

**Excerpt:**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **CHINA. 1900.**

The fires of Beijing danced in Drusilla's eyes as she watched the city fade into the distance. Soon the raging rebellion was no more than an orange glow on the horizon, drifting gently into darkness, yet still she watched it. And Spike watched those eyes.

It wasn't about the rebellion. Spike knew Drusilla well enough to know she would not miss those crowded streets or the splendid violence erupting across them. Pools of blood and broken glass were easy enough to come by, after all. Much as she had savored the scent of fear and the sweet sounds of screams on the breeze, her eyes would not be watching for the chaos or the carnage as it shrunk away behind their carriage. They would be watching for *him*.

Angelus.

Angelus had come back to them. After two long years without a word, he had come back, and their broken bloodsucking family had been made whole. Darla had Angelus, Drusilla had Spike—they were the fanged four once more, and the wide world lay at their feet. But then, just as quickly as he had come, the bastard was gone again.

Darla was the most betrayed. She had scarcely spoken since he fled, except to inform them coldly of his treachery. Darla had sired Angelus, and for a century and a half, they had been each other's most intimate allies. Even after he had sired Drusilla and Drusilla, in turn, had sired Spike—Angelus and Darla had still had something special. But then the fool had gotten himself saddled with a soul. He was a vampire with a conscience now, and so was lost to them, perhaps forever. Drusilla had taken the news in numb silence. It was the silence that rankled Spike most of all. But what was there to say?

If the rebellion had struck China like a righteous and harmonious fist, then Angelus had struck the family like a coward's dagger—in and out in a flash, all the damage done before the pain had time to set in.

It was setting in now.

Spike leaned his chin on his hands and scowled as the carriage rocked. Twenty-four hours ago, he had been in the middle of the best night of his afterlife. He had sunk his fangs in a slayer's throat. Drusilla had licked the girl's blood from his fingertips and gasped in excitement at his touch. For one glorious night, Spike had been everything that she needed, and for a fleeting moment, all had been right with the wicked world. And then the moment was over.

Drusilla's eyes remained glazed, locked on the dim horizon as the carriage bounced along, and Spike was left with a familiar ache. Even at his best, he would never be enough.

The feeling settled thickly inside him like the soggy half of a biscuit slumping into a cup of tea. It bobbed up and down in his chest, turning everything that had been so glorious before into miserable, sodden mush.

Spike took a deep breath. His undead lungs might not need the air, but he still needed the moment. No. He was more than enough.

His days of whimpering in back alleys were over. Spike might have left London as another common blood rat, but he was returning a verified villain, a slayer killer, a god among vampires. Trembling watchers would whisper his name to slayers-in-training for generations to come—and Drusilla would be happy. Things were going to be better. Just wait.

London was ahead of them, and this time it was going to be glorious.



### ENGLAND. 1901.

London was underwhelming. At least, *under* London was under whelming.

What the dusty basement lacked in amenities, it more than made up for in stench. The smell—like rotten ham with hints of cheap perfume—had been content to sulk in the back room for the first week or two, but lately it had begun to stretch its legs, loitering moodily in the parlor and even pushing its way into the bedrooms at the most inconvenient times. It was a dogged stench, a stench with dreams and ambitions.

Spike sighed.

There were no windows down here—not that any of the current residents would have been inclined to open them if there had been. Mismatched bricks along the outer walls belied places where openings used to be, now just memories written in the masonry. This whole floor had once looked out onto the bustling streets of London. It had known the touch of sunlight and the scent of fresh air. In those days, it had been carpeted with expensive rugs and furnished with finely upholstered settees and plum armchairs. The only furniture that now remained in the dimly lit chambers were the pieces too ragged and embarrassing for their former owners to allow them into the light where anyone might see them. They had been left behind to be bricked in, and then the streets had risen around them, and the world had forgotten the place even existed.

That was all ages ago, of course—well before the various lines of London's underground railway had burrowed under the city. The basement's previous tenants had been long-dead by the time the railway's work crews accidentally knocked a hole in the eastern wall. The new tenants—who had found their way in through that damaged wall—were technically long-dead, too. But they were a much more active sort of dead.

They were not nearly active *enough* for Spike's taste, though. He sighed again, only louder.

“What’s the matter?” asked Darla, not looking up from the pages of her book. She was lounging on a moth-eaten divan in the corner. “Is the poet warrior feeling uninspired?”

“I am feeling inspired,” Spike said, “to drive a stake through my sodding temple if I have to stay cooped up again all night. We’ve been back for weeks, and we’ve barely left the nest. Is it any wonder poor Dru is getting so antsy?” He slouched in his chair, drumming his fingers on the battered table. Drusilla sat across from him, shuffling a deck of cards and humming tunelessly to herself. “Drusilla is fine.” Darla turned another page, slowly. Spike noted the title, set in a gaudy red script on a yellow cover.

He sneered. “Bad enough you brought that rubbish into the house,” he whinged. “But do you have to actually *read* it?”

“It’s interesting,” said Darla. “This Stoker fellow got a lot of things right.”

“Hurrah,” Spike grunted without enthusiasm. “Trade secrets revealed.”

“Don’t be jealous. Not everyone can be Dracula.”

“Not everybody *wants* to be. I’m not jealous of that puffed-up plonker.” Spike gave a snort and slid his chair back with a squeak. “I’m going out.”

“Now?” said Darla, allowing her gaze to creep up over the top of the book. “What for? It’s only an hour to sunrise.” Spike pushed his hair back out of his face. “To get someone to eat.”

Darla scowled. “You still haven’t even finished that iceman you brought home last week.”

“The iceman’s gone off,” said Spike. “He’s all peaky. I’m gonna find a nice lamplighter or something. Might stop by the old Shady Shop on the way home. Don’t worry. I’ll be quick about it.”

“You haven’t got any money for the Shady Shop,” said Darla. “You spent the last of it getting Drusilla that overpriced dress.” Spike sneered. He *did* remember the dress. He had forgotten about the money.

“I still don’t know why you didn’t just drain some strumpet behind the dance hall and take *hers*, like a normal vampire,” Darla muttered.

“Because Drusilla wanted *that* one,” said Spike. “And Drusilla deserves to get nice things from time to time that haven’t been worn by mutilated murder victims.”

Drusilla glanced up from her cards. “Aww. My Spike is always so sweet,” she said. Her eyes crinkled with a smile. “Frankly, I think the mutilated murder victims are half the fun.” Darla shrugged. “They give an outfit bit of history.” “Ugh. I could do with a lot less history,” Spike said. “History packs too much baggage. More interested in the future. Our future.” His eyes flicked to Drusilla. For a moment he seemed to forget what he was saying. His chest rose and fell as he watched her shuffle the battered cards—but then he shook himself back to the

present. "And in my immediate future, I'm going out," he declared, "before I start bashing my head into the wall just to feel something."

Darla shook her head. "Fine. As long as you don't forget that we have an appointment to see Lord Ruthven at the guild tomorrow." She went back to her book.

"Wait, Spike." Drusilla spread the deck out on the table in front of her. "I'm going to read your cards before you go. Angelus likes me to keep in practice."

Spike's mouth twitched, but he nodded and put on a smile. "All right, Dru. Just a quick one. Go ahead."

"Your current condition is"—Drusilla laid a card on the table—"the four of cups." On the card, a boy sat beneath a tree with a collection of goblets around him.

"Bollocks to the cups," muttered Spike under his breath. "My current condition is *stuck in a rotting basement.*"

"Discontent, my sweet one. It means you're unsatisfied."

"The tarot picked up on that, huh?"

"Don't be smart," she chided. "Got to lean into it." "Lean into it?" Spike shrugged. "Wouldn't mind leaning into four or five cups—maybe a whole bottle."

"Your greatest obstacle is"—Drusilla ignored him and laid another card atop the first—"the knight of wands." Spike leaned over to peek at the card. "He looks like he's on fire. Who's that bloke supposed to be, then? Some sort of wizard? I could fight a wizard."

"The knight of wands is hastiness. Frustration. Rash action." "Hmm." Spike grimaced. "I *could* fight a wizard."

"She's right," Darla called from the divan. "You don't think. You never take a moment to plan things out, you simply rush in and sow chaos everywhere you go."

"I *do* think," answered Spike. "It's just that I happen to do some of my best thinking in the middle of the chaos, thanks." "And then we're stuck picking up the pieces for you," Darla added. "It's not cute, Spike. It's selfish. And reckless." Behind them, Drusilla laid out another few cards and tutted softly to herself.

"When have you ever had to pick up my pieces?" Spike said, turning in his chair.

Darla crossed her arms. "Stockholm? Frankfurt?"

"Those don't count."

"Saint Petersburg?"

"Again with Saint Sodding Petersburg! That was as much his fault as it was mine!"

“How about Wiltshire, then?” snapped Darla. “Last month?” Spike hesitated. “What was wrong with Wiltshire?”

“You mean besides you making an unholy spectacle of yourself?” “I was *celebrating!* It was a *party.*”

“You knocked a stone off Stonehenge.”

“It was a *good party,*” said Spike. “Come on. It was our home coming! We were back from China—I had just slain a slayer! The humans can put their big stupid rock back on top of the other rocks. No harm done.”

“No harm? You broke the lintel and set a Squamus loose in the world.”

“Did I?” Spike frowned. “Wait. Was that before or after we ate those druids, because I was hallucinating pretty heavily for a bit there. Druids always have the best mushrooms. What’s a Squamus, anyway?”

“Pestilence demon? Several tusks? Covered in sticky scales?” “Oh! That guy!” Spike brightened. “He was fun! Best New Years I’ve had in decades. Nineteen hundred and one, Darla—a whole new century. What’s the big deal? It’s not like the scaly bastard caused a scene or anything.”

Darla finally closed the book and set it on the table beside her. “He killed the Queen of England. It made the front page of literally every paper across the country.”

“He gave her a nudge!” Spike countered. “Come on. Victoria was eighty-one. She was basically dead already, and it still took him three weeks to get the job done. Toothy scrub was good fun at charades, but not the most efficient monster in the mix, if we’re being honest.”

“Do you ever take anything seriously?”

“Life’s not about waiting for the carotid artery to stop hemorrhaging, Darla. It’s about learning to dance in the spray.” “Ugh.” She rolled her eyes.

“What? Would you rather I was more like your precious Angelus?” Spike said.

“Don’t,” growled Darla.

“Seven of swords . . .” Drusilla murmured behind them. “Your perfect Angel,” Spike continued.

“Always seriously sadistic and sadistically serious. He never stopped to smell the corpses. Never threw a punch he didn’t know would land. Never made a single move he didn’t ponder for days first.”

“That’s enough,” Darla hissed.

“Really makes you wonder”—Spike cocked his head at her— “how long he was planning to abandon us before he finally up and did it. Twice.”

Darla was on her feet in an instant. She narrowed her eyes at Spike, fingers clenching and unclenching, before she spun around and stormed out of the room.

Spike ground his teeth.

“Fool,” said Drusilla, airily laying down another card. “She started it.”

“The fool means new beginnings. Risks. Spontaneity.” The image on the tarot card showed an old-fashioned jester standing on a cliff overlooking the ocean.

“Right,” said Spike. “That’s me, then. Bloody fool.” He leaned his elbows on the table. “So, what’s our future hold, princess? And don’t say death. I always get death—a bit on the nose for a vampire.”

Drusilla dealt three more cards. “A partnership. Broken trust. Deception.”

“That’d be the past,” Spike grunted. “How’s it all work out in the end?”

Drusilla flipped the final card. It showed a tall brick tower in ruins, buffeted by a storm, fire dancing from the walls and smoke pouring from its windows as bodies plummeted toward the rocks below.

Spike eyed it. “That one looks cheery.”

“Destruction,” Drusilla said, scowling.

Spike pursed his lips, but then put on a reassuring grin. “Everyone else’s, Dru. We’re not the tower, we’re the flames.” Drusilla smiled. “That’s right, my sweet. The four of us against the world.”

Spike’s jaw set. “Three of us,” he corrected.

Drusilla made no indication that she had heard him as she swept the cards back into her deck, humming softly to herself again.

“Right. Well then. Back in bit, love,” said Spike. He plucked his frock coat from the broken rack beside the crack in the wall. “I’ll see if I can’t pick you up something nice.”