

## Episode 6.6 Transits

by Just Human and Jane Davitt

"This is it, Mom. This is the one." The sandy-haired young boy pushed the glossy catalog he'd been reading at his mother, careful to avoid the flour dusted across the black marble counter in front of them but ignoring the fact that she was half-way through peeling an apple.

Pausing with the knife still angled towards her, his mother frowned at the picture. "Jordy, that's a mighty big *and expensive* stereo."

He shook his head at her blindness and carried on looking at the stereo. "Not when you look at what it's got, Mom! High performance digital sound, seven channel 120 watt receiver, *and* an eight hundred disc changer!"

With a smile and a shake of her head, his mother went back to her task. "I'm sure we can find something nice, but a little smaller, to put in the living room. We can ask your cousin -"

Pulling back a stool, he sat down next to her. "Not the living room; for downstairs. I want it as a present for the celebration."

Putting down the peeled apple and her knife, she wiped her hands on a dishcloth, picked the apple back up, and began to slice it. "When your father gets back from Japan next week, we can talk about a new stereo for the family. We won't be putting expensive electronics next to your cage in the basement."

The catalog hit the counter, sending up a cloud of flour. "Mom, you don't know what it's like down there for hours and hours! It's *boring*!"

"Jordy, you'll be thirteen next week, and I've been chaining you up down there since you were practically a baby. Don't tell *me* about long nights in the basement." Putting the bowl aside, she pulled a ball of dough in front of her. "Besides, 'hours and hours' is a bit of an exaggeration. Now you're older, we only lock you up half an hour before it happens. And afterwards, well, let's just say if anyone needs entertaining, it's me."

"Fine," he said, lips pushed out in a sulky pout. "I'll ask Grandma."

The rolling pin landed hard on the dough but only gave a muffled thwap. "You will not." Shaking her head, she looked up at the newcomer entering the kitchen. "Daniel, will you tell your cousin what a bad idea it is to put *expensive* stereo equipment into a basement?"

Lifting his eyebrows, the young man almost allowed a smile to form on his face as he looked over Jordy's shoulder at the sound system. "Nice. These sub-woofers could probably set off the San Andres."

"See! He likes it." Jordy grinned triumphantly at his mother as his cousin reached out for the catalog.

"But, Aunt Maureen's right; you don't put something this shiny in the basement. Terrible acoustics for one thing."

Jordy deflated and slumped forward, picking up a piece of peel and shredding it moodily.

"The boom box you have is plenty," said Maureen firmly.

Picking up an apple from the bag beside his aunt, Jordy's cousin polished it on his shirt and flipped a few pages in the catalog. "On the other hand, a single CD on repeat is banned under the Geneva convention. But something like this -" He pointed to a much smaller system with a CD changer. "This would pass any Red Cross inspection."

Jordy watched his mother's face change from rejection to indecision and finally resignation, and he gave a delighted whoop of victory. "Knew she'd listen to you!" He gave his cousin a grin. "You're so cool, Oz."

Oz bit down into the apple, as green as his eyes, and grinned back. "I get that a lot."

---

## [Watch the Credits](#)

- **Episode 6.6:** Transits
  - **Written by:** Justhuman and Jane Davitt
  - **Edited by:** Debxena, Mackiemesser, and Highlander II
  - **Researched by:** Adoxerella, Overworked, Eac, Stars, and Wondersheep
  - **Produced by:** The Brat Queen and Flaming Muse
- 

Fix main theater lighting: it was on Gunn's mental list.

The chandelier had been down since the Haunter attack. There were other lights, but they were only intended to get people to their seats during preview, so they didn't do much. The chandelier itself looked like a diva taking her dying breath the way it was draped across the center section. All in all, the place was kind of eerie. Angel would call it character or some other crap like that, but since Gunn couldn't see in the dark like some of his co-workers he was all for brightening it up.

They had started using a few of the theatrical lights that had been left behind. It hadn't taken much effort to aim them at the section of floor set aside for combat practice. Each of the lights had a piece of colored plastic in front of the lens. On the edges of the irregular circle they formed, each light bled its distinctive color. Red, blue, and amber melded in the middle of the practice area, creating something that mostly looked like sunlight - at least on Connor's face. It did weird things to Illyria's skin, sometimes making her glow, sometimes making her look green.

The main floor was angled down towards the stage, making it a less than ideal practice area. Having it that way was good; with the things they usually ran into, Gunn felt like he'd never been in a fair fight, so there was no point in practicing in ideal conditions.

Setting down the brown paper bag he'd carried in from the lobby, Gunn took a seat next to Spike, who was fiddling with his lighter and watching Connor spar with Illyria... or, more accurately, watching Illyria toss Connor around.

"How's he doing?" Gunn asked.

"Like some poor sod who got tossed into a cage match and has no bloody idea what hit him." Methodically, Spike opened and closed the lighter, his eyes never leaving the fight.

Gunn winced as Illyria picked Connor up and threw him into the front wall of the stage, nearly landing him in the orchestra pit. "Illyria, don't break him; we still need him to answer the phone."

Illyria looked put-out, or maybe Gunn was just imagining that the god-king would be. The truth was he had no idea what the hell went on in her head. Connor picked himself up and dropped into something approximating a fighting stance.

Spike leaned over, lowering his voice. "He's tough. Whatever magical whatsit got to him did a good job."

Leaning away a little, Gunn grunted. "Uh-huh. You do get that we're not watching a movie and it's okay to talk out loud. Also, not your date."

Spike gave Gunn that slow shit-eating grin, the one that Gunn hated when it was directed at him. Leaning further into Gunn's space, Spike said in a slightly louder voice that shouldn't have carried to the pair

fighting, "He only looks a little foppish when he's dodging a right-cross."

"Hey!" Connor stopped, glaring up at Gunn and Spike. Illyria clocked him in the back of the head, sending him face first onto the dusty floor.

"Kid's got hearing like a vamp." Spike ran his tongue along his lower lip and continued to work the lighter.

"And you care, because?"

Spike shrugged.

Sighing, Gunn got up, grabbing the brown paper bag. "It's bad enough that Angel keeps firing temps, Illyria. Don't give him a reason to quit."

"He is still inadequate. I would not have him as a pet." Cocking her head, Illyria looked at Spike, still sitting in the audience. He waved from his seat. Ignoring him and transferring her gaze to Gunn, Illyria continued. "With work he might equal the smallest hell beast that I kept in my kennels in the time before."

"Gee, thanks." From the way Connor was rubbing the back of his neck, Gunn could see the kid was heading for a serious headache.

Gunn took pity on him. "How would you like a new assignment, Connor?"

Connor gave him a hopeful look. "Please."

Gunn handed him the bag. A thoughtful frown came across Connor's face as he looked into the bag.

"What's all this? Rubber gloves, soap, and what the heck is this for?" Connor pulled a curved plastic stick from the bag about a foot and a half long.

From his seat in the back, Spike raised his hand. "Not sure what anyone had in mind, but it conjures a few images for me."

"Spike! I think we can manage without you." Gunn didn't turn to face him but instead pulled out a small box, showing it to Connor. "I think the stick thing goes with the disposable toilet brush things, and if it doesn't I don't want to know."

"Again, I could make some sug-" Spike began.

"Don't. Want. To. Know." Gunn dropped the box back in the bag and addressed Connor. "The boss' girlfriend is tired of wearing flip-flops in the shower near the dressing rooms. This is your opportunity to score some points; full moon is tomorrow." Gunn wondered if the lawyer stance or the gang leader one would be more effective in persuading the kid to dive into this new mission.

"Is this part of my job description?" Connor looked back and forth between Gunn and Illyria, probably weighing the advantages of going back to fighting.

"Sure it is. Under the clause where minions get all the shit jobs." Spike called over his shoulder as he walked back to the lobby.

"Hey! I'm an intern, not a minion."

Gunn just laughed and gave Connor's shoulder a couple of friendly slaps before heading out of the theater.

---

Nina's senses were keener now that she was a werewolf. Old buildings like the Walden were chock-full of

odors that newer buildings just didn't have. When Angel had first opened it up, there was the pervading smell of must and mildew that made everyone wrinkle their noses, but even in that Nina had been able to pick up subtler things, like old plaster, rat droppings and rusty pipes, nuances that to other people were part of the ambient smell. Once the place was aired out, things had gotten better, at least on the main level; the basement still left a lot to be desired. It was a far cry from the antiseptic clean feel that the Wolfram & Hart building had had.

Trailing her fingers along the wooden banister, Nina took her time climbing the stairs to Angel's office, savoring Angel's scent. It was one of those things girlfriends did; most would have probably buried their faces in one of his old sweatshirts or his pillow. Nina did have a souvenir or two snatched from Angel's laundry basket, but she could get that same thrill of closeness even when she was half a block away from her boyfriend.

The voices coming from the office weren't necessary for her to know that Wesley was in there with Angel. Ever since she had been bitten, Nina had come to know all their scents to one degree or another.

Angel and Spike had something extra - or maybe missing - that set them apart from humans. Nina had just labeled it *vampire* in her head, but now Wesley shared it, too, which meant the right word was probably *dead*, but Nina didn't care for the term. Instead, she settled on the idea that they were from the same *family*.

As she approached the top of the stairs, she could see them through the half-open doorway.

"A few dead animals just doesn't seem like much to get excited about," Wesley said doubtfully.

Angel reached over Wesley's shoulder, tapping his finger against the relevant article in the local paper that was spread out over the desk.

"I've known some cat owners who'd disagree," Angel said, "but are we sure in this case 'animal' means exactly that?"

Wesley picked up the paper and studied it again. "Well, they've spelled three words wrong, and I'd be inclined to use a comma there - " His finger tapped against the paper. " - not a colon, but other than that they seem to be pretty clear about it. Corpses in the sewer tunnels. It happens."

Angel took the paper from him, studied it for a long moment, and then gave a slightly disappointed grunt of agreement. "Yeah, maybe." He tossed the paper down so that the pages splayed out across the desk.

Wesley sighed, picked it up, and folded it neatly. "Angel, I'm trying to keep - oh, never mind." He leaned back in his chair and glanced up at Angel. "There's no harm in going to take a look, though. In fact, rodents, dead or alive, scarcely merit a mention, let alone three paragraphs, so it seems logical to assume that we're talking about something a little less mundane."

Angel moved over to the coffee maker and poured a cup. He reached for the sugar, and Wesley cleared his throat gently.

"Angel, you have a cup right here, and you don't -"

He grinned. "Not for me."

Nina walked through the door on cue, and Angel handed her the cup with a smile, a flourish, and a smug glance at Wesley as he said, "Now this is why vampires make good boyfriends; we're always prepared."

"I seem to recall that being more of a Boy Scout thing," Wesley murmured. He gave Nina a friendly smile. "Good to see you again."

Returning Wesley's smile, Nina said, "Good to see you, too."

Carefully holding the hot cup of coffee off to the side, Nina stood on her toes and gave Angel a quick kiss,

hoping it would give her an excuse for the hot flush she was feeling in her face. It was a fairly tame kiss, not the kind she wanted to give him, but it seemed appropriate since they had an audience. "Definitely a good boyfriend." Before she could get wrapped up in the ideas of the things she *did* want to do with Angel, Nina took a half-step back and sipped her coffee, reminding herself that it was the thought that counted and not the actual taste.

Then she noticed something different. Pointing at the corner of Angel's desk where Wesley was sitting by the newspaper and various books, she commented, "Hey, clean."

Angel followed her glance and frowned. "It is? Oh, yeah, it is." He raised his eyebrows. "You trying to tell me something, Wes?"

Wesley smiled and tweaked a pen straight in the holder he'd placed just within reach. "I prefer to think of it as setting a good example. Unless, of course, you find unbelievable clutter an efficient way of filing, in which case I'll scatter some files around at random, and you'll never know I was here." He gave Angel a quizzical look. "You never used to be quite this disorganized. Are you finding it difficult to adjust to a slightly smaller work space?"

"No." Wesley and Nina both waited patiently. "A bit," Angel admitted sheepishly. "And I'm starting to appreciate Harmony more than I ever thought possible, despite the whole sleeping with the enemy when she was supposed to be loyal to me deal."

Playfully poking Angel in the chest, Nina put on a mock-fierce look. "No more cute secretaries with nice-looking legs." Taking a step closer, Nina allowed their bodies barely to touch and then pointed a thumb towards Wesley. "He's a good influence; you should keep him around and learn from him."

"Somehow, based on past experience, I can't see that last part happening," Wesley said dryly. He stood up and smiled at them both as he moved towards the door. "But I'm quite willing to take care of some things for him, Nina. Particularly when it's obvious that if I don't do it he'll never get around to it." He paused, surveying the cluttered office and the small cleared space. Rolling his eyes, Wesley looking resigned but with a glimmer of amusement. "It's a start."

He nodded at them and left, closing the door behind him.

As the door clicked shut, Nina put her coffee on the desk and then slid her arms around Angel's neck. "He's got a point you know. Someone - " she glanced innocently at the ceiling before looking back at Angel. "Someone gets so wrapped up in his work that he forgets about the little things." Seeing a worried look cross Angel's face, Nina gave him a quick kiss. "I'm not talking about dates or anniversaries. I'm thinking more about you taking care of you. Or, you know, letting me take care of you."

"Either way sounds good to me," Angel assured her. He sat down in the chair Wesley had been using and pulled her onto his lap without meeting any resistance. "And if Wesley wants to spring clean, he's welcome to, but I don't need any reminders when it comes to you, because you're not a little thing. When I've got you close like this, it's the last way I'd describe you." Before she had time to do more than suck in an outraged breath, he added hastily, "Which doesn't mean you're heavy. No, you're just right." Her finger poked him in the ribs and he winced. "Aren't you supposed to be in class right now? Or is beating me up for a slip of the tongue more appealing?"

Nina's fingers found more gentle pursuits tracing lines up and down his chest. "I can't deny I like getting *rough* with you, and yes, you caught me, I'm ditching classes today. I got a bizarre bill in the mail from a pottery shop trying to charge me for some kid's birthday party: four ceramic kitties, five puppies and two mugs. Since it had the last four digits of my credit card, I thought I better go in person to straighten it out, in case it's identity theft." Shifting, Nina reached around, scratching the back of Angel's neck while she enjoyed the feel of his thumb tracing patterns and circles across her lower back. "I thought that since I needed part of the day to do that, I'd also do something about the basement grime before the full moon tomorrow."

"Okay, you and Wes are starting to freak me out," Angel said. "I see Gunn with a duster in his hand, I'm

going to assume he's possessed and hit first, ask questions later." He settled back into his chair, tightening his arms around her. "That credit card thing though - yeah, you should look into it. Want me to come and stand behind you looking menacing? I'm good at menacing."

There was a sincerity in Angel's face that made things flutter inside Nina. Being an independent, self-reliant woman didn't mean she couldn't get a thrill over her boyfriend being willing to go into battle for her. Granted, with Angel that could probably get literal. It was kind of like a cat bringing a dead mouse as a present.

"My hero." Before her brain could further turn to mush, Nina leaned in to give Angel another kiss on the cheek, smiling when he turned his head and brought their mouths together for something longer, slower, and sweeter than just a peck.

As they broke off, Nina stood reluctantly. "I think I can handle the bill without my own personal bodyguard, cute as he may be. Besides, if I stay here any longer, I suspect neither of us is getting anything done today."

"Well, if you're sure - cute?" Angel gave her a smile that was the definition of the word as far as she was concerned, looking pleased and just a little flustered. "Not what people usually go for as their first choice when they're describing me, but I can live with it, I guess."

Shaking her head, Nina tugged on his hand until Angel stood. "Come on, cute hero, walk me out." Nina turned, taking a step towards the office door, but then was spun around into Angel's arms. The momentary stiffness from having been surprised faded, and Nina relaxed. "Hey, errands."

Angel nuzzled against her neck, which he was just a little too good at - though Nina wasn't exactly complaining - and said plaintively, "And I'm not on your 'to do' list?" Nina let out a sudden burst of laughter, and he straightened up. "I'm really not thinking these comments through, am I? You go and do... stuff; I'll carry on fighting the evil dust bunnies."

Putting her hands on both sides of Angel's face, Nina stood on her toes again and kissed Angel, just hard enough that he'd remember it and hopefully not so hard that he wouldn't let her get out. Taking his large hand in her smaller one, Nina pulled him out the door, and the pair descended the stairs together.

---

As Angel walked Nina to the door he could see Spike and Wesley looking at a map spread across the concession counter. Figuring they were far enough away, he snagged the belt loop of her jeans and pulled her into one last kiss. "You need to tell me what you want for breakfast later this week."

"Okay, I'll think about it." Nina gave him a stern look. "Don't get into too much trouble."

"Who, me?"

"Oh, yes, he's a paragon of saintly behavior, and trouble never comes in his wake," Spike said without looking up from the map.

Angel rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

Patting him on the chest, Nina rolled her eyes as well and gave his hand a squeeze before she opened the door. Sunlight cut a wedge on the faded red and gold carpet, framing her in the golden glow as she walked through. The artist in him appreciated the play of light and beauty, but he was also reminded there were places he was never going to be able to follow her.

He headed towards the counter where Wesley was tracing a path on the map with his finger. "It's not that far from here; probably easier to get to via the sewers rather than through the streets." Wesley straightened up. "According to the newspaper, they were able to divert normal activities around the tunnel with the *animals* so it must have happened in a side tunnel."

Snorting, Spike turned away from the map. "Probably a bunch of Bravkactors sacrificing their young."

Wesley gave that comment a moment's consideration before shaking his head. "I doubt it. If they were devout enough to follow the old ways, one would assume they'd go the whole hog and consume the remains. I think we have to look at something slightly less..."

"Traditional?" Angel offered.

Wesley gave him an approving look that involved no more than a slight flicker of his eyebrow. "Exactly."

"Traditional would involve having a victim asking us for help. You know, a case? What makes you think this is worth our time when we have helpless needing helping?" Spike propped an elbow on the counter and leaned like he was thinking about taking up permanent residence.

Angel swept out his hand, knocking Spike's elbow aside, and Wesley watched with a faint smile as Spike, without any visible reaction, remained on his feet, leaning nonchalantly on thin air.

"It's called being proactive," Angel informed him. He glanced at Wesley. "Right?"

"Oh, certainly," Wesley agreed, clearly fighting to keep his face solemn. "The very definition of the word; we're anticipating a future problem and -"

"Nipping it in the bud," Angel finished triumphantly. He stared at Spike, who was still without any visible means of support, and raised an eyebrow. "Want to bring your pruning shears and make yourself useful? Or would you rather work on the miming and really hone your ability to annoy?"

"And here I always thought you liked mimes." Straightening up, Spike walked in front of Angel doing a fair impersonation of a man trapped in an invisible box.

"I liked making them scream," Angel clarified. "Want me to show you how I did it?"

Angel was waiting for the hand aimed at his nose, but he hadn't anticipated Spike's sly feint towards his coat pocket in an attempt to steal his car keys under cover of a scuffle. He stepped back quickly, glaring at him, and pulled the keys out, dangling them in front of Spike with a taunting smile.

"After these by any chance?"

"Might have been."

"You've wrecked enough of my cars, Spike. You don't get to drive this one. Ever."

Spike scowled at him. "Anyone ever tell you -"

Wesley coughed. "Fascinating though this is, I believe the bodies were found in the sewers?" he said pointedly, glancing between them. "We're walking?"

---

The older neighborhood had a distinctive charm: brick buildings with storefronts on street level and apartments up above. Checking the addresses, Nina finally spotted a hand painted sign hung on the side of one building, indicating that the Colorama Pottery Studio was around back. Following the gravel driveway she found a short flight of stairs leading downwards, the banister wrapped in twinkle lights. Lace curtains hung in the windows at ground level, serving as a backdrop for jack-o-lantern candle holders, spoon-rests in the shape of Thanksgiving turkeys, and a figurine of a blue pig. At the bottom of the stairs Nina was able to peer through the glass at the top of the door. The brightly painted walls sported hand-painted plates and mirrors with mosaic frames.

A small set of bells tinkled as she came through the door. The shop smelled of glazes and clay from the

raw bisque pieces that lined unfinished bookshelves. There was a faint odor of something else she couldn't quite identify. The main counter was a mosaic of tiles that reflected the available paint colors next to neatly printed signs listing the studio hours and weekly specials.

Assuming the clerk would come out in a moment, she took some time to look at the finished pieces on display. Some of them looked fairly professional; most had some thought put into them, but the execution was amateurish. She couldn't help but smile at the small animal statues that were a mixture of colors that didn't occur in the wild - purple kitties and orange dogs with green tails.

Strangely, it had an appeal for her. Her passion was for hand-crafting clay sculptures with intricately incised designs for decorative glazing, each piece a work of art and a labor of love. Because of her need for monthly confinement, she had regretfully passed up a semester-long trip to study the techniques of artisans in North Africa.

"Hi. Sorry, I was in the back loading the kiln. Did you want to paint?"

Startled, Nina turned to find a young man, her own age, wearing a casual shirt and pants with row of three silver hoops piercing his left ear. His nametag read, 'Stephen.' Incense. The odor she couldn't quite place before had become more pronounced when the clerk came from the back.

"Actually, I think I've been billed by mistake." Handing Stephen the receipt she'd received in the mail, Nina leaned on the counter as he frowned and typed the invoice number into a computer. "I haven't been here before, and I haven't hosted a kid's party recently, so..." Not liking the frown on the man's face, Nina geared herself up for a fight.

"Huh, it's odd that we have your name and credit card number, Ms. Ash. I recognize the customer who planned the party; I'm not sure how this mix-up happened." Looking up from the computer screen, he smiled at her. "I'll tell you what, come into the back with me. I'll explain it to the manager, and I'm sure he'll put in a credit for your account right away."

"Oh." Relieved that it would be so easy, Nina returned the smile. "That sounds great. Actually, I'm a sculpture student. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd love to see your back room, the kiln, and everything."

Looking delighted, Stephen nodded. "Oh, sure, right this way." He opened the door he had entered from earlier and led Nina down a short corridor. As they passed the restrooms, the scent of incense became more pronounced. There was something under the powerful odor, but her nose was too overwhelmed to make it out. Using a key, Stephen opened the door at the end of the hall and stepped aside and gestured that Nina should precede him.

Nina stopped only two steps into the room because there was a man floating in front of her. He was lying face-up in the middle of the room, wearing only a bathing suit. Blood. It was the scent being masked by the incense. It ran in thin trickles down the sides of his body from wounds created by metal hooks.

Taking it all in, Nina suddenly understood that the man wasn't floating but was suspended from the ceiling by a series of metal hooks that had been inserted through his skin and attached to long white straps that ran through pulleys. Where the double row of hooks pierced him, the victim's skin stretched upwards while his body weight pulled him down. There were two, four, six - no eight - total in his chest and stomach with another six in his legs.

Around him there were two men and a woman dressed in the latest in vintage jeans and cut off tee-shirts, sporting more body jewelry than Nina had ever seen in one place. All three of them were holding long, thin, curved needles. Nina could see that there was already a neat row of cold metal running down the victim's spine.

They all turned to look at her. Letting out a harsh breath, Nina spun around and slammed into the clerk. He smiled and gave her a light push so Nina stumbled further into the room.

The side tunnel hadn't been hard to find. Between the map and the smell they'd been following for thirty minutes, it would have been hard to miss. Spike carried on down the main tunnel, scouting ahead, leaving Angel and Wesley to survey the carnage. The tunnel floor was covered by bodies of varying sizes but the same species. "Looks like the sewer department wasn't in a rush to clear this out."

"It would be hard to fault them." Wesley peered down the tunnel, shining his flashlight on the damp, curved walls. "I wonder what that is." He started picking his way through the bodies to a raised area about thirty feet further on.

"Nothing more down the main tunnel," Spike reported, appearing behind them. "Hey, Bravkaktors. Looks like they sacrificed more than their surplus kiddies."

Wesley gave him a slightly impatient look. "Spike, impressed though I am with your unexpected knowledge of demonic rituals, I think that you're letting it cloud your judgment." He nodded at the corpses. "This is a slaughter, not a sacrifice. And there's something else to consider -"

"No bodies," Angel said.

Spike rolled his eyes. "Knew this would happen. The strain. The stress. He's lost it." Speaking more slowly and loudly than usual he said, "Angel. Look down. Bodies. Lots of 'em." He patted Angel's arm. "I'll take care of you now you've reached your golden years, mate. Never fear."

"They didn't kill any of their attackers," Angel clarified, giving Spike a look that had him removing his hand hurriedly. "Either they took all their dead and wounded with them, or the Bravkaktors didn't get to do any damage at all."

"And they're usually fairly efficient fighters," Wesley added thoughtfully, squatting down and examining an arm that was no longer attached to a body. "No sign of any blood other than theirs, no evidence that they even managed to inflict any damage..."

"Hard to say that without seeing the other guys, but, yeah, doesn't look like they stood much of a chance." Spike was randomly turning over corpses, looking for some distinguishing mark.

Having made his way to the other end of the cavern, Wesley inspected the raised dais. "It's an altar. Not that I'm as familiar with their rituals as some people..." Wesley looked pointedly at Spike, who doffed a non-existent hat. "But it does appear they were going to perform the sacrifice. Spike, if you'd like to take a look?"

"Wouldn't do much good. It's not like I've ever seen the ritual." Somewhat belatedly, he added with a shrug, "Or cared. You know how it is; you're making polite conversation with a demon when you're trying to see his cards, and you pick up things. Fleas sometimes, if the moggies aren't from good homes." Lifting one body with the toe of his boot, Spike shook his head and lowered the corpse again.

"So all of your vast knowledge of demon-kind comes from back room poker involving cats," Angel said as he joined Wesley at the altar. He bent down and picked up a chalice that had fallen to the ground, examining the insignia before placing it beside a similarly decorated bowl.

"Kittens." Spike corrected him. "It's not the same when they get older."

"Be that as it may," Wesley interrupted, "the preparations for the ritual appear to be intact. I can't guarantee that all the items are where they belong, but everything is set out in a precise manner."

"Meaning?" Angel asked.

"Meaning the Bravkaktors came for here for a family get-together, and whoever crashed the party wasn't here to stop the ritual." Spike stood up, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Exactly," Wesley said. "And we're still none the wiser as to the attacker's motivations for the massacre."

Angel had been studying the bodies, looking for a pattern in the wounds, and there was only one thing in common. "Yeah, yeah we are." Grabbing the nearest body, he dropped it on the altar, sweeping aside the chalice and an assortment of knives and bowls. "Take a look at the wounds. Multiple stabs to non-vital organs, assuming that this thing keeps its organs in more or less the expected places. Look at the face. Whoever did this wasn't out for death; it was out for pain, torture."

---

"Let me out of here!" Turning again, Nina saw that there was another woman in the room, who had been standing behind the door.

Stephen locked the door, turning around and holding out his hands in what Nina guessed was supposed to be a calming gesture. "It's okay. Really. We're honored that you're here."

Backing off to the side, away from everyone, Nina looked for another exit but didn't see one. "Okay, I think I want to leave now." As her eyes darted around the room, the decor was making her even more frightened. There were at least two sets of chains and manacles mounted on the walls, as well as a rack with a variety of whips hanging neatly. Near the activity in the center of the room was a low table covered with a white sheet, where an array of needles and hooks were lined up like some macabre operating room accessory. And, in the back of the room, there was a large steel cage. While Nina had no idea what was going on, she knew that she had spent too much time in cages this past year. The sight of it filled her with an undeniable dread.

"Oh! *Oh!*" The clerk was coming towards her with the palms of his hands turned towards her, as if he was trying to calm her down. "Please, Honored One, do not leave us so quickly."

Reaching out, Nina grabbed the first heavy object she could lay hands on: a long iron rod with some kind of weight on the end. She was thinking that Angel would be proud; she was also thinking that it would be a whole hell of a lot better if he were actually there.

"Friends, friends." The man hanging from the ceiling drew everyone's attention, including Nina's. "Please let me down so that I can better greet our guest. Stephen, please put on the kettle; I'm sure we can all use some tea - a calming blend. Perhaps some black cummin seed and chamomile." His voice was strained but not exactly victim-like.

Nina found herself staring open-mouthed at him. The clerk nodded and dashed to the far side of the room where an electric kettle and a coffee maker were set up. The woman who had been behind the door took a step towards Nina.

"Keep your distance." Brandishing the iron rod in what she hoped was a threatening fashion, Nina wondered if she could make her escape while everyone else was busy lowering the man from the ceiling and... making tea. Sense, there was absolutely no sense to this. Then again, the last time that Nina had been the guest at a party they had surrounded her with parsley.

"Look, I don't know what's going on here, but you can be damned sure that I'm not going let you smear me with jam and eat me like a scone." Her words made her feel braver. They made everyone else pause and look at her like she had two heads, including the man hanging from the ropes and hooks. Lifting his hands in a gesture of openness, something completely out of place based on his current position, he said, "We mean you no harm or disrespect, Honored One. I'm Gene, the leader of these brethren, and, ah, we have no intention of trying to eat you. Quite the opposite, actually."

---

Spike was quick to pick up on where Angel was going. "No. No way, Angel. If you're trying to link this to those demons who had a go at us before, well, newsflash: it's not always about you." He paused. "Well, *sometimes* it is... but not this time. This is just a scrap these poor sods lost. Doesn't have to be more than that."

Angel held Spike's gaze and kept his voice level with an effort. "You never paid attention to your victims, did you, Spike? Never learned from them, never cared about more than draining them and moving on."

"Wasn't a sadistic bastard like some we could mention, no," Spike retorted. "Or at least -"

"Oh, you were, don't fool yourself," Angel said. Wesley had stepped back and was watching them both, his face unreadable. "You just weren't patient enough to be good at it the way I was."

"Fine. So tell me, O Master of Pain, can you tell just from looking how this lot died? 'Cause from where I'm standing, I can see it hurt, but, then, doesn't it always?"

The flippant tone hid an unease Angel recognized because he shared it, just as he'd shared - for a moment - the agony that had left an indelible mark on the faces of the demons.

"Not like this," he said shortly. "This was special."

"You think the Haunter demons did this," Wesley said, making it a statement of fact. He pursed his lips. "It would explain a lot."

"Oh, not you as well!" Spike said in disgust. "Right. Suppose it was them; what the hell were they doing down here? Bravkactors can't make with the sizzle, the way Gwen can, so they wouldn't have been a threat."

"It's impossible to say," Wesley told him. "Perhaps the ritual drew them, or this slaughter is something they're doing for their own mystical reasons." He shrugged. "Or it could be bait to trap something even worse, and they're waiting out of sight for it to appear. We don't have enough to go on."

"Trust you to have the cheery thoughts," Spike muttered, glancing around. He hunched his shoulders. "Now I feel like I'm being watched."

"Illyria said they went after things for the hell of it." Angel moved the body back to the floor, using a little more care than was strictly necessary. "As far as we can tell, the Haunters didn't have anything against those gangland demons they left in a heap on the streets a couple of weeks ago, either."

Spike was stepping between bodies, scanning them. "Big group acting tough; that's got target written all over it if you're the bullying kind of demon."

Angel and Wesley exchanged a look. Spike's assessment was sounding more than a little personal to Angel, although he knew it wasn't meant that way. There was no prickling on the back of his neck, but Angel knew the Haunters were somewhere near.

He also knew who their target was.

"I haven't seen these demons in action, but I agree with your assessment of these victims. If you're right, and the Haunters were only beaten back and not destroyed, it's not unreasonable to assume they may be back." The look on Wesley's face did not comfort Angel.

"Spike?"

Spike paused as he moved around the room, looking from one to the other. He gave a resigned shrug. "Yeah, could be them."

"Wesley, take anything you think you might need. Let's get the hell out of here."

---

The 'brethren' let out short laughs, smiling as they went about the work of lowering their leader - a hard concept to swallow given what he had been enduring. Working her way back to the door, she watched as

the men who had been holding needles adjusted the straps, lowering Gene to the floor. The women supported his shoulders so that the needles in his back did not hit the cement. Arriving at the door, Nina discovered the lock needed a key, making a quick escape impossible.

Finally, Gene was on his feet, still bleeding slightly from the hooks remaining in his skin. He was a life-sized marionette, waiting for the puppet-master to pull his strings tight again. He accepted a coffee mug from Stephen. It had been hand-painted in a swirling pattern of apple green and vivid purple and was clearly from the shop.

"My thanks to all of you for nurturing me in this ritual of preparation." Facing Nina, he continued. "Honored One, I'm sure this is as much a surprise for you as it is for us." Crossing his arms in front of his chest, the man bowed, letting out an involuntary moan. As he rose, his eyes were tightly shut in pain, but as he opened them, he smiled. Nina could see a certain euphoria in his face.

"I think we should all take a moment to calm down and center ourselves, ground the energy of the preparation ritual." Nodding, the assembled group took up relaxed stances, their hands at waist level, palms held upwards. Gene continued, "Let us all take a moment and feel our feet upon the floor, which is connected to the earth and the source of our vitality. Breathe in through your feet to the muladhara, the base chakra. See the portal open as a lotus flower and visualize its red light flowing from the base of your spine, filling your entire being."

Everyone had their eyes closed, and they were breathing deeply, following the gentle rhythm of Gene's voice, as soothing as a bedtime story read to a sleepy child.

Now that Nina had a chance to focus on all of them, she could see a pattern of interlocking spirals scarred into the arm of one man, accented with barbell piercings. One of the women had on a cropped top that showed not only her belly button piercing but also a matching pair of bruises and half-healed flesh where hooks had probably been imbedded in her flesh.

"You know, this is great, and I'm obviously disturbing your... your thing. So maybe it's best if you tossed me the key, and I'll let myself out." Nina fruitlessly tried the door handle again.

"We breathe the muladhara because it is our connection to the primal energy." They all followed Gene's words, taking a deep breath and then joining in the invocation.

"To the physical acts of passion."

"To the courage of the hunt."

"To the survival of the fittest."

"To the spirit of the Wolf."

With blissful smiles, they all let out a long sighing breath, opening their eyes to gaze hopefully at Nina. A bit stunned, the pieces started falling into place.

"I... I don't know anything about wolves."

Gene stepped forward, a fatherly look on his face. "We know you, Nina Ash. Who you are. Where you live. *What you become when the moon rises.*"

Nina was pissed off, the anger swamping her fear. "You've been following me? That's how you got my credit card number and used it to lure me here? I don't know what the hell you want from me, but I don't need to be involved in your cult or any other supernatural crap. I'm just a normal girl with a couple of rough nights a month."

Gene cocked his head to one side. "You're a werewolf who dates a vampire."

Nina blinked. "Uhm. Okay, maybe a little out of the ordinary, but I'm not interested in praying or wearing robes, or... or, being hung from the ceiling." Firmer in her resolve, Nina brandished the iron rod in front of her.

Staring at her in surprise, Gene looked back at the others and laughed. "Forgive me, of course you don't understand. We are the Brethren of Tooth and Claw. We are marked by your sign." Gesturing at the end of the rod that Nina held, they all turned, pulling down the waistbands of their pants or pulling up their shirts. All of them had the same marking. Looking at the heavy weight on the end of the rod, Nina realized that it was a wolf's head and she was holding a brand.

Gene brushed his hands over the hooks still imbedded in his flesh, sighing in a mixture of pain and pleasure. "Our ritual prepares us for the pain of transformation, the blessed release of the sacred bite of the werewolf. Your sacred bite."

"Wait - you, you want to *become* werewolves?" Staring at them in shock and horror, Nina heard the loud clang of metal hitting cement as she dropped the rod.

---

Nina was breathing hard as she pulled open the door to the Walden Theater but stopped dead in her tracks when confronted by Illyria, who was standing about four feet from the entrance, staring at nothing. The door bumped closed behind Nina as she tried to decipher the meaning of the far-off gaze. Finally, Illyria cocked her head and stared directly at Nina without blinking.

Nina hesitated briefly, then moved on as she heard the friendlier voices of the rest of the group. "Angel!" Making a beeline for him, she didn't stop until her body was pressed tightly against his. The paper he was holding fluttered to the floor as his hands slid up her arms, pulling her back so he could see her face.

"Nina, what happened? Are you okay?" When Nina couldn't form a response, Angel led her over to a chair. "Here, come on."

"It was..." Nina simply didn't have the words to express her horror and anger over what had happened at the pottery shop. Focusing her attention on Angel, his hands holding her tight, the concern in his eyes, Nina blurted out, "They wanted to be werewolves."

Angel frowned. "Who did?" he asked. "Nina, just calm down - "

"Give her a break, Angel," Spike said, abandoning the book he'd been flicking through in a less than enthusiastic way and giving Nina a look that was sympathetic if detached. "Girl's not ready for that yet; needs to do some more trembling. Can't rush these things. Unless whatever got her spooked is right behind her. In which case, love, take a deep breath and -"

"Shut up, Spike," Angel snapped, all his attention focused on Nina. He gave her an apologetic look. "They're not, are they?"

The tunnel vision started to fade, but Nina kept her eyes on Angel. "No. No, they're not behind me. It was the pottery shop." At Angel's frown, she opened up her purse, pulling out a crumpled paper. "The bill I got in the mail; it was a fake. They used it to get me to go there. They had a cage."

"Nina, did they hurt you? Because, so help me..." Angel's threat didn't end in a growl, but there was more emotion behind it than Nina was ready to handle. He was holding her arms too tightly.

"Angel - "

"Hey, caveman." Spike hit Angel in the arm, causing Angel to turn sharply, making Nina stumble. "You're scaring her more!"

"I'm - " Angel turned back and Nina watched the anger fade and the compassion come back into his eyes.

He loosened his grip on her arms, gently moving his fingers over the spot where he had squeezed too hard. "I'm sorry. I just - I don't want anything to happen to you. Are you hurt?"

His concern made Nina smile. "No, I'm okay; they didn't hurt me."

"It's good that you got away. Did you take any of them down when you escaped?" As Nina turned, Gunn settled on the arm of the sofa.

"I didn't..." Nina frowned. "I didn't escape exactly. They more-or-less let me go."

"Did they threaten you? Say that they would come after you?" Wesley was frowning, too, weighing the situation as if it were a battle he was preparing to fight.

"No." Nina was feeling a flutter of uncertainty. "They cleared the fake charges off my credit card."

She could see everyone looking at each other. It almost felt like they were doubting her word or questioning her sanity.

Connor reached around Angel, handing her a glass of water, which Nina accepted gratefully. "Did they threaten your family?"

"No!" Sitting up straighter on the couch, she pulled away from Angel a bit. "They fed me herbal tea and gave me a gift certificate. What do you want me to say? As far as scary cultists go, they didn't have the whole routine down, but let me tell you - scary all the same. They wanted to be werewolves!"

To Nina, this explained everything, but from the looks being exchanged she was guessing that she wasn't being clear enough.

"Sycophants and leeches. They crawl to the places of power begging for a morsel. In my time we would have fed them to the kenneled demons." Illyria said. Everyone turned momentarily away from Nina to stare at her.

"Alive?" asked Connor, looking a little queasy. "I mean; you killed them first, didn't you? Before the feeding?" Illyria answered him with an eloquent silence and a slightly scornful sniff. "That's just - that creeps me out," he said, rubbing his hands along his arms as if he were cold.

"Did you study cryptic comments at God school, or is it a natural talent?" Gunn demanded, giving Illyria a less-than-friendly look.

"No," Wesley said quickly as Illyria stiffened with annoyance. "I understand what she means. In fact, it's something I've come across before." He cleared his throat. "I know it's a little difficult to understand, but there are people - humans - who actively seek a change that most view as a curse or have forced upon them."

Enlightenment dawned on Spike's face. "Oh, *those* kind," he said. "Yeah, ran into them in Sunnydale once."

"Werewolf-wannabees?" Gunn asked, screwing up his face in disgust, which he dropped as soon as he caught the look on Angel's face.

"No - vampires," Spike said, "but same idea, right?" He grinned. "They paint their bedrooms black, splash out for a cape and some makeup, and think they're one step away from having a life."

"No!" Nina said. "It wasn't - they weren't kids, and they weren't playing." She shuddered convulsively. "You should have seen them; the leader, he was strung up - there were these *hooks* in him - oh God, I could smell the blood..."

"Oh yeah, they'd poke themselves with pins, making pretty little patterns on their skin." Spike sneered.

"Like that would satisfy a vamp."

Connor swallowed, clearly still spooked from Illyria's walk down memory lane. "And what did you do? When they asked you to, uh -"

"Turn them?" Spike said, sounding very matter of fact. "Oh, usually I ate them."

"Spike?" Angel said firmly. "Stop helping."

He reached for Nina's hand and drew her to her feet, holding her close as they walked up the stairs to his office.

---

The entire way up the stairs, Nina felt Angel's hand on her, touching her waist or back. It was a good thing, and it wasn't a good thing, because he was trying to calm her down, and she wasn't ready for that. Not yet. As soon as she stepped through the office door, Nina broke away and wheeled on him.

"I don't get it. You fight the bad guys. They *want* to be werewolves."

Angel pulled out a chair and gently pushed her into it, but as soon as he moved away to lean against the desk, she jumped back up. He sighed. "Nina, what do you want me to say? That werewolves are bad? How can I? Sure, some -most- are killers, but there's you, and I've known others, well, one, who wasn't. These people are stupid, but they don't seem to be threatening you; they asked, you said 'no,' end of story."

"End of story." Nina couldn't look at him, so she paced. "How can it be the end of the story? They want to become monsters. I can't even begin to understand that. And saying 'no' doesn't change the fact that I'm a walking threat."

Angel smiled at her. "Unless they force open your jaws and wedge their arms inside -" His smile faded as he considered that. "Which isn't at all likely," he said hastily, "then there's no problem. They want to be bitten; you're not going to do it. And we're back at the happy ending."

"Do you think this is a joke?" Nina was about to tear into Angel further when the confused look on his face registered.

"Nina -"

"Wait. It's like that for you but not for me." She held up her hand, indicating she needed a moment. Taking a deep breath, she went and leaned on the desk next to Angel.

"You make a conscious decision to bite people. You do the bumpy face, sink your teeth into someone's neck -" Catching the look of denial in his face, Nina realized that these were weird terms to be thinking of the guy she regularly was naked with. "Okay, not you - an evil vampire. Tell me how *they* make a new vampire."

"It's - look," Angel said, sounding a little desperate, "it's a thing. You really don't want to know all the details." He stared at her, and she made sure her face reflected nothing but determination. "Or maybe you really do." He rubbed his hand over his face and then relaxed. "You feed. Feed until you know the next swallow's going to be the one, the one that kills them." His eyes went distant, seeing horrors. At least, she hoped that was what he was seeing. Nostalgia would be a bit much to deal with. "It's an effort to stop by then -"

"That's a lot about blood. Could you forget the details, hit the high spots?" Nina asked, knowing she'd just gotten a lot paler. She'd felt Angel's strength as he'd held her; the thought of being held helpless as he fed was freaking her out.

He gave her an apologetic look and then shrugged. "It always comes down to the blood. You drain them

close to death, give them some of your blood as they die, and they come back, a demon in a human shell, soulless and immortal."

Nina focused her mind on trying to get it clear. "Right. The vampire had to make decisions all through that, to bite, not to kill, to give them vampire blood. It's not like that for me."

Nina could see Angel getting restless, and finally he slid an arm around her, bringing his mouth close to her ear. "If a werewolf gets loose, they're really not responsible for what happens. They don't understand. As long as you make the effort to be locked up - "

"Shhh." Nina pressed a finger to his lips. "I'm a werewolf every day of the month, not just three days. If I bit someone hard enough right now, I would make them a monster."

His fingers were wrapped around hers. "And you're not going to bite anyone."

"Angel, let me finish. It's not about deciding to bite or not. It's not a thing I *do*, it's a thing I *am*. It's like having a disease. It's not at all about blood. It's in my saliva; everything I touch with my mouth is contaminated. I don't even have to bite anyone. Someone has a cold sore and shares a glass of water with me, I could infect them. Think about it: forks, toothbrush, lipstick, drinking milk straight from the carton." She laughed a little hysterically. "I need a bell, don't I? So I can walk down the street ringing it and yelling, 'Unclean! Unclean!' Oh God..."

Angel shrugged his shoulders, looking uncomfortable. "I suppose so," he said a little uncertainly. "But you knew that already. You've had time to get used to who you are, and you're not the sort of person to take risks." He smoothed her hair back behind her ear. "You're responsible. Intelligent. This is something I know you can handle, and it's not like you're dealing with it by yourself." He tapped his chest. "Fellow monster sitting right here, remember?"

"But you can't accidentally turn someone else into a monster." She tightened her lips and asked bluntly, "Does it hurt when you change?"

Angel shook his head.

"You and Spike do it so easily; I didn't think so. For me, it's like knives cutting into me when the claws come out. When the muscles grow and the bones reshape, it's like a bunch of people grabbed my arms and legs and pulled in different directions. I have to scratch everywhere at once when the hair comes. Angel, I don't want anyone else to ever have to feel that."

"You never told me how much it hurt," he said. "I've seen it happen to you, but I didn't realize you remembered it." He looked at her, clearly groping for the right words. "I can't stop it doing that, Nina, but anything else I can do, I will."

"I know." Leaning into Angel's chest, Nina let out a pent-up breath. "They scared me, Angel. The things, the hook and needles, all of it was to push their bodies, to get them ready to transform into werewolves."

"They don't understand," Angel said, using his thumb to stroke the length of Nina's arm gently.

"No, they don't. But, God, the smell of the blood..."

Before Nina could say more, Angel pulled her closer. "I know. You get the scent, and it arouses all your senses; you're more alert, hunger pangs start throbbing, your whole body is on edge, anticipating."

To her credit, Nina didn't stiffen in his arms; there was no fear in her mind that he would ever hurt her. "Something like that."

And that was a lie. The smell set off in a Nina a primal need to rip and destroy, an unquenchable anger that left her afraid and disgusted.

Angel nodded. "It gets - not easier, but you learn to deal with it so you can smell it without reacting so strongly. If you want to talk about it, well - vampire not werewolf, but I'll understand." He looked pensive. "Maybe we could hit the books, see if there's anything out there that might help you."

Nina remembered a possibility that she had been actively avoiding for over a year. "Lorne gave me some information on different social, support kinds of groups. A lot of them are for people that have suddenly found out they're part-demon." In truth, Nina still wasn't particularly thrilled with it as an option.

"That sounds great." Pulling himself off the desk, Angel smiled at Nina, but he must have caught the hesitancy in her face. "I mean, it probably wouldn't be a great solution for me. Not much for, you know - "

"Going out in public and meeting people that you don't talk to everyday?"

"I guess we haven't gone out to dinner in a while, huh?" Angel's face morphed into what Nina secretly referred to as 'lovable dork,' which was something she found hard to resist.

Smiling for the first time in hours, Nina reached up and gave him a kiss. "It's okay, you took me on vacation."

"Vacation, where we were attacked by Haunter demons."

"Angel, I - " There were few other topics that Nina wanted to dive into less. Instead, she kissed him again. "Okay, I'll see if I can find a meeting. You should go hunt demons."

"He really should," said Wesley, appearing in the doorway. He gave Nina a slightly apologetic smile. "Angel, I think in light of the fact that the Haunters are still active, we really do need to - "

"Get right on it. Agreed." Angel squeezed Nina's shoulder in one final gesture of reassurance and then headed out of the door with an eagerness Nina couldn't help but feel was less to do with demons and more to do with having reached his limit of being sensitive for the day.

"He does need to do this," Wesley said softly as Angel's footsteps died away. "I'm sorry. I hope you're feeling less shaken now?"

Still leaning against the desk, Nina shrugged. "Yeah, I'm doing better; besides, one woman or saving the city. It doesn't seem like a hard choice really."

Wesley opened his mouth to answer, then reconsidered. Finally, he said simply, "I'm glad you're feeling better," and turned to follow Angel.

---

After making a few phone calls using the numbers that Lorne had left her, Nina found a group that had regular meetings once a week at a local church hall and was, as chance would have it, meeting that night. After spending way too long trying to pick the right outfit for telling strangers what she was, she headed over to the church, eyeing the moderately crowded parking lot and feeling her mouth go dry. As she approached the welcome table set up just inside the door she adjusted the strap of her purse with nervous fingers, feeling more and more reluctant as she eyed what was in store.

Nina was surprised that it wasn't the red eyes and gigantic folded over ears that was making her wary, but the three by five white square on the man's chest that boldly proclaimed *CLEM* in an uneven scrawl.

Before Nina could speak, her hand was being enthusiastically shaken by an oversized, clawed hand. "Hi, I'm Clem. Welcome to the DOA."

"DOA?" Dead on arrival. Nina suddenly felt worried as she tried to remember what the actual name on Lorne's list was.

"Demons and Others Anonymous." While still holding her hand, Clem stood up, trying to look behind Nina, who was breathing a sigh of relief. "Hmm, no horns, no tail." He gave her a shrewd look. "Witch?"

"What?" Forcing a smile, Nina tried to tug her hand free.

Suddenly noticing that he hadn't let it go, Clem released her, shrugging. "I was asking, are you a witch? Good or bad is optional."

"Uh, no, not a witch."

Clem sat back down, looking at her expectantly.

"Oh!" Realizing he was waiting for her to fill in the blank, Nina blushed and continued. "I'm a - " Nina hesitated, realizing that she'd never actually told anybody, at least no one outside of Wolfram & Hart, which really didn't count because they were the ones who had told her what she was in the first place. There was also the part where she still hadn't told her sister or niece.

Nina suddenly realized that her shoulder hurt, and that was because she had been gripping her purse so tightly that the strap was digging into her shoulder. Forcing her hand off the bag, she ran her fingers through her hair and glanced away from Clem.

"Hey." Clem's voice was soft and undemanding.

Hugging the purse against her body, Nina caught the concern in his features. "You know, I'm thinking I'm a little tired tonight."

"It's okay; we're all a little different." He gestured at his head to emphasize his point.

"I'm just not sure that this is the right time." Turning towards the door, Nina took two steps but was stopped by Clem's voice.

"Coming out isn't easy, but it's easier around people who know what you're going through."

Nina had a brief flashback to her conversation with Angel that afternoon. Turning around again, she went back to the table. Putting her purse down on the table, she took a nametag and marker. Feeling a little uncertain, she looked at Clem and said, "Hi, I'm Nina, and I'm a werewolf."

---

"I heard what you said." Angel gave Wesley a look that might have been apologetic and closed the book he was reading with a soft thud of musty paper.

Wesley's hand continued to propel a pen across a piece of paper. "Hmm? Yes, I know you did; you gave it to me."

"What?" Angel frowned, then his brow cleared. "Not when you asked me to pass you the seventeenth book that didn't contain anything useful; I meant I heard what you said to Nina in here, before she left."

"Ah." Wesley put his pen down and straightened, looking at Angel for the first time. "That."

"Yeah." Angel hesitated. "She was - you know, I think she was more freaked by those people wanting to be werewolves than she was when I told her what she'd turned into." He gave Wesley a puzzled look. "Does that make sense? Because it doesn't to me."

Wesley steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. "Do you want me tell you that, yes, it certainly makes sense to me or go into details about why?"

"If you go into details, do I get to stop researching while you talk?" Angel asked hopefully.

Wesley's eyebrows lifted. "Almost three hundred years old and you've still not mastered multi-tasking?"

"Oh, and I suppose you can read and talk and listen and..." Angel ran out of activities and finished lamely, "all at the same time?"

"You missed out juggling a spoon and three oranges," Wesley said.

"Funny. Can we get to the bit where you and your giant brain spell it out for the challenged vampire?"

A smile tugged at the edge of Wesley's lips. "By all means." Sobering, he said, "In Victorian days, as you'll remember, the so-called 'tuberculosis look' was highly fashionable; women would take pride in being able to faint several times a day and take arsenic to give the skin a nice, deathly pallor." He smiled wryly. "The fact that they often died as a result might have been some consolation to those who had the disease itself and probably didn't care about how fashionable they were as they coughed up blood and wasted away." He shrugged. "I think they'd understand Nina's feelings quite well. She's managed to achieve a certain equilibrium, but the fact that these people not only want what she would give anything not to have but glory in the idea of being werewolves is upsetting that balance. She's angered by them, certainly frightened, and I shouldn't be surprised if there weren't resentment mixed in there as well."

Angel gaped at him. "Wes - that's a *lot* of detail," he said finally. "You've thought about this, then?"

Wesley looked back at his book. "Chapter Three was a little tedious," he said, as though that was all the explanation necessary.

Angel shook his head, unable to hold back a grin. "And that was your idea of a change of pace?"

"If you tell me I need to get a life, I'll be forced to make the obvious reply, you know," Wesley warned him.

Angel tried to straighten his face. "Wasn't going to say that."

"Liar," Wesley said without heat. They exchanged smiles and settled back into a comfortable silence.

---

The meeting was overwhelming and under-whelming at the same time. In smaller side rooms, different interest groups were having discussions. None of them was about being a werewolf specifically, and Nina wasn't sure she was quite ready for that, anyway. Most people seemed to have gathered in the main hall to socialize. There were long folding tables covered with white paper tablecloths, plastic spoons, and paper plates, plus an assortment of crock-pots and casserole dishes.

She had expected demons, just not the huge variety that there was. At the same time, however, it looked like every potluck dinner she had ever been to, including the children underfoot. There was something especially unfair about children being afflicted with these conditions, but for the most part they didn't seem to care that they were different, or even if they were different from each other.

Before Nina could decide what to do, a human-looking boy about twelve or thirteen ran into her, knocking her purse to the ground and spilling the contents. The boy reached out a hand and made a poor effort to steady her.

Laughing, he shouted, "Sorry!" and ran off, being hotly pursued by two demon boys about the same age. "You better give it back, wolfboy!" one of them shouted, while the second added only a growl to the conversation. Somewhere out in the room several people shouted, 'No running!' but all Nina had on her mind was *wolfboy*.

"Sorry about my cousin." A guy, a human-looking guy with spiky-brown hair, squatted down and began gathering the loose items from her purse.

Squatting next to him, Nina opened her bag and began putting things back. "Thanks, you don't have to."

"I know." It wasn't quite a smile that he gave her. His nametag read *Jordy's Cousin*.

"That's an interesting name."

He glanced down at the tag.

"Yeah, this isn't my usual kind of gig, but Jordy wanted me to come, you know, so we could hang out together. You can see how well that's working out."

Nina laughed.

He gestured at the nametag. "I figured it would answer a lot of questions. I'm Oz." He extended his hand.

Shaking it, she smiled. "Nina." Looking around, she could see all three boys fidgeting in front of someone's mother, getting lectured. "I don't mean to pry, but is he really, uh, affected by the moon? I mean, a... a werewolf?"

Having picked up everything, they both stood. "Oh yeah, and so am I. You could say it runs in the family - except, well, not. Jordy was bitten by a werewolf when he was about four and a half. Fortunately, the two wolves involved started tearing each other apart; that's how he survived. For me it was Jordy, who was maybe a bit over-stimulated during a tickle fight."

"He *bit* you?" Nina could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

"Wow, you just got really pale. Would you like to sit down?"

"I... okay." Nina nodded and allowed Oz to lead her to a chair.

"Let me guess, you're pretty new to this whole mystical deal."

"Yes." Nina could feel the color rising to her face. "Well, I guess it's been over a year. I'm a... a..." She couldn't help but glance around and then in a low voice said, "I'm a werewolf too. I was lucky to have some friends who understood what had happened. This is my first time out in the wider community. Aren't you upset that he bit you?" Nina could feel the flush in her face.

"I'm cool with it. I mean, given a choice, I think I'd rather be a real boy, but he was a kid so it's kinda hard to blame him. It's not like he did it on purpose. At first I was more upset with my aunt and uncle for not telling the family about it. But sometimes you just have to look at it as the universe intervening." Oz gestured at his head. "With the wolf ears, I can tune a sound system like nobody's business."

"Wow, you're so mellow about this." Nina looked at him, debating whether or not to share her experience with the cult. He raised an eyebrow, clearly recognizing her indecision, and she blurted out, "I ran into a group of people today, humans, that wanted me to make them werewolves."

"That's pretty intense. If you don't mind me saying so, you don't look like you're taking it well."

"I'm not." Nina could feel all the pent-up emotions from the afternoon bubbling to the surface. "I mean, I shouldn't be, but these people wanted to be monsters, and they wanted me to do it. And, oh God, I've probably really offended you."

"No, I didn't pick this either." It was hard to find a comfortable position in the orange plastic chairs, but Oz seemed to be lounging without much difficulty. "It's not cool that they want to do it. I've run into their type before, in Milan, Austria, Finland. What you have to watch out for is if they become violent."

"They weren't violent. Well, at least not to me." Nina looked at him, feeling a little stunned. "You've been to all those places? I mean, since you became a werewolf?"

"Oh, yeah, I've traveled all over the world. I went searching for ways to deal with it, maybe even cure it. I've picked up a lot of useful ways to cope, but no cures. Actually, that's one of the reasons I'm back in California. I'm supposed to start teaching Jordy some meditation techniques for his were-mitzvah."

Nina blinked, not sure she'd heard that last bit right. "His... Are you Jewish?"

"Not exactly, as in no. Were-mitzvah. It's a family thing. Aunt Maureen and Uncle Ken thought he should have a rite of passage, start introducing him to some of the things he needs to know about being an adult werewolf."

Nina found herself just staring. "I'm just... there's a whole world outside my cage that I didn't know about. God, I have so many questions. I've been dealing with the full moon and everything, but this is the first time since it happened that I've even thought that things could be... normal."

"Normal - kinda overrated in my opinion."

Nina laughed, and Oz gave her a small, approving nod.

"You look good when you smile; you should do it more often," he said.

"My boyfriend says that."

"Boyfriends fit into normal."

"He's not exactly human." Nina sucked in a breath. "Oh God, that sounded so bad. I didn't pick him because he's not human. I like him. I like him a lot."

"Now that's a smile. Personally, I haven't been with anyone long-term for a couple of years."

Nina nodded understandingly. "Not since you became a werewolf."

"No. Had a girl both before and after the change," Oz said. "Haven't had anyone steady since her."

"She was human?" At Oz's nod, Nina continued, "Weren't you afraid of infecting her?"

Leaning forward, Oz rested his forearms on his thighs. "To be honest, we didn't think about it much. The mood hits...?" Oz shrugged. "We had a no-biting rule, but the other risks of oral contact didn't always occur to us. We were careful enough, I guess."

Feeling a little self-conscious, Nina rubbed the back of her neck as an excuse to look away. "I may be a bit... zealous with making sure I don't contaminate anything."

Oz bent his head slightly so he could look her in the eye.

"My sister - the nurse - thinks I should go scrub an operating room since I seem so fond of cleaning," she said. "I don't know; it's the only way I feel like I have any kind of control over it."

"Yeah, I get that. We both kept going along like things were a hundred percent normal. The whole time there were things that tested my control. Keep in mind that while I usually test well, I did end up repeating my senior year of high school."

"Werewolf cults?"

Oz sat up straight, a far away look in his eyes. "More like other werewolves encouraging me to heed the call of the wild."

Feeling like it might be better to change the subject, Nina asked, "What are you going to teach Jordy?"

"If the stars are aligned right..." Oz turned in his chair. Following his gaze, Nina saw Jordy licking what looked like whipped cream off the back of his hand. Oz spun back around. "And if I can get Jordy to focus, I'm going to try and teach him to see the full moon again."

Nina started to nod and then stopped. "Werewolves can't..." There was something in Oz's eyes that was telling Nina that maybe she didn't have all the facts.

"With control - real control - you can do amazing things." Oz extended his hand and his breathing slowed. As they watched, his fingers elongated, thick dark hair sprouting from a hand that was no longer human.

---

"Are you done with that book?" Wesley asked.

"Think so," Angel said, passing it over to Wesley without hesitation. "Sorry I'm not being much help. Blame it on - well, it's been a stressful day. Week. Hell, it's been a stressful *year*."

"I'm not inclined to blame it on anything," Wesley said. "Research isn't really your strong point, I know. But perhaps we should carry on. I'm not finding much, though; there's a possible reference in Pliny to a creature that haunts the night, but it turns out to be a poetical way of referring to a beetle..."

Listening to Wesley ramble on, Angel relaxed, picking up books and stacking them around him in unsteady columns, bristling with scraps of paper used to mark pages, not really noticing that he was still smiling. When Wesley paused and glanced up, looking a little puzzled, Angel coughed.

"Yeah... how 'bout those Haunter demons, then?"

The puzzled look deepened. "Angel, are you entirely sure you're in the mood for this? Because, really, if you're still concerned about Nina's experience, perhaps you could - "

"No," Angel interrupted without giving Wesley a chance to suggest anything. "I'm focused." He gestured at the cluttered desk. "All this is, well, it's getting us nowhere, but I suppose we've got to do it - "

"When you put it like that, I wonder why," Wesley said a little ruefully, "but yes, we have to use every resource we possess before turning to new avenues to explore."

Angel hesitated. "You know, Wes, I hate to say it, but Wolfram & Hart had resources. The best, in fact. Is there any way - "

"No," Wesley said flatly.

"I hadn't finished!" Angel said. "All those books you used to have - "

"From what I'm told, the offices are still in a state of confusion as the renovation goes ahead," Wesley told him. "I doubt they'd be amenable to sharing what information they have - if any - without a *quid pro quo*. It's best we handle this ourselves."

"So let's put it all together," Angel said, "and see if we can see any pattern. Take it from the top."

He got an encouraging smile from Wesley, who waited, pen poised over a fresh piece of paper. Angel gave him a pained look. "Wes? The taking notes thing? Do you have to?"

"I really do," Wesley said unapologetically. "Suppose you begin with the first attack and tell me every detail."

"I was lying on my back in bed, with Nina sort of, well, I suppose you could say she was sitting on me. Straddling me. And she was naked - "

Wesley put his pen down and cleared his throat, not meeting Angel's eyes. "Er, Angel..."

"Less detail?" Angel guessed.

"If you don't mind," Wesley murmured. He picked up his pen and then frowned. "With Nina... no, she can't be the common factor, nor is what you were doing..." He gave Angel a bright smile. "My conscience is clear; we can skip the detail in this instance without missing anything vital. I'm sure of it."

"Glad to hear it," Angel said. "So, you're trying to see if there's something that's common to all the attacks?"

"All the attacks on you, yes," Wesley said. "I'm not, at present, seeing any connection between them and the slaughter in the sewers, but one may emerge, of course."

"I was the only one of us there for all of them," Angel said. He frowned. "I thought it was the Senior Partners who were after me. And no matter what Spi- people seem to think, I'm not just saying that because I think the whole world revolves around - never mind."

"It's a valid point," Wesley said gently. "A little paranoia on your part is probably not only healthy but justified. I'm certainly not aware of any link between the Senior Partners and these demons, but that doesn't mean there isn't one. In fact, you should hope there is, as otherwise you have an enemy we're unaware of."

As soon as someone agreed with him, Angel felt the doubts creep in. "Yeah... but maybe they're right? Maybe I'm taking this way too personally and letting it blind me to other possibilities and - well, not the part about being a prat, because that's not true, but maybe - ?"

Wesley rolled his eyes. "If you're quite done quoting Spike and being indecisive, perhaps we could get back to you providing detailed - PG rated - descriptions of the attacks?"

"Oh." Angel smiled guiltily. "Sure, Wes."

---

Metal legs scraped loudly across vinyl tile as Nina tried to stand but only succeeded in pushing the chair back.

"Stop! Just, I mean, don't."

Oz nodded, his face etched with concentration and what seemed to Nina like serenity. His eyes fluttered a moment, and he let out a long, even breath as his hand transformed back into its normal shape. Impulsively, Nina reached out to touch his hand and then stopped herself. After a moment, when nothing happened, she tentatively put her fingers on the cool smooth skin where a paw had been.

"I'm sorry about that; should have thought about how much it might freak you out." Turning his hand, Oz gave Nina's a squeeze and then he sat back.

"It surprised me. I used to like surprises and then, you know, I got the big surprise. Did that hurt? It must have hurt." With some effort, she calmed her breathing and settled into her chair once again.

"Yeah, especially when the claws pop out. I can tell you that I have a lot more respect for the design of cats nowadays." Lifting up his arm, Oz carefully inspected his hand. Apparently satisfied, he lowered it to his lap. "I learned in Tibet how not to change during the moon. I found out by accident that it wasn't that hard for the wrong kind of change to happen when there was no moon."

Nina shivered and folded her arms across her chest.

"The hard part, the part that took years, was learning how to do the change half-way. It hurts; hurts a lot

for about the first ten minutes, but it allows me to have all the advantages of the wolf and still be in control. Doing the really selective change like I just did, I'm still practicing."

"It's amazing, but why? Why would...?" Nina stopped, afraid of offending him.

Oz smiled. "Like it or not, it's part of who I am now. I used to hang with people that saved the world on a regular basis; it kind of rubs off on you. I help where I can. Not everyone agrees, but owning up to who and what I am, and using everything I've got to help out, that's what being human is all about."

Putting her hands on the seat of the chair, Nina pushed down, stretching her arms and staring for a moment at her feet. She couldn't stop a half-smile from coming to her face before she looked up again. "It's funny; you more or less just described my boyfriend. He fights evil for a living. And despite having him for an example, I never saw that potential in myself. Actually, I'm still not sure that I do."

Oz shifted on his chair, resting his elbow on the back and putting his head in his hand. "I get that, but the thing to remember is that we don't actually stay the same. I can still play, but I'm not a bass player anymore, but maybe I will be again. If things are clicking right we're always evolving. What we are today isn't who we have to stay."

"That may be more profound than I'm ready for." Nina shifted nervously. There was so much possibility but it seemed like almost too much, too potentially dangerous.

"I could try to teach you how not to change during the moon."

In that one sentence there was so much possibility.

Nina lifted her head slowly and took a good look at Oz's face. "I'd like to do that." The words came out of her mouth, but she hadn't really thought about them.

Jordy skidded past them, being pursued once again by his two friends. Oz and Nina followed their progress across the hall for a moment.

"I could invite you over to Aunt Maureen's house, but - "

"That's okay." Nina stood up, digging in her purse. "If you don't mind, I'm still a little gun-shy after my visit to the werewolf wannabes." She blushed and added quickly, "Not that I think you're going to kidnap me or make me bite someone or... eat me for lunch."

"It's okay. I get it." Oz frowned. "Okay, maybe not the lunch part, but for the most part."

Nina smiled. "Do you think you might be able to come over to my boyfriend's office?" Pulling out one of Angel's business cards, she handed it to Oz.

Oz took a long hard look at the card. "Should have known." Nina felt a tingle of uneasiness, sure that it was the precursor to disappointment. A glimmer of a smile coming to his face, Oz shook his head. "I can meet you there."

---

"Yes - No - Well, technically, yes - Hello?" With a frustrated sigh, Wesley pushed a button to end the call and came back to the snack counter, tossing the cell phone aside with a little more force than was advisable before digging into the Rolodex.

From his seat behind the counter, Gunn finished jotting a note on one of the client folders, then closed it and put it off to the side. "Contacts giving you a hard time?"

"You might say that." Wesley squinted at the tight scrawl on one of the cards. "For instance, this one is dead. And, unlike me, in the more traditional, completely permanent way." He tucked the card back into

the file and continued to thumb through the cards.

"Then how come you put it back?"

"Cordelia wrote it."

Gunn hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "So what about the living ones? That's the fifth phone call I've seen end that way."

"It seems that the public display we instigated last spring has made some people nervous." Wesley's voice was dryly amused, the impatience already back under control.

"Imagine that; you force the hand of the evil empire, and people get upset when a dragon shows up."

Wesley looked up, frowning. "I'm not sure it was the dragon that upset them or the fact that we lived through it - well, some of us, that is."

Not looking up from his paperwork, Gunn made another note. "One of these days, I'm going to call you on that shit."

Wesley paused, looking at a card. "It will probably be a conversation that ends poorly," he murmured.

Gunn nodded, despite the fact that Wesley wasn't looking at him. "That's why it won't be today." He put down his pen and stretched out cramped fingers. "You gotta get yourself back on the streets. Can't hang up on someone who's staring you in the face."

"Yes, you're right," Wesley said as he punched another number into the cell phone. Abandoning the counter, he wandered around the lobby as he spoke, drifting in and out of the auditorium.

There was the gentle thump of the glass door swinging closed, and Gunn looked up, checking out the new arrival.

Oz took his time walking across the lobby, inspecting the decor as he went. "Angel's into sheep tipping?"

Gunn glanced off to the side, but Wesley was still out of the room. "Angel tips waitresses - okay, he doesn't tip well - but waitresses, not sheep. Are you applying for the temp job?"

"I figured," the man said, with a sober nod. "I was just going with the sign out front."

Scrubbing his hand across his face, Gunn shook his head and asked, "What does it say today?"

"ANGEL TIPS SHEEP WHITE AS SNOV" Oz pursed his lips reflectively. "You mean 'snow,' right? My bet is an excess of 'V' and a lack of 'W.' Still, I think it gets the meaning across."

"Uh-huh. I didn't catch your name, but the job's been filled."

"I'm Oz and I'm not looking for a job - looking for a friend. Actually a couple of them. Nina's around, right?"

Gunn sat straighter on his stool. "As a general rule, people don't come here looking for Angel's girlfriend. What makes you think she's here?"

"I can smell her." Oz stuffed his hands in his pockets, looking around like he was taking in more of the theater's ambiance.

Bringing up an ax from beneath the counter, Gunn let the head land heavily between them. "Okay. And I trust somebody who sounds that much like a vampire because...?"

Looking a little defensive, Oz took a step back, bringing up his hands to ward off any attack. It was instinctive, but his voice remained calm, showing no sign of unease at the fact Gunn had just threatened him with a very sharp weapon. "I just came in from the sunny side of the street?"

Inclining his head, Gunn acknowledged the point but continued to grip the ax tightly. Getting to his feet, he started making his way around the counter. "Then what the hell are you? 'Cause you sure as hell aren't human."

"Werewolf." Both men turned toward the sound of Wesley's voice as the man re-entered the lobby.

Oz nodded. "Watcher."

"Not for a number of years," Wesley said calmly. "Like Giles, I was fired."

"No offense." Oz held up his hand in a gesture of peace and then frowned as he sniffed the air. He cleared his throat, green eyes fixed on Wesley. "Uh, again, not to be offensive, but - "

"I'm dead, yes," Wesley replied, without betraying any sign that it bothered him to admit it.

"I was going to say new hairstyle, but that, too."

Putting his ax back beneath the counter, Gunn looked between the two of them. "Let me guess; you two know each other. And why do I have the feeling that I'm not going to like the answer to the next logical question?"

"Sunnydale," they responded in unison.

Wesley's phone rang. Glancing down at the caller ID, he sighed. With an apologetic look, he turned towards the main theater as he answered it.

"Yup," Gunn said with deep conviction, "Nothing good ever came out of Sunnydale - except Willow. Anyone who keeps Angel's soul in his body is good in my book."

"You'd think he'd keep better track of it." Spike's voice dripped with sarcasm as he followed Angel in from the basement entrance.

Shaking his head at the newcomers, Gunn resumed his seat. "If y'all don't mind, I've got business to take care of." He picked up the phone and started dialing.

Angel came forward and shook Oz's hand. "I *do* keep track. Oz, good to see you. You haven't changed much."

"Likewise." Pointing over Angel's shoulder, Oz asked, "You *are* aware that's Spike behind you, right?"

"Unfortunately," Angel said, as he walked to the counter to put down his sword and the various weapons he had tucked in his coat pockets. When he turned back around, Oz was eyeing Spike's head suspiciously.

"Chip still working out for you then?"

Spike flopped on the couch, apparently unconcerned. "Soul."

Looking back to Angel, Oz expressed his sympathy, summing the situation up perfectly. "Copycats, huh?"

"Tell me about it." Angel gestured at the sofa that Spike wasn't occupying, indicating that Oz should have a seat. "So, what brings you to town?"

Oz sat down, throwing his arm across the back of the sofa. "My cousin, but it's your girlfriend that brought me here." With a glance towards Spike, he continued, "Unless I really misread which vampire she

was talking about."

Tearing a page off the memo pad, Gunn grabbed his ax again. "The Jacowskis had some activity last night; I'm going to go check it out."

Spike sprang up and joined Gunn as he was coming around the counter. "We had no luck with our little search of L.A.'s lovely down-under. Tell you what, I'll come with you and see if it turns up something useful."

"So I get to listen to you bitch about being under a blanket? You do know it's daytime in the non-sewer regions of the city?" Gunn eyed him with less enthusiasm than was flattering.

"See, and a person who didn't care wouldn't mention the blanket. I'm touched, Charlie." Spike swept past Gunn, patting him on the shoulder and picking up Angel's sword without bothering to make it surreptitious, as four feet of pointed steel was hard to hide.

"Get your own," Angel said, without bothering to raise his voice. "That's my favorite."

"Since when?"

"Since now. Put it *down*."

"See, and this would be the definition of *not* caring." Spike dropped the sword back on the counter with a clang, gave Angel a disgusted look, and retrieved the one he'd left by the basement door.

Gunn rolled his eyes and followed Spike to the entrance to the basement. "I'll let Nina know we have company," he called back as he went down the stairs, close on Spike's heels.

"Thanks." Angel went to the mini-fridge and held up a soda can for Oz.

"No, thanks. I'm not sure if the sugar or the artificial coloring will kill you faster, and I don't feel inclined to experiment on myself. It never ends well," Oz said.

"Around here, that's usually the least of our concerns." Pouring a cup of blood, Angel popped the mug into the microwave and began pressing buttons. "So where did you run into Nina?"

Oz opened his mouth, but the question was answered for him.

"At the meeting last night." Pausing at the counter, Nina gave Angel a quick kiss before pulling off her rubber gloves, moving to shake Oz's hand. "We were sharing some werewolf experiences. Spike was saying that everyone knows you. How come?"

"We've been known to hang." Oz said, smiling at Nina as she sat beside him.

Angel pulled a bottle of juice out of the fridge and then retrieved his mug when the microwave dinged. "So was Oz able to tell you things you needed to know?" Angel said hopefully. He crossed the lobby and handed Nina the juice before taking a seat next to her.

Nina turned in her seat so she could look at Angel's face and nodded. "He can teach me how not to change during the full moon."

"Nice." Angel looked at Oz. "You can do that?"

Oz gave an almost unperceivable nod. "I can, and I can try to teach it. There's a lot to it; not something you learn overnight - lots of meditation and more meditation. I don't want to crush any hopes, but it's not easy. I had to study for a while at a Tibetan monastery."

Nina shifted to face Oz again, her eyes shining, as if just saying the words 'not change' made her feel

happier. "That's okay. I am so ready for this. When I want something I can be very determined." She gave Angel a sidelong glance.

Angel took Nina's hand, squeezing her fingers. "I've never had much luck with Tibetan monks."

Nina smiled at him. "I don't know about monks, but you look awfully meditative when you practice with your sword."

"Well, yeah, I really only ever thought of that as concentration, but I suppose technically - "

Nina turned back to Oz. "See, I have help."

Faced with Nina's smile, Angel tried to cover his uncertainty by taking a sip of his blood.

Wesley walked out of the theater and over to the sofa, moving quickly enough to get him Angel's full attention. "Excuse me. Angel, we've had a sighting of the demons. There's an attack going on right now."

Angel was on his feet before Wesley had finished speaking. "We need to get Illyria, and we should call Gunn and Spike, get them back here."

"Angel, based on the descriptions of the last attack, we're not ready for that. We should do some reconnaissance first. Besides, Gunn and Spike are working on another case," Wesley pointed out.

"All right. We'll grab Illyria on the way out." Angel went to the counter and picked up his sword. Then he frowned. "Where are my car keys?"

"Did you check your pockets?" Nina asked.

"No, I left them right here with the sword and other weapons." Angel thrust his hands into his pockets anyway at the same time as he was checking the floor, but he came up empty. He stopped suddenly and practically growled out, "Spike."

"Not unlikely," Wesley said as he checked the taser that he took from the weapons cabinet before clipping it to his belt. He pursed his lips in thought and then reached for his shotgun.

"I'm going to kill him. I'm going to put holes in his damn blanket. How are we supposed to get there without the Viper?" Angel glanced around, finding no outlet for his frustration, and smacked his hand against the counter. "I hate it when he does this."

Wesley was waiting by the basement door, shotgun in hand. "Angel, there're three of us anyway. It's not as if we could stuff Illyria into the glove box. There's another solution." Wesley hesitated for a moment, and Angel could read the discomfort on his face. "The SUV I've been driving is a Wolfram & Hart company car. Room for all of us, and you'll be protected from the sun."

Angel's face settled into a deep frown for a moment before he nodded. Walking over to Nina, he leaned down and brushed a kiss against the top of her head. "I'll be back in time to lock you in tonight, promise."

"Be careful," Nina said.

Oz nodded at him. "What she said."

"Do my best," Angel replied.

---

Angel followed Wesley down the stairs without looking back, and Nina watched him go, silently wishing that he'd decide it wasn't important and stay.

"Some things never seem to change," Oz said.

"Huh?" Nina turned back, having momentarily forgotten about Oz. "Oh, I'm sorry. Angel distracts me a little."

The beginnings of a smile came to Oz's face. "I get that. Are you ready to give it a try?"

Sitting on the edge of the couch, Nina leaned forward. "Definitely."

"Cool. Do they have a stereo around here?" Oz asked. "I've got a CD of some relaxing music. Thought it might help with the meditation."

"I think there's something in the main theater, but I'm not sure about it working. Not to mention the fact that the theater has been really creepy since the chandelier fell. Maybe we could just do it without the music..." Nina hesitated and then added, "And pretend we don't hear the rats in the walls."

Oz looked sympathetic. "If you're up for it, I've got another solution."

---

"I wish to drive," Illyria said. She held up her hands and studied them for a moment, then curved them tentatively as though they held a steering wheel. "It is a position of power, and as such it is fitting that it be mine."

"I'm not getting in if she drives," Angel said, stepping away from the car, hands raised. "No way."

"Why do you think that?" Wesley asked Illyria in a calmly curious voice as he opened the back door of the SUV for her. "In fact, the more powerful a human becomes, the less likely it is that he will drive himself. It's a mundane task, designated to underlings."

Illyria gave him a look that proved she was able to experience skepticism. "Then why did you and the vampire squabble so over who propelled this vehicle?"

"We didn't," Angel said quickly. "No squabble; it's Wes' car, and I'm happy sitting in the passenger seat. Happy and getting in right now. See?"

Illyria frowned as she climbed in. "I have all Winifred Burkle's memories. She could drive. I do not see why you do not wish me to experience this."

"That's true," Wesley said thoughtfully. "And, one presumes, you know the city as well as she did."

"Wes!"

Wesley turned his head as he started the engine and gave Angel an amused look. "You really don't have to worry," he said. "I don't intend to let either of you drive. I'm fairly certain it would invalidate the insurance policy, for one thing."

"Oh, yeah," Angel muttered. "God forbid Wolfram & Hart get their premiums hiked up."

Wesley drove out of the garage and glanced back at Illyria, who appeared lost in thought, staring out at the busy streets. "It's really bothering you that I have this car, isn't it?" he said quietly. "Angel, it's just a car. It means nothing."

"It means they're being nice to you," Angel pointed out. "It means they're, I don't know, wooing you over or something."

"They hardly need to," Wesley said, deftly changing lanes and racing a light with the casual disregard for 'red means stop' of a seasoned city-dweller. "They already have me in their employ."

There was a long silence. "Can't tell you how much I hate that idea," Angel said finally. "I mean, I *really* hate it."

"I've noticed that," Wesley said. "Would it help if I told you that, being dead, I no longer qualify for retirement benefits?"

"Is this where I'm supposed to laugh?" Angel said, his voice tight. "Not seeing the joke, Wes. Really not seeing it. If they've got time and resources to fiddle around with trivial stuff like getting you a place to live and a fancy car, they're back in the game. Already."

"The air seethes and boils," Illyria said unexpectedly.

Angel snorted. "Tell Wes to turn on the A/C. I bet this perk comes with all the extras."

Wesley smiled equably, refusing to rise to the bait. "Actually, when I insisted that it be fitted with necro-tempered glass for times just like this, they retaliated by canceling the DVD player, but other than that, yes, it's fairly well equipped. However, as the internal temperature gauge reads 70, I think it's safe to assume Illyria is being poetic."

"The thoughts of the people heat the air," she said. "Hatred and envy and greed."

"Poetic in a biblical way," Wesley amended. He spoke over his shoulder to her. "They're just people, Illyria. And rush hour traffic's enough to make anyone edgy." His attention returned to the road. "*Will* you make up your mind what bloody lane you're in?" he muttered under his breath as the driver of the minivan in front of him swerved dangerously.

Angel's gaze fell to Wesley's hands, white-knuckled as he grasped the wheel. Somehow, seeing that Wesley wasn't as calm as he sounded made him feel better.

---

Oz paused as he was about to open the back door of the house. "Don't let Aunt Maureen freak you."

Nina hesitated, taking a step back. "Is she part-demon?"

"No, all suburban mom."

He said it with so much seriousness that Nina was worried that she was missing something, and then Oz gave her a smile. She felt such relief that she had to cover her mouth when she let out a burst of laughter.

As they walked in Nina saw a tense-looking thirty-something woman on the phone. There was no denying the family resemblance.

"Yes, thank you." Maureen hung up the phone. "Daniel, have you seen Jordy since this morning?"

Frowning, Oz shook his head. "Not since breakfast. Something wrong?"

"I'm worried, Jordy - " Maureen stopped short, noticing Nina.

"I'm sorry, maybe I should come back some other time." Nina started moving towards the door.

Oz put a hand on Nina's arm. "Aunt Maureen, this is Nina. It's okay; she's a werewolf, too."

"Oh. Oh! Jordy and Daniel told me about meeting you. I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to introduce myself. And... and I'm sorry again because I'm about to go out of my mind. I can't find Jordy. He usually comes home right after school on full moon nights." Pushing her hand through her hair, Maureen was clearly fighting to control her voice, caught between anger and worry. "He *knows* to come straight home. I've called his friends, the library. He's not anywhere."

"Okay, we should stay calm. Maybe we should go out, retrace the route to the school." Oz suggested.

"I could help," Nina added.

Maureen shook her head. "One of the neighbors is already doing that. He's a school bus driver and knows the ways the kids travel. I'm so worried, and, God, what if he doesn't get home before moonrise?"

Oz seemed calm, but Nina was becoming just as agitated as the boy's mother. "Okay, not a detective myself... but my boyfriend and his agency are. Usually they ask questions, like has he ever done anything like this before? Does he go places on other nights, when he doesn't have to get home?"

Maureen was biting a nail, shaking her head.

Nina continued, the wind knocked out of her sails. "Uhm... new friends? Okay, I'm not a detective."

Maureen sighed, "No. I don't know. Mrs. Ross just told me that Jordy hasn't been there all week, and that's where he'd told me he was."

Frowning, Oz started heading out of the kitchen, pausing in the doorway. "Normally I'm not a fan of illegal search and seizure, but I remember what it was like the next morning when I didn't make it to a cage. It sounds like Jordy's got a few secrets. The best place to look for them is probably in his room."

---

It was the room of a thirteen-year-old boy. Nina hadn't seen one of these since she was thirteen herself. Overall, girls were neater. With a disgusted sigh, Maureen had pulled a laundry basket into the room and was tossing in clothes from the floor, searching the pockets.

"I don't even know where to start." Nina glanced around, wondering how Angel did it, walked into a strange place and found a clue amongst the rubble.

"Not that I come in here and look for things, but usually everything's just laid out on the floor somewhere." Maureen tossed a pair of jeans into the basket with a bit more force than necessary.

Oz was lying on his back, head and arms under the bed, like a mechanic. "Ah, you ladies are not familiar with the methods of young men."

Maureen straightened up, hands on her hips. She and Nina exchanged a look.

"For instance, you leave nothing important out in the open where Mom might find it." Oz moved his head into view for a moment. "Also, nothing in the sock drawer." From deep under the bed, he tossed out a dozen video games, one at a time.

Maureen stared open-mouthed at the find, then frowned. "Those are all expensive." Her eyebrows pulled together as she picked up a few of the titles. "He was begging me for two of these about a month ago. Where did he get them?" Maureen turned her frown on Nina, who kept her face studiously blank. If Jordy had turned to shoplifting to feed his hobbies, she wasn't going to be the one to say it.

"He could have -"

"No!" Maureen interrupted Oz before he had time to finish. "My son is not a thief. I brought him up better than that."

"Sure," Oz said quietly. "I know that."

Taking a cue from the games and not wanting to look at Maureen's anguished face, Nina began poking at the small bookcase buried behind another pile of clothes. She moved aside a few books and found a CD. Shrugging, she moved on, finding more and more. "Look at this. CDs, DVDs, all hidden."

There was the rattle of silverware against a plate or bowl.

"Is that where all my spoons are?"

"Looks like." Oz's voice was muffled.

Nina turned around, adding the items she was finding to the growing pile on the bed.

Oz came out, holding a coffee mug with a sad looking camouflage design. "That's all that's there."

"But what does it mean?" Maureen touched the different items in disbelief. "How could I have not known that something was going on?"

"Jordy's got some friends with money. And people don't give you things for free." Oz offered a second explanation, but it was clear from Maureen's face that it wasn't one she found any more comforting than the first.

Nina's gaze was fixed on the mug. Stepping around the bed, she looked at the larger pile of dirty dishes. Some of them were everyday stuff, but others were crudely painted porcelain.

"Oh, shit."

---

"Hey, Steve, I need some more green apple." Jordy sat at a wrought-iron table in the Colorama Pottery Studio, huddled with a paintbrush over a candy dish in the shape of a cornucopia.

"Would it kill you to say please?" Stephen chuckled as he squirted more neon green paint into Jordy's paint tray.

"Sorry, I just want to finish 'cause it's getting late. Do you think my mom will like it?" Jordy sat back so the clerk could see the figure.

"Your mom's going to love it. I'll make sure we get it fired before Thanksgiving." Capping the paint, Stephen headed back to the counter.

"Great. It's a surprise; Mom doesn't know I'm here." Jordy continued painting the vines and leaves.

Stephen smiled. "You're a good kid. By the way, I've got a new selection of discount games."

Jordy's head snapped up. "Cool."

---

Angel stood outside the SUV, which had been parked by a door in an area of shadows deep enough that he didn't need a blanket. They'd arrived to find the address was a power plant, though what the Hunters were doing there none of them had been able to guess.

Illyria had gone on ahead to scout, and Wesley was off to the side, shotgun in one hand, phone in the other, talking in a low voice. As Angel watched, his own phone pressed to his ear, Wesley ended his call and tucked the phone away, holding up five fingers to Angel and glancing questioningly at the door.

"- you're sure they were the same pigs? Because, you know, a pig? Not all that distinctive - oh. Right. Trained eye. Okay, Nina, Wes just called Gunn and Spike, and they'll meet you there in five minutes, I promise. Don't wor - yes, of course I'm coming, too."

He grimaced apologetically at Wesley and mouthed, "Find Illyria."

Wesley frowned but opened the door. It swung outward, and he started to enter the building and then

paused, staring ahead. "Angel," he said, bringing up his shotgun. "Angel"

Angel dropped his phone on the hood of the SUV and got to Wesley just as a woman, blood-streaked and sobbing in a terrified, near-silent whimper hurtled out of the door.

"Oh God, oh God, help me... they're killing them... please." Her hand came up to scrabble at Wesley's arm and then she saw his gun and shrank back. "You - no, don't hurt me!"

"We won't -" Angel said, trying to project calm. He could hear Nina's agitated voice coming out of his hastily discarded phone, but he had to find out what was happening.

Wesley lowered his gun and said, "I don't think we can just leave, Angel."

"Find out what's going on," he said, and moved to pick up the phone. "Nina, sorry. I have to go."

He hung up the phone without waiting for her to answer, wincing as he pressed 'end' but doing it anyway. "I'm so going to pay for that," he muttered.

The woman was talking to Wesley, who was holding her arm and listening intently. He released her and turned to Angel. "They match your description of Haunters. They're in there, but she doesn't know how many or where they are. Just that people are dying. She hid and -"

"Made a run for it?" Angel asked, as the woman broke away from them, heading toward the car park. "Like that?"

"Probably." Wesley tightened his grip on his shotgun, preparing to go in. "I don't think she'd have been much help, anyway."

Angel jogged toward the door, calling back to Wesley. "I'm worried about Nina and the cultists."

"Angel, this is where you need to be. There are human beings in the plant -"

"I know; I'm not going anywhere." Angel paused at the door, bringing his ear close and listening. "It doesn't make it any easier, you know?"

"Nina will understand," Wesley said. "And Gunn and Spike are more than capable of dealing with untrained humans. You've done what was needed to help Nina and the boy."

"Let's get this over with." Angel said, taking a step back and adjusting his sword.

Moving towards the door, Wesley took a firm grip on the handle and glanced over at Angel with a small smile curving his lips. "On the count of three?"

"Three," Angel said and went through the door with his sword at the ready.

---

Jordy tested the iron bars of the cage, trying to rattle it against its mounts. "You know, moonrise isn't for hours. I don't have to be in the cage this early. Heck, if I wanted to be treated like a baby I could have gone home."

One of the women bent down by the small refrigerator and looked at him. "Can I bring you a refreshment to ease your stay?" Opening the door, she listed the contents. "Chilled herbal tea? Wheat grass smoothies? Carrot juice? There's still an apple."

Jordy gave her a look that only politeness kept from being horrified. "Don't you have any real food, like nachos or cookies? I could really go for a couple of Double Meat burgers and an extra-large soda."

"I'm afraid we don't..."

Gene put a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right, Megan. Stephen, perhaps you could go up front and bring back some of the snacks from the birthday painting-party the other day."

Without waiting for further instruction, Stephen went through the door to the shop.

"Jordy, we appreciate the sacrifice you are making to allow us to witness your miraculous transformation." Gene said, in a voice that was clearly meant to be reassuring.

"You can let me out of the cage and open a window. The place smells. *And*, if you really appreciated me, you'd set up a DVD player." Jordy gestured at the video equipment in the corner of the room where two people worked.

Gene coughed, using his hand to cover his mouth. "Unfortunately, to record the transformation, the video equipment needs to be set up now."

Stephen returned, handing half-a-dozen mini-chip bags through the bars with a paper cup and a half-finished two-liter bottle of soda.

"Caffeine-free? You've got to be kidding me. You know, this is a big favor that I'm doing for you; you *owe* me for letting you see it." Jordy pulled open a bag of sour cream and onion chips, practically pouring the contents in his mouth.

Stephen flushed red, sputtering. "What? After every game and DVD we sold you for a nickel? And you know there's an envelope full of cash waiting-"

"Stephen." Gene gently laid his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Jordy is our guest and doing us a great honor."

Ducking his head, Stephen nodded. "My apologies, Honored One." There was a slight hiss as the soda bottle opened and Jordy brought it to his mouth, drinking straight from the bottle.

Stephen bit back a response and turned to Gene. "Perhaps I should go out and purchase food more suitable for the Honored One's needs."

A look of satisfaction came to Jordy's face, and Gene nodded. "Please be quick; there's not much time."

The Brethren moved silently, preparing the work space. A table was moved to the center of the room, directly beneath where Gene had been suspended the day before. Wide-eyed, Jordy watched as a long, cream-colored cloth was removed, revealing an array of hooks and needles on another spotless cloth. "What are you going to do with those?"

Gene smiled. "They are not for you, Honored One. Their bite cannot begin to rival yours."

---

The power plant was a maze of featureless corridors. Obviously if you worked there you knew where you were going; if you didn't, they didn't want you to.

Angel followed the scent of fresh blood, experiencing the odd tingling sensation he seemed to get when the Haunters were near and letting it lead him to the first body: a middle-aged man with very little of his chest intact and an expression of agony on his face that Angelus would have revealed in. Incongruously, his head lay in a pool not of blood but of coffee, spilled from the cup he'd been holding when he'd been attacked. Angel and Wesley exchanged glances.

"Yeah, it's the Haunters," Angel said softly. "Same look on their faces, same M.O..." He shifted, wanting to get away from the corpse. The blood was too fresh, too human, too -

"Yes and no," Wesley said, dropping to one knee and peering, not at the gaping holes in the man's chest, but at his hand. "This is new... he's been burned, see? The flesh is, well, it's cooked almost." He stood up, looking a little pale and swallowed hard. "I wish I hadn't got quite so close now."

"It's worse when you think it smells good," Angel said a little grimly. "So he touched something? A weapon the demon had?"

"None of the things you've described the demons as carrying could produce that much heat. Or any heat, come to that," Wesley said. He met Angel's worried look with one of his own. "It's just a possibility, but maybe they didn't come alone?"

Angel gave the body another critical look, rubbing at the back of his neck where it prickled with an atavistic awareness of danger. "Maybe, but where are they? This is a big place, but I would have expected to hear them by now." He shuddered. "They make this sound - "

Illyria landed three feet behind them, causing both men to hold up their weapons defensively. Looking disdainfully at them, she reported. "There is no activity on the roof or in the upper scaffolding. The unconscionable noise and whining of these bits of metal make searching difficult." She wrinkled her nose. "There was a brief flickering of light though that window." Illyria pointed at an office constructed of cinder block.

The interior was dim, but through the glass Angel could see another room beyond it. "Let's go."

Moving cautiously through the doorway, Angel could hear random noises that didn't sound like any of the machinery so far. Not that it was playing a symphony, but there were regular intervals to the clangs, chugs, and hums. The next room was a mass of pipes, radiating enough heat to keep Chicago warm in winter. Sunlight streamed through a series of basement-style windows near the twenty-foot ceiling, but the light only fell part of the way across the room, not in Angel's way.

Ignoring the caution signs, Illyria swung up onto the pipes like a gymnast mounting the uneven bars, slowly making her way up and across. Angel did a quick check in by making eye contact with Wesley. At his nod, Angel crept closer to the door.

"Where is everyone?" Wesley murmured, following Angel through into the apparently deserted room. "This looks like the sort of place that's normally crawling with technicians and engineers." He frowned, listening carefully, and then jerked his head in the direction of the anomalous noises. "Over there?"

Angel nodded, letting his awareness of the Hunters' presence work for him.

Wesley headed towards the source of the sounds, moving into the lead quickly but carefully, with Angel and Illyria staying far enough back that if it came to a fight they wouldn't crowd each other. They'd crossed a dozen yards of floor when Wesley's foot slipped. "Careful," he said, glancing down. "The floor's wet here." He reached out a cautious finger and touched the nearest pipe, as wide as his body and painted in a dull gray shade, pulling it back with a grimace. "And these pipes are hot, far more so than I'd expect them to be."

Illyria moved above them, dodging the superheated pipes like a spider avoiding the sticky threads in her web. Each pipe was coated in a heavy cement-like plaster, color coded for some purpose beyond Angel's comprehension, but it did give him a clue about what temperature the lines were. "The yellow ones are the hottest."

Wesley paused, looking at the network, and then nodded.

There was too much noise to make out things like heartbeats or breathing, not that the three of them were actually doing that, but under normal circumstances Angel should have been able to pick out people hiding or get an idea if anyone was around the next corner. The white noise was frustrating, like having earmuffs on. As they moved along, a different sound became louder, a long hiss. The smell of blood hit him. Looking ahead, he could see overturned orange safety-cones and the shredded tangled remains of yellow

tape stamped with *CAUTION*.

Putting a hand on Wesley's shoulder, Angel pointed to the small pool of blood that trailed to the next doorway. The hissing noise was louder here, and then Angel spotted a break in the smooth plaster surface over the pipe. Holding Wesley back, Angel picked up a long piece of the caution tape on the end of his sword. There was a brief flutter as it moved in front of the break, but almost instantaneously it shriveled into nothing as if it had been tossed onto a fire.

"Steam leak," Wesley said. "Based on those cones, we should give it a wide berth." Nodding, Angel took the lead again, moving five or six feet away from the leak following the blood trail. It led to a wide opening, where the pipes passed into an enormous room with an even greater maze.

A scream pierced the air.

Hoping that there were no more steam leaks in their path, Angel began to hurry towards the sound, cursing as it died away in a bubbling moan that usually meant someone's lungs had filled with blood rather than air.

"That didn't sound good," Wesley commented. "Angel, be careful - "

"Always am, Wes. I - " Angel rounded a corner and stopped mid-sentence.

The scene in front of him was pulled from the worst of dreams, the mundane surroundings making the dead and dying look almost obscenely out of place. There were over a dozen bodies littering the floor, and the terror-laden stench of death hung in a miasma Angel could smell and taste, if not see.

His eyes weren't on the bodies, though. He was looking at what had killed them, and from the silence behind him he guessed he wasn't alone.

"They're not quite how I imagined them from your description," Wesley said after a moment with commendable calm, his hands gripping the shotgun firmly.

Across the floor, there were six or eight... bugs or maybe crabs; it was hard to tell. Each of them was covered by an oval-shaped armored shell, making them longer than they were wide. They had six equally armored appendages that they seemed to use as either arms or legs. Most of the creatures were standing up on their back pair, which made them a head taller than Angel, sometimes dropping onto all, well, sixes and scuttling across the floor with a disturbing clicking of chitinous claws.

One of the things was using the jagged edges of his front limbs to demonstrate how it'd never have trouble opening a can of beans, using a victim who looked really, really dead. He had to be; he had a mouth, his eyes were open, and he wasn't screaming. That equaled 'dead' in Angel's book.

The head, if it could be called that, of the creature was buried in the armored plates and poked out briefly to dive into the open chest wound. The only clear image Angel caught was of razor-sharp teeth.

"That'd be because they're not what I described." Before Angel could decide what to do next, two Haunter demons materialized in front of him, swinging their swords. "*This* is what I described."

---

Nina pointed at the window with the pottery figures. "See? Blue pig."

Oz nodded, raising his eyebrows. "That it is. What I find slightly more significant is Jordy's bike." He pointed to the bike chained to the metal railing of the basement stairs.

Dropping to her knees, Nina peered through the window. "I don't see anyone, just some paint and figurines." When she looked up, Nina saw him going down the stairs. "Oz?"

Oz was halfway down. "Look, I know help is on the way, but... family, you know."

Nina could feel her heart pounding and had a sudden desire to smack him. "Impatient, short-tempered. I think we both know what that's the sign of."

Oz went completely still for a moment and then took a deep breath. "You're right." Turning, he took another step down. "Still, family."

A car whipped around the corner from the driveway and came to a screeching halt in front of Nina.

"I'm driving home." Gunn got out of the car. "No two ways about it. We should've taken the truck. You should be under a blanket - or maybe not." He pulled a tire iron from behind the seat. "Also, if we had my truck, we'd have weapons."

Spike opened the driver's door, hanging back out of the sunlight. "Nag, nag. You're worse than his poofiness." Turning to Nina, he asked, "This the place?"

"Yes it is and I'm glad - "

"Watch out!" Spike called and sprinted to the bottom of the stairs, avoiding the sunlight and forcing Oz to go flat against the building or get run over. Trying the knob, Spike frowned. "It's locked."

The announcement, which seemed to surprise no one, was followed by a brief moment of silence.

"So?" growled Nina.

Putting up his hands in a calming gesture, Spike squatted in front of the lock, pulling out a paperclip and bending it with a flourish. "Just making sure - "

"You have *got* to be kidding me." Gunn said when he saw Spike. "Break the door in already."

"Oh, should've said." Spike stood up, giving the door a seemingly effortless kick, which sent it flying open. The bells attached to the door jangled loudly.

Shrugging, Gunn began moving down the stairs, compelling the others to follow. "No point in wasting time; they know company's coming."

As Nina got inside, she pointed at the door to the back, but it was unnecessary because Stephen stepped out.

"Nina! You've changed your mind."

Gunn planted one hand in the middle of the man's oxford shirt, raising the tire iron with the other. "Yup, instead of leaving you alone, she wants to beat the shit out of you." He shoved the man down the short corridor and into the back room.

From her spot in the back, Nina couldn't see who hit Gunn with what, but she watched Spike launch himself into the room, followed quickly by Oz. When she finally made it to the door, she spotted Stephen lying against the far wall; he looked unconscious.

Gunn was on his knees a few feet from her, clutching his head. Rushing to his side, Nina forgot about being afraid as she tugged on his arm, but she had no luck budging him. Gunn mouthed something.

"What?"

"Watch out!"

Nina looked up and found one of the women was standing over them, gripping the heavy branding iron

that Nina had used the day before as a weapon. Snatching up Gunn's tire iron, Nina swung it as hard as she could.

---

Dodging away from Wesley, Angel brought up his sword and blocked the blow from the first Hunter. He could see Wesley charging the second one, taser in hand.

Not surprisingly, the thing turned on Wesley like it had been zapped with a joy buzzer.

"Wesley!" Angel shouted but couldn't move closer as he defended himself from the Hunter that was pressing its advantage of size and strength. The Hunter in front of Wesley was lifting its sword when Illyria leapt from the pipes and passed through the demon, the heel of her boot sending the Hunter's sword across the floor. She hit the floor, pushing Wesley out of the way.

The Hunter screamed, a sound torn out of nightmares, and Wesley cried out, scrambling awkwardly out of its way and trying to bring his taser up again. The Hunter wavered and backed away, looking almost wary, then turned on Illyria who called out something that, no matter what language she was using, came over loud and clear as a command.

If she'd expected them to obey her, she was doomed to be disappointed. Its sword might have been beyond its grasp, but it reached for her, clawed fingers curling hungrily. She jumped straight up, moving so quickly that she seemed to blur and then reappear, landing on one of the overhead pipes and clinging to a large wheel, attached to a gauge, designed to allow the pipes to vent or be drained.

The Hunter howled again, and Wesley got to his feet and took advantage of its inattention to use his taser on it again, his shotgun still in his left hand.

The Hunter attacking Angel dematerialized and reappeared behind him. Not wasting time spinning to face it, Angel jumped straight up, taking a cue from Illyria. The move didn't take him completely out of danger, but he hoped it would distract both Hunters' attention away from Wesley, who was less able to leap buildings with a single bound.

The Hunters obliged him by teleporting into the maze of pipes. Angel dodged the one he'd been fighting with by swinging himself up to a higher level, using the pipes to help him, and discovered that he'd been right; the yellow pipes *were* hotter.

"I've felt worse," he muttered. Capitalizing on having the higher ground, he leaned out and slashed down with his sword, cutting cleanly through the Hunter's incorporeal body.

---

When Oz came through the door, he had only one goal and that was reaching Jordy. He stepped around Gunn and went the opposite way from Spike, heading towards the cage until two guys got in his way. On an intellectual level he got why they were doing this. On a spiritual level, Oz understood the need to let it all go, and while he didn't agree with the path these guys had chosen he understood the motivation.

Unfortunately for these people, none of that mattered to him right now, only Jordy and the obstacles that were getting in his way, like the table in the middle of the room, which went flying with a satisfying clatter of small metallic objects as he flipped it into guy number one, who had follower written all over his face. The other guy was wielding a knife, thin, small, like a scalpel.

"Hang tight, Jordy; I'm coming to get you." Oz didn't get a response, but nobody was near the kid, which meant so far everything was good.

The knife guy was annoying him. Oz's combat stats were never incredibly good. He was pretty sure that an experienced fighter could have taken down this clown in a matter of seconds, but he was having no such luck. They were dancing, something slow and lacking in the rhythm department.

A long and thin object flew between them. Oz had no idea if it had originally been aimed at him; all he knew was it missed and broke a window. The guy he had sent to the floor was looking for things to throw from the debris around him, which meant soon he'd be facing two opponents.

Oz geared up to rush knife-guy when he saw a bottle flying through the air and coming straight for his head. He ducked and only suffered a glancing blow to his shoulder. When he straightened up again, both men were coming for him.

---

Tucking the taser back on his belt, Wesley ran over and picked up the fallen sword, stepping behind a piece of machinery so that he wouldn't be immediately visible to the demons on the ground floor. There was no way for him to get the sword up to where it was needed, not that it appeared to be of much use on this enemy. Snatching a very brief moment to study the weapon, he glanced at the runes inscribed on the blade.

A quick glance around a pipe let him know that the bug-shaped demons seemed to be more interested in the fight going on above than they were with their dead prey. Wesley couldn't be sure, but it seemed that they were communicating with each other, using a series of clicks and hisses. All he could clearly make out was the pointing of the deadly appendages toward the battle above.

Illyria was up against the second Haunter, who, disarmed though it was, had no hesitation in moving quickly towards her, pinning her back against one of the pipes. Snarling, she launched a blow at the Haunter, which was forced to become incorporeal to avoid it. In the split-second that it was no longer solid, she reached up, slapping her hands against an overhead pipe and using it to flip up and out of sight.

On the ground, unable to help and momentarily free from attack, Wesley watched the bug demons, trying to fix a picture of them in his mind and to identify any possible weaknesses. As he edged closer, one of the bodies stirred, a bloodied hand reaching out imploringly. Wesley was still too far away to hear what the dying man was saying but whatever it was it had been a mistake. Attracted by the sound, a demon turned and walked over to him, remaining upright as it studied him dispassionately, its head emerging and its mouth gaping open, a slender black tongue flickering out as though it were tasting the air.

Wesley doubted that he could save the man, but he dropped the Haunter's sword and brought his shotgun up anyway, preparing to fire, though in the midst of so much machinery and the potentially lethal pipes he wasn't convinced it was the best of ideas. He aimed and then hesitated. The demon had extended one of its upper limbs, cupping a ray of sunlight that had found its way through the grimy windows that ran along one wall of the room. Throwing back its head, the demon called out a stream of clicks in a rhythmic cadence. The sunlight boiled and spat, forming a brightly gleaming puddle.

As he watched, the demon brought his hand to his mouth and swallowed the liquid sunlight.

---

Spike spotted Jordy at once, who was standing well back inside the cage, his mouth open in a horrified yell, his hand still clutching a bottle of soda. As long as the lad stayed in there he'd be safe, so Spike concentrated on dealing with the humans who were proving that, when they were in danger of being thwarted, they made the meanest demon look tame.

Spike dodged a woman who was screaming, spittle flecking her lips as she lunged for him, her manicured nails crooked into claws. That took him into the path of a young man, but he was easily dealt with; Spike drove his fist into his face, cursing as his knuckles were cut by an assortment of studs in nose and lips. The man went down in a crumpled heap, and Spike smiled grimly.

Turning with an almost lazy assurance, he prepared to pick them off, one by one. It would have worked, too, if someone hadn't hurled a long piece of metal at him, javelin style. Ducking, he heard the sound of glass smashing, but was too busy with his next opponent - the screaming woman, back for more - to see what it had broken. She looked fiercely determined and was wielding a broom. A wooden broom. Backing away hurriedly, he tried to knock it out of her hands but succeeded only in smashing it in half, leaving her

holding a jagged but serviceable stake.

She frowned, clearly not sure why he was alarmed, then advanced on him. "I've waited too long for this," she hissed, stabbing at him with the piece of wood.

"Not long enough to come up with some decent repartee, though," Spike said, stepping back and noticing that he was getting closer to the cage.

He did not notice, however, that he was backing into a patch of sunlight filtering through the broken basement window.

"Spike!" Gunn shouted.

"Sort of busy, Charlie," Spike called, after quickly glancing over at Gunn and Nina, who were fighting in the far corner. Well, Nina was fighting; she'd got a slender, dark-haired woman up against the wall and was yelling at her, but the woman's unfocused eyes and slack mouth showed she wasn't really in a fit state to listen. A trickle of blood at her forehead and the tire iron in Nina's hand told their own story.

Gunn was on his feet, swaying slightly, but looking in Oz's direction. Oz was backing away from Gene and another man, the latter hanging back and looking a little uncertain, as if the sudden violence had been too much for him to deal with.

"I can see that," Gunn shouted, starting to run to Oz. "You're on fire!"

Spike smirked as he lost patience with the woman and kicked her in the stomach, driving the air from her lungs. "Thanks, but they're hardly a challenge, are they?"

Gunn gave him a disgusted look, rolled his eyes, and took three long strides over to Spike, tearing off his smoldering duster and hurling it to the floor.

---

Angel bent at the waist, barely dodging the long arc of the Haunter's sword. What he wasn't expecting was the second one materializing behind him. For a moment, he could feel icy dread creep up his spine as it reached out with its agonizing grip.

With no place else to turn, Angel pulled in his arms and legs so he was a long tight silhouette falling through the pipes. About ten feet down, he caught himself on a lower set. The Haunter that was still armed dove after him. Strangely, Angel found himself more worried about the one without a weapon; that demon had the agonizing grip as its current means of attack.

Lifting his broadsword, Angel deflected a blow, sending the Haunter back a few feet. This time it was Illyria who landed behind Angel, and she was just in time, because the second Haunter tried to materialize in the same place. Screaming, it teleported out of the space it was currently sharing with Illyria while Angel parried several swipes by the Haunter in front of him.

What none of them was expecting was the earsplitting scream from the unarmed Haunter. Reflexively, Angel grabbed his ears and took a step back. Between him and the Haunter with a sword, the second one materialized partially in the steam pipe. It was phasing between states, incorporeal, invisible, and something that looked almost solid. Not wasting any time, Angel brought his sword down. It moved smoothly through the Haunter's head. Trying to check the blow before his sword rattled off the pipe, Angel finally felt it bite.

The Haunter let out another scream, long and loud, before it shriveled and disintegrated, like the plastic tape had done earlier in front of the steam leak.

Angel didn't know what had happened, but he wasn't looking a gift disintegration in the mouth. A flash of movement told him that Illyria had dropped back to the floor, and through the pipes he could see that

Wesley, though safe, was getting really close to the bug demons. The first Haunter seemed disconcerted and was swaying in place as if it was afraid to move and taking advantage of that Angel followed Illyria.

"Time to go," he muttered.

Then the far side of the room lit up, and Angel threw up his arm to shield himself from the sudden burst of light.

---

Wesley had been wary from the moment the bug demon completed the spell. He had no way of knowing if the transformed sunlight was their equivalent of Gatorade or a weapon of some kind, but he wasn't eager to find out the hard way. Crushing his natural sympathy for the man who was writhing in pain, he stayed back, gun at the ready, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The bug's belly, as protected as the rest of its body, began to glow and the armoring irised open, reminding him of a camera lens. What lay beneath the armor Wesley didn't know, but the stream of light that emerged to play over the twitching body had a devastating effect. The man screamed, his final breath being used to fuel an agonized, incoherent howl that ended only when his skin began to shred, crumbling away in seconds to reveal a fiery core, as though he'd been set alight from the inside.

The demon raised its upper arms, whether in triumph or to end the spell, Wesley couldn't be certain. The beam of light cut off, and the aperture began to close.

Wesley's finger squeezed the trigger before it finished.

The shotgun blast reverberated around the room, mixing with the scream of the bug demon as it fell on its back and skittered across the floor. Cocking the gun again, Wesley reached down, picked up the Haunter's sword he'd dropped, and tossed it to Illyria, who snatched it from the air with a twist of her wrist, testing its weight. The remaining Haunter demon appeared in front of Angel, and the pair began exchanging blows. Illyria joined Angel, assisting him in fighting off the demon, their combined attack preventing it from touching them.

During all that action, the bug demons chattered excitedly and finally righted their fallen comrade. It was still alive but moving slowly. One of the other demons stepped forward, upright on its hind legs, into the faint beam of sunlight.

"Wes, Illyria, we've gotta get out of here, now!" Angel shouted.

"We most certainly do," Wesley responded, getting behind Angel and Illyria and aiming his gun at the spell-casting demon, ignoring the Haunter who was in the way.

Another of the demons let out a loud series of clicks, sounding almost impatient, and the Haunter paused, looked back momentarily, and then teleported into the group of bug demons. They were left facing the spell caster.

"Run!" Angel turned, giving a slight shove to Wesley's shoulder, trying to get him turned around.

With a final glance back, Wesley turned and ran.

---

It happened too quickly for Nina to register at first. She'd stopped Megan from landing a second blow, and then righteous anger or primal violence had taken over. Now Megan was leaning against the wall, dazed and bleeding.

Nina nearly dropped the crowbar, her eyes widening in horror.

This wasn't something she had talked to Angel about. She could be a little more PMS-y than most women, but she'd thought she could handle the violent emotions that had come with the transformation - always with her, no matter how deeply she buried them. Now she wasn't so sure.

Turning away from the dazed Megan, Nina took a step towards Oz, who appeared to be in the most trouble. More people came through the door, making her halt, indecisive about what she should do in the face of the new threat. The clothing and jewelry identified them as cultists, but she hadn't really expected them to be on her side.

Nina counted five of them as she lifted her crow bar to fend off the two men rushing at her. The one on the left staggered suddenly and cried out as he was hurled through the air, smacking hard against the cement wall. Nina blinked.

Angel.

Moving with a speed she'd rarely seen him use, he turned on the second man, a low growl peeling back his lips in a snarl. The man backed away, raising his hands in a futile gesture of appeasement, but Angel's fist was already heading for his face, and when it connected the man crumpled to the floor, moaning and clutching a bleeding nose.

"Nina! Are you all right?" Angel paused to glance at her before scanning the room with a practiced eye.

"I... yeah, more or less."

"Good. Be right with you." He gave her a grin before turning quickly and putting up an arm to block a chair leveled at his head.

In the background, Nina could see that Illyria and Wesley had joined Spike and Gunn and were fending off the remainder of the newcomers. Oz was in the back of the room, half-hidden from view, pinned to the wall by Gene and one of the other men, who were taking turns punching him in the stomach. Nina took two steps towards them, her anger rising because beside them Oz looked so small, when a howl rising amid the chaos brought her to her knees. Reverberations shot down Nina's spine as she fought the urge to reply. She could feel it from snout to tip of the tail that she currently wasn't wearing, the call to the wolf who lay sleeping within. She tasted blood as she bit her lip trying not to respond and struggled to her feet.

In front of her, Gene and one of the other cultists slowly fell to their knees, but, unlike Nina, deliberately, facing the half-man, half-wolf that Oz had become. The air was charged with the smell of blood, both her own and that of others. Nina's skin crawled with the desire to change.

Squatted down in the cage, bouncing on hands and feet, Jordy cackled with glee, the primal exultation that was racing from Oz to Nina affecting him, too, as the moonrise approached. The cultists that could dropped to their knees and looked at the embodiment of their dreams in abject worship.

Touching his forehead to the cold concrete, Gene raised himself up. "Forgive us, Honored One. We only desire your touch."

"Hey, it doesn't matter if he bites you; I still get the stereo, right?"

Every head in the room turned to face Jordy, who had sobered and was glaring at Gene suspiciously.

There was no sound in the room, and Nina's vision shrank to encompass only the occupant of the cage. She flung herself at him, and the bars hurt as she pressed herself harder and harder against them, trying to break through and grab him.

"You *volunteered!* You'd spread this abomination for some DVDs and games? What are you?" she cried.

Hands were grabbing her, pulling at her urgently. She squirmed away, batting them back, but they wouldn't let go. Jordy was huddled up against the back wall, cowering away from her.

"Nina!"

The hand holding her wrist was covered in fur, giving her pause. Breathing hard, Nina turned enough to see Oz and watched him shift back to fully human.

"It's done," he said. "Let it go."

The world was coming back into focus, and Nina was fighting back tears, her heart pounding hard in her chest. There was one pair of hands left, holding her shoulders with a gentle pressure. Turning, Nina practically fell into Angel's arms, pressing her head into his chest.

"I'm sorry. I got here as fast as I could," he whispered, his lips against her hair. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

The words glided past her like the tears sliding down her cheek.

---

Angel could feel the sun setting no matter where he was, but he wasn't attuned to the moon in quite the same way. Even so, Nina's tension was infectious now that moonrise was almost upon them, and he hurried down the basement stairs with her to where her cage stood waiting, open, and clean.

Very clean.

"You'll be all right?" he asked her. "Do you want me to stay? Would it help?"

"No." Nina stepped towards the cage, hugging herself. "I mean, in a couple of minutes I won't know... I won't know anything."

She hesitated a minute and then turned back, wrapping her arms around Angel's waist, hugging him hard.

"And tomorrow, when you do remember, I'll be right here," he said quietly, bringing up his arms to give her shelter, still feeling echoes of the emotions he'd experienced when he'd come into the room and seen her distraught and screaming.

He hated feeling helpless.

"Angel?" It was Wesley's voice coming from the top of the stairs.

Nina gave Angel a last squeeze and then walked into the cage, pulling off her shirt.

"Angel?" Wesley called again.

Angel watched her, feeling particularly helpless. "Yeah, Wes."

Nina's movements were slow but efficient as she gave the clothes a quick fold and stacked them just outside the door, where she could pull them through the bars in the morning.

The helpless feeling just didn't go away.

"I may have a source on the phone that can identify our demons." Wesley's voice was slightly louder, as if he had come closer to the room but was still down the hall, out of sight.

Angel started to turn then stopped, calling over his shoulder. "I'm coming." Nina was adjusting a ragged blanket over her shoulders; she looked cold and alone. "Are you going to be okay?"

Nina nodded. "You should go save the world."

The sound of metal on metal echoed through the basement as the steel door closed.

THE END

Page printed from:  
<http://ats-nolimits.com/episodes/ep0606.php>