

Episode 6.7 Eclipse

By Jane Davitt and Just Human

Connor stood behind the reception desk, which still smelled of popcorn in a lingering legacy of its former life as the concession stand. Shaking his head in bemusement, he turned a page of the newspaper he'd found in a cupboard, neatly folded and stiff with dust. It was from 1985, and he was entertained by reviews of movies he'd never heard of, ads for products that didn't do half the stuff they were supposed to - toothpaste that just cleaned your teeth? Who'd buy that? - and news items that, depressingly, hadn't changed a bit: murders, rapes, drive-by shootings and, oh look, a cat that could play the piano.

The low murmur of conversation from Angel's office upstairs changed to frantic, high-pitched squeals that he hoped were from the demon couple who were the latest - only - clients and not from Angel or Gunn. He concentrated and picked out Gunn's voice sounding soothing as he assured them that discretion was what they were best at, next to fighting, and Angel being sympathetic in an 'I don't get your problem, but I'll smile and maybe you'll think I do' kind of way.

Smiling to himself because Angel just wasn't cut out for the bonding with clients bit, he flipped to the last page, re-folded the paper neatly, and sent it into the trash can beside him with a flick of his wrist.

Before he had time to get *really* bored, the door to the street swung open, and he brightened at the prospect of something interesting. Then, getting a good look at the visitor, he found himself smoothing back the soft brown hair that persisted in falling into his face no matter what he did to it.

"I need to speak to the boss," she said.

The brisk, snapped-off voice dispelled some of the charm of her softly-curved lips and deep, dark eyes, but there was enough perfection left in her lush yet slender body that he didn't care.

"He's with another client right now." Connor stared at her, enjoying the view, and then realized that her never-more-than polite smile had turned chilly. "If you'd like to wait, I can get you - make you - well, there's coffee?"

She gave him a pitying look. "I'm sure there is. No. I think that I'll just head up to see him."

She nodded toward the stairs and began to walk over to them. Connor slipped out from behind the reception desk, blocking her path.

"Look, he shouldn't be long, but, you know, you can't just - "

"Interrupt him?" she quirked her eyebrows. "Actually, I can. It's a question of priorities, and I *really* doubt that whatever he's discussing with -"

Connor cleared his throat. "I think they're Therk'tin dem - umm, from Therk'tin." He tried a casual smile. "Wherever that is."

She smiled back. "So discreet, but it's wasted effort. They're demons and of no importance whatsoever. I need to speak with him. Don't make me repeat myself a third time. I bore easily."

Connor folded his arms across his chest. "Sorry." He nodded at a chair, well-used, cheap and clashing terribly with the faded carpet, the walls, and, well, the whole reception area. "If you take a seat - "

She tapped a glossy red fingernail against her white teeth and stared at him for a long moment. Connor flushed, doing his best to look unconcerned. "I'll stand," she said finally, shifting so that she could see Angel's office door at the head of the stairs. "I'm not expecting to be here long."

"You sure I can't get you some coffee?" Connor asked.

"No," she said. "And please stop following the example of the man in charge and wasting my time."

"I'm not following anyone," Connor said defensively. "I'm trying to help."

"Perhaps you were," she gave him another of those appraising looks. "I didn't intend to be rude; I'm just doing my job. Or trying to."

Connor waved his hand in dismissal of the apology. "No problem. Hey, I never got your name, or what the problem is. I'm supposed to open a file -"

"A file?" She frowned and then raised her eyes as the office door opened and the voices grew louder.

"- absolutely sure? Because we can deal with it, you know. Seems a shame to waste your money -"

"Gunn, they said that's not the way they want to handle it," Angel interrupted, ushering the clients down the stairs, human-looking apart from the small tentacles at their foreheads and a pale lilac tinge to their skin. "You know the customer's always -"

"- right," Gunn finished. "Yeah, I know. Still think we could deal with this better than paying up."

The clients hissed in concern, their tentacles lifting and writhing in an agitated manner. "You need not fear that we will not have sufficient funds to pay *you*," the male assured Gunn, adjusting his tie with trembling hands as they stepped down into the lobby. "A debt is always to be paid. It is a sacred duty amongst my kind."

"Glad to hear it." Gunn moved over to lean against the reception desk. "But, no, I wasn't thinking that. It just seems to me that by the time you pay off these blackmailers, you're not gonna have a whole lot of spare cash left yourselves, that's all. You said this was all you had saved. We persuaded them to back off and keep on going, and -"

"No!" The female gave her husband an anguished look, the lilac in her skin deepening to purple with agitation. "Tell them, Jeryn!"

Jeryn began to reply and then noticed the woman who stood waiting beside Connor, her expression one of bored impatience. Lowering his voice in an attempt at discretion he said, "You'll do it as we discussed, yes? Deliver the money, collect the - the package and destroy it instantly." He drew himself up and poked Gunn in the chest. "Or there won't be a bonus." He gave Angel and Gunn a smile, revealing teeth that were too sharp to make the smile entirely reassuring.

Gunn rolled his eyes. "Bonus. Right. We don't have a retainer, and you're talking bonuses. Not that we wouldn't do this for free, you understand. We're here to help. Even when some people don't seem to *want* -"

The demon opened his mouth to protest, but Angel said, "Gunn!" through gritted teeth and gestured towards the door to the street. "We'll handle it. You can count on us."

Jeryn favored him with a curt nod and left, his wife close on his heels.

Giving Gunn a reproachful look, met with a bland smile, Angel turned to the woman. "Sorry about that. As you can see, we, uh, really go the distance when it comes to taking care of people." He held out his hand. "Hi. I'm -"

"I want to speak to the boss," she said, her voice cool. She glanced at Angel's outstretched hand but did not take it.

Angel dropped his hand back down to his side. "Like I said: hi, I'm -"

She shook her head slowly, a slight smile doing nothing to soften her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't make myself clear, did I? I want to speak to *my* boss."

"Well, he's not here," Gunn said. He frowned. "Was he supposed to meet you here? Is he in danger?"

The small, private smile grew wider. "No, not precisely. The matter *is* urgent though."

"And you're going to tell us what the problem is?" Angel asked. "Or do we keep playing guessing games?"

One dark eyebrow lifted. "Well, it certainly isn't personal, so I suppose that would be in order. Forest or hunter."

"What?"

"Green," she said patiently. "With our contacts, I can have it delivered and fitted in a day, but I need to know what shade he's settled on."

Angel folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah, okay. And in language I can understand, that sounds like...?"

Speaking in an exaggeratedly slow voice, she said, "My boss needs to choose a color for the carpet in his office. Until he does, I can't go ahead with the redecoration." She spread her hands in appeal. "I'm sure you see my problem."

Angel's forehead creased in a frown. "Not really."

She gave a light laugh. "Are you *serious*? This isn't a trivial matter. He's a man of some importance. CEO in fact. There are certain standards to be met in a position like his. As soon as they walk into his office, our clients have to feel that they're in the presence of someone who matters, someone with power."

Angel's eyes narrowed. "So, mind telling me who he is, and why the hell you're here looking for him?"

The door leading to the garage swung open revealing Wesley, a blood-smearred ax in his hand. He paused, staring across the lobby at the woman, his expression darkening.

She beamed. "Never mind. I found him."

Without warning, Wesley brought his hand up and threw the ax at her, sending it spinning in a bloody arc.

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- **Episode 6.7:** Eclipse
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Gunn gave an inarticulate sound of alarm and began to move forward, but there was no chance that he would be able to push the woman to safety. She remained standing as still as Angel, a faintly amused look on her face.

It was Connor who leapt forward, springing from his casual slouch against the desk and snatching the ax from the air, a mere foot from her face.

"Thank you, Connor," she said, giving him a polite smile. "You're quite an impressive young man, aren't you? I wonder what side of the family you get that from?"

Connor frowned. "How do you know my - ?"

Angel's eyes darkened. He gestured sharply to Connor to be quiet and then swung on the woman. "I don't think that's any of Wolfram & Hart's business." He gave her a cold stare. "That *is* who you work for, right?"

"Wait," Gunn said, "if she works for Wolfram & Hart then that means her boss is - "

Wesley stepped into their midst, facing the woman down. "I suggest you leave, Johanna. Now."

She walked briskly towards the street door, her tapping heels surprisingly loud against the worn carpet, cutting sharply through the charged, tense silence. "Of course. But you and I are still scheduled for a meeting. We have more to discuss than decor. Tedious, I know, but you do have work to do. And, if you'll stop trying to decapitate me, you'll have an office to do it in that's a little more suitable, considering who you are."

"Who he is? Thought you wanted Wes to make a choice," Angel said quietly.

She turned her head, pausing at the threshold. "He already has."

Wesley immediately turned to face Angel. "Angel, I - "

"My office, Wesley," Angel said tightly. "Now."

Wesley watched Angel climb the stairs, his face unreadable, then followed him without a word.

Connor looked down at the ax and then at Gunn. "What should I do with this?" he asked, holding it away from him and screwing up his nose at the acrid smell of demon blood.

Gunn stared up at Angel's door. "Clean it and keep it handy. The way things are going around here, you might need it."

"Looks like you missed a few things when you brought us up to speed," Angel said as soon as the door was closed.

"Not really." Wesley met Angel's gaze calmly, taking a seat. "You knew I was working for them; does it really matter in what capacity?"

"You know it does, or you wouldn't have kept it from me. *Damn* it, Wes! After what I went through, how the hell could you even consider it?" Angel said, remaining standing, the back of his chair gripped tightly in his hands.

"I'm not you," Wesley said, "and I knew what I was getting into -"

"Lot of good that'll do you!" Angel snapped, thrusting the chair away from him and taking the three paces that were all he needed to bring him up against a wall. Angel hissed with frustration and turned back. "This ends now."

"It can't," Wesley said firmly. His hand lifted and pressed against the thin cotton of his shirt, where it lay against the wound that had taken his life. "Angel, I am here now *because* of them. I don't trust them any more than you do, but considering the circumstances what more do you want?"

"I want you not to have people coming here to find out what shade your office carpet is going to be," Angel said angrily. "I want - and who the hell was she anyway?"

Wesley sighed. "Johanna. The new liaison to the Senior Partners. And I'm fairly certain that my views on interior design are of no interest to her at all; she just came to cause trouble."

"She came," Angel said, his voice flat, "because she wants you over there. With them. Behind my desk."

Connor dipped the cleaning rag into the saucer on the reception desk and applied a small amount of clove oil to the ax-head. He turned to Gunn, who was sitting hunched over in the cheap office chair, half his attention on the stake he was whittling, half on what was going on in Angel's office. So far it seemed quiet up there, but maybe that wasn't a good sign. "Those clients who just left, why won't they let you help them?"

"What?" Gunn gouged a chunk of wood off the half-formed stake and watched it fall to the spread-out newspaper that he'd rescued from the trash. "Oh, them... Got me. They're being blackmailed; want us to make the drop. Seems like it'd be better all around if we just taught those slime that there's better ways to make money than stealing from your own, but they wouldn't go for it."

"They were scared," Connor said thoughtfully. "Wanted to take the easy way out."

"Yeah. Lot of that going around," Gunn said. He inspected the stake and rotated it to begin work on a new part. "The drop's tomorrow night at eight. Think I might swing by tonight and see what's up. Do a recon."

Connor grinned. "You just want a chance to fight them."

Gunn pretended to frown at him. "Me? Want a chance to beat on some low-lives? Maybe bust a few heads?" He sighed. "You know, couple of years back, I'd have said that was a perfect night out. Now it's just what I do. Kind of miss it being fun, you know?"

The ax head was beginning to shine. Connor gave it a final swipe with the cloth and set it down on the reception desk. He began to gather up the cleaning supplies. "I know."

Gunn nodded at the ax. "That was neat, what you did there. Not going to tell me saving a pretty - I'm guessing evil, but still pretty - lady wasn't fun?"

Connor gave him a sheepish smile and returned the supplies to the cardboard box they were stored in, placing it beside the ax on the desk. "It didn't suck." The smile faded and he said slowly, "But I did it without thinking. I didn't *mean* to, and if I'd tried I'd probably have ended up with Wes' ax embedded in my skull."

"Really doubt we're insured to cover that," Gunn said, grinning. "Try and keep the wounds down to a paper cut or two, okay?"

Connor laughed, his face clearing, and was about to answer when the door to the street swung open.

Gunn's smile widened. "Hey, Nina."

Connor glanced at Angel's girlfriend, a speculative look coming to his eyes. "Good to see you," he said giving her a friendly smile.

Wesley's eyes narrowed. "Your desk?"

"You think this is about me being *jealous*?" Angel shook his head, his eyes still livid with anger. "Wes, after everything they've done to us, everything they've taken - "

"They'll take more if we're not careful," Wesley told him.

"*Nothing* is careful with Wolfram & Hart," Angel said. "Which I know *because* I once sat at that desk. No deal is sacred. There's tricks, and fine print, and ways to screw you over that you can't even begin to imagine."

"What would you have me do?" Wesley demanded. "Quit? Hand the reins over to someone we don't know? Or, worse, someone we know damned well would love nothing more than to use all of Wolfram & Hart's resources to hurt you?"

Angel folded his arms. "Isn't that why they gave *you* the job? To hurt me?"

"I'm on your side," Wesley said.

"And you thought you'd demonstrate that by lying to me," Angel retorted.

Wesley had the decency to wince. "I did what I had to. Though I wasn't exactly wrong to suppose you'd be upset by this."

"You got something else up your sleeve that you think I'm going to be upset by?" Angel asked. "Because now'd be the time to get chatty."

"I am here for you," Wesley said, his voice clipped. "It may not be the best deal around, but it's all I have to offer. Take it or leave it."

Angel glared at him. "Wes - "

"Angel - "

"Hi!" Nina burst in without knocking, forcing both of them to pause. She went straight to Angel for a hurried hug and kiss, beaming from ear-to-ear and obviously excited. Stepping back, she turned and gave Wesley an apologetic but exuberant smile. "Hi, Wes!"

"Hello, Nina," Wes said, offering her a polite smile in return.

Angel cleared his throat. "Hey, Nina. You look - " He studied her. "Excited? I really want to hear about it, but Wes and I were just in the middle - "

"I saw the moon," Nina said. She looked up at the cracked plaster ceiling as if she could see the heavenly body right then and there. "The moon!"

Angel made a non-committal sound to cover his confusion, and silently blessed Wesley when he said, "Nina, there are no windows near your cage; how did you - ?"

"Oh! Well okay, technically I didn't actually *see* anything." She ran a hand through her hair and took a calming breath. Glancing between them both she said, "I was working on the meditation exercise Oz taught me. I could feel the change pressing on me, and I was fighting it. Which is hard to do when you're trying to stay centered. And then there was this moment where everything seemed to, I don't know, balance out? Anyway, I opened my eyes and I could see the clock on the wall. 8:24. 8:24!"

"8:24?" Angel asked, glad to see that Wesley seemed just as perplexed as he was, although the shift from being angry with him to being grateful for his support was going to make continuing their discussion difficult.

"8:24." Nina looked at them as if the information she was imparting should be obvious. She rolled her eyes. "The moon rose at 8:22."

"Honey, that's great; so you stayed human all night?" Angel smiled at her and glanced over at Wesley, still wanting to finish the conversation they'd started, but realizing that this was a major breakthrough for Nina. She wanted someone to share her euphoria, which he did, he really did, just -

"No, I got so excited that I lost my focus and never actually saw 8:25, but it's a start," Nina said, her smile fading a little.

Angel nodded. "So, two minutes? Maybe three? Well, that's - that's great, Nina. Really great. Absolutely... great."

"It certainly is," Wesley said, with far more conviction than Angel had been able to muster. "The duration of your resistance isn't important; that you were able to do it at all is the main thing. By the next full moon, when you've had more time to practice, well..."

He gave Angel an expectant look, as if he was encouraging him to follow his lead, but Angel was having a hard time shifting mental gears. "Maybe we can celebrate later?"

She let out a breath, visibly deflated. "Yeah, thanks for the enthusiasm."

"I'm sorry," Angel said, scrambling for the right kind of apology. "I get it, I do. And it's really - "

"Great?" Nina finished, her voice dropping the temperature of the room by several degrees.

"It is," Angel said, hastily. "And I want to celebrate. It's just that Wes and I were kind of in the middle of something."

With a look that indicated that she was definitely not happy, Nina started to walk out. "Okay, I'll just get out of your way. No point in dragging you down with the first glimmer of hope I've had in a year."

"Nina!" Angel tried to stop her leaving, but short of grabbing her arm - and he really didn't think that'd go down well - there was nothing he could do. She slammed the door behind her, and they listened as her feet hit every step down to the lobby with a forceful, angry thud.

He turned to Wesley and gestured helplessly, their interrupted conversation momentarily forgotten. "What did I say?"

Wesley's lips twitched in amused exasperation. "I think in this case, it's more what you left out, Angel."

There was a long silence as Angel replayed the scene in his head and then opened his mouth.

"If you're about to excuse yourself and the excuse in any way involves me, don't bother," Wesley said. "I appreciate that Nina arrived at a bad time, but that's scarcely her fault."

"Yeah, she did," Angel told him. "Look, Wes, about that - "

"My position hasn't changed," Wesley reminded him. "Literally or metaphorically. It's not about to change in the next few minutes either, so if you'd care to do something that will vastly improve the quality of your life in the quickest amount of time I suggest following the beautiful woman who just left and groveling as much as inhumanly possible."

Angel hesitated. "Wes..."

"We can talk later," Wesley promised.

"Don't think I won't hold you to that," Angel said.

Some unreadable emotion flickered in Wesley's eyes. "I don't doubt it."

Angel walked down the steps into the lobby. Other than Gunn, still sitting and whittling, the room was empty.

Gunn gave Angel an expectant look. "What's up?"

"You know, just once, I'd like for my life to be simple," Angel said. "Is that too much to ask?"

"You find out what's going on with Wesley?" Gunn pressed his finger against the point of the stake, testing its sharpness.

"I don't want to talk about it," Angel said shortly. "If I talk I somehow end up the one who doesn't care and is just in it for the sex."

Gunn yelped as a splinter from the stake pierced his finger. "Now, before I start to add two and two and get the winning lottery numbers, we're not talking about Wes anymore, are we?"

"What?" Angel's frown deepened, but he wasn't really paying attention. He cocked his head to the side. "Nina."

"Now *that* makes a whole lot more sense," Gunn said around the finger he'd shoved into his mouth to suck clean. "She's - "

"Still here." Angel's nostrils flared as he caught her scent. "She said she was leaving."

"Well, from the look on her face, I don't think you're far wrong there. She had some stuff in the basement she needed. Connor went with her."

"Why?"

Gunn shrugged and stood up. "Beats me. Boy must be crazy; I mean, choice of helping out a pretty lady or sitting here waiting for the phone to do something besides nothing. Well, tough call."

"Pretty lady'? She's my girlfriend!"

"So he's not allowed to look?" Gunn snorted. "Good luck on that. When I was his age..."

"Don't you have something better to do than reminisce?" Angel snapped, ignoring Gunn's response as he headed for the basement.

"I suppose every relationship doesn't start with a damsel in distress being saved, no." Nina gave Connor a puzzled smile as she folded a shirt. "Angel's saved a lot of people and hasn't gotten involved with them... at least, I don't *think* he's - "

"And his curse doesn't bother you?" Connor interrupted, his eyes watchful. He moved aside a bottle of bleach and perched on a rickety table.

"Bother me?"

"You don't make him perfectly happy," Connor said bluntly. "And if you did you wouldn't like it." His gaze dropped for a moment. "Or so I've heard. Must make things difficult. Does that make you feel like you're not enough for him?"

Nina tossed the shirt into a box and gave Connor an exasperated glare. "I'm not sure where you're going with this, Connor, but I'm really not in the mood."

"Not in the mood for what?" Angel said from the shadows at the top of the stairs, his voice dangerously calm. He walked down the short flight of steps to her side.

Picking up her box, Nina glanced at Connor. "Nosy interns." Stepping towards the stairs to the lobby, she glared at Angel. "Unsupportive boyfriends." As Nina's foot hit the bottom step, she called back, "Please don't let me get in your way. I'm sure you've got important things to discuss with Connor."

"You do?" Connor asked warily. "I mean, we do?"

"We don't!" Angel said impatiently.

Connor blinked, a little startled by his tone. Angel lifted up his hand in an unspoken apology and then fixed him with a suspicious look. "Maybe we do, but it can wait," he said, turning to run up the stairs. "Nina!"

He caught up with her just before she opened the door, and Connor watched as his father bent down, speaking to her in an urgent, heartfelt whisper that, to Connor, was as clear as the proverbial bell.

He continued to gaze at them with youthful cynicism as Nina's stiff posture and hurt face softened as she received a kiss that he really didn't want to watch. Walking away into the shadowy depths of the basement, he tripped over a pile of drop cloths that tangled his feet and sent him staggering forward, arms outstretched.

With a soft thud, his hands landed against a section of wall that jutted out from the main wall, and sank, wrist deep, into moldering plasterboard, still damp with water damage.

When he pulled back, a section of wall came with his hands, revealing not pipes or wires but the glint of metal. He bit his lip, but the wall would already need to be fixed, and the basement wasn't exactly finished... With more enthusiasm than he'd shown for any of his officially assigned tasks, he began to tear down the wall.

It took only a moment for him to have cleared enough space to have his guess confirmed.

It was a vault, hidden and forgotten.

Until now.

A smile spread across Connor's face. "*Cool.*"

"Look, let me walk you home," Angel said insistently as he and Nina emerged into the lobby.

"I live miles away, Angel," Nina pointed out gently, reaching up to tweak his collar straight and making an obvious effort to smile. "If it's all the same to you, I think I'll drive."

"Well, let me drive you then," Angel said eagerly. "You never know what's out there."

"Me," Nina said, with a wry twist to her mouth. "I'm out there. Look, I need some space. I just - there's so

much I have to consider, and Oz gave me a list of books that might be useful. I'm going to go over to the library..." She pursed her lips. "Or maybe look online... the local library's heavy on the blockbusters, not so big on the meditation rituals I'll need to master."

"Then let me take you out to dinner tomorrow night," Angel said firmly. "We don't do that often enough." He frowned. "Actually, we don't do that at all."

"Now, I wonder why that is?" Gunn said to the air. "Oh, wait. You don't eat." He picked up the newspaper he'd been using, holding it carefully to avoid spilling the wood-shavings it held, and went over to the trash can.

"I can eat," Angel protested, shooting an annoyed glance over at Gunn. "I might not be big on the spicy wings like Spike -"

"What's this? You finally admitting I've got better taste than you?" Spike asked, holding the door open for Illyria with a smirk and a low bow that was lost on her. He sauntered over, nodding to Gunn and giving Nina a flirtatious wink. "This philistine tried to tell me once he couldn't tell the difference between -"

"Spike!" Angel said, grimacing at him in what he hoped was a meaningful way, though the chances of Spike taking a hint were minimal. "Really not in the mood for a trip down memory lane."

"- decaf and espresso."

"Oh. One comes in *really* small cups," Angel said, relieved Spike had come up with something so innocuous.

Illyria walked over to Gunn's chair and crouched down to study a few stray wood-shavings left on the carpet, poking at them with her finger.

Nina shifted the box to her hip, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Since when? I've only seen regular, giant, and java-junkie," she told them.

"Just something I remember from Italy," he said hastily. He tried a casual laugh. "Crazy Europeans."

"With your *friend* in Rome?" Nina asked archly.

Trust Spike to make *anything* twist around to be a major pain in Angel's ass. The triviality of the exchange was beginning to grate on him coming so soon after his interrupted talk with Wesley.

"No. Not with - Look, can we just change the subject?"

Nina nodded slowly. "Sure. Change is good. Sometimes it's looking like the only option."

Spike winced. "Why do I get the feeling that while I was away lunk-head here put his size twelves right in it? Nina, love, whatever he did, forgive him. Not for his sake but for mine." He gave her a conspiratorial look. "Tell you what; I'll take you out for dinner, and we can have a fine old time chatting about some of his less-than-shining moments."

Nina grinned at him. "I think Angel's taking me out, but thanks." She gave Angel a questioning look. "Well? Are you?"

"Taking you out for dinner?" Angel smiled at her, relief that it would be that easy to retrieve lost ground easing his tension a little. "Tomorrow night, at nine? I'll meet you at the Mimosa."

"Someone die and leave you a million?" Gunn demanded. "A starter there costs more than most places charge for three courses and wine."

"It doesn't matter, Gunn," Angel said through a gritted-teeth smile. "This is a special occasion."

"No, it's not," said Spike. "It's just you being a prat, as usual. And if you take her there every time you piss her off, we'll be operating out of a cardboard box by Christmas."

Nina reached up and patted Angel's face. "They're right, so stop pouting."

"I don't pout - Spike, so help me, one more word and I'll - "

"Angel." Wesley's voice, quietly compelling, cut through Spike's reply as he walked down the stairs, book in hand. "If I may? There's a possibility that the sword we took from the Hunters is engraved with a message, rather than a simple decoration. I think we should explore that angle a little more."

Angel looked at him, unwilling to just let their unfinished conversation be forgotten, as Wesley seemed to have done. "If you're sure that's what you want to do, Wes. Stay here, that is."

"Perfectly sure." Wesley glanced at them all. "This is important," he said to no one in particular. "These demons - both types - have proved violent and impossible to defeat and we have to - "

"You know, I should go," Nina interrupted, her lips tightening as Angel began to walk over to Wesley. "Angel, I'll meet you at nine, but let's just make it at the diner over on Belmont. It'll take up less of your time."

The door swung closed on her before Angel had time to apologize for whatever he'd done wrong this time.

Nina's departure left a silence that was too full of tension to leave room for awkwardness. Spike tilted his head back, staring up at the ceiling and whistling softly until Angel growled his name.

"What? A bloke can't whistle?"

"Nice to see you get *something* right, Spike," Angel said. "Look, Connor's in the basement, why don't you - "

"Oh, I see. You piss off the girlfriend with a little help from old Wes, and I'm the one who suffers." The glare Spike gave Angel had an edge to it. "Always did get a kick out of trying to make me your whipping boy, didn't you?"

"I almost never used a - and she wasn't pissed off." Angel looked at them all. "Was she?"

Illyria gave a harsh, discordant bark of laughter, abandoning her study of the wood slivers with her customary abruptness. "She did not seem pleased with you, vampire."

"Well, tomorrow I could give her flowers," Angel said. "That'd help, right?"

"I do not see how," Illyria said flatly. "Decaying vegetation, plucked untimely, with severed stems dripping sap like blood?"

"Remind me to sell my shares in Interflora," Gunn said, rolling his eyes.

"They're used to convey messages: gratitude, sympathy, love," Wesley explained. "In fact, a century or so ago, each flower had a meaning, and it was possible to make a bouquet that conveyed a very precise message of love to the recipient, without being too obvious about it."

Illyria's china-blue eyes clouded. "And yet you never gifted Winifred Burkle with any. Did she not care for them?"

Wesley stared at her, jolted out of his lecture mode. A hint of coldness touched his words as he replied. "I don't know. We weren't together long enough for me to find out."

Illyria cocked her head at him. With what for her was a helpful attitude, she replied, "She did. In particular she wished that you had given her - "

"Illyria, *please*," Wesley said, his voice strained.

Of all people, it was Gunn who came to Wesley's rescue. "Hey, no real news there, though, right? All girls like getting flowers from their man."

"I don't know," a new voice said. "There are those of us whose tastes run a little more to diamonds."

"Gwen!" Gunn said, turning to face the new arrival and grinning.

"That's my name." Gwen favored them all with a brisk smile that softened a fraction as she glanced at Gunn. She smoothed a hand down the curve of her hip, encased in tight black leather. "Though I'll answer to 'Hey, you' if there's something sweet enough in it for me."

Spike made an eloquent, if not polite, noise and jerked his head at Illyria. "Come on, pet. Let's go see what's keeping Connor busy down there before I lose my breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner."

"If you two have finished whatever it is you're doing - " Angel said to Gunn a little sharply, as Spike and Illyria walked away.

"Saying hello?" Gunn asked, without taking his eyes off Gwen. "Yeah, all done with that."

"Can we talk?" Gwen asked him, putting a finger in the center of Gunn's chest and pushing him back slowly so that they moved towards the main theater. "Away from the crowd?"

"I think it's actually 'far from the madding crowd'," Wesley said.

"Yeah, that works too," Gwen said over her shoulder.

"Those two mating disturbs you?"

"What, Charlie and Sparky? Nah." Spike jumped down the last three basement stairs and glanced around, looking for Connor. "Just not much for watching a man get that lovey-dovey look in his eyes. Not these days anyway. Makes me wonder if I looked that bloody stupid." He gave her a curious look. "Don't suppose you ever fell in - no. Guess you never did."

"Emotions such as that serve no purpose." Illyria paused and then reconsidered. "I demanded them from those who worshipped me, but that was - "

"Different," Spike finished. "It always is, love."

Connor appeared from the shadows and gave them a smile innocent enough to make Spike's eyes narrow.

"You done lurking in the dark and the damp?" he asked. "Because there's a phone up there with your name on it."

"Think you'll find it's got Angel's name on it," Connor said, walking to the foot of the stairs.

"Most things around here have," Spike said.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you," Gunn said as they came to a halt just inside the theater, "but usually when you show, there's a reason. Or a fight about to happen. Sometimes both. Which is it?"

"No fighting. But there's a reason," she said. "I wanted to do this - "

Her lips brushed against Gunn's in a light, testing touch, then she smiled and deepened the kiss as his arms came up to hold her.

"Now that's a good enough reason for me to be pleased to see you," he said when the kiss ended, "but I still think - "

She pulled back. "Read my luscious lips, Charles. I'm here because I wanted to see you. And I was hoping it was mutual. That's it. Cross my heart and hope to fry. Sorry. Freak humor."

"Oh." Gunn studied her. "Well, if you want mutual..."

The second kiss was longer, but it was the last. With an apologetic glance at the door to the foyer, he stepped back and said, "This beats what I normally do on my coffee break hands down, but - "

"So much I could do with that sentence," she sighed. "Watch me be a hero and not. Is this the bit where you tell me you've got to go save the world, and I'm just holding you back?"

Gunn smiled. "I've penciled the world-saving in for next Tuesday. But, yeah, I'd better get back in there. Angel's having problems understanding women and that means - "

"Gunn! Phone!"

Gunn's mouth twisted as Angel's terse bellow shattered the moment. " - he's not going to be in a good mood with the rest of us."

"Then why don't you take me for coffee and give him chance to cool off?"

"Now, Gunn! And where the hell is Connor?"

"You know, that's not such a bad idea," Gunn said, wincing slightly. "If I belonged to a union, they'd be telling me it was quitting time." He cleared his throat. "Maybe we could plan something that might sound like a date to anyone paying close attention? You free any night soon?"

"In a few days, yeah. Got a few chores to do: clean the bath, do the ironing, steal a fifty-foot-tall modern sculpture of a woman giving birth to a frog..." She smiled. "Joking. I do have some standards you know."

"Never doubted it," Gunn said, ushering her back out into the lobby. "Just never thought you'd let them stand in the way of anything you wanted."

Gwen glanced up at him. "Insightful and dedicated. Remind me again why I like you? Because those aren't usually good selling points for me."

Gunn waved at Angel, who was giving him a pointed glare as he dealt with a caller.

"Because I'm brave when it counts, but I can take advantage of a situation when I have to?" He headed towards the door. "Wes, when he's done explaining why we really need our carpets cleaned but we're still not going to do it, tell Angel I'm going for coffee and I'll be back later."

"Much later," said Gwen. She paused and looked at Wesley, tilting her head. "Weren't you dead?"

"I got better," Wesley assured her.

Angel sorted rapidly through a sheaf of messages Connor had marked as urgent, frowning and making notes on some, and then tossed them on top of a stack of files. "I've got to go out," he said abruptly. "I need to check out that case we had earlier and see where we're making the drop."

"Take Spike and Illyria with you," Wesley said absently, studying the dense text of a book that seemed to have been bound with thick string.

"Why?" Angel said. "Not like I'm planning on *doing* anything." He met Wesley's knowing look with an innocent smile. "Just going to look at the nice little blackmailers."

Wesley's gaze traveled to Angel's hands, which had taken one of the cushions from the back of the second-hand couch and were squeezing it into something like a misshapen basket ball. He raised his eyebrow. "Just look? Really?"

Angel realized what he was doing and released the cushion. He pushed it back in place and shrugged. "Okay, I'm a little tense. The walk will do me good." He hesitated and then asked, "Come with me? Connor can handle things here, and you've been reading all day."

"And getting nowhere," Wesley said. "No, I'll stay. We shouldn't all leave, not when Connor's still so new to the job." He glanced over at a box of books beside the wall. "And I've still got those to go through." His gaze returned to Angel. "But you might need back up. Take the others with you, just in case."

"Well, isn't this just like old times?" Spike said chattily. "You, me, and a former god, walking along the city streets, on our way to do good and - no, it really isn't, is it?"

"You're spoiling a beautiful night with your yammering; that's the same," Angel said, but without much heat.

"Wes seemed to think you'd be glad of the company," Spike said. He looked over at Illyria pacing beside them, eyes flickering from side to side. "Not that Illyria wouldn't have been a crowd all by her little self." He frowned. "Remind me again why we're walking?"

"It's not far," Angel said. "And fresh air's good for you."

"Or it was before I, oh, what's that word again? *Died*." Spike gave Angel a puzzled look. "You going to start adding wheat germ to your blood next?"

"It's not that," Angel said. He walked a little faster. "I just didn't want another *discussion* about who gets to drive, that's all. Not without Wes around to make sure someone understands that 'no' means 'never.'"

"You need not fear," Illyria said, emerging from her long silence. "I no longer wish to experience what so many do and do so ill. It is beneath me to act as little more than a mule, flea-bitten and braying." She gave Angel a cool smile. "You are henceforth permitted to be my driver."

"And mine," Spike said. "Shall we go back and get the car so you can practice driving Miss Bluebell?"

"No!" Angel stopped dead, his shoulders stiff, the words emerging through gritted teeth. "I've said we're walking, and we're walking."

"Fine, whatever, certainly, sir," Spike muttered. They came to an alley and he nodded at it. "This should cut off a block or two, though. Short cuts allowed, are they?"

Angel paused, staring at the alley with a faint stirring of unease. He shrugged. "I suppose so. If it saves time." He looked at Spike. "You're sure it'll save time?"

"Positive," Spike said, no longer paying attention. He began to run. "That is, if offing the vamps having a nibble on that bloke down there doesn't take more than five minutes."

"Oh, for -" Angel followed him, moving quickly. "It's you, isn't it, Spike," he demanded. "You attract trouble."

Illyria overtook him, pale eyes gleaming. "This is not trouble," she said. "This is battle."

Spike hauled the feeding vampire off a struggling, weakly screaming teenager and punched him hard enough to send him flying into a stack of crates. The vampire obligingly smashed a crate into makeshift stakes with his landing and then struggled to his feet, snarling.

Angel stepped out of the shadows, picked up one of the pieces of wood and waited calmly until the vampire had got in at least one good punch to Spike's face before staking him from behind.

Illyria had the second vamp cornered and was smiling at him as she held him by the throat, squeezing hard and watching his dangling feet jerk helplessly.

Choking on frantic sobs, the boy pushed past them, hand clutching his neck where the blood was seeping out in a dark trail. "Let me out of here!"

"Does that mean 'thank you' in a language I'm not fluent in?" said Angel. He felt on edge, as if a storm was coming, his skin prickling and tight.

"I don't know," snarled Spike who was scratching the back of his neck instead of tending to his injured face. "Does letting that fresh-turned git break my nose translate as helping me? Because if so - "

"You feel it too," Angel interrupted, realization dawning. "Don't you?"

Spike gave him an irritable frown. "Feel what?"

"They come," Illyria said, still holding onto her captive. They turned to her, and she stared past them into the depths of the alley. "The Haunters of the Silences approach."

"Short cut. Right." Angel looked at Spike. "Tell me again why this isn't your fault?"

"It's not your fault at all, Connor; it's mine," said Wesley. He mopped up a little more of the spilled soda that had engulfed his notes and gave Connor a tight smile. "I should have noticed that you'd placed a super-mega-sized yet still flimsy cup of soda in my blind spot and refrained from turning to greet you with a smile."

"You're being sarcastic," Connor said, grinning. "I can tell, you know."

"It wasn't hard to miss," Wesley said. He relaxed a little. "I think the notes are still legible, and this carpet seems remarkably absorbent; there's no harm done."

"Except I don't have anything to drink now," Connor pointed out.

"I didn't say there weren't consequences," Wesley said. He folded his hands, staring down at the desk, and then gave Connor an apologetic look. "I didn't mean to point out the obvious. Sorry. "

"No need," Connor said. "Consequences. I get that, I really do. It's why what he - Angel - "

"Your father."

"Yeah. It's why what he did with our memories didn't work so well, right?"

Wesley attempted to align soggy pieces of paper together and frowned as they failed to form a neat rectangle. "I think that's something you should discuss with him. If you think it advisable, that is."

"You don't?" Connor perched on the edge of Wesley's desk, pulled a face as the sticky dampness began to seep through his jeans, and dragged over a chair instead.

"I think it's not for me to comment," Wesley said. "You and Angel have decided that it's best not to broadcast your relationship, and you're perfectly within your rights to do so. It's probably prudent, both for your safety and because I really don't think my nerves could stand the thought of Spike's reaction."

"I don't know what Spike would do," Connor said. "I don't know him that well, and he's not like Angel, is he?" Connor's foot scuffed against the carpet. "Angel's made it so the only father I have who's always been there isn't him. I don't have any memories of him being there when I was a kid - "

"Which is, for the most part, my fault," Wesley said, his voice steady and his eyes fixed on Connor. "Angel's not to blame for that. If I hadn't taken you - well, you'd be cutting baby teeth, and you'd be wearing a diaper, not jeans." He rubbed his fingers across his forehead. "Connor, if you want to discuss this - "

"With Angel? I'm not sure if you've noticed, but he's not much of a talker."

Wesley opened his mouth to reply and then sighed, a faint smile coming to his lips. "No, I suppose that he'll never be awarded the title of 'The Great Communicator.' Connor, I'm still not the best person to be - "

"You owe me," Connor made an apologetic grimace. "Sorry. Didn't mean to sound so dramatic." He fiddled with a pen on the desk and said, without looking up, "But you do."

Wesley couldn't help but study Connor's face. "I suppose that I do. Or did. Your father erased any such debt, not wanting my story to be a part of yours. Did you think about that?"

Connor took that in, obviously mulling it over. "You're not planning on giving Angel any awards for always making the most clear-headed decisions, are you?"

"I'll give him any award going for always wanting the best for you," Wesley shot back, the words emerging before he had chance to censor them. He sighed, trying to regain his outward calm. "I'm sorry, Connor, but unless there's a specific question you wish me to answer, I really do need to continue with my research into the demons who seem to be - "

"Going after Angel."

"Well, I think they're doing more than that."

"No." Connor shook his head. "I've hunted. I remember how it felt. Everything he's said; the way they've acted... I know. They're playing with him. Trying to get him off-balance."

Wesley frowned. "That's a fairly large assumption to make," he objected, hearing the lack of conviction or surprise in his voice.

Connor stood up, brushing his hands down his front. "No. It's true." His eyes narrowed. "And you know it is, don't you?"

"You've always known it! That I'm every bit as good at the hero lark as you, once I put my mind to it. But you won't admit it, oh, no!" Spike snapped, staring down the alley to where the shadows were deepening. "I'll want an apology later, Angel. *And* you've got to come out and say that I've saved your worthless ass more than once."

"I'll say you're the fairy on top of the Christmas tree, if you'll just get out of the way," Angel said, trying to decide if that patch of darkness was moving or not.

The vampire squirming in Illyria's grasp took advantage of her inattention as she peered down the alley and brought his head forward and down, slamming his skull against her face with a sickening dull crack.

It bought him his freedom, but he ran the wrong way.

The shadows swirled and coalesced into a Haunter, and the air was shattered by its screams. They weren't enough to cover the clicking, hissing noises that, even though he'd only heard them once before, Angel recognized as coming from a bug demon, standing a few yards behind the Haunter.

"Back!" Angel ordered.

He wasn't talking to the vampire, but the tension in Angel's voice was enough to make him skid to a halt, slipping on some garbage and ending up sprawled in front of the Haunter.

Its ululating cry sounded suddenly gleeful, like a child given an unexpected treat. It let the vampire climb slowly to his feet, swaying in the air as it waited, cat-like, for its prey to entertain it. When the vampire failed to do anything but shake in fear, the Haunter teleported behind him and grabbed his spine in an agonizing grip. The vampire screamed in pain, his head whipping from side to side.

Illyria and Spike were regrouping. Angel knew he should have been shouting that they should all run, but for a moment he was caught in the memory of the pain he had once felt from a Haunter's remorseless grip, experiencing it with the hapless vampire.

"This doesn't look like any of our business; maybe we should take off?" Spike tugged on Angel's jacket, forcing him to break eye contact with the scene in front of them.

"What? Right, we should - "

The rapid clicking of feet told them that if there had been a chance to run it was now lost. Falling into a triangle with Angel in the leading position, they took up defensive stances as the bug skittered out of the shadows behind the Haunter.

"Man and his dog, out for a walk," Spike said.

"What?" Angel didn't look at Spike, and if he had he would probably have glared, but there was a small part of him that was grateful for the comment - flippant as ever, but a reminder that he wasn't facing these things alone.

"The bug," Spike said. "It's in charge. Look."

As they watched, the Haunter presented its victim to the bug, which was standing on its rear legs, and, yeah, now Spike had said it, Angel had to admit that there was a flavor of a pet giving its owner a captured mouse. The bug demon chattered a command, and there was a moment of expectant stillness before the

vampire started to scream again.

"What's it *doing*?" Spike whispered. "What the bloody hell is it *doing* to him?"

"Something it needed sunlight to do before," Angel said grimly.

Angel and Spike, driven by instinct, backed away behind Illyria as a twisting arrow of light shot out from the bug's chest, piercing the vampire and showing him that a stake was not all he had to fear in the night.

Angel had seen and been the cause of a good many vampires turning to dust, but none of them had left the world like this. The light went straight through the vampire and the Haunter too, not that the Haunter seemed to notice. A fountain of dust blew out of the ever-widening hole, dust filled with fire, but the shell of the vampire remained intact, soap bubble delicate, but whole. It took an ungodly amount of time, and the vamp screamed until the hole took out his lungs, but the look on his face let them know he was feeling it all.

Between the light and dust the Haunter looked like an inside-out snow globe, and it shrieked in an eerie counterpoint to the agonized screams of its victim.

Angel felt a shiver run through Spike and moved his head a little to stare at him in surprise. Somehow, without Angel noticing, Spike had taken hold of his arm with a hand that trembled slightly.

"Did it do this before?" Spike whispered.

"I told you what it did to the man in the power plant," Angel said. "Not sure how it's working the spell now, but - "

"It has stored the energy, holding it within until needed," Illyria said, her lip curling. "I once darkened a star, taking its light to adorn my hand and dazzle all who looked upon me, but this? A child's trick, no more. See? Already the light dims."

"Too late for him," Angel said as the hollow shell of the vampire curled like blackened paper and was cast to the wind that skirled down the alley. "Let's hope the sun's all it can draw on."

"Yeah," said Spike. "Let's hope it's a veggie too, shall we? Because those claws and teeth look, oh, what's the word? Bloody sharp."

"That is two words," Illyria said, taking a step backwards.

"Oh, for - !"

"Save it, Spike," Angel snapped. "And, Illyria, stay still. We take this fight onto the street, people are going to get hurt."

"We stay here, *I'm* going to get dead. Again," Spike said. "Trust me; it's not something you get used to."

"Yeah, I get that," Angel said. "The only thing I know for sure is that Wesley was able to hurt the bug. They're not incorporeal like the Haunters." Charging forward, Angel grabbed a wooden pallet, spinning it like a discus straight at the rapidly closing hole in the bug's chest.

"Yeah, but didn't Wes have a sodding *shotgun*?" Spike yelled at Angel's back.

The makeshift weapon smashed against the bug's carapace and shattered, doing, as far as Angel could tell, absolutely no damage at all and serving only to focus the attention of both demons on him.

Okay, maybe it hadn't been a *brilliant* plan.

"Angel! Get back!" Gunn called.

From the shadows that had spat out the demons came rescue, bearing not weapons but coffee. Gunn and Gwen exchanged glances and tossed their coffee cups aside before splitting up.

Gunn moved to the side and began to rummage through some junk, looking for a makeshift weapon and keeping one eye on the action. The Haunter, its shrill screech threatening to pierce Angel's eardrums, was backing away from Gwen as she paced towards it, bright, dangerous smile in place.

It was backing right into Spike, who seemed incapable of dodging it for one endlessly long moment, his face a mask of horrified apprehension.

"Spike, maybe you should consider moving," Gwen said. The smile never left her face as she slowly started lifting her right hand, but her eyes were wary. Her every movement was causing a reaction in the Haunter, as if she held a remote-control tuned to its frequency.

There was a clatter of stone-hard claws as the bug moved for, what looked to Angel, to be a better view of her. "Gwen, watch your back," he called.

"No. *You* watch my back, and I'll watch the thing that only I can hit." She glared at the Haunter, her face a little pale.

Angel continued to keep an eye on the bug, knowing which one was the more dangerous of the two. "Gwen, don't get too cocky, last time - "

"I know the risk, but I'm feeling a caffeine buzz. Could make all the difference." Gwen's eyes never left her opponent. Smiling, she addressed it. "Remember me? Or weren't you one of the ones I fried last time? If you've been feeling left out, I can soon change that." Her voice trembled slightly and she swallowed and snapped out, "Spike, move your ass!"

Shaking off his paralysis, Spike began to roar out a challenge - just as the Haunter teleported behind him and lifted him off the ground. Spike was a screaming, writhing rag doll, and he was in Gwen's line-of-fire.

"Shit!" Gwen pulled back her hand, eyes wide.

Claws clacking, the bug started moving towards Spike. Angel was sick and tired of this crap. "Grab something; stop the bug."

Illyria hurled a full garbage can into its path, spilling the contents across the alley. Gunn stood up, a half-brick in his hand, and ran forward before throwing it straight at the bug's head. Angel was already charging.

"Gwen, zap it!"

"What about Sp- "

"Do it!"

Watching Spike's body convulse as Gwen sent a blue-tinged stream of electricity at the Haunter wasn't pleasant, but Angel knew - from experience - that it was bearable. In comparison to the hell of a Haunter's touch, most things were.

Apart from being burned up by a bug, maybe.

That almost made a weird kind of sense, almost triggered an insight. Even as Angel frowned, trying to connect black dots on a black board, he came level with the bug, and all his concentration was needed to deal with the threat it posed.

He was fairly certain, without having any grounds for thinking so, that the sunlight beam was one-shot only in the middle of the night. If he was wrong he'd have a couple of minutes to kick himself, if he could

manage that as he writhed in agony, and then it wouldn't matter anyway.

He launched a punch at the head, figuring that if it was hidden in the depths of the carapace, it might be vulnerable. His fist crunched and slid over hard slipperiness, and then the bug chattered with indignation, rearing up on its back legs and swooping down on Angel, all teeth and claws and anger.

Dropping Spike to the ground, the Haunter teleported, reappearing about ten feet behind the bug, which paused its attack.

"Yeah, looks like it's just you," Angel said, moving back prudently and working the ache out of his fist. "You against the five of us. How do you like those odds?"

Lifting a clawed appendage in the direction of the Haunter, the bug spat out something in an eerie cadence. The Haunter howled, flying a few feet closer and not looking remotely happy. The bug tried again, its tone - if the sounds it was making actually had a tone - even more forceful. The Haunter screamed again, making Angel wish he could cover his ears. It tried to retreat but was forced a tiny bit closer.

"Guess it doesn't want to play anymore." Angel said. Glancing off to the side, he could see Gunn helping Spike up and Spike trying to brush him off like everything was just fine.

The bug hissed as it took a step closer to Angel, who backed up a step. Almost as fast as a vamp, the bug brought a forearm up and made a slashing motion in front of Angel's chest.

Having figured out that grabbing the bug's arm would be the equivalent of manhandling the business end of a sword, Angel took another step back, looking for an opening to kick its feet out from under it.

"Gwen, could use a little more help."

"Sure. Duck!"

He let reflexes take over, dropping into a crouch, weight balanced on his hands so that he could swing out with his right leg and try to take out the bug's hind legs. Those instincts proved right a moment later when Gwen's electrical blast nailed the bug high in the chest. Blue sparks splintered off the thick torso, going off in random directions, scarring the bricks on the buildings but doing no apparent damage to its intended target. Angel's kick managed to set the bug off balance, forcing it to sway and stagger, looking for footing amongst the garbage Illyria had tossed about earlier. With an excited twitter, it caught a bolt of Gwen's lightning as it bounced off its body. A small glowing ball rested lightly in its claw, like a star plucked from the sky.

"Angel, I'm not sure that was such a good idea," shouted Gunn from somewhere behind him.

The bug opened its maw to swallow the fairy light.

"Yeah, I'm getting that." Charging, Angel knocked the bug to its back, where it chattered and screeched in protest, the ball of light falling to the ground and dissipating harmlessly. "Run!"

No one had to be told twice.

"No, Gunn," Wesley said in a voice that a thousand parents would recognize. "I'm still not able to tell you any more about either type of demon." Gunn opened his mouth and then closed it when Wesley glared. "At least, no more than I was able to when you asked me ten minutes ago. Rest assured that should I make a breakthrough and miraculously find the book with a chapter on - how did you describe them? 'noisy sacks of air and scary roaches'? - I will immediately share my findings with you and the rest of the group."

"Damn, I missed you taking twenty words to say, 'Shut up'," Gunn said wistfully. "You gonna yell 'Eureka!' like you used to?"

Wesley relaxed, smiling at him. "Possibly. Although you will let me know if you think that's too stuffy, won't you?" "You can count on me for that," Gunn told him. He glanced around the foyer. Gwen had gone home, tired but exhilarated, after arranging to meet with him soon. Illyria had decided to keep watch outside; though, as Angel pointed out, when the Haunters could teleport into your bedroom that wasn't a hell of a lot of use. "Got to ask, though; is it mutual?"

"I'm sorry?" Wesley said, giving Gunn a puzzled look.

"Can *I* count on *you*," Gunn clarified. His eyes met Wesley's with a hint of challenge. "Have to say, Angel's not the only one who got a shock when that woman showed up. Thought you'd be the last person to hook up with those guys again."

"It's - "

"Wes, you say 'complicated' and I'm going to get my mad on."

Wesley pursed his lips. "Complex?" he offered.

"Funny," Gunn said dryly. "How about we agree it's a bad idea, you should know better, and no good'll come of it?"

There was a moment of silence as they stared at each other, and then Wesley said, "It was unavoidable, Gunn. I'll just repeat what I told Angel: you can trust me. Whether or not you accept that, there's really nothing more to say."

Gunn nodded slowly. "Right." He glanced away. "So how about we use you?" he said casually. He turned back and raised his eyebrows. "Can we talk about how easy it would've been for you to get the skinny on these Haunters a year ago? Any chance you could - "

"They're not operational yet," Wesley said. He turned his attention back down to the book in front of him, flipping through the pages with sharp, crisp gestures. "Besides, as everyone keeps telling me, it's foolish to give them any more leeway into our lives than we have to. They're already too eager to leap upon any sign of weakness."

Gunn nodded again. "I can get behind that."

Wesley gave him a brief smile. "Good. Thank you."

"What's up with Spike?" Gunn asked, changing the subject.

Wesley sighed. "Gunn, I really do need to get on. The lead on the Haunter's sword came to nothing; the runes were Breknithian in origin and the sword most probably stolen from its owner's corpse. And these new demons, this power they have of collecting light, it's all very - " He looked over at where Spike sat, perched on the bottom stair leading to Angel's office, head down, contemplating the faded carpet between his boots. "He does seem a little downcast, doesn't he?" he said softly.

"Been like that ever since the demons showed up," Gunn said. "Never thought I'd miss him mouthing off, but I do."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," Wesley said, "but I don't like to see him - "

"Join the Brood Squad?" Gunn offered.

"Well, quite," Wesley said, smiling faintly. His eyes became speculative, interested. "I wonder what the founding member's telling him?"

Gunn turned. Angel was coming down the stairs, staring down at Spike, his face expressionless, saying something to him in a voice too quiet for them to hear as he paused beside him.

"Hurts like hell." Angel pitched his voice so that he and Spike might as well have been the only people in the room.

Spike stiffened as if he hadn't heard Angel coming. "Yep."

"I'd put the Haunter's touch in the top ten of things I never want to experience again," Angel continued.

Spike nodded but otherwise didn't move.

Angel sighed. A century ago, give or take a few decades, Angelus would have been knocking Spike's head through a wall for freezing up in a middle of a fight, even if it had only been for a moment. A nice brawl to relieve the tension, blood, bruises, some whiskey, and all would have been forgotten. He had no idea in hell what to do now.

It didn't help when Spike turned on a dime, giving Angel a curled-lip sneer and saying, "Next time, I'll hold your hand for you, shall I? Keep the monsters away?"

Or maybe it did, because now he had the perfect excuse to slam Spike up against a wall, and he would have if Spike didn't look so pathetic.

"No, Spike. That's not what this is about. I'm not suggesting you're - "

"Being a total fucking girl's blouse?"

"Want the truth?" Angel said, settling down a couple of steps above Spike so his boots rested on the same step as Spike's ass, which might be handy if he ended up having to kick it. "I was kinda surprised you froze. In the alley, facing the dragon, well, you were there, right by my side, rock-solid. If we agree that we forget this conversation as soon as it's done and never mention it *ever*, I'll even go so far as to say that it kind of reminded me of the old days. Without, you know, the evil and the killing."

"Cheers, mate," Spike said, summoning up a tired smile. "Thanks for the bouquets."

Angel took a moment to contemplate the flat-out weirdness of exchanging compliments with Spike, shuddered instinctively, and pressed on. "So what the hell went wrong tonight?"

"We should've taken the car, like I said?" Spike asked.

Angel cuffed the back of Spike's head with a little more force than he'd intended to use and no regrets. "Okay, I'm gonna keep on asking nicely until I get bored, which I'm guessing will be about five seconds from now. Then I'm going to go back to the tried-and-true method of hitting you until you spit it out. Your call."

"This Nina's influence?" Spike said. "She giving you lessons in sensitivity or something? Fine. Keep your hulking great fists in your pockets; I'll tell you."

Angel watched Spike shift restlessly on the stair, bringing up a knee and resting his forearm on it.

"Dusted plenty of vamps; staked 'em, tossed them into the sunlight. If it's violent, I've done it. But I only knew of one vamp that was fried from the inside by the sun." Spike smiled without humor. "Until now."

"You died like the vampire tonight," Angel said, finally getting it. "It must have been - " He hesitated, not

knowing what word to use.

"Yeah, it was just like that," Spike said bleakly. "Beyond bloody words. Having it happen and watching it tonight from the outside, captive audience with a front row seat... I can't do it, Angel. I can't go through that again."

His eyes were wide and anxious and somehow, without either of them noticing, he'd gripped a fistful of Angel's coat.

This wasn't a side of Spike that Angel saw often - or ever - unless he was spying on him when Spike didn't know he was there. Across the room, Gunn was doing a crappy job of pretending he wasn't watching, and Wesley had his head buried in a book, which didn't tell Angel where his attention really was.

Reaching down with both hands, Angel grabbed Spike by the front of his shirt, hauling him to his feet. Nothing felt more natural than slamming him into the wall.

"Could you keep the hands off the leather?" Spike growled. "Do you have any idea how many coats I go through without you trying to mess them up?"

For the first time in their conversation, Angel's voice rose, loud enough to carry. "Put it behind you. There's no room for hesitation or muddled thinking. We've got to stay focused, and we've got to *fight*. That way the only things dying will be them." Angel had wanted more edge, more anger in his voice, but it just didn't come. He hoped the other two would read it as weariness, whether with the situation or Spike, he didn't care. Either way, he hoped no one noticed that the person who really needed this advice was himself. "Whatever your doubts are, bury them. There are more important things for us to deal with."

Spike stared at him and then knocked Angel's hands away. "You done?" He tucked his shirt back in with exaggerated care.

Angel thought about it. "Yeah."

"Good. Saves me telling you to shut up."

Sneer back in place, Spike headed for the door.

Angel met Gunn's puzzled eyes and snapped, "What?"

After rinsing off her toothbrush, Nina slid it into the travel case and tucked it back in her cosmetics bag. Taking the toothbrush she never used, she wet it down, shook it out, and placed it back in the rack. From underneath the vanity, she pulled out a container of quick cleaning wipes with bleach and gave the sink the once over.

Just another day in the life, she thought as she dropped the cloth into the small trash pail. The past week had been stressful, but now that she was back in her routine and could work on the meditations Oz had given her, everything was going to be better.

She stiffened suddenly, catching the scent of blood on the air.

"Aunt Nina?"

Nina turned around and saw her niece leaning against the doorframe, looking completely disheveled. There was a bad scrape on her forearm, and she was holding a handful of napkins to a bleeding knee. "Mandy! What happened?" Gently taking the girl by the arm, Nina dropped the toilet cover and sat Amanda down,

biting her lip as she fought back the sensations the metallic tang of the blood was eliciting.

"I was riding my bike, and the curb jumped out in front of me."

Nina smiled despite the situation as she put her hands on Amanda's head, turning it and looking for damage. "Jumped out, huh? I hate when things like that happen. Did you bump your head?"

"No, I landed on my arm, and I guess my knee."

"I guess," Nina said dubiously. Gearing herself up, Nina pulled back the blood-soaked napkins and looked at the ugly gash. The blood scent was strong, but unlike the previous week Nina didn't have to fight the urge to rip and tear. The week or two after the full moon, there was always a sense of extra closeness to her family. The urge she fought now was to lick the wound clean. She tried to remember what Oz had told her she should do, but it was all too new to her and she just concentrated on the need to help her niece, letting that consideration give her the strength to behave normally.

"This isn't pretty," she said, "but I don't think you need stitches. Let me just wash my hands."

Amanda sat back, patiently waiting attention as Nina threw the napkins in the trash can and then turned on the tap. "Did you and Angel have a fight?"

"What?" Nina blinked hard at the girl as she rinsed the soap from her hands.

"You were mumbling this morning, while you were making your bed." The look on Amanda's face was serious and concerned.

"Oh." Nina thought about how her sister and brother-in-law had fought before the divorce. Amanda usually didn't let it show, but Nina knew that she hated the idea of adults fighting. Pulling the bandages out of the medicine cabinet, she shrugged. "He just said something silly, but it'll be okay."

It was mostly true. After she'd had a chance to cool down, Nina realized that she hadn't done a particularly good job of explaining to Angel how much she had been counting on him to help with the meditations. Oz was about to leave for the wider world, and she was worried about going at it alone.

Amanda looked doubtful, probably having heard one too many times that 'things would be okay.'

Nina smiled. "He said he was sorry and he's taking me out on a date tonight." Moving to her knees, Nina covered the wound with a washcloth that she'd wrung out.

Amanda sucked in a little breath, biting her lip as Nina began to wash the cut. "Mom says that all men are dumb."

Nina paused, laughing. "She said that, huh? Well, sometimes they are, but that doesn't mean they aren't worth keeping around." There didn't seem to be any grit or dirt in the wound, so Nina moved onto the peroxide, pouring it over the knee while she held the washcloth under the wound to catch the excess. The tang of blood in the air weakened, and she felt a spurt of relief.

"Ow!" Amanda flinched, twitching her leg but only pulling it back a little.

"Sorry, hon. I need to clean it or it'll get infected. You wouldn't want that."

"I guess not." Amanda relaxed, holding the washcloth as Nina fiddled with the bandage. "Is he going to pick you up here tonight?"

Playfully Nina put her hands on her hips and scowled. "Are you trying to steal my boyfriend?"

"No!" Amanda shook her head hard, hair flying. "Eww, I don't want a boyfriend."

Nina laughed, "You might just change your mind one day. No, I'm meeting him for coffee." Pressing the bandage in place, Nina sat back on her heels and inspected her handiwork. "There. It'll be good as new in a few days."

Experimentally, Amanda flexed her leg. Apparently satisfied, she lifted it up. "Kiss it and make it better?"

"You're a little old for that, but okay." Nina leaned down to bestow a chaste kiss on the top of the bandage. The blood scent became stronger suddenly, surging over her unexpectedly, and in her mind she saw the image from her first day as a werewolf: Amanda torn apart and bloody. Amanda's face altered to become Jordy's, then began to morph into a wolf's. Looking up, eyes widening in horror, Nina saw a werewolf staring down at her, its eyes empty of all but the lust for the kill.

Swallowing, she jerked backwards, knocking over the trash can as she threw out her arm, her heart pounding in a sickening rhythm. She blinked, and the nightmarish vision faded, and it was just Amanda again, still sitting and looking curious and a little alarmed.

"Aunt Nina, are you okay?"

"Yeah..." Nina sat back on her heels again, trying to cover as she picked up the garbage that had spilled and put it back in the can. "I - I just lost my balance." Nina looked up at Amanda's concerned face. "I think I'm catching a little cold. Probably better if I didn't spread my germs to you." As she dropped the bandage papers in the trash, Nina noticed that her hands were shaking.

A shadow fell across the door, and she looked up and met her sister's eyes, perplexed and concerned, her gaze traveling between Nina and Amanda.

"Hey, I just got home. What's going on?" Jill asked.

"We need to talk," Nina told her, the words easy to say because she knew now that she really didn't have a choice. She reached out and smoothed back Amanda's hair. "Honey? Can you give us a minute?"

Amanda's face showed enough confusion to make Nina want to hug her. Instead, feeling the symbolic weight of the action, Nina took a deliberate step away from her.

"Want me to carry the money?" Gunn asked, staring at the small leather bag resting on the floor.

"Watch him," Spike said, testing the balance of a small ax and nodding approvingly. "We get out into the wide-open spaces and he's going to do a runner. Got that look about him."

"It's only twenty thousand dollars," Angel said, reaching past Spike to take his sword out of the weapons cabinet. "He wouldn't get far on that."

"Only'?" Spike said. "It'd go a long way towards doing this place up, and have I mentioned lately how much I miss that pricey otter's blood Harmony used to give us in the morning? Had a real kick to it."

"She was supposed to give it to *me*, but you kept intercepting her and charming her into handing it over," Angel snapped.

"What can I say? Girl had a thing for me." Spike preened, oblivious to Angel's look of disgust. "Anyway, point is, why can't we kill the bad guys and keep the dosh? Clients are happy, we're happy - "

"Because we're the good guys?" Gunn said. "And because - "

"Could do a lot with it," Angel said. He met Gunn's astonished look and added, "A lot of *good* I mean. I

wasn't thinking about a new chair for my office. Or a carpet that didn't smell." He chuckled self-consciously. "And I *really* wasn't thinking about a cappuccino maker."

"I'm - glad about that," Gunn said. "What with it not being our money to spend." He frowned. "But since you brought it up, it's a lot of money for Jeryn, but to a professional blackmailer twenty thousand is peanuts. It's just... it's not serious money, you know? I went to scope out the drop-off point this morning, seeing as how you two did such a pathetic job of recon last night - "

"We were saving lives," Spike said virtuously. "Well, one life, and the ungrateful bugger didn't so much as say thank you, but still."

"Yeah, I seem to recall my girlfriend doing most of the saving," Gunn said.

"Your *girlfriend*?" Angel asked, starting to grin. "Does she know that?"

"She's a friend, and she's a girl," Gunn said. "Not sure she'll ever be the settling down type, but neither am I. But we'll take it slow, maybe try things for a little while. Nothing fancy. Just gonna play it by ear, and if it's meant to be it's meant to be and if not then we part and can stay good pals, you know?"

"Yeah, thing to remember, Charlie, is that none of us asked, and most of us barely care," Spike said. He cocked his head to one side. "So what was the place like? A club, maybe, bit of a dive?"

"It's a house near to where the clients live. Nice house. On a street. Nice street." Gunn shrugged. "It's not the 'burbs but it's the kind of place families live: park at the end of the street, no litter, kids on tricycles..."

"Evil kids?" Spike said. "Like what'shisname in *The Omen*?"

"No. Just kids." Gunn looked thoughtful. "Some were demons, though. You could tell. Bundled up in coats, hats... sunny, warm day, but I guess when you've got horns or tentacles, you've got to watch the UV. Point is, these clients aren't the sort it's worth blackmailing." He toed the bag. "This is all they've got, and usually blackmailers like people they can squeeze more than once."

"Am I getting the feeling there's more to this than we were told?" Angel said.

"Isn't there always?" Spike said. "Look, run it by me one more time? These demons - "

"Jeryn and Marisha," Gunn supplied. "They don't have last names as such. Therk'tins belong to clans; theirs is the Hodellin clan. Got a temple over on Duke Street." He pulled a wry face. "Right next door to an animal slaughterhouse, and, yes, they planned it that way. Kind of big on the blood offerings."

"Handy," Spike said with a shrug. "Probably means the rent's low too. Kills two birds with one sacrificial knife."

"They said they couldn't meet their blackmailers face-to-face," Angel said. He frowned, trying to recall the exact phrase. "Something about being shamed. Some curse."

"The Retribution of Alaric will fall upon their heads," Gunn said, his eyes slightly glazed as the implanted knowledge in his brain supplied the details. "It's an obscure torture used on Alaric - "

"Alas, poor Alaric, I knew him well," Spike said.

"You're funny, Spike," Angel said, "but we're on the clock here. Drop-off's at eight, and I'm meeting Nina at nine. Being late isn't an option."

Spike held up his hands. "Fine, fine." He glanced over at Gunn. "Off you go then."

Gunn pursed his lips. "Short form? The guy did something really trivial, with the best of intentions, and it blew up in his face. Something about polishing a sword so it looked nice and shiny for the battle, and it

slipped out of the clan leader's hand and he got shish kebabs. So they took Alaric and started at his toes -
"

Angel scooped up the bag and tossed it to Gunn. "Let's walk and talk, shall we? Spike, if you trip too often because you can't handle both, we'll stop, but otherwise let's - "

"If you say 'get this show on the road', I'm walking behind you so people don't think we're together," Spike warned him.

"I wasn't going to say that," Angel muttered.

Gunn nodded at the house, rescued from blandness by a well-kept garden and a bright-red door. "This is the place."

They had parked around the corner, trying to be subtle about making the drop. Angel noted that the place matched Gunn's description and didn't look particularly dangerous. Spike was practically vibrating with impatience or caution; it was hard to tell which. Figuring he was doing enough watching for the three of them, Angel shrugged. "Okay, let's do it."

Taking the satchel from Gunn, Angel led the way up the walk and onto the porch. He rang the bell and they all tried to look casual, something they were failing at miserably, but at least they were trying.

The door was opened quickly by another Therk'tin demon, his tentacles writhing slowly and his skin flushed to a rich purple shade that indicated agitation, lust, or anger, from what Angel remembered of his kind. He hoped it was the former emotion, but the way his week was going, he wasn't counting on anything being easy.

"You have the money?" the demon asked in a low whisper, eyes darting from side to side.

"Every ill-gotten gain," Angel assured him.

"Good, good."

The demon reached for the satchel but Angel tossed it behind him and Spike caught it deftly. "Sorry. It doesn't work that way." He let his face grow fangs and smiled. "Think the idea is an exchange of goods, and so far all you've given me is another reason to dislike you." He glanced at Gunn, standing in silence beside him, his face grim. "I mean, we haven't even been invited in for a drink. I'd call that rude, wouldn't you?"

"Don't think people like this are big on social etiquette," Gunn replied, giving the demon a stony glance. "People who blackmail their own kind."

The demon gave them an uneasy look, stepping back from the threshold. "Paltin!" he called. "Come here. Quickly!"

A demon fully fifty pounds heavier and six inches taller lumbered forward out of a side room. "The unclean ones are troubling you, Stivan?"

"They don't understand how to make an exchange; perhaps you should show them."

Paltin came forward, staring down into Angel's face with a far-from-friendly expression.

There was a loud click as Spike opened his lighter and held the flame mere inches from the bag. "Wouldn't do that, mate."

The demons exchanged glances and chuckled. "Leather does not burn that easily, little man," Paltin said.

"Little *vampire*, if you don't mind," Spike said. "And thanks for the advice." He went into game face as Angel had done, and handed the bag to Gunn. "Hold it open, Charlie. Let's see if these dollars are the special, fire-resistant sort. I'm thinking not, but I'm always up for a little experimentation."

"No!" Stivan said. He took a deep breath. "We... seem to have made a bad start here." He held out his hand. "The package, Paltin. Give it to me."

The beetroot tinge to Paltin's face faded a little. He grunted and reached inside his jacket, bringing out a small white envelope.

"Here," said Stivan, holding it out to Angel, his eyes flickering nervously to the still-open bag, with Spike close enough to set its contents alight.

"Thanks," Angel said, taking it from him. "See how easy that was?" Without looking at what was in it, he passed it to Gunn, swapping it for the bag.

Stivan reached out eagerly, but Angel held the bag out of reach. "Not so fast," he said, smiling pleasantly. "Before we finish this, there are a few things I want to say."

"Er, remember Nina?" Spike said behind him. "What's that saying? 'Punctuality is the stern virtue of men of business, and the graceful courtesy of princes'? Although, come to think of it, neither of those apply to you so - "

Gunn made a small choking sound and distracted Spike.

"What?" Spike asked.

Angel ignored them as they bent their heads over the contents of the envelope and focused his glare on the two demons.

"Listen. You seem - well, you're not quite what I was expecting - "

A small child appeared, running up to tug at Paltin's hand. "Unka Paltin! Need to go potty! Now!"

Angel blinked as Paltin bent down and whispered to the toddler, who ran off, giggling, and then started again. " - but blackmail means you're the lowest of the low, someone who makes money from other people's weaknesses, other people's secrets. You might think that's an easy way to make a fast buck, but let me tell you - "

Stivan rolled his eyes and sighed. "You have the photographs; give us the money."

Angel's lips tightened, but he held out the bag, which was snatched unceremoniously from his hand. "As I was saying, what you've got to think about is what this does to you as a community of demons, trying to - "

The door slammed in his face, leaving him an inch away from a broken nose. "Hey!"

"Angel..." Gunn said.

"I wasn't done!" Angel thumped the door with his fist.

"Really think you should - "

"I hadn't got to the part where I told you no man is an island!"

"How about the part where I tell you these particular clients are murderers?" Spike said, tapping him on

the shoulder and stepping back out of reach as Angel whirled around to stare at him.

"What?"

Gunn held out the photographs.

Angel took them with a slightly disapproving look and began to flip through them. "I don't think we should be *looking* at them, Gunn; not our business what they get... up... to... which would be... oh, not good." Angel's voice trailed away and he studied the photographs more carefully, his face going from shocked to eerily calm.

"These two boys; they don't look more than fifteen," Gunn said.

"About that," Spike agreed. "Sort of hard to tell in most of the pictures, what with the blood and all. And whoever was spying through the basement windows with their handy-dandy camera should've used a flash; most of them are a bit dark, if you ask me."

Spike's flippancy didn't earn him any brownie points this time, but Angel could see that he looked a little shaken. They'd seen worse - they'd *done* worse - but there was something particularly horrifying about the casual way Jeryn and Marisha were dealing with the dismemberment of two bodies; Angel hoped the boys had been dead at that point, but he couldn't be sure. His clients - the supposed victims in the case - were exchanging smiles and looked pleased with themselves, almost jubilant.

"Good enough to make me want to go over there and collect our bill right the hell now," Gunn said ominously.

"No," said Angel, turning back to the door that had been closed in his face. "I want some answers first. I'm tired of being in the dark."

Without waiting for Gunn and Spike to comment, Angel kicked in the door without any further preamble and walked in, ready to demand answers about his clients from the blackmailers. He didn't look to see if Gunn and Spike were behind him, though he knew they would be, because he was more than ready to go this one alone.

Nina settled into a booth in the back of the diner, choosing the seat that allowed her to watch the front door.

"What can I get for you, honey?"

Startled, Nina looked up to see the waitress looking down at her, order pad in hand. "Sorry, must have been in my own little world for a minute there. I'll have some coffee for now. I'm meeting my boyfriend." A glance at her watch told Nina that she was about ten minutes early.

"Sure. I'll get your coffee and bring you some rolls while you're waiting." The waitress, whose nametag told the world that her name was 'Margie', smiled and began to clear the dirty dishes from the next table.

"Thanks," Nina said, her eyes on the door. "I'm sure he won't be long."

Same neighborhood, different door, same crappy lock. It only took one solid kick to send Jeryn and Marisha's door crashing to the foyer floor. Angel didn't look, but he heard Spike heading upstairs while

Gunn made for the kitchen. Angel made his way cautiously into a living room full of floral prints and doilies on top of furniture that gleamed with too much furniture polish.

"It doesn't look like our *clients* are home." Gunn came through the dining room, ax swinging easily at his side.

"No-one upstairs, either." Spike's boots landed heavily on the stair treads as he made his way down. "Think they skipped?"

Angel picked up the newspaper from the table beside the well-worn easy chair. "I think they went to the movies." He tossed the paper at Gunn and started prowling restlessly in the small room.

Gunn glanced down at the paper, where an ad for a local movie house that specialized in showing classics had a neat check mark next to the 8.50 showing of 'Gone With the Wind'. "They're going to be gone for hours," he said. "We going to wait? Or come back later?"

"Neither," Angel told him. "You two are going home."

"What?" Spike asked. "We're just going to forget two kids got turned into kibble for a demonic mascot that was supposed to be fed some fancy imported sheep?"

"Goat, not sheep," Gunn said absently. "Siamese and pricey." His tone became deadly serious. "Angel, don't be telling me that we're letting these bastards get away with this. I've watched one too many kids from the street get picked off by lowlife demons. And let's not even talk about the fact that they were just feeding that - pet - so they could sacrifice it and cut off its lucky rabbit's foot." As he spoke, Gunn had closed the gap and was up in Angel's face

"So what do you want to do, take out the whole neighborhood?" Angel moved in an inch closer. "You did the recon, right? Would it be easier to kill them all during the day when the kids are playing on the streets?"

"You know I didn't mean the whole neighborhood," Gunn protested.

"Well, what did you mean then?" Angel asked. "Tell me."

"We were working for the bad guys *again*." Gunn's face was tight with frustration. "We got the hell out of Wolfram & Hart for a reason."

"Yeah, and we're out," Angel told him.

Spike watched in silence, arms folded across his chest. Angel wasn't sure if he was grateful for that or not. It was odd not to know what - whose - side Spike was on.

"Not all of us," Gunn said. "Some of us died. Though that's getting to be less permanent these days. And can I just say when I die I want to *stay* dead? Because a ticket back costs more than I'm willing to pay."

"I'll make a note of that," Angel snapped.

"Good. Because just thinking about working for them again gives me the creeps." Gunn looked uncomfortable. "And, no, that doesn't mean I'm creeped out by Wes."

"Glad to hear it, as he's not the only technically dead guy you're working for," Angel pointed out.

"With," Gunn corrected him. "Working *with*."

"Uh, girls, let's not get all bitchy about this. Despite appearances, we're on the same side." Spike dropped into a side chair and began to pick at a worn spot on the upholstery, making it into a hole.

Angel broke eye contact first so he could glare at Spike. The tension eased, which might have been what Spike planned, and Gunn backed off to the other side of the room, his eyes still angry.

"Gunn, I don't like it any better than you that Wesley is still stuck there, but he's on our side," Angel said.

"And you think it's going to stay that way? I don't think Wes wants to hurt us, but that doesn't mean it isn't going to happen. You've got to draw a line somewhere," Gunn replied.

"I am, and Wes is on our side of it. We're not letting go of family." Resting his hands lightly on his hips, Angel began to pace.

"So who pays for the kids in the basement?" Spike was leaning back in the chair now, drumming his fingers impatiently against the arm.

"I'll take care of it." Angel thumped a fist against the wall in front of him, just for the hell of it. It didn't help. He did it again. No, still didn't.

"Angel - "

"Angel, you don't actually have a plan, do you?" Gunn crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"I *said* I'll take care of it," Angel told him.

An electronic beep echoed through the room, making both Angel and Gunn turn towards Spike, whose finger was hovering over the playback button on the answering machine.

"Hello? I'm sorry, I was in the back and now the machine-" Jeryn was cut off by Stivan's urgent tones.

"Jeryn, it's Stivan. No - just listen. The vampire you used - the unclean scum that you sent to my house - has discovered your sin."

Jeryn's moan of panic sounded heartfelt. "No! He was supposed to destroy the photographs, just that. He promised!"

"And you trusted him?" Stivan laughed harshly and then sobered. "Jeryn, you're a fool but you're still of my clan. That's why I'm warning you, and that's why I'm helping you."

"You want to help?" Jeryn sounded uncertain, and the three listening to his voice exchanged skeptical glances. Stivan hadn't seemed the helpful kind somehow.

Spike's eyebrows shot up as Stivan continued. "You must go to the temple."

"No! No! We can't, the H'reldin - " Jeryn's voice faltered.

"Is your only hope."

A second beep cut off anything else that Stivan might have planned to say.

Gunn picked up the newspaper and then dropped it back on the table. "So do we still think they went to the movies?"

Angel shook his head. "No. They've gone to ground." He looked at them both. "Holy ground."

Spike murmured, "Sanctuary. The bells, Esmeralda, the - " He caught Angel's eye and gave him an unrepentant grin. "Sorry."

"He's got a point," Gunn said slowly. "If we go in and take them out of the temple, there could be repercussions. People tend to get worked up over religion."

Angel smiled. "We could set fire to it and kill them when they try to escape."

Spike frowned. "Did Nina make you just a little bit *too* happy and we never noticed?"

"I'm not serious about the fire," Angel told him impatiently. "But they crossed a line. They killed humans, and they tried to make me part of that. They lied to me." He turned and strode towards the door, his face set and hard. "They don't get a second chance after that."

Not that she was interested, but Nina read the ad for the \$18.95 oil change off the placemat for the tenth time anyway. The sugar packets were neatly arranged, pink, white, and blue, the basket of rolls was down to crumbs and spent butter wrappers, and Nina's cup contained the dregs of her fourth cup of coffee. She knew that she wasn't going to get any sleep that night, but upon reflection she realized that that option hadn't been likely ever since she had bandaged Amanda's knee.

"Refill?" Margie looked sympathetic as she stood next to the table holding a pot of regular.

"I probably shouldn't." Nina pushed the cup and saucer forward.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"One boyfriend with fewer worldly obligations." Nina tried to force a smile, but even she could tell it wasn't taking.

"Huh, like there are any of those around. Even when they don't have anything to do, they feel like the whole world is waiting on their next breath." Margie stepped off to the side, placing the coffee pot on a hotplate.

"He - " Nina stopped herself from making a joke about how breathing was optional for Angel. "He's got a lot of responsibilities."

Margie pulled out the coffee filter and began setting up to brew a new pot. "Cop? Fireman? Those guys are married to their jobs. Take it from me, you'll never have to be jealous of another woman; they're all having affairs with their partners."

Nina smiled, for the first time in hours. "Yeah, it feels that way sometimes. Say, would you pour me a couple of cups to go?"

"Two cups?" Margie, the waitress, sounded a little incredulous. "Honey, the guy ditched you. Don't go looking for him, and *don't* bring him coffee."

"I've got to talk to him about some family stuff." Nina wasn't quite sure why she was explaining, but Margie had been a friendly ear. "Things are changing fast for me."

"Looks quiet." Spike lit a cigarette.

Angel spared him a sidelong glance and then went back to his study of the building across the road. The temple was simple, almost homey in contrast to the industrial feel of the dark and silent slaughter house beside it.

Hefting his ax, Gunn rolled his shoulders, flexing them. "Maybe too quiet. Front door?"

Taking a step off the curb, Angel veered towards the far side of the temple. "We haven't had any luck with front doors yet tonight. Let's go for subtle."

"Can't deny you need the practice," Spike murmured.

Working their way around to the back of the temple, Angel found a window just begging to be broken and climbed through it, dropping silently into a kitchen. Gunn and Spike climbed down behind him.

"Blood," Spike whispered.

Angel nodded. "Not human."

"That's a small blessing. Really small. Actually, not exactly a bless- " Angel's full-on glare made Gunn stop. With a half bow, Gunn gestured at the door on the other side of the kitchen.

Angel led the way through the corridors, following the helpful sign pointing to the inner temple. The place seemed to be deserted, but then a voice began to chant from a room ahead, the sound rising and falling in a mournful wail.

With a quick glance behind him at Spike and Gunn, Angel turned a corner and found himself before double doors made of ornately carved dark wood. Light spilled through the gap between them, and he sniffed. "The smell of blood's stronger here."

Pursing his lips, Spike nodded in agreement.

Shrugging, Gunn led the way up to the door, wrapping his hand around a heavy iron handle. Spike positioned himself by the other door. Angel watched them nod and started marching through as soon as the doors flew open.

It could have been any church; there were rows of wooden bench seats in front of an altar and candles flickering in rows in addition to the more prosaic electric lights. Before the altar, kneeling with outstretched hands lifted high, was an elderly male Therk'tin, dressed in ceremonial robes in a reddish-brown color Angel supposed was chosen with an eye to the inevitable mess of cutting throats. It might not show the marks, but it didn't really go with the lavender complexion.

"You the H'reldin?" Angel demanded, striding forward.

The priest turned and gasped in shock. "You should not be here! This is a sacred place, forbidden to outsiders."

Angel smiled coldly. "Our business can be quick, if you make it that way. Minimal defiling."

"You sure, Angel? It's been a long time since I had a chance to defile anything." Spike strolled up on Angel's right.

"I don't know," Angel replied. "Seems like we're the ones getting cooties just from being here."

"Angel, the vampire." The priest got to his feet, composing his features and achieving a certain dignity. "I am the H'reldin, clan priest and spiritual leader of my people, and you will leave this place."

"Now is that friendly? I was thinking about converting," Angel said, advancing on him.

The H'reldin moved backwards, stumbling on the shallow steps leading up to the altar. "You must leave!"

"Not without what we came for," Angel told him. "Not without some justice, if that means anything to your kind."

Anger flared to life in the priest's eyes. "It does, but forgive me for being surprised that a vampire values

it, even one as - blessed - as you. I ask you again - for the final time - to remove yourself from this place that you profane with your very presence." As the priest spoke, he began to move backwards, towards a scarlet rope hanging from the ceiling, the end looped loosely around a hook on the wall.

Gunn took a half step forward. "He's gonna run."

"Not outrunning us, Charlie." Spike started moving towards the priest with Gunn and Angel close behind.

"Oh, see, now that hurt my feelings, you trying to leave when we're just getting to know each other." Angel said.

The priest flung himself at the rope and tugged on it sharply. A hidden bell tolled, the deep peal echoing around the large room.

"I think we can hurt more than that, vampire," he said, his face expressionless.

A side door was flung open, bringing a gust of fetid air into the temple, and Angel realized it led directly into the slaughterhouse. Six Therk'tin came charging through it, dressed in blood-stained overalls, skinning knives held high, heading straight for the intruders.

"You don't know how much I'm going to enjoy this," Angel told them, feeling his face twist to make room for his fangs. "Kicking doors is one thing, but kicking ass?" He smashed his elbow into a snarling face and smiled thinly at the crack of breaking bones. "I *never* get tired of that."

Wesley glanced up from the book he was reading as the street door opened. "Can I help - Nina." He sighed. "Judging by the look on your face, I'd wager Angel didn't make it for your date?"

Nina walked into the foyer of the Walden and smiled. "Pretty much. And let me guess, he's not here?"

"I'm afraid he's not."

Nodding, Nina held out one of the two cups of coffee she was carrying. "No point in letting this go to waste, if you have a few minutes to take a break." She glanced around. "Just you?" Wesley smiled back, taking the coffee with a nod of thanks. "Yes. Illyria's on the roof, supposedly keeping watch for the Haunters, although I think she just likes it up there, and Spike and Gunn went with Angel." He eased the lid off his coffee to allow it to cool. "If it means a break from reading books that I've practically memorized, then I'm willing to give you all the minutes you like. Hours even." He rubbed at his forehead. "Lord, this is frustrating."

Nina pulled up a chair beside Wesley's and sat down. "But despite the complaints, you really love it, don't you? The world saving, I mean."

Wesley picked up his coffee and sipped at the hot liquid cautiously. "I suppose so." He gave her a curious look. "I take it you wouldn't?"

"Not really," Nina said, with an apologetic grimace, "but I get it. Once you *know*, you can't pretend, can't look away. You have to be a hero, because anything else makes you a villain or a coward."

"Exactly," Wesley agreed. "Well, with the exception of the last part. There's no cowardice in recognizing your limitations, and some people aren't up to taking an active part in the battle. There are times I feel that way myself. Or there were. Being dead is quite the stress reliever."

"Okay, that's creepy." A self-conscious smile formed on Nina's face. "I know; I date a vampire, a little hypocritical. I guess I've come to define dead as not talking, not moving, not - " Nina felt her face flush.

Wesley couldn't help but smile. "Angel feels very much alive, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does." Nina studied Wesley for a moment, her face unreadable. "I love being with him, taking care of him when I get the chance, but the hero gig is hard on the girlfriend. It would probably be different if this was the kind of work I was interested in, but it's not." Nina took a small sip of her coffee.

"But you're interested in *him*," Wesley said, leaning forward a little and speaking earnestly. "In Angel. And even though you're not on the front lines, so to speak, you're fully aware of what he does, and you support it. Believe me, that's no small thing you do right there."

Nina nodded slowly, sipping her coffee. "When you're dating a hero, I suppose it helps to know yourself really well. Today I think I've found out just how much I still need to learn. How much of a danger I am to the people I love."

"Nina - " Wesley stared at her. "I feel a little out of my depth," he confessed. "If you're saying that you don't think you're cut from heroic cloth, well, I'd have to disagree." He gave her a warm smile, reaching out to pat her hand. "You've coped with what happened to you in a manner I can't help but admire, and I know Angel feels that way. You've also given him what he's been lacking; a connection to a normal life that's still within his far-from-normal world." He cleared his throat. "You make a good couple, if you don't mind me saying so."

Nina stared down at her coffee. "Thanks, but coping's not quite the same as living productively, and I haven't actually done that well with it. With the changes in me since I was bitten, I mean."

"I think you may be judging yourself rather harshly. But now you're learning the techniques that Oz has taught you. In no time - " At the sad look in Nina's eyes he paused.

"I'm not sure have time," she said. "Not now."

Wesley sat back. "Something's happened," he said, not troubling to make it a question.

"Yes." Nina looked at him. "I really need to talk to Angel."

Wesley reached out for the phone, responding to the appeal in her eyes. "He still hasn't replaced his cell phone, but perhaps I can reach Gunn..."

Gunn swung his ax like a batter knocking one out of the park. The blunt end connected with the back of a Therk'tin's head sending him flying to the floor unconscious.

"Watch the coat!" Spike dodged a knife from one attacker, eyeing him warily.

"Spike, behind you," Angel shouted as he punched the Therk'tin in front of him in the tentacles. The demon took a step back, squealing in pain.

"What, this one?" Without seeming to look, Spike grabbed the knife arm of the attacker behind him, twisting hard. The metal clattered to the floor as Spike wrapped the demon's arm behind his back. Using the Therk'tin like a shield, Spike charged the other attacker, forcing them to slam their heads together. Both fell in a crumbled heap to the floor. "Hey, two in one blow."

"Yeah, Jack, we'll print it on a belt later." Angel delivered one final, brutal kick, sending his opponent flying through the air before a supporting pillar interrupted his short journey. Glancing around, he saw that none of their attackers was getting up any time soon. Walking up to one limp body, Angel scooped up a knife that had fallen from slack fingers.

"Let's see, someone was telling me all about this torture your clan invented," he mused, walking over to the priest who was huddled before the altar, his hands clutching at the cloth draped over it - an exact match in color for his robes. "What was it called? Oh yeah, 'The Retribution of Alaric.'" He crouched down beside the priest, letting his human face return.

The H'reldin gave a low moan, his eyes darting between the knife and Angel's smiling face. "Got to say, back in the day, I'd have given that one a solid nine out of ten for creativity." Angel tapped the blade against the priest's mouth. "But I'd never have started with the toes. Didn't like the begging, you see; got on my nerves. So I usually took the tongue first. Didn't stop them screaming, but it was, well, it was a *quiet* agony. Much more civilized." The tentacles that emerged from the priest's forehead were twitching limply in shock, and Angel chuckled.

"Again, I'd like to talk about the whole you plus girlfriend equals too hap- "

"Spike! I'm working here," Angel growled. He turned back towards the priest and lifted an eyebrow. "Well?"

The priest reached up a hand that trembled slightly and pushed the knife away. "You threaten most convincingly, but these acolytes lie sleeping, not dead."

Angel shrugged. "They got lucky." His face hardened. "And I mean that. I don't generally give people coming at me with knives a second chance, but they didn't fight well enough to make them worth killing."

"I doubt their knives have ever been used to do more than their job requires," the priest said with some asperity. "They came to protect me, as is their duty, and thereby proved their courage as you are not known for your mercy."

"I'm not?" Angel said. He pursed his lips. "Now that's - no, that doesn't hurt my feelings. More of a compliment, really. Where were we?"

The charged silence that followed was broken by the chirp of Gunn's cell phone. He gave Angel an apologetic smile and turned away. "Hello? Yeah, he's here, Wes, but he's kinda busy right now." One of the demons groaned and stirred, his fingers groping for his knife. Gunn delivered a precise kick to the head that silenced him before sending the knife spinning away. "Kinda busy myself, but I can't say fun wasn't had tonight."

The priest rolled his eyes and stared at Angel. "The humans you protect have odd ideas of what amuses, vampire. Now help me up and have done with your games. I'm too old to lie on cold floors."

Angel sat back on his heels, tossing the knife aside. "You'll answer my questions?"

The priest nodded, and Angel hauled him to his feet. Gunn murmured a goodbye and tucked his phone away, joining Spike in watching over the bodies on the floor.

"Let's start with these," Angel said, taking out the photographs.

He pushed them at the priest who held up his hand. "Spare me."

"Why? No one spared them," Angel said in a hard voice.

"Very well; save your time then." The priest sighed. "I know what they show. A despicable act, performed by desperate people. When they were chosen to care for the sacrifice, their faces showed none of the delight they should have felt at such an honor. I should have known then."

"Known what?" Angel asked.

The priest looked surprised. "That they were unworthy. Do you not comprehend their sin? To save themselves money, *money*, they betrayed their heritage, lost our clans the blessings that bring us luck, keep

us safe in this world."

"They killed humans and fed them to your precious sacrifice," Angel said angrily. "Doesn't that make the sin-list too?"

"Oh, that." The priest's tone was dismissive. "Well, yes, of course it does, as it was the tainted flesh of the humans that brought about the untimely death of the sacrifice."

"Tainted?" Gunn said angrily. "You might want to lose the 'tude before you find yourself short a tentacle or two."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Angel said, giving Gunn a quelling glance. "And if the sacrifice hadn't died you wouldn't have cared about those two boys. Little bit of deception, cutting the corners... doesn't matter if no one knows. The sin's not in the doing, but the getting found out, is that it?" His face twisted in disgust. "I've had it with that way of thinking. I'm going to reduce your congregation by two, and don't even try and tell me I'm not entitled."

"You see that as just?" the priest asked. "You were deceived and betrayed, and so you wipe out the offence with blood?"

There was a moment of silence as their eyes met. "Not always," Angel said. "Sometimes I can be the forgiving kind. If it's someone I know, if it's someone I trust."

"And you neither know nor trust Jeryn and Marisha?"

"Really don't," Angel said.

The priest nodded. "I would not expect you to, but their blood need not lie on your hands."

"I just explained why it *does*," Angel snapped. "And for the record, I'm a vampire. I *like* blood."

"Me, too," said Spike. "Well, not yours, mate. No offence, but you'd have to be pretty desperate to drink demon blood. Though there was this one time - "

Gunn tapped him on the shoulder. "Spike? Really good place to close that flapping hole you call a mouth."

The H'reldin gestured around him, with an ironic smile on his face. "You like blood? Then breathe deeply, vampire."

"I don't do that a lot actually..." Angel said.

"Then taste the air," the priest said, glaring at him impatiently.

Angel sniffed. "Smells of blood, but I guess it usually does given the location." His eyes narrowed. "Fresh blood," he amended.

The priest smiled coldly. "Very fresh."

"They came to you for protection," Angel said slowly. "And you killed them."

"Their bodies were taken from this altar not five minutes before you arrived," the priest told him. "Stivan called them. Warned them. Sent them to me." The priest shook his head. "You might show mercy, vampire, but Stivan? Never. He knew what I would do faced with their actions and - " The priest eyed Angel thoughtfully. "I think you frightened him a little."

"That's too bad," Angel said. "I meant to frighten him a *lot*."

"I'm sure he'll be back shortly," Wesley said, giving Nina a smile that was starting to look a little frayed around the edges. "Gunn didn't seem to think it would take long, and that was half an hour ago."

"But he didn't say where they were or what they were doing!" Nina pointed out, retracing the path she was beginning to wear in the carpet. "They could be in danger."

"Ah. Good point," Wesley said. "But Gunn sounded quite cheerful, so I'm not inclined to panic. Not that you're panicking," he added hastily. "Just... walking."

"I'm driving you nuts with my pacing, aren't I?" Nina said, pausing and giving him an apologetic glance.

"Just a little," Wesley admitted. He stood up. "Perhaps I could make us some more coffee?"

The door to the street opened and then closed with a quiet thump. "Wes, you're not going to believe what we found out about our clients." Angel's voice was tired, but he brightened when he saw who was standing beside Wesley. "Nina?"

She turned towards the door. "Hi."

"I'm sorry. Our date; I'm late." Angel took a quick look at his watch. "*Really* late. I could grovel, would that help? I think I'm getting the hang of it now."

"No groveling required." Nina's face relaxed into a wistful smile as she stood up. "Hey, the Belmont is open twenty-four hours. Why don't you take me out now?"

"You threatened to torture their priest?" Nina's eyes were wide with something close to shock.

"He knew I wouldn't have gone through with it." Angel reached across the table, taking Nina's hand into his. "At least - yeah, he knew. And he did send all those knife-wielding demons after us."

"I'm sorry." She glanced away a moment before squeezing his fingers. "So what did the priest say? Why did he do it?"

"Not a lot." Angel shrugged. "He said that he'd let tradition guide him when he struck. Sanctuary isn't one of their traditions apparently, but I guess Jeryn and Marisha were all out of anything but the difficult choices by then." Angel could see Nina pale slightly as she looked away again, pretending to be reading the placemat. "Hey, are you all right?"

"I need to go, Angel." She didn't look up, but Angel understood. It was the middle of the night, and he was a jerk for not just taking her home.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kept you up so late. Don't tell Spike I said it, but sometimes I'm not so - "

"I *need* to go." Nina looked up, her eyes glistening and full of meaning she was obviously trying to impart without saying the words.

Angel was very sure that he didn't understand. "Nina?"

"I've been hiding for the last year, trying to pretend that I'm not a werewolf. I'm done hiding." She took a deep breath. "I told my sister today. What I am."

"You did? Nina, if she threw you out, don't worry. We'll find a place for you to stay. You'll stay with *me*." Angel smiled, adjusting to the idea faster than he would've expected. "You know, that's not such a bad idea anyway. We're a couple; we should be living together. It'd be kinda - "

Nina was shaking her head. "It's not going to happen, Angel. What did you just say about making difficult choices? I need to do that too. Because I'm not human any more. Not really. Staying here, trying to meditate; it's not going to work. It's not enough."

There were times that Angel was thankful that his heart didn't beat, because he didn't know if he could stand moments like this when it would feel as if it'd come to a screeching halt.

"You don't have to - "

"I *need* to. Oz is taking off tomorrow morning, and I'm going with him. He's going to take me to the safe houses and the places he's studied. It's for the best."

"It's not," Angel said. "Not if it means you have to leave." He pushed his chair back a little and tried to make sense of her decision. "Look; is it your sister? Was she - how did she take it?"

Nina ran her finger around the rim of her coffee mug, staring down with a concentration that really wasn't needed. "Pretty good, when you think about it. She was angriest when she thought it was a joke. Once I convinced her - " Nina's eyes lifted to return Angel's concerned look. "She cried. For so long I was frantic. Cried because I'd dealt with it by myself, cried because she knew I had to go. And she couldn't take her eyes off the picture on the table beside her. The one where I'm kissing Amanda as she opens her birthday present from me." Nina stared at the cocoa-flecked whipped cream on her finger and reached for a paper napkin. "Guess I did a good job of making her see how dangerous I was, because she never once asked if I was sure, if I didn't want to stay and see how it went."

"I'm sorry." It was as inadequate as his response to her happiness the day before had been, but she didn't get angry.

"Lot of that going around," she whispered.

There was a long moment of silence as Angel absorbed what she'd said. "I just don't get why you have to leave. You can be with me and feel safe - "

"Can I?" Her eyes met his. "Yes, I suppose I could. You'd protect me, the way you try and protect everyone you care for. I've seen that for myself. You're the most determined man I've ever met, and it's hard to argue with you. But even you can't handle this. You fight the monsters. All the time. And that's not something I can help you with. Not when I *am* a monster. I have to learn to deal with that and - "

"And I can help you," he interrupted. "You said I could; we could train together, work on the meditation - "

"Yes. We could. And we'd just be in the middle of it when some crisis would come up, or Wesley or the others would need you, and you'd be gone before I had time to blow out the scented candles," Nina said.

There was no bitterness in her voice, just a wry acceptance.

Her chair scraped across the floor as she stood. "I can't drag this out, Angel. It's too hard to do. Just let me go and wish me well?"

Angel looked up at her mutely and then sighed, resigned, not to her decision, but to the loss of someone else he loved. That seemed to be a constant in his life. "You know I do. And you know if you ever need me..."

"You'll be there?" Nina said, trying to speak lightly.

"Yeah. I will," he said.

She nodded, looking as if she wanted to leave. Angel sympathized. He was fairly sure the wino two tables down was listening, and a young girl in the corner was watching them, chin propped in her hand, as if

they were a live version of a soap opera or something.

"It's not as if I'm leaving you to take care of yourself alone," she murmured, sounding as if she was trying to convince herself. "You've got friends. Good ones."

Angel snorted. "Hey," he said, standing up after putting some bills on the table. "Not that having friends isn't nice, but don't worry about me; been around a while, remember. I can take care of myself."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "I hope so."

They walked to the door with Angel giving the sentimental girl a glare as she sighed wistfully, following them with her eyes.

The street was empty, but it wouldn't have mattered how many people were around. Angel pulled Nina into his arms and kissed her, feeling her respond and trying not to let her see how much he hated to let go.

In the end, it was she who broke the kiss, stepping back and giving him a smile that wavered for a second as if she was about to cry and then changed to a look of calm determination. Without a word, she stepped back, one pace, two, and then turned and walked away quickly.

He watched her walk out of sight, but she didn't look back.

Angel could hear someone in his office as he climbed the stairs. Finding someone in the theater in the middle of the night wasn't unusual, but he was glad his senses told him it was Wesley waiting. He *really* couldn't handle Spike right now. He wanted time alone to adjust, but Wesley needed to be told about what had happened.

All of it.

Wesley was pouring a cup of coffee when Angel got to the doorway.

"That'll keep you up," Angel told him by way of a greeting.

"It's for you, actually; mine's over here." Wesley gestured at the second cup.

Angel sighed, lifting his hand, palm forward. "No thanks."

There was the rasping sound of a screw top coming off a glass bottle and the smell of whiskey. Wesley poured a good dose of the amber liquid into Angel's cup and then, with a shrug, poured a smaller amount into his own. After recapping the bottle, he picked up both mugs and handed one to Angel.

"Take it. You look as if you need it."

For a moment Angel looked between Wesley's face and the mug before taking the coffee. "You knew?"

"I guessed."

Angel sat down and took a sip of his coffee, almost wishing Wesley had just handed him the bottle.

"She told her sister. I think that's as close to dousing your boat with gas and throwing a match at it as it gets," Angel said.

Wesley sat opposite Angel and took a slow sip of his drink. "She's leaving with Oz?"

Angel nodded. "Yeah."

"Tonight - she seemed, well, upset, but as if she'd come to a decision," Wesley said. "I'm sorry that she felt she had to leave."

Wesley waited while Angel sat in silence. Finally he took one last sip of his drink and stood up. "Good night, Angel."

"I've been thinking," Angel said, making Wesley pause.

"About Nina?" Wesley asked.

"About you." Angel's gaze drifted up to study Wesley's face. "About how we can fix things."

"I'm sorry?" Wesley frowned, holding onto the back of his chair.

Angel seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "What I've been thinking is... alive or dead, you're a good man. A good friend. I know that. What I don't know is why we're working on clients who don't deserve anything but a sword through the gut and researching demons who aren't in the books. I'm tired of being blindsided, Wesley."

"Angel, there are still other avenues I could explore that might give us a lead on the Haunters - " Wesley told him.

Angel's fist slammed down on his desk. "No! That can wait. Starting tomorrow, I want you working on one thing only: how to break this hold they've got on you. That's going to be top priority, understand?"

Wesley's features hardened. "No. I understand where the sentiment is coming from, but - "

"Cut the crap, Wesley. This isn't about sentiment. This is about doing our job. Helping people." Angel stared at Wesley, his face determined. "Starting with you."

"No." There was nothing but flat refusal in Wesley's expression. "Angel, believe me when I say that I'd love for things to be different, but nothing we do, nothing we research is going to change the fact that I'm a dead man walking because they're letting it happen."

"We don't *know* that," Angel said stubbornly. "Look at Buffy, hell, look at Spike; death doesn't have to be final - "

"Look at Fred," Wesley said softly. "This is what I am now, Angel. Dead. With you because of a deal you want to destroy. Perhaps you could; there's very little you fail at when you set your mind to it, after all. But when you succeed, I'll be dust. Or, no, let's not be poetic. After three months, I'll still have flesh clinging to my bones, there'll still be some soft tissue for the worms to eat - "

"You're still being kinda poetic," Angel said, giving him a level glance. "And if you want to gross me out, you're really going to have to try harder than that."

"I don't. I just want to make you accept what happened," Wesley said.

"I'm not sure I can," Angel admitted. "You died, and I dealt with it - not well, but I dealt... and now you're back, and it's good, but it's still not *right*, Wes. I hate the thought of you being jerked around by those people."

"Enough that you'd prefer me gone?" Wesley didn't give Angel time to reply. "Sorry, not going to oblige you there. I have work to do. Work that requires me to be here."

"That's not what I was saying, and you know it," Angel snapped, immediately regretting his loss of control. With a heavy sigh he stood up, walking around to lean back on the desk in front of Wesley.

"Sorry. I'll let it go for tonight, but, Wes, I'm not forgetting about this."

Wesley hesitated and then shrugged. It wasn't agreement, but it would do.

"It still doesn't solve the problems with the clients." Angel picked up his cup, staring into the brown liquid before setting it down again, untouched.

"Gunn called me back when you were with Nina and filled me in on events. Quite a shock, I imagine, but it seems to have resolved itself satisfactorily," Wesley said.

Angel shook his head. "Satisfactorily? I found the clan priest, we beat up some guys Harmony could've taken without breaking a nail, and then got shown two bodies. Our clients. I wasted my time. They already handled it. Killed them there and then in the temple. Nothing satisfactory about that."

Wesley frowned. "When you put it that way, it was rather precipitate of them. What made them panic?"

"Well..." Angel gave a self-deprecating cough. "Think that might have been finding out I was on my way over."

"And yet you believe you did nothing?" Wesley asked. "I think you under-rate the feelings you inspire in others, Angel." He glanced away and then met Angel's gaze. "The priest might well have exacted some penalty on those two had he known of their actions, but your involvement gave him no choice. You can't be everywhere, Angel, but I think tonight showed that you don't have to be." There was a pause as Angel absorbed that and then Wesley cleared his throat. "And we've learned a lesson, I think."

"We have?"

Wesley nodded. "From now on, we get a cash retainer up front, and no messing about with credit cards, personal checks, payment in kind, or any of that crap."

Angel gave him a startled look, and then started to smile. "Spike told you to say that, didn't he?"

Wesley grinned. "Filtered through Gunn, which meant it was considerably more profane originally, I imagine, but, yes."

"I'll think about it," Angel told him. He rubbed his hand across his face. "Tomorrow."

Wesley stepped into his apartment and locked the door behind him, letting his shoulders slump, just a little, now that he was alone. It had been a long day, and he was sure the night would be equally tiring, as he didn't expect to be sleeping any time soon.

He walked over to a cupboard set against the wall. There was a safe hidden inside it. It was one Wesley hadn't felt a need to touch since he'd first used it the night he'd moved in. He'd promised himself he wouldn't use what it contained - that he wouldn't use anything more from Wolfram & Hart than absolutely necessary. But desperate times called for complementary measures, and he wasn't about to turn his back on a resource if it meant doing what was right.

The safe's keypad beeped as he punched in the code to unlock it. The solid steel door opened easily, revealing the one thing Wesley wanted to make damned sure was kept out of eyesight.

Wesley reached in, and pulled out one of the template books from the Wolfram & Hart library.

"I want an index of every text that mentions the Haunters of the Silences," he told it. Then, as though it would matter, he added, "Now."

There was the usual faint rush of sound, like a million pages turned at once in a million libraries. Wesley let the book fall open and watched as a single line of text ran across the page. Frowning, he called up the book and his breath caught as a picture, hideous in its unsparing clarity, appeared on the page.

Not a Haunter, but what they'd taken to calling a bug demon.

He read the text aloud, tasting the words. "The demon known as the Haunters of the Silences in its adult form." He scanned the page and then sat back, closing the book and setting it aside. He relaxed the hand that had formed, unthinkingly, into a fist and leaned back, staring at nothing but darkness. "Oh."

THE END

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