the bus depot?"

"No." Angel's word was emphatic. "Wait - what guy in the bus depot?"

"I took care of it," Connor said. He wouldn't meet Angel's eyes.

Angel wasn't deterred. "Because I will *kick the ass* of - do you know I know at least two hundred ways to torture somebody just using his shirt buttons?"

"You figured that out before they invented TV, right?" Connor asked.

"*Anybody* who even thinks about - "

"I took care of it," Connor said again. This time, he looked at Angel as he said the words. His tone was completely flat

Angel calmed down a bit. "Really?"

"Knocked him out," Connor said, eyes still on Angel. He mimed hitting someone three times. "You'd like it. It was violent and everything."

A hint of pride touched Angel's face. "You know I can show you how to do that with just one punch. See if you turn your wrist just *so* you can - "

Wesley cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, our demons?"

"Oh, right," Angel said. "Them. Okay, why do they want to have sex with Connor?"

"You know the family resemblance between the both of you - " Wesley shook his head, bemused in spite of himself. "Never mind. To answer the question, I merely meant that Connor's managed to incapacitate several sha'dnak demons. I'm certain they find him very intriguing, much as vampires regard Slayers."

"Don't vampires also want Slayers dead?" Connor asked. He glanced at Angel. "You know, usually?"

"There is that," Wesley acknowledged.

"So," Angel said, "We round up these sha'dnak, and we play guillotine. Sounds like a plan."

Wesley nodded, but Angel was already gathering weapons from the bag by his feet. Wesley watched Connor track his father's every movement. When he caught Wesley observing him, Connor tilted his head and stared back. His eyes were wide, curious.

"What?" Connor said.

"Nothing," Wesley said, closing the book. "Nothing."

"You are still here," Illyria said, stepping out from the basement doorway.

"Yes," Wesley replied. "And we could use your help."

"You wish me to kill things?" she asked, brushing past Connor. He tracked her the same way that he tracked Angel.

"There are some demons who want to hurt Connor," Wesley informed her.

Illyria turned her head to the side to look the boy over. "In my time I would have used your bones as offal to feed my dogs."

Angel pushed the bag of weapons away from her with his foot.

"I have a dog," Connor said. "His name is Buster. And you used to like me. Kind of."

"This isn't Fred," Wesley said. He put his book down and started to unroll his sleeves.

"Angel said she has Fred's memories." Connor took a deep breath. "Isn't that what makes a person?"

Wesley buttoned his sleeve and tugged the fabric over his wrist. He very deliberately said nothing.

"Let's head out," Angel intervened. He held out a sword to Connor. "You remember how to use this?"

Connor took the hilt and pointed the sword away from everyone. A frown appeared between his brows. "I think so."

"Let's find out," Wesley said. He finished buttoning the cuffs of his sleeves and raised his hand in time to

catch the handle of the axe that Angel tossed him.

The sharp crack of glass shattering resonated behind them, and Wesley turned to see three sha'dnak demons breaking and entering into the theater.

"Yes," one of them said. "Let us find out."

Even outnumbered, the demons remained unfazed, and they also seemed to learn fast. All three of them were gunning for Angel this time, determined to take him out first. They moved faster than before, anticipating Angel's moves as if they'd been studying him as well.

Angel managed to keep them at arm's length with glancing blows with the tip of his sword until Illyria dragged one of them away by the tail of hair gathered on the top of its head. She trailed the demon behind her like a scarf as it struggled to get out of her hold.

"I hope there's nothing about killing them from the front," Wesley said. His axe blade made a surgical decapitation as he stood behind one of the demons left sparring with Angel.

Illyria, weaponless, seemed content enough to bat her demon around between two corners of the room, most of the action delivered with the heels of her feet. Connor stood in the middle of the lobby, looking from Illyria to Angel. He seemed unsure who needed more help. Wesley pushed him gently towards Angel's direction and then headed towards the other side of the room.

With one demon to wrestle with, Angel gave it a swift kick in the solar plexus, then a head butt to move it into range. He glanced over to find Connor standing, sword in both hands and his knees locked.

"Bend your knees," Angel told him. "And keep your eyes on its neck."

Angel hit the demon in the middle of its forehead with the hilt of his sword, and the demon bent over in pain, exposing his neck. Connor ran forward and raised his sword in the air. The flash of the blade shining on its way downward was brief and effective. The sha'dnak's head rolled away until the points of the frills sank into the carpet. Dead eyes looked up at Angel from the floor, blank and unmoving.

Connor's eyes were far from dead. They glinted like the sword as he watched Angel in silence. Without a word, Connor turned and started to walk towards the door.

He paused when he saw Illyria holding the third demon's head between her hands.

Angel caught Wesley's look and followed after Connor.

"Where're you going?" he asked.

"Back to my farm in Smallville," Connor answered.

"Wait."

Connor stopped and turned his head far enough to look at Angel over his shoulder. He eyed the door again, his shoulder slumped.

"My mother has a wind chime that she still hangs up in her kitchen window," he said. "All the chimes are shaped like sand-dollars. I bought it for her when I was twelve."

Angel kept his eyes on Connor's back. "I know this is hard."

"This isn't what I wanted," Connor said. "It's not what I came here for."

"It hasn't been the easiest of days."

Connor's laughter sounded strange and forced. "Is it ever easy?"

"It can be," Wesley said, walking over to stand beside Angel.

"It will be," Angel said. "Let me help you. I can train you, you'll be good as new - "

"Yeah, because you and me fighting together always worked so well," Connor snapped.

For a moment Angel looked as though he'd been struck. Then he swallowed it and spoke calmly. "You're right. There's a history. We can't deny that. But I want what's best for you, Connor. That was true from the moment I found out about you, and it hasn't changed. If you really want to leave, then I won't stop you. But if you want to stay then you're welcome. You are always welcome."

Connor lingered by the doorway, his hand resting on the metal handle. "It can't be like it was before."

"Of course not," Angel said.

"I'm not - " Connor's gaze flickered over to Wesley, as though he would remember better. "I'm not going to be that guy. Not ever again."

"That's okay," Angel said.

Connor sucked in a breath. He let it out slowly. When he faced Angel again, his cheeks were heated pink. "I'll stay. Answer the phones. File reports. Whatever the job was when you were going to hire me anyway. And if I train - I want it to be with Illyria."

There wasn't even a breath between Connor's last word and Angel's first.

"Agreed," Angel said.

Spike stomped his way into the Walden. One half of him was covered in slime so thick that his dark clothes were invisible underneath it.

He stopped in the lobby with the bang of the door still volleying back and forth in the emptiness.

"That's just perfect," he said. "Send me out to do the dirty work while you lot get your beauty rest."

There was a box of tissues on the counter, and he walked over to it, axe dragging behind him and catching every once in a while on the carpeting. He snatched a tissue and tried to wipe his jacket clean, then gave up. The tissue made a wet sound against the wall.

His boots made the floorboards crack as he climbed the stairs. He shrugged out of his jacket, mumbling to himself.

"See how you like having a face full of leather and slime."

He headed towards Angel's office. His pause in front of the door was almost imperceptible, and then his steps boomed down the rest of the hallway.

At the end of the hallway, he opened the door to the restroom and let it shut with a distinct click. When he turned and retraced his steps, his shoes were completely silent.

He cracked Angel's door open just wide enough to see inside. Connor was sitting on the floor with his legs crossed, a notebook on his knee. He checked his watch mid-scribble.

"Aw, man," Connor said, unfolding his legs and stuffing his notebook into his bag at the same time. He reached outside of Spike's vision and pulled a handful of loose leaf paper towards him, sticking those inside the bag as well. When he swung the strap across his shoulder, a piece of paper fluttered to the ground.

Spike closed the door right before Connor opened back up from the other side. He slipped into the shadows and watched Connor's back retreat towards the stairs.

Spike waited until he heard the snap of the lobby doors shutting, and then walked into Angel's office. He picked up the piece of paper and read the boy's notes, words written in dull pencil, the cursive precise and adolescent. Words Spike would recognize under any circumstances. *Angelus* and *Sunnydale* and *events that sent Angel to hell*.

Spike peered through the open door into the empty hallway and crumpled the paper in his fist.

Fade out.

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