Out of Time

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Summary

After surviving the First and losing Spike in the battle, Buffy begins to see Spike in mirrors and she gets glimpses of his life. At first she thinks she's crazy...but what if Mirror Spike isn't just her imagination? And what happens when she travels to England and ends up in William Pratt's former residence? Rated M...because it's Spuffy and who knows what will happen...

Notes

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Oh...this fic has been nominated for a Sunnydale Memorial award...if you like, go vote :)

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The first time it happened was the day after Sunnydale collapsed.

Robin drove the bus north along I-5 for about two hours, until he noticed the gas gauge was dangerously close to empty. He pulled over at the nearest exit and drove to the first motel on the right hand side of the street.

The post-fight euphoria had wound down; talks of shoe-shopping had turned to shopping for more practical items such as ace bandages, antiseptic and gauze and, as the talk wound down, Buffy could only look at her hands.

Giles went into the motel to take care of the rooms while Andrew and Dawn went across the street to the Rite Aid to purchase supplies; Faith checked on Robin, berating him for waiting so long before stopping while he stubbornly insisted he was fine. Buffy, Xander and the rest of the girls stepped out of the bus.

Buffy tuned out most of the chatter around her as the girls asked "Where are we?" and "Where are we going?", her thoughts were so jumbled she couldn't focus on anything in particular. She looked down at her hands again and cataloged each bloody gash and scrape, each shredded nail.

But no burns.

*Shouldn't there be blisters and burn marks?* His hand burned, his whole body had gone up in flames and she had held on as long as she could before running out of the basement.

Why couldn't she carry burns?

*Didn't she owe him burns?*

Dawn and Andrew returned and Giles strode out from the motel office with a handful of keys. At some point during their shopping trip, Dawn and Andrew had devised a plan for treating each member of their group.

Buffy was first, Dawn announced. Everyone nodded, no one was surprised.

Dawn took her key and her hand and escorted her to her room; Andrew followed, hands full of white plastic bags.

Buffy wanted to protest. She wanted to shut them both out and just lie down and sleep, yet when she looked at her sister's wide blue eyes and saw the concern in them, she relented. She had made the mistake of shutting her sister out before and she was determined to not make that mistake again.

Instead, she found the energy to give Dawn a half-hearted smile as her sister gently cleaned her scrapes and gashes with the antiseptic.

When Dawn voiced her concern Buffy told her that she was fine, just tired.

Dawn made Andrew turn around as she raised Buffy's shirt to inspect her stomach for injuries. She gasped with shock over the ragged, puckered flesh that had already started on the path of healing.

She asked "How?" and "Why?" but Buffy had no answer, she simply shrugged as she lay back on the bed and rolled in between the cool sheets. She raised a hand to Dawn's face and was rewarded
when her younger sister smiled a beautiful smile full of relief.

"We really survived, didn't we Buffy?" she said tremulously.

Finally knowing the right words to say, she smiled. "We really did, Dawnie."

"You're tired. I … we - Andrew and I - are going to take care of the others now."

Buffy nodded and listened to the duo as they gathered up their bags.

Just before Dawn opened the door Buffy sat up and yelled, "Dawn!"

Dawn dropped her bags and was at Buffy's side in a second. "What? Are you in pain?" Worry clouded her features and Buffy took a shaky breath.

"I'm okay. I'm sorry, it's just -" Panicked, Buffy reached down and grabbed her sister's hand.

"Dawnie, I love you. Okay? I just wanted you to know, I love you."

Please believe me. Please believe me, she pleaded inwardly, fearful that her sister would look at her with sadness and say No you don't.

Dawn smiled. "I love you too Buffy."

Then she was gone.

And Buffy was alone.

She slept restlessly from the early afternoon and well into the next morning. Every sound seemed to wake her. First, the quiet murmurs of Willow and Kennedy in the room next to hers followed later by the excited voices of Vi and another Slayer - who she assumed was Cho-Ahn (since half the conversation seemed to be in English and the other in Chinese). Both voices were excited and each girl seemed to be trying to recount the fight.

"Shuo yachi?" Vi repeated.

"Shuo. Yachi." Cho- Ahn carefully enunciated each word. She must have added a visual for clarification.

"Oh" Buffy listened to the sound of Vi as she giggled. "Very big teeth."

Buffy dozed off.

The sounds got quieter.

Dawn crept softly into the room and Buffy listened to the sounds of the shower as she drifted back to sleep.

Later, she woke to an empty room. She stretched and grimaced slightly when she felt the pull on her stomach muscles. Cautiously, she pulled up her shirt and gently explored the red, puckered area.

Then it hit her.

I should have died, Buffy thought.
No one should be able to survive a mortal wound - by its very definition, it was a mortal wound. If she had died, she knew deep in her gut, that he would have crawled his way to her while the walls and ceiling collapsed around them. He wouldn't have left her to die alone. He would have held her in his arms as he burned up from the inside out, saying some smart-ass remark.

"See you on the flip side, Slayer".

Yeah, that sounded like him.

She frowned.

Maybe not. He was so sure he would ride the highway into Hell... but surely his sacrifice wouldn't go unnoticed? The thought of Spike being overlooked by the Powers That Be made the acid in her stomach churn. A champion didn't deserve that...

She swung her legs off the bed and stood, taking a moment for the lightheaded feeling to pass before making her way into the bathroom.

In the shower she washed the layers of grime of the fight from her body, scrubbed her arms and legs. She refused to give into the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. She closed her eyes as she inhaled deeply through her nose and tipped her head backwards into the steaming spray to wash the suds away.

*Lather, rinse, repeat.*

It was her fourth repeat and she thought she might finally be clean.

She turned off the spray, squeezed some of the water from her hair and grabbed some of the large white towels from the rack beside the shower. She wrapped one towel around her body and another around her head. She stepped out of the shower and walked to the mirror over the bathroom sink.

The mirror was clouded, opaque with steam, and she swiped a hand across the mirror until she saw her image. She took her time, dispassionately staring at the image in front of her. Here, while alone in the bathroom, she could tell herself all of the hateful things she thought, things she couldn't dare say out loud in front of her friends and the potential-Slayers, they were all Slayers.

"You are awful." She told herself. "How could you?"

Her words seemed loud in the quiet of the bathroom. It wasn't enough. She pulled the towel from her head and watched as her hair fell in wet waves. She leaned forward in the mirror, placed her palms on the counter until she was nose to nose with her image.

"You are a disgusting evil thing! How can you stand to even look at yourself?"

She stopped and tilted her head. She had heard a weird echo in the bathroom as her words were repeated in an odd, distorted way. Her words, but not her voice...

Then it happened.

She watched as her green eyes changed until they became blue; the shape of her face changed, hollowing out slightly in some areas and cheekbones jutting out sharply in others. Her hair receded, the length slowly retracting while the color changed and became bleached blonde and slicked back. She wasn't looking at her face anymore.
It was Spike. She whirled around-

- and looked behind himself.

"Buffy?" Spike said.

Of course she wasn't there and he stamped down the insane hope that curled in his belly. Yet, it some cruel way, he could swear he heard her voice gasp "Spike?"

He had been walking by the mirror after stepping out of the shower. He had swiped away some of the steam and looked at empty bathroom. He had no reflection because – well, duh, vampire. She was gone, dead and he had left Sunnydale in the early hours of the morning because he couldn't bear the place. Buffy was everywhere in that town, and the memories - were too much.

He found this place just before sunrise.

Filled with loathing and disgust, he spoke to the mirror.

Slowly, he turned until he could see the reflection in the mirror out of the corner of his eye. She was still there, in an awful parody of his reflection. He raised a hand to his head to run his fingers through his head, stopping his hand in mid-air when he saw the Buffy in the mirror do the same.

Slowly he dropped his hand and Mirror-Buffy did the same. He twisted his hand and watched his- no her – hand in the mirror as it did the same. Her hand looked raw, knuckles were scraped, nails ragged. Her arms were marked by long gashes, thin scrapes and bruises everywhere. Then he looked at her face, his eyes drinking in the sight of her.

"You look awful." Was the first thing he said and then heard her voice, muffled and oddly distorted, repeat the words a scant second later. His lips twisted bitterly and he saw hers do the same.

"You should see the other person." He said automatically, as if she were really there, in front of him. Once again he heard the weird echo of her voice. He sighed and her image did the same. "I know it's not possible, but …" they both stopped and he looked into her green eyes. He knew it was a mirage then, the love in her eyes...

"You're a sight for sore eyes." He said softly. Her lips moved at the same time and her voice echoed back. He choked down a sob, felt his eyes fill with moisture and hung his head.

"All aboard the Crazy Train. Next stop Looneyville." He said to himself. The weird Buffy echo repeated his words back to him.

He closed his eyes and raised his head, too afraid, and too filled with hope to look into the mirror. What if she was gone? Despair filled him at the thought. She was dead, and the logical part of his brain knew that but, if he was going crazy because she was appearing in mirrors then he could embrace insanity with open arms and never let go.

He would believe in anything to have her back, even if it was just as a figment of his imagination.

He opened one eye and almost passed out with relief when one green orb stared back at him. She, too, had her fingers splayed across her face. Tears sparkled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. He reached out with a hand and touched the smooth surface of the mirror, wishing that it really was her face he could touch.

In the mirror, their fingertips touched.
"I know you're dead." They both said.

He looked at her eyes and saw the same startled expression in her eyes. He was overcome by a wave of guilt. He promised her that he would take care of Dawn and what does he do? Not even two days after her funeral and he left the Bit because he was having a difficult time dealing. That's why she was here, that's why he could see her in this mirror. This phantom-Buffy was here to remind him of his promise. Spike knew then that he needed to go back to Sunnydale and back to Dawn. He had promised Buffy he would always look after her kid sis and Spike always kept his promises.

He leaned close to the mirror again until he was nose to nose with her; he needed her to believe these next words, even if she wasn't real, even if she was only a-

- figment of her imagination. She had to make him believe.

"I meant what I said." She said fiercely looking into his blue eyes, watching as they showed the same intensity she felt. She heard the muffled distortion of Spike's voice repeat the same words. Then the mirror clouded over with steam. She choked back another sob and said brokenly "I love you, Spike."

Then, clear as a bell, she heard his voice say brokenly. "I love you, Slayer."

Not muffled, it was if he was standing next to her.

Maybe it really was him in the mirror. Maybe, she wasn't crazy…

Tears streamed down her face and sobs shuddering through her body, she reached out and frantically wiped the foggy condensation from the mirror. Until she saw –

- nothing.

No reflection. Just an empty bathroom. He clenched his fists on the counter and looked into the mirror, anger and pain threatening to explode out of him. He took his fist and punched through the glass, not feeling the glass as it sliced through his fist as –

- the glass shattered and shards rained all over the counter.

She stood and gazed at the empty space on the wall where the mirror once rested. She heard the pounding on the door and Willow's muffled voice coming from the other side of the connecting door. For a moment, hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her. Maybe she was crazy. Willow continued knocking, and then Buffy heard Willow mutter an incantation in a hesitant voice.

The door opened and Willow came into Buffy's room.

"Buffy? What happened?"

The hysterical laughter burst through her lips and Buffy slapped a hand over her mouth at the sound.

"Goddess, there's glass everywhere. Buffy, don't move!" Willow commanded and looked over her shoulder, "Kennedy, can you find a broom?"

Buffy ignored them and continued to stand and stare at the empty space on the wall where the mirror had been. She wasn't sure how long she stood, while Willow and Kennedy cleaned around her - seconds, minutes, hours…it didn't matter.
Later, after the mess was cleaned up, she got dressed and made her way to the motel office. She asked to speak to the manager, knowing that she needed to let them know about the mirror she had broken.

The front desk attendant told her the manager was out, but he expected her to be back from her lunch in a few minutes.

Buffy said she didn't mind waiting and took a seat. Idly, she looked around the small office, taking in small details - the vase of fresh flowers on the small table near the loveseat that she sat upon, the outdated celebrity magazines spread out in front of the vase, the large mirror behind the front desk...

She looked at the mirror and stared at the room in the reflection. The sun shined through the windows and caused the fresh white carnations in the vase glow, as did her reflection. Then the hairs on her arm seemed to stand up and another image slowly replaced hers.

Mirror Spike was back.

 Bloody Hell, I'm really losing it.

Spike watched Mirror-Buffy as she regarded him with fathomless green eyes. She still looked awful - being dead would do that to a person, he figured -she had huge circles under her eyes and wore a pair of jeans with a hideous yellow t-shirt that read "My Sister Went to California and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt."

So, even figments of imagination change clothes once in a while.

The manager had stepped out for a moment and he was alone in the office. He stood, unsurprised when Mirror-Buffy also rose. Simultaneously, they walked backwards until he had a head to toe view of her. His eyes roamed over her body, once again drinking in the sight of her.

Yep. Insanity was welcomed if this was the view he got every time he looked in the mirror. Of course, real-life Buffy never looked at him with this open and almost greedy expression. Oh, how he had wished she had though…

In fact…

Well, that was weird. He stared straight ahead at the image and, if Mirror-Buffy had followed the rules that his on-the-brink-of-insanity mind had already set up, then she should be looking straight ahead as well. She wasn't. Mirror-Buffy's eyes were moving, up and down and he swore - he swore - he could feel her touching him with her eyes. His skin began to tingle.

He forgot himself.

"'Like what you-"

"-see, Pet?"  Buffy felt a shock go through her.

Startled she looked straight at Mirror-Spike's face and saw his eyes filled with his familiar leer, the cerulean blue eyes sparkled with promise and his tongue curled back in a way that she used to complain was obscene, but always secretly found sexy.

She almost replied back with some cutting remark, out of habit - back in those horrific days when she had wanted to punish him for making her want him, for staying when she told him to leave, for
daring to love her and make her feel.

*This time, I could tell the truth.*

"Always." The word slipped from her lips on a sigh.

The flash of pain across his face was so un-expected, but all too familiar; even with the truth, she could hurt him, even this figment of her imagination didn't believe her.

The door opened and more sunlight spilled through the office, but in the mirror Buffy realized the room was dark, like it was night.

*Some imagination…of course Spike can't walk in daylight, so I make it nighttime in his mirror world.*

It was kind of scary, that her mind was going through so much trouble to make him exist.

The manager walked in front of her and Buffy watched the woman's reflection in the mirror. Mirror-Spike watched the woman as well. Buffy frowned and watched as Mirror-Spike did the same.

Something was off…

As if there were two separate speakers playing the same song, but one set had a slight delay in relaying the sound, Buffy heard the woman speak.

"I'm told you had a problem with your room?" she said, looking at Buffy expectantly. Buffy tipped her head to the side and looked at the mirror. She could see the back of the manager and Spike's face as his head was tipped to the side as well.

*Very weird.*

"No problem. The room was fine, but I caused some damage." Buffy heard her words repeated in the same muffled and distorted Spike voice that she had heard earlier in her bathroom. Once again she tipped her head and met eyes with Mirror Spike.

*Now this is getting freaky.*

"Damage? What kind of damage?" the woman asked, *in stereo.*

"A broke the mirror in the bathroom. I'll pay for damages." She and Spike said together.

*What the hell?*
Reflections

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was disconcerting to say the least.

She explained to the Manager about how the mirror broke, but continued to be distracted by the muffled and distorted words being repeated by Mirror-Spike at the same time. The Manager's responses were identical in words, but varied in tone. In fact, the Mirror-Manager's tone seemed… flirtatious?

Which caused Buffy to have the insane urge to pop the bitch in the mouth.

Truly insane.

Mirror-Spike didn't exist; he was created by her crazy, cracked up brain because she was suffering from some form of PTSD and therefore …damn, not only was she on board the crazy-train, it seemed she was also the engineer and driving it.

"Well, we here at the Weary Wanderer Motel understand that accidents sometimes happen and we appreciate your candor." The Manager told her brusquely flashing Buffy a fleeting, professional smile while the Mirror-Manager gave a breathless giggle and patted the hair on the back of her head.

Buffy scowled and the Manager's smile faltered uncertainly. Reaching under the counter, she pulled a large register and plunked into on the counter, the noise echoed in the mirror world.

"I will need to get some information from you for insurance purposes."

Buffy nodded, averting her eyes from the mirror as the Mirror-Manager continued to flirt with Spike. She heard his muffled responses but had no desire to see any flirtatious expressions that she imagined crossed his face as he spoke to the Manager. A knot formed in her gut and she berated herself for being jealous.

You are being ridiculous.

"Um…first let me log the date. May 18, 2004" The Manager said to her as she wrote.

"…May 18, 2002." The Mirror-Manager echoed.

What the hell? Why is she imagining Spike in 2002?

"Name, address and phone number please?"

"William Pratt."

Her head whipped up and once again they locked eyes in the mirror. William Pratt? Silently she mouthed the words to herself.

Spike stopped and nodded.

"That's my name. William Pratt…" He seemed to speak to her, like he had in the bathroom and Buffy had to force down another bout of hysterical laughter. Spike continued, looking back at the Manager. "No address yet, but I have a post office box."
"Miss? Miss? I need your name and address please." Buffy tried to focus on the (real) woman standing before her.

Buffy shook her head.

"Buffy Anne Summers, 1630 Revello Drive…uh…" she paused, remembering the recent events in Sunnydale. "It's not there anymore. There was an…earthquake or something..." her voice trailed off and her throat burned.

"Oh, no matter, I will just make a note of it in our log." Mirror-Manager said.

"Not there? Oh…I think I heard about that. We felt something yesterday – in fact the news is all abuzz about a town to the south that experienced major devastation…” Buffy nodded and the woman tutted sympathetically.

"Sir? Sir?"

"It is horrible. They said the whole town was swallowed and all that is left is a crater."

"The Fuck?"

"Sir?"

Even through the distorted and muffled sounds of the mirror world, Buffy heard the panic in the Mirror-Manager's voice and looked over.

"Bloody Hell! What happened?" Mirror-Spike asked, looking over the shoulder of the Manager and at Buffy.

"Sir? I don't understand."

"They said the most of the town was evacuated. I hope everyone made it out safely. Did everyone-" the Manager's words trailed off as she stared at Buffy. Buffy ignored her and looked at Spike, who tilted his head and stared intently.

"Not everyone." She said softly and felt tears fill her eyes.

She wished he could step out of her hallucination and hold her. She knew now why she created an untouchable Spike, unable to step out of the mirror world and back into her own. She wasn't worthy.

"Oh dear. I am so sorry. Were you close to –"

"I can't- I can't talk about it." Buffy stared into the mirror and looked away from the yearning in his eyes, the pain in her chest too overwhelming.

The Manager quickly wrote into her log book and flipped it around for Buffy to sign. Buffy looked down to sign her name. Tears streamed down her face and as a few splashed across the form she signed, she used her free hand to swipe them away. The Manager gently pushed a box of tissues her way and detached a carbon copy receipt sliding it across the counter.

Taking a tissue Buffy looked up and saw her own reflection staring back from the mirror.

The disappointment was crushing.

She sat on the edge of the bed, facing a large mirror that hung over the small desk, only a scant four
feet from the wall. The lights in the room were off, the heavy blinds were shut, but some of the bright light from the outside still managed to steal into her room. Some of the corners of the room were shadowed, but otherwise objects were clearly visible. She sat and stared. She didn't know how long she had been waiting for... something. Yet, no matter how long she stared or how hard she prayed (who prayed for more proof that they were insane?) all she saw was her own form.

A light knock sounded on the door and she made no move to open it. The sound continued, hesitant and unsure then stopped. Buffy exhaled with relief, followed instantly by guilt. She thought about the bathroom and the Manager's office. She sat in the dimming light of her motel room, she looked into the mirror and accepted the truth.

She'd had a little breakdown.

She supposed she was entitled. She had gone up against the First and a gaggle of Uber-Vamps and lived to tell the tale. She had lost people - she might have known some of them longer than others, but they were all good people. Each death wounded her as if it was a burning blade shoved into her gut, re-opening her battle scars. They had been her responsibility, hers to command - she led the battle and they had followed. The survivors had won, but the dead had paid the price.

She wondered bitterly why the price always seemed to be so high.

Dawn came into the room quietly after the sun had gone down, bringing with her small boxes of Chinese Takeout.

"I knocked earlier, but you must have been sleeping. I didn't want to disturb you, so I brought you back something to eat."

She placed the cartons onto the small round table near the window and Buffy smiled weakly. Worry flashed in her sister's blue eyes.

"Are you feeling better? Your wound…"

Buffy raised her T-shirt and showed her scar- still red and angry looking, but the wound had closed and the swelling had gone down.

"It itches." Buffy shrugged. "It looks worse that it feels."

Dawn nodded. "A few of us were going to a nearby Wal-Mart. We're leaving tomorrow and we all need fresh changes of clothes and food for the road. Do you want to come?"

Buffy hesitated. She wanted to remain alone, in her dark room, hidden away from everyone, and stare into the mirror. Maybe he will...

"You have to go on living…so one of us is living…" An eternity seemed to have passed from when he had said those words to her more than a year ago.

"It-it's okay, Buffy," Dawn began softly. "I understand if you need some time to…be alone."

Surprised, Buffy looked up at her sister's face and was struck by the maturity and compassion she saw. When had Dawn, the Teen-Drama-Queen, been replaced by this mature young woman? No pouting expression, no censure in her eyes, just acceptance that Buffy might need time alone. Buffy remembered all the times she had wished Dawn had been more like this when she returned from the dead. All the times she resented Dawn's neediness and punished her by withdrawing away even more.
"Shopping with my sister? Shopping? Have you met me?" Buffy pulled up a smile and grabbed her sister's hand. Yes, she might be going crazy and yes, she was grieving, but she resolved that she would never push her sister away again.

They had all loaded into the school bus and Robin drove them a few miles down the strip of road that was littered with chain restaurants. Buffy stared out of the window at the darkening sky, observing groups of young adults waiting outside of a TGI Fridays and realized she didn't even know what day it was.

She had no clue which town they were in and didn't care. It seemed strange, after the abandoned atmosphere Sunnydale had gained, that life had gone on elsewhere.

Restaurant and bars looked inviting, their windows intact and lacking the spray-painted graffiti that had appeared recently all over Sunnydale. People stood in a long line at the doors of a movie theatre and Buffy scanned the unfamiliar titles on the marquee.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and a gentle squeeze. Giles settled into the seat and slid an arm over her shoulders. For a moment they both looked out the window at the signs of "life goes on".

"They'll never know," he said softly. Buffy hummed in agreement.

"It is all because of you. No- don't shake your head Buffy, it's true."

She stiffened and pulled her body away from his contact. "Not because of me, Giles."

"Don't be modest, Buffy." His lips curved indulgently and her lips tightened in annoyance. "It was your idea for the spell to activate all of the potentials. If you hadn't thought of that and led them down to the basement…"

"We still would have died Giles." Her tone was low, agonized. It was a final bit of truth that she had hid from the others, from herself.

Giles shook his head in protest.

"Yes, Giles. We would have died. We only survived, the world only survived because…" she struggled to breathe, the sounds of her harsh gasps filled the bus and Buffy realized that everyone on the bus was silent.

"It's true, G." Faith was out of her seat, moving towards them. Out of the corner of her eye Buffy noticed a few heads nodding in agreement.

"Don't get me wrong. The spell helped. It was a stroke of genius when Buffy had the idea and that we happened to have someone with us who possessed the power to complete the spell – we were lucky." Faith held a hand up toward Giles when it looked like Giles was going to interrupt. "But you weren't down there Giles. You didn't see what we were up against. There was hundreds of thousands of those Uber-Vamps, all with a desire to bring us down. There were just a handful of us. Yes, we were all powerful and yes we would have fought as long and as hard as we could. But we would have died in the end. The vamps would have come up and the First would have won."

Each Slayer nodded in agreement.

"It was Spike," Vi said quietly.

"Spike." This from Cho-Ann, who continued to speak in Chinese, the cadence of her voice raising
and falling in passion and tears slipped from the Asian Slayer's face. Her words were incomprehensible to them, but the emotion behind them was all too readable. Vi hugged Cho-Ann at the end.

"Well said, my sister," Kennedy said. Surprised, Buffy looked over at the Slayer who had never been an advocate for Spike and they shared a sad smile.

The others might not understand, but Buffy knew each Slayer present knew the truth. The only reason that life as they knew it continued was because of the brave actions of their champion.

"We're here." Robin interjected as the bus pulled into the parking lot.

The superstore seemed overly bright to Buffy. She had never been as aware of her reflection as she had in the last few hours. Who knew Wal-Mart had so many reflective surfaces? Each time she saw her face staring back, she was bitterly disappointed.

A few hours, bags of clothes and toiletries later, Buffy was back in her room. Everyone would be getting up early the next morning and heading the airport. They were flying to New York. A few suggestions had been tossed around and Angel had offered them all accommodations at his hotel, but Kennedy's suggestion of going to her family's estate in New York had blown Angel's out of the water.

Inwardly, she was grateful.

She didn't want to see Angel since the last time she had seen him, she had given the impression that they could have a future together. It was only later as she stood on the edge of Hell that she realized that she had been wrong. By then, it was too late. Her selfish words and actions (Spike had seen them kiss!) had deeply hurt Spike, a man who already thought himself unworthy of love and reinforced his belief that she didn't mean it when she had said "I love you."

She didn't blame him. Three little words couldn't take back years of disdain and insolence.

She wished to see him in the mirror just once more, just so she could tell him "All along, it was me. I wasn't worthy enough for you."

The sky had darkened and the sounds of traffic outside her motel room door had lightened. Buffy was back in her room. The sounds of Slayers and people in the rooms around her had stopped. Dawn was asleep and the unladylike snores that her sister emitted produced the ghost of a smile on Buffy's lips.

She sat up and looked across the length of the bed to the large mirror on the wall. She wasn't sure which option was worse- going crazy or just wishing she was, just so she could hallucinate him again. There was no other explanation. It wasn't like she could prove- Her heart leapt into her throat as she realized that there was one sure fire way to prove that she was going bat shit crazy and cursed herself for hesitating because of the implications. She shivered under her blankets as a fleeting memory of the mental ward she had "visited" briefly when she was first called.

Soundlessly, she slid from her bed and walked lightly toward the door, careful to not disturb her sleeping sister. Unable to help the slight squeak of the door, she slipped outside and winced when the door closed with a quiet snick (the sound seemed as loud as a gunshot). Purposefully, she made her way down the covered walkway and rounded the corner.
The office door was unlocked, the lights still on at the front desk. She could see the desk attendant looking at his watch before he stood, opened a drawer and removed some items. He walked by the counter, paused and set the small object on the counter that she recognized as a pack of cigarettes. He patted his torso absently and walked back into the office area to grab, what she assumed were matches. He returned shortly, whistling a jaunty tune, grabbed his cigarettes and walked towards the back.

As soon as she couldn’t see him anymore, she slid through the door. Casting a quick glance to make sure she was alone, she went behind the counter and ducked her head to look at the shelves underneath. The ledger was easy to spot. She lifted the book and flipped backwards through its pages, searching for invoices that were dated May 2002.

It only took a minute before she found the document.

William Pratt. Rm 118 (the same room number as hers), notes about a shattered bathroom mirror and the date – May 18, 2002.

Here it was. Proof of a name that she had never seen or heard before (Well, she had known he was William, but no one had ever mentioned a last name to her). Gently, she traced the signature on the paper. How was any of this even possible?

A door slammed somewhere in the back recesses of the office. Buffy ripped the paper from the book, closed it and slid the book back on the shelf, while stuffing the paper in her pocket. She had reached the outer door when the night desk attendant came out of the back. The odor of cigarettes surrounded him like cologne. She marveled at the contradiction – when Spike smelled of cigarettes it seemed sexy and comforting…on this stranger the smell seemed stale and stifling.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Tea?" she smiled weakly as she turned.

"Excuse me?" the front desk attendant looked confused.

"I was hoping you had some tea bags. There is a small coffee maker and coffee in my room, but I don't drink that. Do you have any tea?"

To her surprise, he nodded and gestured to a side table. Two large metal carafes rested on top…one labeled COFFEE and the other HOT WATER. Beside the water was a small basket that held small packets of tea.

"Oh…color me embarrassed. I don't know how I missed that." Quickly, she walked over and poured a cup of hot water and grabbed a packet of Orange Pekoe. She had returned to the door when the man called out to her.

"Miss…miss…you dropped this." He handed her a small piece of paper, the receipt that she had just stolen and stuffed into her jeans must have fallen out. Luckily, he didn't look too closely. She stuffed the paper into her pocket and walked out the door.

It was two weeks before Buffy saw his reflection again.
"Please? Pleeease?" Dawn looked down (God, would her sister ever stop growing?) at Buffy, her eyes wide and pleading.

"What is wrong with taking the limo?" Buffy asked, shocked that she even took having a limousine at her constant beck and call for granted.

Dawn pushed out her lower lip. "It's New York. We are tourists. Everyone is supposed to do it at least once!"

Buffy, who could stand toe to toe with the most fearsome of creatures without blinking, relented against the power of Dawn's secret weapon – her pout.

Dawn saw the resigned look on her sister's face and vibrated with glee. "Thank you! Thank you!" she said fervently before Buffy could speak a word.

"Yeah. Yeah. I am the best sister in the world. Let me go tell Joe." Buffy walked a few feet toward the limousine that waited for them, the chauffer standing beside the rear door. She said a few words to the man. He nodded and walked towards the driver's side.

"Two hours, Dawnie. We only have two hours, and then we'll have to be back here."

Dawn clapped her hands in response, the grin on her face made her seem every bit the young teenager that she was, rather than the seasoned Scooby she had become. The glee was contagious and Buffy giggled at the sight her sister made as she bounced down the stairway toward the subway.

They purchased tickets, pushed through the turnstile and waited with the other bystanders for the next subway train. Within a few minutes, they were standing in a subway car and moving away from New York City towards Brooklyn.

Dawn smiled and nodded at the people around them and within minutes had struck up a conversation with another teen. Buffy looked out of the window at the famous skyline, absently listening to Dawn chatter away. She slid into a vacant seat and her eyes closed as the car caused her body to sway side to side.

She must have dozed for a moment because when she opened her eyes, the view out of the window changed, daylight was gone and she stared at her reflection in the window. They were in a tunnel. The person next to her shifted and Buffy looked around. They must have stopped briefly, the car had become crowded again. Buffy turned her head and smiled when Dawn waved excitedly to her.

"That's my sister Buffy. She's the best…"

A movement in the glass grabbed Buffy's attention. She looked at the reflective surface and blinked. She knew the car was crowded, but in the mirror like reflection of the window, the car was practically empty – except for one person who stared back at her. He wore a short black leather jacket sprinkled with silver studs over a black t-shirt and jeans with strategically torn holes in the knees. He leaned forward, his eye ringed in black liner widened slightly before his head turned as he looked around himself. Once again, he stared back at Buffy and she watched his mouth move silently forming words.

"What the fuck?"

Relief flooded through her and giddiness followed. Something in her expression alarmed him because he scowled back and looked warily around.

"William Pratt." She whispered the name slowly and his head whipped around as if she had shouted
the words. His mouth formed words, but she couldn't hear anything beyond the noise of the train on the tracks and the myriad of conversations that carried on around her.

"My champion. My love." She whispered the words again and his expression hardened. His mouth formed words and this time, it was as if he was sitting beside her, the sound of his voice close to her ear.

"Ain't no one's champion, luv. Far from it." His words were harsh and her heart squeezed in response.

"You are my champion." She whispered again.

"No one would ever believe that." He scoffed.

"I believe in you, Spike." Longing flashed across his face just as the subway train escaped the darkness of the tunnel and shot out into the daylight once more. The reflection vanished, Spike with it and Buffy looked away from the view.

Chapter End Notes

Stay Tuned :)
Ricochet

Chapter Summary

In my Spuffy Verse, NYC subways run 24/7.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

New York, 1977

He blinked and she was gone.

Vanished. And, with the clarity of a drunken haze, he doubted if she was ever really there in the first place.

Perhaps he had become too comfortable and that was his mistake. Too content and too certain of his place in her life, and now, he was being punished by her absence. No matter how hard he tried, he could never love her just right. It was always with too much passion, too much intensity. Too much love.

Love. She had said the word with such scorn, such disdain – and some broken (wrong) part of him wondered why it was so awful to love someone with every fiber of their being.

The subway car took a sharp turn on the track and Spike's thoughts were jolted into the present as his body swayed loosely with the turns. The car was empty, save his inebriated self. He pulled the flask of whiskey from the inside pocket of his leather jacket, unscrewed the cap and took a sip. A few drops spilled onto his tongue from the empty container and he shouted an expletive.

Nothing was going right.

He hated New York. It was supposed to be their new kingdom…they were going to rule the night together - at least that was the plan until that fucker who called himself The Immortal waved his dick around and Dru left him with not so much as a "by your leave".

Again.

Too painful. Don't think about it.

This time, they'd had eight years of blissful depravity and sinful delights and he supposed he should have been grateful; it was the longest she had stayed faithful to him – he had actually started to believe that she had decided he was enough (why wasn't he ever enough?). The last time she had left was while they were at Woodstock where he experienced the Vampire version of a psychedelic acid trip and Dru left him with not so much as a "by your leave".

After Woodstock, in an uncommon display of independence, he headed to Africa on a cargo ship following yet another false Gem of Amara treasure trail. He knew it was a waste of time, but it was a
good way to waste time until she came back. She always came back...eventually... and eight months later, she found him. By then, he had disproved yet another Amara legend and was returning from a disappointing Slayer encounter on the outskirts of Addis Ababa (the Slayer hadn't been called for more than two days, and her hand shook so much from terror at meeting him - she dropped her stake twice- before he told her to stop).

Using a few words of Amharic he had picked up, he told her if she lived another two years, they would try again.

He had been at loose ends and, desperate enough for any distraction, he had seriously been tempted to follow up on an interesting rumor regarding a series of trials a bloke could pass in exchange for a reward (any reward) near a village at the base of Kilimanjaro in Tanzania when Dru showed up. Like all of the times before, he let himself be folded into her cold, hard embrace and stifled every confession his un-dead heart wanted to whisper. I'll do anything. Never leave me again. Please stay. Why am I not good enough?

Eight years after Woodstock and his trip to Africa, she had left him alone again.

He hated being alone and the feelings of isolation and shame it brought.

I am not that person anymore. I am the thing that makes the night tremble in fear. He tipped his flask for more alcohol and scrunched up his mouth in annoyance when he remembered it was empty.

She'll be back.

The words didn't bring the same reassurance that he used to feel and he decided he needed a diversion. Perhaps it was time to follow up on that old rumor, pass those trials and ask for the Gem of Amara.

Perhaps.

The next night, he wandered into a smoky, dimly-lit demon bar on 42nd street shortly after sunset looking for a game and hoping for a fight. Spilling blood always raised his spirits. He sauntered into the back room and flung enough cash onto the table to raise more than a few eyebrows, but the collection of demons and hybrids seated around the scarred poker table barely gave the money (and Spike) a glance.

Spike didn't care to be ignored.

"Room for one more?" He pulled out a pack of Pall Malls and shook a cigarette into his hand.

"Your money's no good here, Vampire." A small, squat Fhrewh'ard demon tossed two cards on the table and motioned a stumpy, fingernail-less digit to the dealer.

"Is that a fact?" Spike spoke softly and another demon (Spike couldn't recall the kind of demon he was, but he would have made a Chaos demon look attractive) nodded in agreement.

Irritated, Spike stepped forward and wrenched the head off of the unfortunate demon and the movement caused the demon's body to fall off of its chair. All of the demons at the table paused and looked at Spike as he filled the vacancy.

"Oh look, a space just opened up." He inhaled on his cigarette and his lips twitched at their annoyed
expressions.

"Your money is no good here Vampire." The Fhrewh'ard repeated.

"Oi! I'll have you know…"

"Calm down Vampire." The Chipr demon on Spike's left gave an exasperated huff and tilted his wart-covered head at the Fhrewh'ard. "Marv here just meant that we do not play with money. New York has a Slayer, which means our main food source is not so easily available and we've to resort to more...creative methods. Those furry little delicacies-" another warty-head tilt toward a large carton in the corner "will be a delightful treat to the winner."

Spike rose and walked over to the box and stared inside where various hues of blues, greens and browns blinked sleepily at him.

"Kittens? All I need are some kittens?"

The others laughed. "This ain't some two-bit game we run here Blood Drinker, this is a high stakes game...purebloods and rare breeds only." The Chipr licked his warty lips.

Spike noticed the papers on the table, which he realized were being used as a substitute for money.

"I take it this is proof that the little fuzzballs are pure." The others nodded and Spike flashed a smile showing his pearly white (and blunt) teeth. He could have let his demon face out but preferred to use his human face instead. "Well, we all know the rule is 'You keep what you kill', so I'll be playing with my inheritance." He gestured to the rather tall stack of papers in front of the dead demon's seat. Fortunately, he had killed the demon that was winning. "Looks like I am in the game now."

Spike sat down again.

"New York has a Slayer, eh?" He scooped up the cards that had fallen from the deceased demon's fingers when Spike had ripped off its head. It was not unusual for any local demon population to react this way when a Slayer was present as they had an annoying tendency to bring down the death population in their general area. The smart ones left, others kept their noses clean and heads low to avoid unwanted attention and the dumb ones died.

Spike was never one to follow a crowd.

He glanced at his hand, immediately discarded three cards and motioned for more cards. The others grumbled under their breath, but the dealer just blinked his rheumy eyes and sent three cards flying his way.

"So. Tell me about this Slayer..." Spike licked his lips in anticipation as he picked up his new cards. The cards were shit, but news of The Slayer was just the distraction he was looking for until Dru came back to him. If he was lucky, this one would be worth the effort it took to track her down

He hoped she was good. He was looking for a challenge.

Wistfully, he remembered the Chinese Slayer as he rearranged the cards in his hand. Oh what a night! She had been the epitome of single-mindedness - quick, agile and focused with each attack. Fighting her had been like dancing the tango on the edge of a thin tightrope over a bed of wooden nails - erotic, terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

He had been so certain that she would have been the death of him and when he won that battle he felt invincible for the first time.
Her Slayer blood had kept him hard for days - Dru didn't even look at Angelus (or any other demon) for most of that time – and it had been a turning point for Spike. Everything seemed to click after that. Angelus had backed off and vanished shortly after (Spike never thought too hard on his grandsire's whereabouts, he was just grateful that Angelus hadn't taken Dru with him). Dru would still take off, but never for longer than a few weeks. No matter where Spike ended up, she would just wander in dreamily, as if she had been enjoying an evening stroll and had forgotten the time. She had never, until Woodstock, stayed away for longer than a few weeks.

Fucking Immortal! He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to banish the sudden recollection of why Dru might have "lost track of time" this time. Fucking pretentious prick! Recklessly, he tossed a few pedigree papers into the pot. "I'll raise you a Himalayan and a Kurilian Bobtail."

"Kurilian Bobtail?" With a disgusted sigh two out of the six demons folded and Spike's lips curved at their muttered "Too rich for my blood" grumblings.

The Chipr, answered with a raise of his own. "Sokoke."

With a grimace, Marv threw down his cards.

Wordlessly, Spike flipped through his stack of papers before selecting six Siamese. He tossed them in to the pot. "So, tell me about this Slayer." He repeated.

He lost the first round and got a description of the Slayer. During the third round, Spike asked if any of the demons present had stood face to face with the Slayer and snickered at the way their faces blanched.

This time it was Marv and Spike who remained in the game. Conversation continued as they raised and countered each other.

"Who would want to go up against a Slayer? Not many do and live to tell the tale, Vampire." More papers tossed into the "kitty". Spike gave his cards a considering look and unconsciously rubbed the scar on his eyebrow.

"Some do." He smiled at the laughter that erupted in the room and lazily rubbed his index finger over the scar. Laughter faded and, in the ensuing silence, Spike's grin widened.

"Plenty around that have killed one slayer. Slayers are like the tails of the Shirati – cut one off and another grows back in its place." Marv grunted and tossed a short stack of papers into the pot. "Now, killing two Slayers, that would be an accomplishment worth bragging about."

The Chipr gave Spike a hard look.

"I've never met a vampire with a scar before. What kind of weapon leaves a scar?" The other's shifted, uncomfortable when Spike placed his cards on the table and pulled another cigarette from his pack. He picked up his lighter and brushed his thumb along the small wheeled flint to ignite a spark. He puffed a few times on his cigarette, letting the flame from the lighter stay on for longer than he needed. A Tarrykez demon, possibly more flammable than Vampires, looked on in fascinated revulsion.

"Blessed sword. Got it in China some years back."

Recognition flickered in the violet eyes of the Chipr. "Lived in China myself for a while. Heard a rumor about some Vampire that went up against the Slayer during the Boxer Rebellion. Slayer died but the Vampire still walked away with a little token of the battle."
All eyes were on Spike.

"Well, I hate to brag..." Spike began, then he chuckled. "Who the hell am I kidding? I love to brag!"

By the end of the night, Spike won three hairless Sphinx cats (among others) and bets were placed on whether he would be skillful enough to bag his second Slayer. Spike scooped up his unused cash, his box of felines and took his leave. As he walked out the door, he heard Marv's gravelly voice.

"Remember to bring proof, vampire or the wager is void."

Proof? He could do that.

~spuffy~

He found her the next night.

He followed her through some of the backstreets of The Bronx, discretely at first, gradually closer as he tested her range until her Slayer abilities alerted her to his presence (one hundred feet and some change). He knew the exact moment she became aware – a slight misstep and straightening of her spine followed by a surreptitious glance. Silently, he retreated until she took the bait and hunted him down. He appreciated her stealth and single-mindedness as she stalked him. When he reached the abandoned factories along the waterfront, he stopped until she approached him.

She fought like she had never known anything else, which told him that she knew hardship and had been fighting for far longer than she had been a Slayer. Where the first Slayer had been deadly and precise, this Slayer was resourceful with a brutal right hook. He fought back with less intensity - this wasn't the end battle, it was just more of a skirmish to see what kind of fighter she was (mental note: she favored a right jab with a double-left jab combination).

Nikki wouldn't be the death of him - he didn't feel the same *frisson* of danger that the first Slayer had given to him - but he wasn't ready for the fight to be over yet.

In their second encounter, their skirmish in the rain brought some kind of excitement back into his life and he had every intention of ending it that night. However, her hits were just a little too wild, a little too desperate - she was good, but there was something about her that told him she wasn't at her best. He left the fight before he killed her, not out of compassion or anything as laughable as that, rather the fight had been far from satisfying and her distraction only irritated him. Besides, knowing there was still another skirmish ahead pushed away the melancholy that surrounded him with Dru away. The longer he could postpone killing the Slayer, the less he felt like *William* – the pathetic excuse for a man he had been, once upon a time.

The rain poured down in great sheets, soaking through his leather jacket and the thin material of his t-shirt beneath. In a short time, he was below ground. The tunnels were full of vagrants seeking shelter from the storm and he selected a young waif with short russet-colored hair. He suckled her neck, observed the scattered track marks on her thin arms which explained why her blood had the cloying sweetness of syrup, good for a few licks and taste but left an unpleasant after-taste after he drank too much, a result of her drug use.

He still drained her dry of course.

He had lost track of time below ground and guessed the time to be close to midnight when he happened upon the train tracks of an old subway line that lay on the ground. He followed them until they joined with another line. Eventually, he made his way toward a subway station and leapt gracefully onto the deserted platform.
Less than a minute later, he walked into the subway car and sat on the seat. Like the platform, the car was deserted. He pretended that he didn't care, that he wouldn't welcome a little human interaction, even if it was to elicit fear. Fear on a human was like an a drug to vampires that intoxicated while simultaneously brought on a hyperawareness that made the hunt all the more thrilling and, when the prey was drained, left the vamp craving more.

The subway climbed up from below like a giant, segmented worm until it was streaking through the city over the night time traffic.

If Dru were here, he thought wistfully, perhaps he wouldn't feel this shadow of dissatisfaction. He was torn by his feelings – knowing that evil, soulless creatures such as he shouldn't do anything as pathetic as pine, but unable to help the (loneliness) bitterness from spilling over, something that would have amused Dru. They were above such human feelings she would remind him, subtly implying that he was somehow unusual (wrong) compared to the rest of their kind.

Like his "queer obsession" (Dru's words) for Slayers. Angelus, Darla and even his beloved midnight goddess couldn't fathom why he sought out Slayers.

Angelus wondered why Spike even bothered. "Too much risk and not enough reward" he would scoff. Angelus preferred to use his preternatural abilities in the deliberate annihilation of which ever poor bird had become his latest fixation.

Darla preferred to amuse herself similarly, proof that she and Angelus were well matched. She was perfectly content to leave Angelus to his "entertainments" while she sought to pass her time by engaging in the endless pursuit of pleasure; the more depraved the pursuit, the more satisfied she seemed.

It bothered him that they only appeared to put up the slightest pretense of tolerating Dru; they treated her like she was some small pet to be stroked and adored when she was amusing, and kicked to the side when she became bothersome. Dru always ran back to them when they called though; even when Spike tried his best to reason with her Dru would never listen. He understood that Dru would return to them whether he was with her or not, so he followed her the way she followed them in some awful macabre parody.

And yeah—he could see the parallel between Dru's behavior and his own. And like Dru, he didn't care. He would push away the hurt and the pain the second she crooked her elegant, deadly fingers toward him, eager for whatever scrap of affection she choose to bestow. He couldn't blame her. Angelus had her so well trained to be grateful when he showed attention that she thought that was the model of how they were supposed to behave.

Perhaps she was right.

Once again, Spike was the oddity, the source of scorn and ridicule… too ridiculous to even warrant pity. He sought out the Slayers, hoping that the day he got staked would be the day that he finally earned some respect and was proof that he had been worthy.

Absently, he watched the brightly lit New York skyline and wondered what it was about him that never seemed enough to keep others around. The subway made a few stops, but Spike remained alone. The train descended back into the ground and the lights in the car flashed when they entered the tunnel.

He was staring straight ahead when he saw her reflection. She sat straight up with her head tilted slightly forward, eyes closed. He could see the outline of the NYC skyline behind her head. Certain he was seeing things; he blinked and scanned the area around him.
With the exception of himself, the car was empty.

He looked back at the window and saw the woman's body sway slightly from side to side. The lights in his subway car flashed, as if some had flipped a switch to turn them off. Two seconds later, the lights flashed back on and the woman in the reflection had opened her eyes and was staring straight at him.

As they locked eyes, he was instantly flooded with knowledge about her. He knew this woman. He knew she appeared fragile and helpless but was far from it, and that in her small hands the most innocuous objects could become a deadly weapon. He also knew intimate things: the softness of her lips, the touch of her hands on his skin, how she tasted, smelled and felt pressed against his body. He didn't know her name, but he knew the throaty noises she made when she moaned his name.

An image of her straddling him while he lay on a bed, each arm cuffed to a bedpost flashed in his mind and then disappeared. He leaned forward unconsciously, as if she were right before him. The movement stirred the air around him and for a moment he could smell her. What kind of trick was this? Warily, he looked around and confirmed that the subway car was still empty.

"What the fuck!" he said. Ghosts? Spirits? He had heard of such things of course, but had never met one.

At his words, an expression of such happiness formed on her face and something in his gut responded.

"No use haunting me love…" he started but lost his train of thought as her eyes swept up and down his seated frame and then back to his face. If my heart could beat, it would break my chest he thought, then scowled. That part of him died years ago... and she can make me feel like it isn't so...

If she was tangible and corporeal he would have snapped her neck for making him feel such things... in his whole un-life he had never sunk to such derisible depths. He looked around again, mainly to break contact with her eyes. The silly chit should be petrified of him, not looking at him with veneration.

"William Pratt." The whisper tickled as if she were breathing the words right into his ear.

"What game is this?" he whispered and despised how shaky (weak—like William) his voice sounded.

"My champion, my love." Some part of him wanted to weep at her words and brutally (he was not that man any more), he buried it. Consciously, he reminded himself who he was now.

"Ain't no one's Champion, luv. Far from it." And proud of it he finished silently.

"You're my champion."

'William the Bloody' a Champion? He snorted in disbelief. This crazy spirit was off her rocker!

"No one would ever believe that." it was the truth. Never - no even as William- had someone likened him to a hero. He met her eyes in the mirrored window and felt a jolt go through him. The lights flashed and she was gone.

That day, after the dawn, his dreams were haunted by a pair of green eyes, the warm clasp of a small
hand in his as he stood in an inferno and light exploded all around him while her sweet voice said three little words that broke his un-dead heart. *I love you.*

When he woke, there were tears on his face and, in furious confirmation that William was long gone, he destroyed his hotel room and ripped the throats of the three employees sent to see about the disturbance before he leapt gracefully off the balcony into the alley below.

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**Present day (Buffy)**

After the sisters exited the subway station, they climbed the stairs until they were once again strolling on the sidewalk toward the limousine. Dawn crawled across the backseat first and by the time Buffy settled into the seat, her sister had already pulled her legs up on the seat and rested her head against it. She gave Buffy an exhausted and satisfied smile.

"I had a great time Buffy. Thank you for suggesting a 'Summers Sisters' day out." She reached out a hand and squeezed Buffy's. "I love Willow and everyone, but sometimes it is nice for it to be the two of us."

Resolved to focus only on her sister, Buffy pushed away her latest "hallucination" and returned her sister's squeeze with her own. At the touch, Dawn's throat closed up as she continued speaking.

"I don't deserve it. Not after…we did that…we…God Buffy, I would give anything to take that back. It was wrong on so many levels and I am so ashamed that I was part of something that hurt you so deeply."

It was not the first time someone had approached Buffy about the way she had been evicted prior to the last battle with the First. When Buffy had returned the morning after she had been evicted from her home by her friends, there had been tentative smiles and half-hearted attempts to address the incident by Willow, Dawn, Xander and Giles. At the time, she had been able to push her emotions to the side and put all of her focus into her strategy with the First. She had brushed them all aside with a simple "It's okay…I understand."

She had assumed that they understood that it was not the time for apologies, not when they had the First on their heels and very little time to put her plan into effect.

She had said the same to Faith, once the Slayer had regained consciousness. As soon as they were alone, Faith looked her in the eye and told her they had been wrong to tell Buffy to leave her house. As she had with the others, Buffy had tried to brush off the apology stating that it wasn't a good time. Faith had simply laughed told her to shove it, she was going to apologize anyway.

Once the battle was over, Buffy assumed that Xander, Willow and Giles would privately take her aside and offer a sincere apology as well. She was saddened when she realized that they had thought there was no need and berated herself for being so petty.

She wasn't angry at them, but she no longer felt she could trust them as blindly as she had in the past.

"Thank you, Dawnie."

It was amazing how her sister's apology lifted a weight from her shoulders. Buffy leaned across the backseat and pulled her sister into a hug. To her surprise, at her touch Dawn's body began to shake and she heard soft shuddering sobs from her sister. Buffy tried to pull back, but Dawn just pulled her closer.
"Dawnie?" she asked. At a loss, Buffy used her palms to rub circles onto her sister's back.

"I don't want to lose you Buffy. You have no idea how sick I have been, worried that you wouldn't want me around because we...because I-I...I wouldn't blame you." She could feel the wetness from Dawn's tears on her neck, and to her surprise, tears filled up her eyes as well.

Buffy took a steadying breath. "It's oka-"

"No! It wasn't." Dawn interjected, shaking her head against Buffy's neck. "It was hateful and spiteful and I was...I am so ashamed, Buffy."

With surprising strength, Dawn held her in a hug and unsure of what else to do, Buffy simply stroked her sister's hair until eventually she felt the younger girl begin to relax. How long they remained in each other's embrace she did not know, but eventually the brightness of the city lights dimmed as the car moved them toward the countryside.

Later, they sat side by side, Dawn's head on her shoulder, hands linked.

"I want you to know that I never blamed you." Dawn made noises to protest and Buffy rested her hand on her sister's cheek, gently turning her sister's face. "I made a lot of mistakes, Dawn. My biggest regret was pushing you away. After I ..." she searched for the right words, "came back, all I could see was my own pain and I had no right to treat you the way I did. Being fifteen years old is hard enough without adding in the loss of a mother, an emotionally distant sister and an apocalypse."

"But I hurt you."

Buffy was quiet. "Honestly, yes. However, I realize that I am not entirely blameless here either."

Both sisters were quiet as the limo turned into the long driveway of Kennedy's estate.

"Buffy, I know that any memories that we had that are older than three years are just fabrications but I hope...one day...that we could have the kind of closeness that could have been...if the memories were real. If you ever need to talk, or just want someone to listen, you can come to me. But if you...feel like you can't talk to me or...the others, then you can have this." There was a crinkling of plastic and a book was placed in Buffy's lap.

"It's a journal. For you."

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Why New York? Why the subway? Why was she seeing images of Spike? The answers escaped her.

The first time he had looked exactly as she remembered, but on the subway he looked different – harder and more like the Spike she had met when he first arrived in Sunnydale. Why two different versions of Spike? Her only tangible clue to her sanity was in her fingers as she once again opened and smoothed out the faded receipt.

William Pratt. The signature was written in a surprising elegant script, so at odds with the rebel image he had carefully cultivated.

Could that really be Spike? Had she really looked into a mirror in California and was somehow able to get a glimpse of the past? Was such a thing even possible? And why did she get another glimpse of Spike on a NYC Subway of all places? Was there a connection? She felt as if she was missing an
important piece of the puzzle – a forgotten memory that disappeared when she closed her eyes. It was (in a word) maddening.

William Pratt.

Casually, she had mentioned the name to Giles, asking if the name seemed familiar, but didn't mention that it was a possible alias of Spike.

"William Pratt? Hmmmmm….William Pratt. I don't recollect meeting anyone with that name…maybe he went by some variation? Billy perhaps? Hmmmmm….I'm sorry Buffy." He shook his head. "The name doesn't ring any bells."

She wanted to say more, tell him about seeing images of Spike, but some part of her held back, the same way she held back from Willow and Xander. She loved them, loved Dawn, but she just didn't trust...as easily as she used to. This of course was laughable; she was hardly an open book before.

Perhaps that was why she went to Andrew.

After a cursory walk through of the mansion's rooms on the ground level she decided to try his room. She tapped on the door and took a step back when a small cloaked figure whipped the door open.

"Doesn't anyone read the sign?" A pale forefinger poked through the long sleeved arm of the cloak toward a note tacked on the outside of the door.

DO NOT DISTURB WHILE GAME IS IN SESSION.

Buffy read the sign and rose up on her tip toes to look over his shoulder.

"Oh, good. You are alone. I guess the game hasn't started yet."

"Au contraire, Slayer of the Vampyre. The game has been in progress for over five hours." Andrew pursed his lips and then stepped back as he motioned for Buffy to come into his room.

"What's with the weird-speak? I thought we settled this 'Slayer of the Vampyre' crap." She asked as he closed his door and sat down in a chair in front of the computer.

"I'm in character." He whispered. Holding up one finger, he picked up his headset.

"Werdna The Lightstriker has returned." He said in a low voice into the microphone. There was a pause, then "Oh. Okay guys, it was fun to be back! And, Wendell the Wise? You'll let me know about those quests? Thanks. Talk to you all next week."

Buffy flopped on his bed and gave it an experimental bounce before flopping backwards.

"Comfy." She stated. Then she rolled over on her side and placed her elbow on the bed and propped her head with her hand.

"So. Werdna?" she raised an eyebrow and then grinned. "Let me guess, Andrew spelled backwards?"

He pointed at her and touched his nose. "Ah Slayer, you know me well." His eyes dimmed when her grin faded.
"I forgot...you don't like being called that, it always drove you nuts when Spike ...called you--" he stopped when Buffy rolled on her back and squeezed her eyes shut. She heard the sliding of the chair wheels on the hardwood floor and then felt the mattress dip when he sat on the edge of his bed. *You will not cry* she told herself.

She expected the awkward pat on her shoulder, but she was surprised at the comfort she immediately felt at the small gesture and even more shocked when she opened her eyes and saw the tears pooling in Andrew's.

"I miss him." Andrew whispered and catching Buffy's surprised look, he continued. "Don't look so shocked. Other than Dawn, he was nicer to me than the rest of you, he even let me film him once; did you know that?" Buffy shook her head. "Besides, we like totally bonded when we went on that quest."

Buffy brushed away a few tears and sniffed. "I can't talk to anyone about him. The others – they don't understand...and—I could talk to Dawn, but she was so angry with him that I just...Dawn and I are in such a good place right now *finally* but if she said anything... bad... about him, I just – I just --" Buffy looked away, uncomfortable with anyone seeing her so vulnerable, so raw.

Andrew must have sense how close she was to bolting. He tipped his head and looked out of the panes of the French doors that led to his balcony. "I think Spike scared them." He whispered and Buffy snorted. "It wasn't because he was one of the most dangerous vampires they had ever met..." he scrunched his nose and amended his statement "I meant it wasn't *just* because he was one of the most dangerous vampires they had ever met. It was because he *saw* them so clearly, saw what motivated them, and called them on their bullshit." He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I am not explaining myself very well."

Buffy nodded, recalling all of the times she wanted to run from Spike because he refused to let her lie to herself. He had a knack for seeing the truth and pointing it out to others.

"I remember when we got back from our quest," he stopped and smiled slightly "our mission; and he found out that you weren't at the house. Everyone was waiting for him to give them the news on our discoveries and he just looked around the house and told them 'I'll wait for Buffy first'. I had left to go to the bathroom but when I was on my way back into the kitchen, I heard him yelling at all of them."

Andrew paused and his gaze hardened slightly and Buffy avoided his eyes, unsure why she felt self-conscious about their betrayal.

"Did you know they said that you decided to leave?"

~spuffy~

Buffy stood on the deserted platform and slowly chewed the bite of the Hershey chocolate bar she had just opened as the air around her stirred. The subway car rushed toward the platform and, with a squeal of metal on metal, slowed to a stop in front of her. Thankfully, the car in front of her was empty. It was well past her bedtime, but she found the only way to calm her restlessness was to ride the subways. Living in a constant state of chaos over the past year before their battle with The First had her appreciate the moments when she was alone. Too often, she escaped from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the mansion and found herself drawn to the subways. Something about the *possibility* that Spike had ridden these same rails comforted her.

It had been three weeks since she had "seen" him in the reflection of the window, and three weeks since she had "heard" his voice; each night after she haunted the subways hoping for another
She couldn't decide if she had imagined it or if it was real. The only tangible proof lay in the fading yellowed paper that now was crisscrossed with creases and the feel of the thin paper between her fingers brought re-assurance that the men in white jackets didn't need to be called... yet.

Warily, she looked inside the car and then stepped confidently inside and sunk down with a relieved sigh into the first seat she saw. Just before the subway doors closed three figures dashed into her car and chuckled when the doors lid closed behind them.

Buffy shifted and looked around the car. Mistaking her cursory glance for fear, the tallest of the trio chuckled and approached Buffy.

"I love it when we just happen upon a little midnight snack!" he said as the bones on his face shifted and his fangs lengthened.

Buffy raised her eyebrows and took another bite from the candy. "Sorry, boys. I never share chocolate with guys I just met. I am just not that kind of girl."

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NYC 1977

He sat sideways in the empty subway car, legs stretched out before him on the seat and one elbow resting on the back of the seat and cigarette dangling dangerously from his fingertips when the car jerked to a stop and the doors opened. Scents, both foul and mouthwatering, drifted in through the open doors and one side of his mouth curled up in anticipation.

She slipped through the doors moments before they closed.

For one moment, she dropped her head and her chin touched chest as her hands grasped the pole beside her. Though her weight was evenly balanced on her feet, her posture was slightly relaxed and he knew that she had not noticed him yet. Casually, he raised the cigarette that he had pinched between his thumb and forefinger and inhaled.

Ah. She knows now. Her spine stiffened, her head came up and her fingers flexed on the pole.

Spike drew long and deep on his cigarette until the ember at the tip was a bright glowing red. Casually, he pulled his arm back and stubbed it out on the back of the seat. He exhaled slowly and quietly, eyes on the back of the woman's head.

He was about to rise from his seat when the lights flashed and immediately, his eyes were drawn to the window. The train pulled forward and he was aware that Nikki was turning toward him, but he didn't look at the tall Slayer. His eyes were riveted to the scene playing like a movie in the reflective surface of the window.

Three vampires, all in full game face, clustered around the woman (spirit? ghost?) he had seen a week before. She had two vampires, each bracing an arm and a shoulder while the third was talking. Suddenly, her legs flew up and in a heartbeat, her legs gripped the vamps neck. The vampire struggled and his two companions watched in morbid fascination.

He stopped paying attention to Nikki, only vaguely aware that she was pulling something from the deep pocket of her duster. The woman in the mirror stilled when she stared forward and once again he locked eyes with her.

"Spike." his name spoke no louder than a sigh, no more than a whisper on the wind. Then her eyes
grew wide. Entranced, he didn't notice the stake that came flying toward him.

One of the vamps took advantage of her momentary pause in her struggle and pulled a savage, serrated blade from somewhere behind.

Their words spilled from their lips at the same time.

"On your left!" he shouted.

"Stake!" she cried in alarm.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone pick up on my CoR reference?

Stay Tuned :)
ECHO

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

New York City (Buffy, Present Day/Spike, 1977)

Their words spilled from their lips at the same time.

"On your left!" he shouted.

"Stake!" she cried in alarm.

In the reflective window, Spike ducked in his seat and disappeared from her line of sight as she flexed backwards and her motion unbalanced the two vampires that restrained her. Her feet kicked upward, caught the third vampire under the jaw and thrust him backwards into the closed door of the subway car before she swung her legs up and backwards. One of the vamps that restrained her lessened his grip and she pulled her arm free as she continued on her backward flip.

Before either vampire could regain their balance, she landed in a half-crouch behind the first vamp with her feet planted on the bench seat that she had sat upon just earlier, his wrist pulled behind his back in her tight grasp. She pulled her stake and threw her arm forward around his shoulder and stabbed his chest.

She held her breath through the burst of dust; jumped when vampire number two used his right hand to swing the serrated blade toward her midsection, brought her left leg up when she cartwheeled off of the seat and side-kicked his temple. From the impact-

- Nikki careened sideways and slid down the middle of the subway car. Once stopped, she raised her ass off of the floor and bucked, the leverage enabled her feet to land on the ground and she used her stomach muscles to pull the rest of her body up as well. Her show of athletics was all for naught; Spike's attention was once again focused on the window, at the blonde who was now one on one with the tallest of the three vampires that had her restrained only moments before.

He realized his focus should be on Nikki, but for the moment she had no weapon; her stake had bounced off the chair, clattered to the floor and slid under the bench seat when he had rolled away from the attack earlier. Spike had no such worries- vampires were never without their weapon, a useful advantage over Slayers.

In the window, the tall vampire jabbed Goldilocks twice, which she smoothly evaded when she merely dropped her head before she shifted her weight from the right and then quickly to the left with a grace that would put Sugar Ray Robinson to shame. Two more jabs and one powerful uppercut propelled the vamp toward the window.

The blonde –

-looked into the reflective surface of the window and grinned at Spike. For a split second, it felt as if he was really here with her. Even as she had fought the vamps she felt a prickle of awareness that told her he watched her. She couldn't stop the rush of exhilaration, the same feeling that she used to ignore whenever he had been close. Too many years she had spent afraid her desires and ignored that primal part of her that would tell her "Want. Take. Have."
Stake in hand, she knelt and thrust the stake into the chest of the prone vampire. She stood, all too aware of the breath rushing in and out of her lungs, not from the exertions from her fight, but from something altogether different.

The tiny hairs at the nape of her neck stood on end, telling her that the remaining vampire was creeping closer.

Reluctantly, she turned away from the window and faced her foe, and, from the corner of her eye, she glimpsed movement from Spike as he faced his opponent. Once again, they seemed to mirror each other as did their opponents.

The vampire leaned forward, brought his left hand up toward his right shoulder before he extended his arm toward her face in a forceful backhand. Again, from the corner of her eye, Spike's attacker mimicked the movement.

Buffy dodged-

-the hit by turning away. Without hesitation, Nikki pivoted and snapped a side kick that connected to his pelvis. Spike grunted from the impact and he heard a slightly muffled and distorted echo as the blonde in the mirror grunted. He swiveled his head and caught her eye in the window. Once again she flashed a cheeky grin and he felt the beginnings of laughter rumble in his chest.

"Enjoying yourself, Pet?" He said the words before he thought them and Nikki faltered when she thought his words were directed toward her.

An eerie feeling - both familiar and foreign – threatened to overwhelm him and he frowned at the contradiction. Goldilocks turned away with a light and graceful pivot and he did the same, until they had both faced away from each other and stood back to back. Familiar. Nikki stood toward the one end of the subway car, eyed him with consternation and he chuckled unexpectedly. Foreign.

"So, are you going to just stand there all day catching flies in your mouth or are you actually planning to put up some kind of fight? To be honest, I –

-admit that I really need a good fight right now. I'm feeling nostalgic."

_God, this felt good!_ She laughed at the dumbfounded look on the vamp's face. The low rumble of Spike's voice echoed her and she let the muffled sound wrap around her like a favorite song. Without warning, the vamp attacked and the fight was on. She ducked, spun, jabbed and kicked and although she could not see Spike the muffled sounds of the fight echoed and she pictured him mirroring her moves. It was almost like they were both partners in-

-a dance. He thought. The rhythm might be unfamiliar (foreign), but his feet and body remembered the steps well enough. Funny, how earlier, he had been so ready to kill Nikki the Slayer and now all he wanted to do was drag the fight out, continue the duet with the girl in the window. Nikki jabbed and he dodged; she kicked and he…well, it might make him a ponce, but…he danced his way backwards. Laughter and chuckles escaped him and he smirked at the fury that sparked in the woman's chocolate brown eyes.

"What's the matter? Are you –

-not having fun? Awww… is this not fun for you? 'Cause, I have to say, this is the most fun I have
had in quite a while." Buffy smirked when the vampire's eyebrows pulled together to make one long Unibrow that reminded her of Noel Gallagher but more "eew" than "sexy". His arm flew toward her and she ducked; his leg snapped sideways and she jumped, pulled her legs up as his leg swung underneath.

"You think this is funny, Slayer?" Unibrow growled and Buffy heard a muffled feminine echo.

"You think this is funny, Vampire?"

"No, I think –\n\n-a dozen clowns climbing out of one of those tiny yellow cars is funny. You? I don't think you are funny at all." The chuckle that followed his words belied their sentiment and Nikki narrowed her eyes in grim determination.

"Oh, getting serious now, are we?" he continued, his grin widened when he hear an echo of his words from…elsewhere. Nikki advanced and he curled his tongue behind his teeth.

"Say your goodbyes, Vampire. It is time to die."

"You are a little late to the party, Slayer, I have already died-\n\n-twice. But don't let that stop you." She quipped, but it was half-hearted at best. Slayer. The familiar moniker spoken in Spike's low tones caused her stomach to twist and the corners of her mouth to turn down. Funny how she had hated the way he would utter her title and now she hated that it wasn't being directed toward her.

The vamp snapped a kick toward her midsection and the air huffed out, she stumbled backwards a few steps as she tried to pull oxygen into her lungs and he followed up with a brutal hit to her solar plexus. The hits continued…jab to her cheek, another kick to the side of her ribs, uppercut to the jaw. Her vision blurred…

"...and we just keep coming. Like a wave of roaches, and here you are doing a minute waltz, trying to stomp us all. But you can kill a hundred. A thousand. A thousand thousand and the armies of Hell besides. But all we need... ...Is for one of us, just one, sooner or later, to have the thing we all are hoping for..."

"And that would be what?"

"One. Good. Day."

The vamp reached for her head and thrust it-\n\n-backwards: he spun and she pushed his head face-first through the window. He would have yelled with the exhilaration except he only felt shock when he noticed that the parallel fight that had been going on disappeared when she pushed his head through the window. Sheer stupidity, but he realized that he had wanted to believe that it wasn't some trick, that the blonde in the window was real.

His head hadn't been pushed into an alternate dimension when it had broken the glass. His head was in the subway tunnel, air rushed past his face and he looked at the-
-bricked walls of the subway tunnel. Just a fucking tunnel, no alternate mirror-world, no Spike…

Frustrated, the rage bubbled up from inside spewing from her lungs like lava erupting from a volcano in one primal scream. *Why is this happening?* A hand tugged on the back of her collar and she was yanked backwards and shoved to side, the impact of her body on the floor absorbed on her hands and knees.

Unibrow chuckled behind her, the sound low and ominous. Each hair on her body seemed to stand up. He kicked her backside and she sprawled on the ground, his booted foot on her neck, face turned sideways. Under the seat beside her, she had an up close view of dust bunnies, discarded trash and a trio of spiders delicately picking their way over abandoned bubble gum wrappers and (oh!) her forgotten chocolate bar.

Once more, she remembered Spike's words and wondered, was the vamp above her about to have himself a real good day?

*Not this day.*

The pressure eased from her back and she rolled. Her hands gripped his foot and with a vicious twist he was unbalanced. She raised her feet to gain momentum-

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-but was pinned by the unexpected weight of Nikki. She seized his head, one hand on either temple and thumped his head on the floor. *Once. Twice.*

The lights in the subway car flickered and flashed then went dark. He was quick to take advantage of Nikki's momentary disorientation and reversed their positions. His hands went to her throat and slowly he squeezed. Her eyes bulged, her hands swatted ineffectually.

There was no joy here, no thrill in her death when he broke her neck. Blood trickled from her nose and he had a quick memory of the night he and Dru danced in the pool of the other Slayer's blood. It seemed anticlimactic when he stood and walked to the back of the car and pulled the emergency brake. As the car screeched and screamed to a stop, he maintained his balance.

He remembered the bet though. He knelt and began to pull the long leather jacket from her body. When he finished he stood. Unwillingly, his eyes went to the cracked window. All he saw was the distorted view of the subway car where he stood.

The blonde-

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-was gone. It had seemed so real, so vivid to her. *I can't be hallucinating.* There had to be something else at work. There just had to be...

~spuffy~

"Unfair!" The voice startled Buffy as she quietly crept through the kitchen doors. Immediately, her head turned toward the voice and green eyes met brown.

"Good morning to you too, Faith." Her voice was dry.
"Morning-schmorning, B." The dark-haired Slayer stalked toward her and Buffy gave up all thoughts of finding her bed anytime soon. Faith drew closer, leaning forward to sniff suspiciously, whisky hued eyes raking Buffy from head to toe.

"You have been fighting; I can smell it on you!" Faith accused.

"Gee…you mean it wasn't the bruises or the cuts and scrapes that gave it away? I must feel worse than I look." Ruefully she looked at the brunette and tried to brush by her. Faith refused to budge.

"Cut the crap, B-"

"I- I'm kind of tired Faith, can we talk about this later?" Buffy interjected.

"Don't you go getting all avoid-y on me, B! Tell me what's going on. Why were you out so late, what were you fighting with and…why didn't you bring m…back-up?" The last part was said quietly as Faith hugged herself with her arms and looked away from Buffy, her expression uncharacteristically vulnerable.

"I found a nest…or I think I found a nest. Got jumped by three vamps tonight and I-"

"Got jumped? Got Jumped?" Faith ran a hand through her chestnut hair. "Where did you go, B, that you got jumped by three vamps?"

"Nowhere!" Faith's eyes narrowed and Buffy swallowed. Hello, my name is Buffy and I ride the NYC subways every night in hopes of seeing visions of my dead…ex-vampire-lover…but I am beginning to think…but she couldn't say any of that, no matter how much she wanted to. She closed her eyes and decided to go with a slightly altered version of the truth.

"I can't sleep, not at night anyways and when I do sleep, it is never for long periods. So, I go out at night and…patrol. Kind of, except, there wasn't really anything to patrol, until tonight that was."

"Patrol?" Skeptical, Faith grabbed an apple from the kitchen counter and bit into. Thoughtfully, she chewed for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, B. I can understand that. But, no more solo patrols. You hear me?"

Buffy nodded. Faith pointed a finger at Buffy, apple still in hand.

"Next time you feel sleepless and want to go for another patrol, you come get me."

Buffy nodded, eyes not quite meeting Faith's. "Sure thing, Faith."

Faith grabbed another apple and tossed it toward her sister Slayer. "Eat something, B. God, I swear, you barely enough these days to keep an anorexic full, let alone feed a Slayer metabolism."

Buffy caught the apple and bit into it, surprised when she realized she was hungry. The apple was cool, crisp and juicy. She looked up to catch the brunette eyeing her critically.

"You need to get out during the daylight too B. I've seen vamps with better tans then you."

Buffy extended her hand for inspection and frowned when she realized Faith was correct. Her once golden tan had faded.

She looked at Faith, horror etched on her face.

"Do I look-" her lip curled at the idea, "pasty to you?"
Faith threw her arm sympathetically over Buffy's shoulders. "The good news, B? The condition is only temporary. Meet me later after you have a nap and we can do some training over in the south gardens, near that hedge-maze thingy. We will get some good sun today – have ourselves a workout and catch some rays at the same time. What do you think?"

Buffy slanted her eyes towards Faith and felt a spark of life awaken inside for the first time since…in a while.

"I think it sounds like fun."

Faith returned her smile with a friendly shoulder squeeze before she pulled away. "See you after lunch then."

~spuffy~

After a quick shower, Buffy threw on some sleepwear and crawled into her bed. Her hand dangled down, fingers brushing the fabric of her dust ruffle as she felt between the mattresses for her journal. Once she found the object of her search, she sat up and propped a few pillows behind her back.

Buffy tapped her bottom lip with the fuzzy top of her pen and tried to sort out her jumbled thoughts. She had already filled in a few of the journal's pages and she took some time to flip through the words she had written.

From the Journal of Buffy Summer's

**New York June 10, 2003**

I, Buffy Ann Summers, swear upon Mr. Pointy, that I am not crazy. I am, however, seriously wigged. I know one thing for certain though. Anytime I see any kind of reflective surface, I feel this incredible surge of adrenaline and hope. Most times, I am disappointed, but everyone once in a while, I see him.

I see Spike.

A Spike who is not dead…well he is dead, but not dead dead (and yes, I am aware this makes no sense at all, so once again I will swear upon Mister Pointy I am not crazy or at least I hope I am not crazy).

I see him in the unlikeliest of places; a motel bathroom, an office, and the subway in New York City.

I am not crazy, but I don't think I can tell anyone. Who would believe me anyways?

Frankly, I just-

Buffy skipped over the rest of the entry and turned the page. Quickly, she skimmed over the rest of the entries.

**June 12, 2003**

I am officially obsessed with mirrors. I can't pass by a single mirror now without taking time to stare into it and each time I do I can't help but to consider the implications. Deluded? Am I deluded? Or is it really possible-

**June 14, 2003**
I went back to the subways. Joe drove me. At first I felt as if I should explain my weird compulsion to ride the subway at one o'clock in the morning, but when I tried, Joe simply held up his hand.

"No need to explain ma'am," he had said (and might I say, being called Ma'am made me check to see if I had "Mom Hair" again), "Wherever you want to go, it is my job to get you there –no questions asked."

No questions asked? No "Why Buffy?" or "Do you really think that is wise, Buffy?"

And that was that.

I got into the Limo –

**June 21, 2003**

…nothing! Logically, I can say without a doubt that I am wasting my time. A few times, I even tried to stay in. I would say goodnight to Dawn, get into my pj's and brush my teeth. However, after an hour of tossing and turning and thoughts of "What if tonight was the night I would see him again?" would motivate me to get dressed –

She thought about her latest (vision/mirage/figment) interaction with Spike and began to write.

**June 22, 2003**

I saw him again.

Pen gripped in her fingers, she stared at the brief entry. Tried as she might, she couldn't think of anything to write next. Slowly, she slid downward until she was lying flat on the bed. Within seconds she was asleep.

Sometime later, she was awaked by a fist banging repeatedly on her bedroom door.

"Enough z's for now, Sleeping Beauty. Up and at'em." Buffy groaned when Faith's head popped into her room. Before Buffy could respond she was hit in the face by a bundle of black and purple Lycra.

Grumbling under her breath, Buffy changed, made a few pointed comments about the outfit (or lack thereof) and Faith had smirked.

"Shut up, B. You know you ain't got anything to be worried about. Granted your bod isn't the smoking hot brick-house I have going on" Faith paused and ran her hands down her frame and winked at Buffy, "but you do all right."

After changing, Buffy raised an eyebrow when she looked in the mirror. "Matching outfits, Faith? Awww…that's so sweet. We could be twins."

Faith wiggled her eyebrows, "Like some teen's wet dream...haha. C'mon, the sky is blue and the sun is high. Let's go have some fun!"

~spuffy~

**Later that afternoon...**

The room was quiet; the quiet sound of pencil on paper would have been unnoticeable to the average person. To a Slayer, however, not only did Buffy hear the scratch of the pencil upon the paper, but
she could also clearly hear the tinny voice the emanated from the headset Andrew wore. Andrew made no comment as he transcribed the detailed list of instructions dictated by the disembodied voice.

Some of the requests seemed ridiculous to Buffy, but the serious expression on her friend's face helped her to hold her tongue. Bored, she pulled out the new journal Dawn had given her a few weeks before along with a pink pen topped with a fuzzy purple…whatever you call the fuzzy purple things that sometimes topped pens.

Andrew, engrossed in his notation, barely looked her way. Buffy was not offended; she had spent enough time hanging out in Andrew's room that his behavior was common place. In the beginning she teased him about how seriously he took his game, but his wounded stare and an elegiac "Not you too?" had stopped her.

Lower lip caught between her teeth, she looked down at the four words she had penned earlier. Unable to find other words, she had fallen asleep only to be awakened a few moments (okay…not hours but it felt like moments) by Faith's fist bumping on her bedroom door.

Buffy rolled over to her front, legs hinged at the knee with her ankles crossed and placed the journal in front of her on the bed.

Faith had been right, it had been fun. Sparring with Faith hadn't given her the thrill that she had felt earlier when she fought the vamp with mirror-Spike at her back but, trading insults, kicks and blows with her former Slayer rival had been fun. Soon enough, they had drawn a crowd and it wasn't long before they had a group of Slayers sparring around them, laughter mixed in with the sounds of punches, kicks, grunts and groans…a definite change from the deadly focus they had all maintained when they had battled the First and the somber mood in the weeks that followed.

The members of the household not fighting were scattered around the grassy area; Willow and Xander had sat on a blanket as they nibbled from a cluster of grapes, Dawn lay on another blanket with her chin propped a fist and a contented smile on her face, even Andrew had shown up, a small plastic tube clutched in his hand as he reprimanded them all for not wearing sunscreen.

Buffy grinned as she stretched her pleasantly achy muscles. It had been a good day so far.

Pen in hand, she wrote the next few lines.

I saw him again.

And I found out that life goes on. I can laugh and I can play, but underneath it all… I miss him and I need to find out why this is happening to me. Am I really seeing Spike? Or is something playing around with me? I know one thing for sure, if this is one demon's idea of a joke, then I will show them one hell of a punch line.

She closed her journal, rolled onto her back and loosely clasped the book to her chest. Idly, she watched a spider crawl across the ceiling and tuned out Andrew's voice as he began a series of questions directed toward the person on the other side of the headset.

~spuffy~

Eyes closed, Willow sat on the ground in the middle of the atrium, legs loosely crossed, with each hand resting on a knee, palm up with thumb and forefinger touching in a classic meditative pose. She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled in one long, slow and soft breath.

She tried to find time each day to center herself in this way, still shied away from magic as much as
possible and rarely allowed herself to perform spells, too worried that those oh-so-familiar magical cravings (that delicious need) would once again take over her thoughts and desires.

Performing the spell to activate the Slayers had made her nervous and afterward, her fear did not go away. Instead, she spent the following days worried her addition to magic would be returned three-fold, anxiously awaited the seductive rush of adrenaline and need that had followed her the last time she had gone too deep. Even the small spell she had used to unlock the connecting doors at the motel they had used after the collapse of Sunnydale had made her apprehensive.

Luckily, no such feelings had overtaken her but it didn't quell her fears and agitation, caused in part by nightmares – terrifying dreams where she was once again dark haired, ebony-eyed and veiny. Each night, she awoke covered in sweat, heart thundering and clutching to Kennedy like she was a life preserver and Willow had just jumped from the Titanic into the icy Atlantic water. Immediately, she was aware of her lover's hands, at once strong and gentle, smoothing her hair and hugging her close until Willow's breathing evened out and her trembling stopped.

In those moments, Willow could almost believe that Kennedy and Tara shared the same soul and she thanked all the deities in her pantheon that she had Kennedy. In the past, she would have turned to Buffy but for a reason that she could not put her finger on something in their relationship had shifted.

Admittedly, she was partly to blame, the mistakes she had made with her magic had created a distance between them but she also felt that Buffy had contributed as well. After they had resurrected her, Buffy had pulled so far away; it had confused Willow with both its abruptness and calculation. Once Buffy had revealed that they had pulled her from Heaven with her spell, Willow felt they had reached a turning point and, while a gap remained at the very least a bridge was built between them. Until Willow's addictions had reached unmanageable proportions and Buffy became increasingly absent.

Now, she had never felt further away from her friend.

_Inhale. Exhale._ Her meditation continued and she decided she would talk to Xander.

~spuffy~

"I don't unde-"

"Shhh."

"But couldn't you just go in the-"

"No, I can't." the reply was an agitated whisper.

"But couldn't they just-"

"It doesn't work that way, now please…shhh."

Buffy stepped back from Andrew's shoulder and he adjusted his headset, while he tapped a few keys on his keyboard. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught site of Buffy as she mimed closing a zipper over her lips. His lips twitched and Buffy grinned cheekily. From her position behind him as he sat at his computer terminal, she launched herself backwards and giggled when she bounced on the mattress.

A twenty-sided die clattered across his desktop and he sighed. He adjusted the mic attached to his headset.
"A three." His tone was dejected and Buffy frowned in sympathy; while she didn't understand the rules of Dungeons and Dragons, she could tell from the tone of his voice that it wasn't the number he had hoped for.

Buffy tuned out the tinny voices that came through over Andrew's headset and closed her eyes. If Andrew stayed true to form, he would be occupied with his fellow gamers for at least another hour. Like a fish out of water she wriggled around on his bed and sighed with contentment (how had he managed to score the most comfortable mattress in the mansion, she could only guess) when she found the comfiest spot.

It would be nice to get in a short nap before dinner, she was going out again later on in the evening…

~spuffy~

That evening, her outfit was a pair of black cotton Capri leggings, a grey tank top and a black hooded vest. She had pulled her hair back into a pony tail and wore a pair of black running shoes. Tonight wasn't about fashion; she was more concerned with comfort and being able to move. Earlier, she had given Joe the nod and she knew that the tall chauffeur would be waiting for her in the garage.

Her gut told her that the three vamps she had tangled with the evening before belonged to a bigger nest and she was determined to exterminate them. Quietly, she crept down the back stair case toward the kitchen. From the floor above, she heard a muffled thump and she tilted her head for a moment as she listened.

Satisfied that it was nothing, she continued downward until she reached a short hallway, took a left turn and paused at the doorway. Two voices carried through the door in front of her.

"...know Xan, she just doesn't seem the same and I can't put my finger on it. What do you think?" Willow's voice was tinged with concern.

"She's quieter, if that's what you mean. More...umm...contemplative?" Buffy heard heavy footsteps and she took an involuntary step backwards, ready to sprint up the stairs if needed. She held her breath until she heard the quiet squeak of the pantry door followed by a rustling sound. The door closed and footsteps walked away.

"You don't think she is avoiding us, do you?" her friend's voice sounded small and uncertain.

"Why do you think that?" his voice was distorted, like he had something in his mouth. Another sound followed and Buffy smiled when she remembered Dawn announcing that they got more of Xander's favorite flavor of potato chips. She heard another sound, followed by loud crunching and smiled when she pictured him with a handful of Sour Cream and Onion chips.

"Well, I didn't at first. I mean she been shopping with us a few times since...we left California and hasn't walked away whenever I approached her...but then I realized that she never comes to seek me out or just hang...you know like we used to. And, did you notice, that she was sparring with Faith this afternoon and they were laughing and smiling? And we sat on the ground to watch? Buffy said she was done and Faith said 'Yeah, me too. I guess we have been out here for hours haven't we, B?' Hours, Xander! That's when I started thinking...when have we hung out with Buffy for hours lately?"

More crunching as Xander chewed. When he spoke his words were muffled.
"Will, don't take it personally, okay? I think she...I think everyone just needed some downtime. That...battle...with the first, hell the whole year leading up to the battle with the First...we all just need to recover. Everyone withdrew a little. We all lost...some important people," he stopped, his voice pained. She heard some rustling and then light footsteps.

"Xander." Willow's voice was soft, compassionate.

Anya. Buffy knew that Xander was grieving for the blonde ex-demon.

She heard the quiet murmurs of Willow as she comforted their friend. Her throat closed up and she put her hand on the door knob, but something stopped her from turning it and entering the kitchen.

Why couldn't she just go in there and find a way to bridge the ever widening gap between her and her friends?

Like photos in an album a hundred different memories she shared with her two friends flipped in her mind. They weathered break-ups, disagreements and apocalypses; surely they could weather this estrangement? Perhaps, in their grief over losing a loved one, she, Xander and Willow could grow close again.

The last photo was the image she carried of the night they had all asked her to leave (the looks on their faces when they told her to leave) and, like a voice over, she remembered her conversation with Andrew.

"Did you know they said that you decided to leave?"

Buffy stared at Andrew, certain she had misheard.

"I decided to leave? They said...I...no, you must have misunderstood; Giles, Dawn, Xander and Willow would never..." her voice trailed off uncertainly when Andrew shook his head.

"Willow said," he squinted his eyes and looked up at the ceiling as he focused his thoughts; "she said 'Buffy decided that it would be best if she left.' Spike, of course, didn't believe it for a second and he kept pushing for the truth. Willow kept trying to explain but still she kept the focus on it being your decision to go."

Buffy tried but she failed to wrap her mind around this. "But...Dawn and Xander...they would have...Giles would have..."

Andrew looked down at his hands and fidgeted briefly, he took a deep breath and looked at Buffy.

"No one contradicted her, Buffy, but Spike was able to piece it all together. Oh God! I wish you could have heard him. By the time he had finished his rant, Willow and Dawn were in tears, Giles couldn't get his glasses any cleaner...I mean I have heard some rants in my time, but he was...I have never had anyone stand up for me the way he stood up for you. I wish I had been so lucky!

Andrew recounted the events that followed...Spike's increasing ire, the scuffle between Faith and Spike and then his departure.

Then, she remembered, on one of the darkest night of her life it had been the man who had been her enemy, not one of the Scoobies (her family), who had lifted her up and gave her the strength to get up the next morning...the strength to defeat The First.

Her hand dropped off the doorknob and she took a quiet step backwards, and another, until the backs of her heels hit the bottom step of the narrow staircase behind her, then she slowly sank down until she was sitting. Willow and Xander continued to speak quietly, Xander's tone filled with grief and
Willow's tone reassuring.

The chasm between her and her friends had never seemed wider and Buffy wondered if would ever get so wide that it could not be bridged.

Eventually, their voices faded as the left the kitchen. Buffy waited a few minutes then quietly crept away from the stairs. Carefully, she opened the door to the kitchen then quickly tiptoed across the room to the door that led toward the side of the mansion toward the garage.

As she had predicted, Joe was waiting. He nodded to Buffy as he held the door (Buffy had tried to break him of this habit but to no avail) and she climbed inside. He had shut her door and had just settled into the driver seat when the door across from Buffy opened and a grinning Faith slid in beside her.

"You didn't think I was going to let you have all of the fun again, now did you, B?"

~ spuffy~

The door opened soundlessly and Andrew peeked cautiously around the side then slipped into the room.

"Buffy?" he whispered.

Silence greeted him. He scanned her room and frowned when he saw the empty but neatly made bed, then sighed. Buffy's nocturnal doings had become something of a mystery to him, but until she volunteered the details of her nightly wanderings, he was determined to respect her privacy.

Perhaps, it was better that she was out. His eyes sparkled at the idea that his little surprise might give his friend a little pick-me-up.

He stepped into the room, a mid-sized messenger bag slung over one shoulder, and crossed to her bed. From his bag, he pulled a device and placed it onto her bed, along with a long black cord. Casually, he glanced around the walls near her bed until he settled on the lamp on the end table. Lightly, he ran his fingers along the lamp's cord, until the cord trailed off toward the wall near the corner of her bed.

"Success!" he grinned and settled on his hands and knees.

He flipped the comforter and dust ruffle then peered at the outlet. With one hand he braced himself on the floor and with the other he pulled down the electrical cord he had put on the bed and plugged it into the wall. He sat back and was about to pull down her dust ruffle when he noticed the corner of her journal poking out from between the mattress and box spring. Gently, he pulled the smoothed the ruffle and comforter, curious why she felt like it was something she needed to hide. He had seen her journal plenty of times over the last few weeks.

It must be a girl thing he decided.

Once he slung his messenger back over his shoulder, he pulled a piece of paper and a pen. Quickly, he scribbled a few words, folded the paper in half and placed it on top of his "gift". He chewed his lip and stared at the bed, suddenly filled with self-doubt.

Was this a good idea or a disaster waiting to happen?

God, he hoped it was the former and not the later.
The gush of heated water stopped when she leaned down to turn the spigot. Buffy sighed and inhaled the steam deeply through her nose while she rolled her head from side to side. The shower had helped to relax her after the long evening she and Faith had spent patrolling the tunnels near the subway. It had taken more than a few hours, but they had finally found the nest of vampires and between the two of them, they had quickly taken care of the residents.

She heard muffled sounds that sounded from Faith's room as she also prepared for sleep. Buffy pulled aside the shower curtain and reached over the heated rack on the wall until her fingers grasped the closest towel… large, fluffy and, quite possibly, the most luxurious item she had ever touched.

*When we leave, this towel is definitely going in my suitcase!*

She wrapped the towel around her body and another towel turban style around her head.

The bathroom was large, the floor tiled in stone swirled with hues of grey, smoky blue and black. Buffy crossed over to the sink and looked at the cloudy mirror. Hand raised, she paused when she felt a sense of *deja-vu*.

Could it be possible?

Her hand trembled and she felt the cool, smooth surface of the mirror under her palm. Stomach in knots, she cleared the steam from the mirror.

Long, wavy wet hair and green eyes stared back.

Disappointed, she let her breath out slowly and steadily.

She was beginning to hate the sight of her own reflection. She closed her eyes and wished desperately that Spike could hear her words.

"I miss you." She whispered. She was answered with silence.

It took tremendous effort to shake off the melancholy that threatened to consume her. Discarded clothes in hand, she left the en suite bathroom, dumped her clothes into the hamper and pulled out some sleep shorts and cami set. The room was dark, only a faint light coming from her bathroom. After dressing for sleep, she walked to her bed and flipped on a Tiffany lamp on the bedside table.

That is when she saw it, laying in the middle of her bedspread covered by a piece of paper.

She tilted her head and blinked, then picked up the folded paper.

*Buffy,*

*I thought these had been destroyed, but then I remember that I had uploaded these onto an old server back in Sunnydale. Luckily, the server was not located in Sunnydale; it was in LA but could be accessed from anywhere. Without going into too much detail let me just say that Warren was paranoid and had more than a few back up plans. Forgive me for reminding you of my nefarious past, but I hope this makes up for it a little. It is part of my "12 Step" program…but I am making it up as I go along, because there is no anonymous support group for a reformed member of the infamous Evil Trio.*

~Andrew
She opened the laptop and inserted the disk. The computer whirred as the disk spun inside and on the keyboard she hit play.

At first the image was blurry and unsteady, but something was adjusted and then she gasped.

He was leaning against the wall in her basement with a cigarette between his lips, one foot braced on the floor and the foot on the wall with his bent knee visible between the flaps of his long leather coat. Off camera, Andrew's voice spoke softly in what they had all come to refer as his "Story-Teller" voice – filled with suppressed excitement and dramatic whispers.

"He walks the night, shunned by his kind and by the very humans he tries to protect. It is a solitary existence, but he does not fear the solitude." Andrew's hushed voice continued as the camera panned over Spike while the subject smoked his cigarette, seemingly unaware of the attention. "Some, demons and others like him, call him a traitor and place bounties on his head. Other's refuse to call him hero..."

The camera zoomed closer and Spike's eyes moved. As if caught and mesmerized by the vampire's stare, the camera stopped. Irritated, Spike furrowed his brows.

"Oh for the love of...will you get that bloody thing out of my face!" With his thumb and forefinger, Spike flicked his cigarette to the ground, annoyance plain on his face.

"Spike? Can we do this again, the light was behind you and ..." Immediately, Spike's demeanor went from menacing to attentive.

"Oh? Well, I could move over here?" he pointed to the left and the camera jiggled up and down as Andrew nodded.

"That's good! Um...a little more to the...perfect."

There was movement as Andrew walked backwards, the image tilted a little then once more focused on Spike. Slowly, the image zoomed out to include a wider shot of the basement. Once more, Spike was in profile. He leaned back until the wall was behind him, stretched out one leg in front and braced the other foot on the wall behind him.

He pulled another cigarette and lit it.

All along, Andrew chattered away, making suggestions and asking the occasional question. Spike nodded, but said little.

"Okay...give me just a second...amnnd...Action!"

Then, Andrew spoke again, tone hushed and reverent.

"He walks the night, shunned by his kind and by the very humans he tries to protect..." he began.

A giggle escaped her mouth and then another until her giggles turned to laughter and the laughter turned to tears. She replayed the disk four times until she fell asleep, a smile on her lips and tears on her cheek.
Lately the biggest topic of discussion concerning the collection of Sunnydale survivors had been about the future. Most people present had felt that they had enough time in New York to rest and recuperate after the battle with The First and were ready to move on to Europe, while others, Buffy amongst them, were reluctant to leave. Vi had family in Ohio and was ardent in her support for establishing some type of base in Cleveland.

Last night, following dinner, a heated debate had arisen and tempers flared.

Now the next morning, the usual group of early risers had gathered for breakfast and seated in the formal dining room. Conversation was muted, no one wanted to be the first to break the uneasy truce that had been declared, so discussion was limited to "safe" topics such as the weather ("I think it might rain, don't you?" and "Anyone hear about that tornado in Oklahoma last night?").

All talking stopped when Buffy walked into the room. Dressed in her "workout' outfit of a grey Capri yoga pants and grey tank top, hair pulled back into a pony tail, her attire was not out of the ordinary. The smile on her face and the humming sound however were. Her eyes sparkled when she spied Andrew. She bounced over to the blonde male, placed both of her hand on his cheeks and kissed him full on the lips.

"Thank you for last night. You are….incredible! It was exactly what I needed."

Andrew grinned back. "I was worried that it would be too much."

"Well, I can't deny that there were tears, but…” she took a deep breath, "what you did….I can't thank you enough.. Again...it was incredible."

Various faces watched the pair in disbelief. Xander stared, mouth open, fork poised in midair unaware of the small bits of scrambled egg falling onto the table. Giles kept blinking as if he was seeing things. Other faces were a mixture of shock and confusion.

Buffy picked up an orange and leaned closer. "I was wondering…well, hoping really…is there really more?"

Andrew smiled mysteriously. "Oh, I don't think you will be disappointed."

Her carefree laughter trailed behind her as she left the room and Andrew nodded satisfied. He drained his glass of water and looked around the table.

"Vi? Can you pass me the water?" He speared a fried potato on his fork and munched. Aware of the silence at the table, he chewed slower and slower as he noticed all eyes were on him – some shocked, some curious and more than a few glances of feminine appraisal.

"What?" he asked innocently.

Chapter End Notes

Not the same fight as we saw in FFL 'cause I like to play.
Thank you to RDM, SevenSidedDie and Tynum from "Stack Exchange" and Blade Red Wind for their valuable DnD knowledge and patience with my complete and utter ignorance! I do have plans to expand on Andrew and his D & D quest for redemption.

Stay tuned :)
The enormous room was unfamiliar, but reminded Buffy of the gallery in Sunnydale that her mother used to manage, only on a much grander scale. The walls were long, painted a stark white and matched by the polished white marble floor. Other than the artwork that decorated the walls and the occasional open doorway that led to annexed rooms, the most notable feature was the intricate detail on its domed stained glass ceiling, a few stories over their head.

Buffy followed the long line of onlookers as they ambled around, her pace unhurried and although she was unsure of her destination she was confident she would arrive eventually. As she scanned the area around her, she noticed a few familiar faces.

Of course! She remembered that she was on a field trip with her Western Civilization class. All of her classmates held small notebooks and pens, and, much to her embarrassment, Buffy realized her hands were empty. A few feet away, Willow and Xander stood before a large painting; Xander pointed animatedly to various parts of the painting, while Willow nodded agreeably and took notes.

Self-conscious about her unpreparedness, Buffy looked at her empty hands and wondered anxiously if there was going to be a test. Mr. Parks, their teacher, was known for his "pop quizzes" after a field trip and she was already on thin ice with Snyder - she could not afford a bad grade, not now.

"Excuse me, I think you dropped this." There was a light touch on her elbow and Buffy turned. Tara stood behind her, she held out one hand with a notebook and pen.

"Oh, thank you, Tara!" Tara smiled warmly at her and Buffy furrowed her brow in confusion, "I didn't realize that you were in this class—or at our school."

"Oh, I'm not." Tara assured her quickly and Buffy nodded.

"Oh, okay. Did you see Willow? She's just over th—" Buffy pointed over to the left but faltered when she did not see her friends. "that's odd…they were there a moment ago…" Quickly, her eyes scanned the room and she nodded when she found them. However instead of being just a few feet in front of her, they were now further away, practically on the other end of the room and almost out of sight.

"Oh, they moved." She said, lamely.

"They didn't move, Buffy," Tara reached out, put a hand on her arm and Buffy stopped. "You did. You left them behind."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know." Tara smiled kindly.

Buffy glanced at Willow and Xander again. They seemed so far away and she felt so…

"You are not alone, Buffy."

"I'm not?"
Tara shook her head. Then leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"Can I share a secret?" Buffy nodded.

"We have your back."

"We?"

Tara looked over Buffy's shoulder and Buffy turned her head to follow her gaze.

Then, she gasped.

"Of all forms of art, tapestry was always my favorite," the voice, familiar and beloved, said.

With a cry, Buffy ran and threw herself into her mother's arms.

"God, I've missed you so much." The words were muffled as Buffy's face was pressed up against her mother's stomach.

He mother chuckled in response as she pulled away from Buffy. Buffy tilted her head to look at her mom and was confused by the skewed perception. Why was her mom so tall all of a sudden?

"I told you I was meeting your class here for your field trip, remember? I am sorry I was late...my meeting did not end as early as anticipated. And what is this you said about missing me? Just this morning, weren't you the one telling me that you were eight years old and too grown up to kiss your mom goodbye at school?"

Buffy nodded, pigtails swinging and green eyes cast down toward the floor. Without warning, she launched into her mother's arms again.

"I know I did, but I feel like I haven't seen you in years and years and years."

Her mother's arms tightened around her and Buffy smiled at the reassurance she felt. After a few moments they turned to look at the tapestry that dominated the entire wall. Vibrant colors seemed to leap from the fabric and she became entranced by the dazzling display of art in front of her. She frowned when she noticed a spot where the threads bunched up.

"It's pretty. But look-" Buffy pointed to a flaw, "there is a knot. Knots are bad, right?" She reached out to touch, but her mother gently moved her hand down.

"We are not allowed to touch, Buffy. We can look and admire, but never touch."

"Why?"

"It's is delicate piece of art. If you stand far away, you can see the whole picture. But if you look closely, then you can see how it is made up of countless threads woven into each other."

Intrigued, Buffy stepped closer. Upon closer inspection, what she thought was a knot was more like a snag. A single thread poked out of the tapestry, looped in a few places and slightly bunched in others.

Her small fingers hovered over the flawed section.

"If we were to walk backwards, it would seem insignificant and unnoticeable. But as we walk closer..."
Buffy's nose was almost touching the tapestry but she was still careful not to touch. She felt the gentle touch on her hair and she turned to grin at her mother.

"I'm glad you came, Mommy."

Her mother gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Me too, baby."

Sadness flitted across the older woman's face. Something in her expression worried Buffy and she gripped her mother's hand tightly.

"You don't have to go away, do you?"

"I am afraid so, sweetheart, but I promise to stay as long as I can, okay?"

Although her lower lip trembled, Buffy nodded bravely and her pigtails swayed with the movement.

Joyce straightened and the pair began to walk around the room. Buffy wasn't sure how much time had passed, but gradually she became aware that they were not alone.

"Mommy! Look, it's Anya!" Excited, Buffy bounced up and down while she pointed. Anya was turned away and faced the open doorway to the room.

"I see her." Her mother smiled and nodded with encouragement. "You can go see her Buffy, it's okay." Her mother pulled her into a hug and Buffy wanted to snuggle deeper into her embrace but she resisted. She was a big girl, she reminded herself, and her mother wasn't going anywhere.

Her mother released her and Buffy turned away.

"Anya! Do you go to my school too?" Anya turned around and Buffy realized that they stood almost eye to eye. Funny, when she was with her mom, she felt so little, but next to Anya, she felt more adult like.

Anya gave Buffy a happy smile, but her eyes quickly slid away to look out the doorway.

Immediately, her expression changed to wistful.

Curious as to what had grabbed her friend's attention, Buffy peered around Anya. There didn't seem to be anything interesting out of the room, just the usual cluster of high school students milling around the exhibits. With a frown she noticed that Xander and Willow seemed even further away, seemingly oblivious to the man in a tuxedo who wandered around the room as he offered an assortment of cheeses.

Something about the picture it presented seemed funny to Buffy and she turned back to her mother to point this out. Her hilarity quickly evaporated when she realized her mother wasn't to be seen.

"Anya? Did you see where my mother went?" At her words, Anya turned to her.

"Non preoccupatevi, la madre rimane nelle vicinanze." She said, her smile reassuring.

"Ummm…come again?" Buffy frowned. Why couldn't she understand?

"Non preoccupatevi," Anya patted her hand, then waved her other hand in a circular motion in the air "la madre rimane nelle vicinanze."

"Anya, what's wrong? I can't understand you."
Anya bit her lip, then shrugged. "Cosa devo sapere? IO sono solo una vecchia cameriera."

Buffy began to feel alarmed. Something didn't seem right…

"Anya? I can't understand…"

Understanding dawned upon the other girl's face and she rummaged in her purse, until she pulled out a book. "Credo che questo sarà utile."

She pressed the book into Buffy's hands and smiled like she had done a good dead.

"What is this for?"

Again, Anya shrugged. "Destino vi dirà."

"I don't understand…please, I don't know what you are saying…"

Anya looked behind Buffy and then gave a sad smile before she pulled Buffy into a quick embrace.

"Avere un viaggio sicuro!" she whispered into Buffy's ear.

Just as quickly, she released Buffy. Once again, her eyes strayed to something behind Buffy and her expression became rebellious. She tapped the book, pulled Buffy into another hug and whispered more words into Buffy's ear.

"Credo che questo sarà utile."

This time, when Buffy looked at the book, she understood. She looked up to tell Anya, but her friend was gone.

The morning sun streamed through the gossamer curtains and Buffy lifted a hand to shade her eyes so they could adjust to the brightness.

Groggily, she focused on the digital numbers that glowed on her bedside clock and blinked with surprise. For the first time since they had come to New York, she had slept longer than her usual three-hour span. Still on her side, she raised her arms and stretched when she rolled on to her back.

With an unexpected surge of energy, she bounded from her bed and threw on some clothes. After she dressed, she gathered her hair with one hand and put it into a ponytail. Quietly, she closed her bedroom door, mindful that others might still be asleep and lightly ascended the stairs. From the pantry, she pulled a water bottle and within a few minutes, she was headed toward the riding trails. Just as she arrived, she noticed Faith seated on the ground, one hand gripped an ankle while she stretched the muscles in her leg.

"Mind if join you?" Buffy asked.

"Not at all, B." Faith answered. She eyed Buffy critically then grinned approvingly. "You looked a little more rested, today."

Buffy seated herself on the grass. Her body faced the other Slayer, but she had put enough distance between them so their stretches would not be hindered by the other.

"I feel more rested." It was true, she noted with surprise. The restlessness of the last few months had gradually started to fade.
No more words were exchanged. Instead, the two women shared a comfortable silence as first they stretched then ran along the riding trails at a steady pace. When the trail allowed, they ran side by side; when the trail narrowed, they took turns as the lead.

The companionable silence continued, even as the run finished and they walked up the cobbled steps of the southern patio. With a carefree wave, they went their separate ways.

After a shower, she joined the other members of the household for breakfast.

Only Faith and Andrew were absent; Faith had mentioned she was going to have a long soak in the bathtub and Andrew, she knew, was probably still asleep. He had discovered that Buffy spent every night on the subways and in the tunnels to ensure there were no other vampires or demons still hanging around. Although she had Faith, he still insisted that he would wait up by the phone in case they needed help and demanded that she check in with him when she got home.

His late night vigil played havoc with his sleep schedule, so he had begun to sleep in and take the occasional nap. Buffy had pointed out that it wasn't necessary, but Andrew had assured her he used his late night time wisely – already his Paladin was on the road to redemption and he had made good progress on the quests his D & D GM (game master) had laid out for him.

Still, he didn't know about Spike.

Buffy was still too reluctant to discuss her occasional glimpses of Spike with anyone other than her journal.

Cautiously, Andrew eased down the back stairs to the kitchen. At the bottom of the stairs, he peered around the narrow hallway and was encouraged by the lack of people, hopeful that his mission for sustenance would be a success. He had been holed up in his room for the better part of the morning, reluctant to join in with the usual breakfast crowd and had finally caved to his body's need for food.

Still, he had learned that the bevy of Slayers with whom he shared accommodation were a crafty bunch and, for some reason unbeknownst to him, they had decided to hone their tracking skills and catch him off guard at every opportunity.

It was quite unnerving really.

Lately, their calculated and predatory gazes seemed directed toward him.

He couldn't understand it. Maybe if was still an evil genius intent on taking over the world, but he promised that he had no such ambitions anymore. Yet, something about him seemed to spark distrust. Lately, everywhere he turned there was a Slayer stalking him. Mentally, he reviewed his actions over the last few days and found nothing that could be misconstrued as nefarious.

He put a hand to the kitchen door and pressed an ear to it as he listened intently for any sounds of activity. He planned to be fast, in and out…

"Whatchudoin?"

"SON-OF-A-SITH!" he screeched.

"Andrew!" Buffy mock scolded and waggled a finger before him. "I will have you know that there are many young ladies present in this household and they are not used to hearing such language."

"Will you keep your voice down," he hissed "I am trying to stay under the radar." The last few
"Under the radar?" Buffy took a moment to ponder the words. "Umm... going to need a little more information, here Andrew."

Upstairs, a few girls giggled and Andrew twitched nervously as his eyes darted around the narrow hallway. When the sounds grew louder, he grabbed Buffy's wrist and pulled her down the hall through a little-used door then closed the door behind them. The room, a small storage closet, had barely enough room for the both of them.

"Gee Andrew," Buffy said snarkily as she glanced around the small space, "You really know how to make a girl feel special.'

"Quiet." He pleaded. "They'll hear you."

"Who will hear me? And why the secrecy?" Buffy tilted her head and hear the clicking of a variety of slayer shaped shoes clatter in the hallway. Andrew tensed as voices became louder.

"...like he's vanished or something." One voice said. Other girls offered a hum of agreement.

"He is wily, I will give him that. Has anyone been able to corner him?"

Various chorus' of "nun-uh"s answered her.

"Why is he avoiding us? All we want is the scoop!"

"Yeah. Are he and Buffy really doing the horizontal mambo?"

Buffy and Andrew exchanged shocked glances, each mouthing the words "horizontal mambo" silently.

"They must be! Have you seen how happy she's been? I swear I heard her laugh three times yesterday."

Buffy frowned. She's laughed before... hasn't she?

"Don't be so dramatic, Sue. Buffy's laughed before."

"Yeah, but only a little. I haven't seen her laugh, really laugh, since..."

There were a few coughs and shuffling of feet. After a few moments of silence someone spoke again.

"So... it's the only explanation. She and Andrew are bumping fuzzies and he must be some kind of sex god, because..."

"I still think you all are wrong. I mean, it's Andrew... Andrew. There is no way that he is that good between the sheets."

Buffy scowled then a mischievous light came into her eyes. She reached behind her and pulled her hair from her ponytail then ran her fingers through the long tresses.

"What are you doing?" He mouthed to her.

Her smile spread wide across her face and she ran her hands through his hair. Before he could blink, she pulled the back of his shirt from the waistband of his pants and began to unbutton and re-button
her shirt.

I've got a bad feeling about this was his last thought before she pulled him roughly toward her while she pushed him against the door before she twisted the knob. As they stumbled out into the now crowded hallway he silently promised retribution.

"Oh!" she giggled, as if she had just noticed they were not alone.

She thought about making a few suggestive comments, but Andrew silently straightened his clothes and walked away with as much dignity as possible. She looked at the collection of flabbergasted slayers and winked.

"What can I say? I just couldn't help myself." She wiggled her eyebrows. "I really should go apologize to him." The way she emphasized the word gave the implication on how she intended on making it up to him.

With a mysterious smile, she turned to follow her friend.

Later that afternoon, after Buffy had apologized to Andrew for embarrassing him and promised to never do it again, she returned to her room for a cat nap.

Andrew spent the rest of his day in his room, until darkness fell outside and the room was lit by the screen of the computer monitor.

Fingers flew over the keyboard, seemingly independent of the body and, occasionally, the right hand moved to the mouse.

"There you are." He softly breathed.

Another click of the mouse and the file began to download. The wait was short and when the file opened, he wasn't disappointed.

Immediately, he recognized the setting and remembered the day he had filmed this. It was actually one of the last clips he had filmed in Sunnydale. The next day, the power had gone out and a short while later, Sunnydale was swallowed into the ground, his beloved camera with it.

It was also the night that he thought about saving all of film onto Warren's server. It had been a tedious process to upload each clip and Andrew was embarrassed to admit that he blundered by never having labeled any of his clips.

To find a specific clip, he had to open each individual file saved on the server.

With the mouse, he clicked "play" and the once familiar room appeared on his screen.

The image was a close up view of Andrew's face and wobbled briefly when Andrew made the necessary adjustments.

"Will you stop fiddling with that bloody thing? Why do you want to record this anyways?" Spike's tone was curious rather than harsh, but when Andrew stepped backwards and the camera captured his face his expression was pensive.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." Andrew muttered the words quietly, but he was close enough to the camera that the words were picked up clearly.

Behind him, Spike hefted a sword and began to expertly cut it through the air. Andrew moved out of
sight and the camera had a clear shot of Spike, who began to thrust the sword through the air as he
dueled with an imaginary partner, a small smile on his face.

Without a pause, Spike glanced to the side and spoke, "Make sure you get all that gear on. No sense
in getting you all sliced up before the big event."

"What makes you think I can learn this stuff anyways?" Andrew's voice was muffled.

Spike paused in mid-swing.

"You could leave, no one would think any less of you."

Andrew snorted, again off camera and Spike nodded.

"Good point. Let me put it this way, no one would blame you."

This time Andrew's voice was clearer. "Would you leave?"

"I am sure it would make a lot of people happy if I did leave." Spike's lips twisted bitterly. "But I
would never leave h-" He stopped and looked at his sword. Once again, he parried and evaded an
imaginary foe. "Leaving is not my way, mate."

"I think she knows." Andrew's voice, muffled once again.

Spike made no comment, but his eyes looked in Andrew's direction. There was silence for a moment,
until Andrew stepped into the camera's view, a catcher's mask perched atop his head.

Spike smiled.

"What happened to all of your 'extra-protection'? Where is all that gear you had me lug down here
earlier?"

Andrew shrugged. "I was thinking-"

"-always a bad idea" Spike interjected, not unkindly, his words softened when he flashed a smile.

"I was thinking," the last word had an extra emphasis, "that I can't wear all of that gear to the big
fight, so I should probably learn to fight without it."

Spike extended his arm and pointed the sword toward Andrew's chest.

"That is the smartest thing I have ever heard you say." He gave an approving nod and Andrew
beamed, pleased.

"Besides," he began as he walked over the upright locker against the wall. The metal door creaked
on unoiled hinges when he opened it. "I trust you. You said you were going to teach me how to use a
sword."

Spike scowled. "Trust? Vampire, remember? The day you trust a vampire-"

"Pft."

"What was that?"

"You heard me. Pft."
"You had plenty of chances, Spike." Andrew frowned as he tried vainly to imitate some of the blonde vampire's earlier moves. "I am not strong or athletic, would not have a hope in hell of ever fighting you off but you haven't tried to kill me."

"I did once." Spike reminded him.

"Pfft. You were triggered by the First. Doesn't count."

Andrew smiled as the clip continued to play. When it was finished, he copied the file onto a disk for Buffy.

Regretfully, Giles replaced the telephone receiver and tried to focus his thoughts, he knew the next decision was one not to be made lightly.

Outside of Kennedy's personal staff for the estate, he was only one of three males in a house full of girls. Robin, regretfully, had to stay in California. He had loose ends he needed to tie up, reports and statements that needed to be filled out for the state with regards to the high school.

Giles did not relish being the one to tell everyone that their brief respite was at an end because the real world (along with its very real threats) awaited.

Evil, along with its minions, still existed and it was time to plan their strategy.

The seers in the Ireland coven had been unable to keep up with the sheer quantity of newly called Slayers and Giles had been working day and night to organize the remaining members of the council so they would be in position to…to…do something. The sheer magnitude of the task ahead overwhelmed him.

Moving their base to Europe seemed like the best option and Giles had already begun to get the ball rolling on options for a suitable location. In fact, he admitted to himself that he was looking forward to the idea of creating a new council of Watchers.

After he had begun to reconnect with the remaining council members (they were few in number but their combined knowledge was irreplaceable), they had decided that it was time to set up a new base of operations in London.

It was time, he decided, for a Scooby meeting.

First, he sought out Xander and Willow.

For more than an hour, Giles laid out his plans, with Xander and Willow each marking their own notes and writing small lists.

The discussion continued for an additional three hours as the three friends brainstormed. Willow offered to assist the coven with the location of newly called Slayers and Xander offered his expertise in finding a suitable location to meet their needs.

"We need to decide on the current Slayers…" Willow trailed off as she looked at Giles.

"Quite right." Giles agreed. "They won't be happy when they find out that their little vacation is over." They shared rueful looks.

"Well, once all of the decisions have been made, then Buffy can tell them."
"Buffy can tell who what?" Buffy strolled into the room.

"Ah Buffy," Giles smiled, genially. "I was just about to come find you. I got off the phone earlier with some of the Watchers in London and it is time to decide our next step."

Buffy strolled over to the table where Willow, Xander and Giles had spread out their notes. Casually, she moved a few items around with her forefinger as she scanned the variety of notes and lists that they had begun.

"Wow, you guys work fast. How long have you been working on this? An hour?" She had an orange in her hand and, with her thumb nail, she made a slit into the peel and watched a small burst of citrus perfume the air.

"An hour? Oh no, a bit longer than that I think…” he looked at his watched, surprised, "…closer to four hours."

"Four hours?" Buffy raised her eyebrows.

She pulled out a section of the orange and popped it into her mouth.

"Yes," Giles considered at the accumulation of the afternoon's work. "Actually, we made a lot of progress, I think. We decided that we are going to move our base of operations to London. Willow will go to Ireland and work with the coven in Ireland, Xander will help to rebuild the Watcher's council while you and I will remain in London. The rest will work itself out."

"It makes sense for Willow to go to Ireland, our highest priority will be locating the new Slayers. Xander, with his knowledge of building will be useful to inspect some of the damaged building to see if rebuilding is an option."

Giles beamed.

"Yes. We need to get everyone moved as soon as possible. We thought we should call a meeting and you could explain it to all of the Slayers." Buffy raised one eyebrow when she made eye contact with Giles.

"They look to you as their leader, of sorts." He explained.

"Do they?" She mused out loud, her voice quiet.

The trio nodded. Thoughtfully, Buffy continued to peel her orange, carefully laying the discarded scraps on her lap.

"What's the plan?"

Eagerly, Willow, Xander and Giles told her about their plans, proud of their decisions.

"You plan on leaving that quickly?" She looked down at the remaining section of orange in her lap and gently pulled a thick strand of pulp before popping the juicy bit into her mouth. "What happens when you get to England?"

Giles explained that they would have to find temporary housing for all of the girls. He would meet with the remaining council members and decide where to place the girls.

"How many council members and watchers are left?"

"Exact number is unknown as of yet. I have a few people scattered around Europe, placing calls and
renewing contacts to see if there are more out there that have not checked in. I anticipate our arrival to be at the end of this week. The remaining council members will gather and we can decide where to place the girls."

"What about resources? Funds? How will we pay for things like accommodations and food for everyone?"

"I hardly think money will be an issue." Giles gave a small smile. "The council accounts are quite healthy."

"How healthy? Since the assassinations, can the accounts even be accessed?" she asked.

"Access is sort of set up as a chain or a line, as you will. At the top were the heads of council—Travers, Weatherby and Wyndham."

"Wyndham? As in Wesley Wyndham-Price?" Willow asked.

"Maternal Grandfather." Giles answered. "When members of the council pass away or retire, then the access is granted to next in line."

Buffy nodded. "Do you know who has the access now?"

"Two that I know about. Miss Chalmers, she is in based in Rome at the moment, deeply involved in some research and Duvall, currently in route from Berlin to London."

"Chalmers, that sounds familiar."

"Yes, she came out with Travers a few years back for…er."

"Ah, yes. My evaluation." Buffy's eyes hardened briefly. Then, she changed the subject. "What if some of the girls don't want to go where you place them?"

"I guess it's a possibility that a few of the girls might be…reluctant to accede with their placement," uncomfortable, Giles shifted. "But that's when they will look to you as an example. You, above all others, know what it means to sacrifice for your calling. You have filled your role admirably, Buffy."

"I think-" She began, but Giles waved his hand toward her and she blinked at his dismissal.

"We have it all planned, Buffy. All you will need to do is lay everything out for the other Slayers. Sure there will be a few weeks of confusion, perhaps even a month, until all of the details are sorted out, but I expect you will be able to keep the girls occupied."

"Training." Willow supplied, excited. "You could set up a training schedule for them-"

Buffy scooped her discarded orange peel from her lap, her face devoid of all expression and stood.

"I decline."

"Decline? I don't understand."

"You can't decline, Buffy. Now more than ever, the girls need a leader…"

"So, you lead them." She shrugged. Giles whipped off his glasses, eyebrows furrowed.

"Buffy, be reasonable. You are The Slayer-"
"A." Buffy interjected.

"-and as such…what?"

"You said The Slayer, Giles. I am not The Slayer, not anymore. I am just a Slayer as in "one of many"."

"True as that might be-"

Buffy chuckled darkly, without humor. "There is no 'might' about it Giles."

"Buffy, you are arguing semantics." he accused quietly. Before she could comment, he continued "the fact remains that you are The Slayer" he conceded hastily at the expression on her face "with the most experience. You have a duty…"

"A duty." She repeated the word dully, suddenly weary and trapped. For how long?

"I beg your pardon?" Giles asked.

She realized she had spoken the words out loud.

She shook her head, ready to brush her words aside with a "nevermind" when the air around her stirred slightly.

_Cigarettes._

Dimly, she realized the Willow and Xander repeated Giles's question and all were stared expectantly at her.

Cool air stirred the hairs at her nape, enhancing the smell of cigarettes and for a single moment it felt as if Spike stood at her side. He never knew just how much strength she got from him during those horrific last days in Sunnydale, how, just by being nearby, he helped her to stand a little taller and shoulder the burden of Slayer, when all she wanted to do was scream.

"For how long?" the strength and determination in her voice surprise her but she could almost hear a whisper of "that's my girl, give 'em hell Slayer. They have dished it out for long enough."

"I don't understand." Giles frowned uncertainly.

"It's a simple question. How long? Does my duty have an expiration date? I've shouldered "duty" through eight years and just as many apocalypses, if not more. What's the expiration date?"

"Expiration date?" Giles asked faintly.

"Sure. I mean, before me the prophecy said "one girl, in all the world", so the expiration date was death. But now there are hundreds, possibly more. So this "duty" doesn't have to mean until death."

She was hardly speaking to them anymore, rather she was speaking the words out loud, to herself, testing a theory that she realized had been at the back of her mind for weeks now.

"The possibilities are endless. We could be like a…democracy of sorts. Girls could choose the destination. No more "placement" or dictation of orders by a council. We could set up a website or video conference where the girls could get together and share information about the demons in an area. Hell, they could even volunteer to be in _pairs._"

"Buffy, I really don't think-" In an imitation of Giles' earlier action, she waved her hand and
continued.

"The Slayers, they could be their own council. The Slayers Council – with an elected Slayer at the head! Oh my God, Giles, do you know what this means?"

Giles sank down slowly in to a chair. "I really don't." he said weakly.

"It means I need to call a Slayer meeting." She said, excitement on her face.

"Faith!" she called out, "Put out your damned cigarette and get your ass in here."

The brunette Slayer stepped through the barely opened doors and met the eyes of her sister Slayer.

"Do you think it-" Buffy chewed her lip, uncertainly.

"Hell yeah, B! It's fucking brilliant."

Slowly, a wide grin spread across each of the Slayers' faces.

"Should we-" Buffy asked as Faith pulled out a cell phone and began to punch a number.

"Already on it, B. How long?"

Buffy looked at her watch.

"One hour. The Music Room, I think."

Faith nodded and both girls turned and walked out the door.

"What just happened here?" Willow asked.

Xander leaned back, a small smile on his face.

"The times, they are a-changin'" he said.

Joe called together a few of the grooms and together they had arranged the furniture in the music room to accommodate the seating for their meeting.

"Kennedy has stables here too?" one of the Slayer had gasped when she noticed the groom's uniform. She was part of a cluster of girls gathered outside of the room.

"Of course she does," Vi had giggled and winked boldly to one young groom in particular, who returned her wink. "You would know this if you hadn't spent your whole time out near the pool since we got here. I've been having daily lessons for weeks."

She nudged Cho-Ahn, who waved to another groom and purred throatily in Chinese. A few girls around them nodded in agreement; there were some things that did not require a translation. When Vi spied Buffy, she broke away from the group.

"Buffy, can I ask you a question? In private?" She exhaled in relief when Buffy nodded and gestured toward the patio doors.

"Let's go out here." They walked outside. The patio outside led to a secluded garden that was surrounded by walls covered with vines. Both girls made their way to the gazebo In the middle of the garden and sat on the padded circular bench that lined its interior.
Vi took a deep breath, unsure about how her request would be received.

"I know we are about to have a big meeting and, judging by the tension between you and Giles, I think it will be about what is going to happen next. If we are going to be discussing our futures, then I have a request."

Buffy nodded, not surprised that Vi had picked up on the tension. Giles had tried to get her alone, he wanted to talk to her first to find out what she was going to say, but Buffy told him that it wasn't necessary.

However, she was unprepared for Vi's request and honestly, she was chagrined that it had never occurred to her before. As Vi had talked, Buffy had widened her eyes, appalled.

"I think we need to have a translator present. Cho-Ahn has learned a lot of English in the last few weeks, but it is limited to one or two word phrases. When everyone is in a large group, speaking quickly and talking over each other, she cannot follow along. If we are making big decisions, she needs to understand what is going on and be able to voice her own opinions."

Vi paused, as if unsure about Buffy's reaction. She was encouraged when Buffy nodded.

"If a translator was present, she would be able to do this. Giles has tried to take her aside and explain to her, but, I think his grasp of the Chinese language is not as…" Vi wrinkled her nose, searching for the right word, "...comprehensive as he thinks it is. Cho-Ahn has tried to tell him that she thinks she should have a translator but each time, he just pats her on the hand and thanks her for the compliment."

"Vi, do you speak Chinese?"

"No." The young Slayer flushed. "One of the grooms, Tim, is Chinese-American. I have learned a little Chinese, just as Cho-Ahn has learned a little English, but Tim translates a lot of our conversations for us too."

"Tim." Buffy looked at Vi. "Does Tim know about Slayers?"

Vi nodded.

"Most of the staff does. It's not like we haven't exactly been discrete since we moved in here. From what I can gather, as soon as Kennedy was identified as a Potential her father informed the staff."

"Vi, you did good. Let's go meet Tim."

Of all of the roles she had assumed in her life, this was the one she hated the most and it was a role that she had thought she would never have to assume again. However, like any seasoned military officer, she had learned from her mistakes and now stood unwavering before the small collection of friends as she assessed their various expressions.

There were a few people who would be unhappy with how she would begin the meeting, but she knew what needed to be done. After a deep breath, she began.

"Thank you everyone. I know this was short notice…" A low rumble from the back told her that Tim, the groom, had begun to translate for Cho-Ahn. Buffy got the young Slayer's grateful look and was glad she had listed to Vi's suggestion. She spoke for a few minutes then directed her attention to Giles.
"We do, however, need more information. So, Giles – we need to know what resources are available. Money- how much is there? Are there any council owned facilities and where are they located? Where are all the watchers that survived the attack on the first and who are they? I need you to get on the phone and start networking, hopefully we can have a report by end of tomorrow. Be prepared to present after dinner. We will all meet then."

She stopped and looked at her Watcher. Giles nodded but became uncomfortable when every Slayer turned to look at him. The silence stretched out and he realized that he had been given his orders and was now dismissed. He rose awkwardly, protest forming in his mind when Buffy nodded, grateful and relieved.

"Thank you, Giles. It will be valuable information and with your contacts I knew you would be just the person for the job. But, it is a lot of work, I know." Her gaze shifted to Willow and Xander. "Will and Xander will help you."

With the same awkwardness, Willow and Xander rose and walked toward the doors. Just before they all left, Willow looked over her shoulder at Kennedy, but her girlfriend was focused on Buffy as she began to talk.

"It's time for you to talk our future," she began. She gestured to the spread of food on the tables behind her. "Grab some food, girls. I have a feeling that it is going to be a long night."

~SPUFFY~

The doors closed behind them, Giles, Willow and Xander paused.

"Does anyone else have the feeling that we were not wanted?" Willow asked, just as Dawn and Andrew turned the corner in the hallway. Dawn had hands full of long, rolled paper while Andrew carried a stack of legal sized notepads and a few boxes of pens and pencils.

They entered the room briefly, but exited less than a minute later.

"Were you kicked out too?" Xander joked half-heartedly.

Andrew gave a blank look then shook his head.

"We don't belong in there."

"You might not, but I think Xander, Willow, Dawn and myself have earned the right to be in there," Giles responded, mulishly.

"Giles," Dawn placed a hand over the older man, "It's not personal -"

"The hell you say!" he exclaimed, resentfully.

"It's not. It's a Slayer meeting. We don't belong in there." Dawn gave him a disappointed look, then left, Andrew trailing behind her.

Wearily, Andrew clicked on the last file on the server. He had been at this task for days, cataloging through the plethora of information stored. Each file had been viewed and sorted into different categories…Spike, Useful Information, Useless Information. Any videos had had found that contained Spike went into the first file, any files or documents that contained information that Andrew thought could be or would be useful went into the second and everything else went into the last. For all his whimsy, when it counted, Andrew liked to keep things simple.
He opened the file, clicked play to view, he assumed yet another "Useless" clip of Warren on a rant for "Sunnydale Domination"

The image was clear, the focus precise and the subject…was not what he expected.

"Hello Andrew." Spike said.

"Son-of-a-sith" Andrew whispered.

Spike chuckled. "You call that cursing? Did you learn nothing these last few months around me in Sunnyhell?"

Cautiously, Andrew looked around his room.

"Stop your gaping, Boy-Wonder. I don't know how long the battery is good for on this thing, but I might only have minutes left so listen up and take notes if you need to."

"I, William Pratt, of trigger-free mind and perfect body, do hereby proclaim my last word and testament-"

"Son-of-a-sith" Andrew repeated. Before he could hear anymore, he clicked pause. Buffy needed to see this.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-DUN!

There is no Anya to English translation yet, but all will be revealed in time.

I apologize for the lack of Spike POV here, but I will try to make it up in the next chapter. Although this chapter might seem like filler, I tried to focus on the present for story progression purposes. I wanted to explore the relationship between Giles and Buffy as well as Buffy's feelings about being thrust back into the role of General. I think, it was clear at the end of the series (ignoring season 8 & 9 comics), that Buffy felt like she was done. I am sure she envisioned early retirement and perhaps finding a career like any normal girl her age. Her decisions in this chapter as well as the chapters ahead have Buffy ref-defining her role on her terms. How will this affect her relationship with the Scoobies and the other Slayers? That is for me to know and for you to review…er I mean read.

Btw…If you squint, you will see some foreshadowing for Part 2 in this chapter. *squints hard and tilts head* Yep, definite foreshadowing here.

Stay Tuned…
From the journal of Buffy Summers, June 28th, 2003

I keep having this dream.

The details are fuzzy, as the minutiae of most dreams are.

The unsettling part, however, is not really the dream itself but the part where I wake up half-way out of the bed, feet on the floor, accompanied by a sense of urgency. As soon as I am fully conscious, I look around and have no clue what brought me out of bed.

It doesn't give me the wiggins or freak me out, but it leaves me with a nagging feeling that I have something I should be doing or an elsewhere I need to be, but I just can't remember what...like when you walk into a room and look around only to realize that you have no idea what you came into the room to get.

It is frustrating as hell.

Then, earlier tonight, during our Slayer meeting, the girls were taking turns speaking and all I could focus on was the back of Faith's shirt.

There was this thread...

Funny how something so small and innocuous seemed to draw all of my attention, but there you have it. Anyways, I had the strongest urge to pull the loose thread away, but I couldn't do it. I knew that if I did, it would change the world as I know it.

Like tugging upon one thread would unravel the very fabric of...

Over-exaggerate-much? Not I.

But this thread? It triggered a dream flashback...hell, it was so brief I don't even think it would qualify as a flashback, more like a...flash. It triggered a flash.

Flicker.

Whatever.

A quick image of me (I think I am eight), my mom, a big, open room and...a loose thread? That is it, though. No other details, no specifics. Were we darning socks or sewing on buttons?

Not so good with the dream interpretation on this one.

*sigh*

Moving on.

I mentioned the Slayer meeting, which, I am pleased to report, that, overall, I think the meeting went well.
Initially, I worried that Giles was going to make a fuss when I asked him to leave. Honestly, I thought he understood what Faith and I had been talking about earlier, but he looked so...put out, not to mention more than a little incredulous.

For a moment, it looked like he was going to channel Quentin Travers and burst out with a "You Have Got Some Nerve, Little Lady" finger waggle.

If he had, it wouldn't have made a difference.

Faith and I had already decided ahead of time that this meeting was Slayer only. The only exception to this was the presence of Tim, the translating groom, but once he started speaking quietly to Cho, it was obvious why he was staying with us and no one disputed Cho's right to have "Freedom of Understanding" in the newly established Slayer Charter of Rights.

But, other than the furrowing of his brow (and a resentful, slanted stare toward Tim), Giles left, followed by Will and Xander.

The girls scrambled to get some chow, sharing excited whispers and the speed with which they filled their plates and sat down, ready to listen, was encouraging.

I pushed aside my guilt and focused on the meeting.

Dawn and Andrew popped in immediately, with all the supplies we asked them to bring. I had asked them to gather "anything you think might be useful to us" and, boy, did they ever come through.

Efficiency, thy name is Dawn-Drew! (DAndrew?)

How they managed to find poster paper, markers and everything else they had brought into the music room with them, I have no idea. (Seriously, the house is huge! I once ran out of toilet paper and it took me forever to find a storage closet that had all of the extra rolls.)

They dropped their haul, murmuring quietly together as they arranged items in tidy piles. Faith and I shared a look, trying to figure out who drew the short straw on asking them to leave, when Dawn pulled a small pad of paper and a pen.

"Easel – the dry erase kind- for next time, do you think? And what were you saying earlier..." she wrote quickly as they made their way out of the door.

"Maps." Andrew replied.

"Maps!" Dawn scribbled on the pad.

With a wave, they left.

No awkward "this meeting is Slayers-Only" conversation needed.

I made a mental note to find them both later, but, at least with those two, I felt as if there were no ruffled feathers that needed soothing.

The same could not be said, however, for my three oldest friends whose molted feathers were beyond soothing, I worried.

The door closed and Faith stepped forward. She had barely opened her mouth, when we heard muffled voices on the other side of the door, Giles' sounded irate. All heads swiveled from the door then to me. I nodded at Faith and she continued.
Faith and I quickly laid out our ideas and asked the girls what they thought. I made sure to make it clear that we, all of the Slayers, would choose our path.

These decisions would impact the Slayers the most, I wanted the girls to know that they held the power, and not in a "Let's take over the world today, Pinky" kind of way.

Surprised?

My intention was to put the power in their hands. I don't think Giles understands that this will, in no way, negate the importance of the Watcher's role but, with the sheer quantity of called Slayer's it will certainly allow for more democracy and less bureaucracy.

(Take that Poly Sci professor - whose name I forgot! - I think I understood the content just fine, fuck you very much and if I got it wrong, well, it's my journal so there! *insert loud raspberry sound*)

In the past, I would speak a lot at these types of meetings, trying to motivate but knowing by the bored expressions on everyone's faces that all I was doing was hearing myself talk.

This time, I spoke a little and listened a lot (once I stopped obsessing about one loose and dangling thread).

We went around the room and asked everyone what they wanted to happen next. Each Slayer had a chance to speak with no interruptions, while another Slayer recorded this on poster sized paper – one for each Slayer present – that we taped on the walls (it seemed like a poor way to repay our hostess for her hospitality by marking up her mansion with adhesive, but it was Kennedy's idea!)

After each Slayer had spoken, we all sat back for a few minutes reading all of the information on the walls.

Everyone was quiet, the only two voices were Tim and Cho as the pair went around the room, Tim quietly translating what was written on paper and Cho occasionally asking questions, her expression a little awed.

It was, I think, the first time she had ever really felt included and, once again, I was embarrassed by this, forever grateful that Vi had stepped forward. (I am so going to nominate Vi for Head Slayer!)

Once Tim and Cho sat down, Faith stood and asked Sue to pick one item from her poster and walk around the room using a red marker to circle an identical thought on the other posters. When Sue was finished, Vi (green) was next. Cho was blue, Marie purple and so on until each poster was a rainbow of circles.

In the end, everyone realized we all had common goals, ideas we could all put into motion together. Yet, each slayer also had at least one personal goal, separate from the others.

And yes, Faith and I each had posters – which were strikingly similar with one or two exceptions.

I ended the meeting by asking everyone to spend the next few days thinking of things that scared them, obstacles that would need to be overcome. I reminded them that Giles was gathering information for us and we would listen the next night.

After our meeting, I was lost in my thoughts and paid no attention to the conversation around me.

Girls were stacking the dirty dishes from the food that Kennedy's staff had prepared for us (enough to feed an army, or, it turns out, approximately ten Slayers. You would think that a gaggle of teens would barely make a dent, but a Slayer appetite is an entity of its own).
Faith had disappeared somewhere and I was rolling up poster sized paper (where had Andrew and Dawn found these?) and gathering loose stationary, pens and pencils.

I had all of the posters (except mine) rolled and labeled with a Slayer's name, pens were slid back into their boxes and pencils bundled when Faith returned, a box in her arms and a smile on her face. Curious, a few girls drew close to her when she plunked the box on a table.

The, chatter, soft at first, then increasingly more excited when more girls gathered around her and reached into the box to pull out...books.

Huh.

Vi pulled a book and chuckled at the title.

"Look!" she turned to the girls around her and pointed to the 'Robert's Rules of Order'.

"Parliamentary procedure!" a few girls exclaimed in unison, smiles on their faces.

Faith pulled a book from the box and, with her trademark strut, sauntered to me. She held the book out toward me and all I could do was look at her dumbly.

For a moment she disappeared and I saw Anya, handing me a book. Just as quick, Anya disappeared and Faith was there.

"I think this will be useful." Faith said, tapping the book in her hands.

"Credo che questo sarà utile." In my head, a soft, familiar voice whispered, the foreign words an echo of Faith's.

Suddenly, I remembered the dream; Tara, my mom, that stupid, snarly thread and the book Anya had pressed into my hands - the same book Faith was offering to me.

"Useful?" I repeated, trying to make sense of the images from the dream flooding my mind.

With a wide grin, she pointed to my poster.

"If you want that to happen, this might be useful."

That, which she referred to, wasn't anything special really. It was a careless comment I had thrown out earlier, when I was expressing my own hopes for the future. My future. Dawn's future. It boiled down to one simple thing: I didn't want to lead, at least not for a while. I wanted to be a little selfish. Spend time with my sister. Travel. When we were kids, there was one place Dawn had dreamed of going. She and mom planned to go there for Dawn's sixteenth birthday.

I had forgotten all about their plan until it was my turn to talk, while Faith wrote my words on the poster.

She let go of the book and I turned it over in my hands, alternating between the words on my poster, Faith's grin and the book.

It was annn- (the rest of the word is written as one scrawling line and therefore illegible).

"Buffy?"

"Mmmf"
"Buffy."

There was a hand on her shoulder and, before she was fully awake, the hand, along with the body attached, was pinned to the floor. Her journal, which she had been writing in before she fell asleep, tumbled from the edge of the bed and slid across the floor of her room.

"Ggghuffy, git's gee, Gannn-drew." He gargled and the vice grip around his throat disappeared.

"Andrew!" She rose from the floor and he rubbed his neck good-naturedly. "God, are you mental? I could have killed you!"

"Good to see those cat-like Slayer reflexes are still as sharp as ever." He said, wryly, until a new thought occurred to him and his eyes lit up. "You could so kick Darth Vader's ass, y'know?"

His voice deepened. "The Force is strong with you, young Jedi."

"Uh-huh," she agreed tiredly as she began to crawl upon her bed, ready to return to sleep. "It's a quarter to the crack of dawn, Andrew. Is everything oka- oh my god! Dawn!"

"No- Dawn is fine Buffy," he hastened to reassure her as she jackknifed up from the bed, all teasing absent from the tone of his voice as she sprang from the bed and she sagged with relief. He picked up her journal, used her pen as a placeholder then he placed the book on her nightstand.

"Thank god," she declared then glowered at her friend. "This had better be good, Andrew. I swear if I find a gray hair today, you are so…what's with the face?"

"I have something to show you." He hesitated pensively, as if to say more, but instead he turned away and left the room.

Something about his manner stilled the quip that threatened to spill from her tongue, so Buffy followed.

When the gang had first arrived at Kennedy's home, they had been awed by the size of the estate, which contained more than enough bedrooms to accommodate the battle-worn group.

Buffy, Dawn and Faith had coincidentally picked rooms close to each other; Andrew, on the other hand, had inspected the unpicked rooms with the careful deliberation of a majordomo, something which she and Dawn teased him about and, in return, he mumbled something about his "Ciatic Nerve" and "Feung Shui-ing" himself in to a good night's sleep.

At the time, she had thought his fussiness a little excessive, but now she wouldn't expect anything less from her friend.

He chose well she thought with a smirk, as they entered his room. Next time they got to bunk in a mansion, she was so letting him pick her room out.

It wasn't the spacious, luxurious suite she had picked for herself, but the view was breathtaking, overlooking a seldom-used but nonetheless stunning, ornamental garden with an ocean view beyond it. He had pulled bits and pieces into his room from other parts of the mansion- apparently "Feung Shui" to Andrew included some natural elements: an antique desk, with (almost) invisible drawers that hid his laptop when not being used; a collection of unidentified plants that reminded Buffy of the tops of green onions; a leather swivel chair, a balcony door and an ocean view.

Most designers might disagree with his blatant disregard for the Feung Shui philosophy but it worked
for Andrew. And for her as well, she realized. So comfortable was his room, she found she spent more time in his room than in her own.

Andrew paused in front of his computer, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He took a breath and Buffy’s heart stuttered.

"It’s a message…from Spike."

"A message…” she faltered, unable to speak any further.

Slowly, Andrew recounted the brief part of the video that he had seen. When he finished, he waited and watched while she tried to prepare herself.

"But how did…and when did…?” she whispered weakly to herself and slowly sank into Andrew’s computer chair, eyes fixed on the frozen image of Spike.

She took a few deep breaths to ground herself then nodded.

Quietly, Andrew got up, gave her arm a reassuring squeeze and left the room.

In the hall, Andrew debated his choices. Part of him knew he should walk away and allow Buffy privacy, yet his feet were anchored in place; it was not curiosity that kept him from leaving but worry for his friend instead.

Did he make the right decision by leaving her alone in the room? Would it have been better if he had watched the rest of the video first, alone, so he could have prepared Buffy for what she was about to see?

In the end, instead of angst-ing over what could not be changed, he simply slid down the wall in the hallway, until he sat on the floor across the hall from his door.

If she needed him, all she had to do was call.

While he waited, he mused over the bleached vampire’s ingenuity.

He remembered the long night he had spent hacking into the server so he could upload his videos. He had been working steadily for hours and was squinting with eyestrain and a slight headache as he scratched another password off of his list.

Finding the server had been easy, but finding out Warren must have changed the password was painful. He felt silly for feeling betrayed, but it was just one more reminder of how gullible he had been when it came to Warren.

"Frakken liar." He muttered bitterly under his breath. The bitterness was directed inwardly, though. After all, he was the one naïve enough to believe the misogynistic dictator. Too late, Andrew realized that Warren only cared about Warren.

He looked at the next possible password on his list, tried again and hissed in aggravation when the computer beeped in denial.

"For the love of Anakin." He exclaimed in exasperation.

"Isn’t there some dorky rule about mixing your geekdoms?” Andrew gave a squeak of surprise at the sound of Spike’s voice.
"What can I say? I like to mix things up." To cover his embarrassment at being startled, he attempted an air of nonchalance, but he had a feeling the vampire was not fooled. To his relief, Spike didn't comment on the flush that was heating up his neck.

"Whatever blows your hair back, I'm not one to judge." With the toe of his boot hooked 'round the leg of a chair, Spike pulled it back and sat down. Immediately, his legs stretched out, he dropped his head backward and exhaled with a sigh.

"Rough night?" Andrew inquired absently having moved back his attention to hacking the server. He was almost out of ideas but refused to throw in his towel.

"Long night, more like." Spike opened his eyes, but continued to stare up at the ceiling with his head tilted back. "Was out with Marie, Amanda and Vi tonight for patrol. If I have to endure one more conversation about what color lipstick should be worn with what color nail polish," his voice changed and became higher pitched "or speculation on whether 'Spike is a winter not a fall', I just might decide to go for a walk...in the daytime."

"That's just ridiculous," Andrew began. Spike spread his arms and nodded approvingly, until Andrew continued "With your fair complexion, blue eyes and natural hair color, it is obvious that you are..."

Spike displeased growl stopped Andrew.

Don't poke the vampire! He reminded himself as he suddenly became very interested in his task. The computer bleeped again and Andrew scowled as he crossed another potential password from the list. He was running out of ideas.

"What's got your panties in a wad?"

"Warren had a server in LA that we could upload files to. I thought I would save all of my videos I have made there," he shrugged. "It is faster to use this one, than it would be to set up a new server in Sunnydale."

"Save all those little bits you made that Buffy always complains about?" Spike laughed.

"Yeah." Andrew nodded. "Although, I suppose you think that this was a silly idea too. It's just that – well, I'm not a potential, so I can't go slaying; I am not handy with tools, so I can't help Xander fix windows and walls...and I'm bored. All I do is bake cookies and clean." Andrew knew that he sounded whiny, but he didn't care.

Spike leaned back in his chair until it balanced on two legs.

"I say go for it. Can't stand to be bored myself."

"Yeah, well. I will bored again in about one more minute. None of the passwords I had thought of worked, so I can't even get into the server anyway." He grumbled.

With a thump, the chair legs landed on the floor. Spike picked up the pen and wrote three letters at the bottom of Andrew's list while Andrew watched.

"No. Warren wouldn't use that."

"Go ahead, try it."

Andrew typed three keys.
He was in.

He was so tired though, that he was only able to upload six or seven videos.

After the power went out, he figured it was a lost cause. He said as much to Spike a few days later. Spike simply lit a cigarette and told him not to worry about it.

"What do you mean?"

"I watched you do it once or twice, so after you fell asleep, I finished uploading the rest of the videos."

"You did?"

"Oi! Don't look so surprised. I do know how to work a computer you know."

With a trembling finger, she reset the clip, unwilling to miss a single second of Spike's words.

"Hello Andrew." Spike said

Eyes wide, she could only stare at the screen. By now, thanks to Andrew she had more than a few disks loaded with Spike-filled moments and she should be used to seeing him on screen. This, however, was different; it wasn't Spike caught on candid camera or being recorded just So-The-World-Can-Know.

"You call that cursing?" Spike chuckled. "Did you learn nothing these last few months around me in Sunnyhell?"

The camera was centered on his face so it took a few moments for her to place the surroundings. It wasn't her house, but she recognized the crimson and gold pillow sham from the bedroom she had slept in the night they…her friends had asked her to leave her house.

He must have filmed this the next morning, after she had left to find the scythe. Before he had seen her kiss Angel.

She tried to swallow, but the knot in her throat made it difficult.

"Stop your gaping, Boy-Wonder." Spike continued, and she gave a choked laugh as she imagined the expression on Andrew's face when he had seen this. "I don't know how long the battery is good for on this thing, but I might only have minutes left so listen up and take notes if you need to."

"I, William Pratt, being of trigger-free mind and perfect body, do hereby proclaim my last will and testament."

He stopped there and looked directly at the camera and goose bumps spread across the surface of her arms. She reached out with her forefinger and lightly touched the monitor, tracing the outline of his face.

"If you are watching this, then I am dead. It's the only explanation for me allowing you to see this, if I were alive, then this little bit of film would have been deleted." He waved an unlit cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. "I am curious, by the way - how long did it take you to remember all of the bits and pieces of film you have been saving to this server? Yeah, I'll wager that you got quite a surprise when you found this."
He flashed a quick grin and lit his cigarette. It was the kind of affectionate smile he rarely gave and she had only seen it bestowed on a few people…a few times when he talked about Dru, the few times she had seen him with her mom, sometimes with Dawn and once or twice with Tara.

_He really liked Andrew_ she thought with surprise.

After he had confessed his love to her, she had been the recipient of that smile herself…until she had made it clear that wanted nothing gentle from him. She would take his strength, his protection for her family and friends, she would take his passion but she had rejected anything that gave substance to the laughable idea that a vampire, a soulless evil thing, could feel anything as human as affection or love.

_I was such a fool_ she thought, regretfully.

"This is the part, where I expect you to get Buffy. If by some small chance, she is…" his eyes hardened and mouth tightened, "…no longer around, then I will make this short. The Bit is taken care of. If Dawn is still in Sunnydale, then she can expect a visit within a few months. I have made…arrangements, if I haven’t checked in with someone by a specific date, then I will be presumed dead and they will proceed to do as I have instructed. If Dawn has left Sunnydale and you lot haven't heard from my…associates…then call this number."

He rattled off a phone number, but Buffy, too absorbed in the variety of expressions that crossed his face, made no move to write anything down.

"If Buffy is…gone…then everything goes to Dawn and you-" He jabbed his cigarette, pinched between his thumb and forefinger, toward the camera "- delete the rest of this. Do it now." He demanded.

He leaned back, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply on his cigarette. For a long moment he held the smoke inside then exhaled slowly and softly. When he opened his eyes, he started directly at the lens of the camera as if she were standing directly in front of him.

"Hello Slayer."

It was like a fist into her solar plexus that sucked the air from her lungs. Blood rushed into her ears and she felt light-headed; darkness crept in through the corners of her vision, which narrowed until a single pin-prick of light was all she could see.

In a panic, her hand shot forward and patted the keyboard randomly until the image froze. She pushed until the chair rolled backwards and dropped her head between her knees. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and great, gasping breaths were stifled as she pressed one hand to her mouth while the other clenched into a fist.

She blinked the moisture away, determined to keep herself together.

A few moments later, she heard a hesitant knock and Andrew's worried voice.

"Buffy, are you…?" there was silence for a minute and she tried to steady her breaths. Then he tapped again. "Do you want me to come in?"

Slowly, she drew a deep breath and let it out. _Inhale. Exhale._

"It's okay." She told herself and then, louder. "I'm okay."

Whatever Spike had recorded, he had meant for her, and only her, to see. She looked to the door,
afraid that Andrew would react like a typical Scooby and barge into the room anyways.

Funny, she thought to herself, they always look to me to lead them and be the strongest of us all, but they could never trust me to know what was best for myself.

How many times were her personal choices questioned with "Buffy are you sure you know what you are doing?" and "Do you really think that this is the best decision?"

The door stayed closed and she heard a muffled voice.

"Alright, but I'm here if you need me."

A small part of her wanted to call Andrew into the room and spill all of her secrets, her fears and her questions, but the other part of her wasn't ready, not yet and she was glad that her friend outside in the hall trusted her to do what she thought was best. It was his quiet confidence and trust gave her the strength to straighten up and she moved back to the computer.

Her breathing returned to normal and with a steady hand, she pressed 'play'.

In total, the clip wasn't long, only a few minutes passed from the beginning to the end.

When it was over, she replayed the footage, each time she felt the same longing which over shadowed her understanding of what it was exactly that Spike was trying to say. It was different from the other clips…the ones where she could pretend that he was talking to her, but, in the end she knew the truth – they were just moments from his life and it was just her, alone in a room and watching.

But, this?

God, this was Spike talking to her, smiling at her and she didn't want it to end.

The third time, she started to listen and once she did, the longing disappeared and was replaced with anger.

Savagely, she punched the phone number that Spike had rattled off in his little video on her cell phone and listened to it ring. Halfway through the second ring, a voice answered.

"Yes." The voice, low, gravely and tinged with impatience, said tersely. Depending on the point of view, it was either very late at night, or very early in the morning. Yet, whoever had answered the phone did not sound sleepy.

"Who…who is this?" Buffy asked.

"Who is this?" The voice countered.

She hesitated for the briefest moment while she closed her eyes. She was tempted to holler for Faith, beg her friend to light a cigarette just so she could pretend he –

Deep breath, Buffy.

"Buffy," she began, surprised and a tiny bit disgusted with how small her voice sounded. "Buffy Summers." This time, her voice was stronger.

"Ah…The Slayer."
"Not "The", "A"."

The words hovered on her lips, but she bit her tongue in an attempt to hold back the correction.

"Yes."

"We've been looking for you." The voice was calm, but tinged with the faintest of reprimands.

"I'm sorry." She apologized automatically.

"It's no matter. Where are you?"

She hesitated and the voice sighed.

"Look, obviously, you are calling this number because the Va- Spike gave it to you." Was it her imagination or did the voice sound sad?

"Yes, he…he…" she bit her lip in an effort to stop her stammer and finished with a whispered "Yes."

"I see." He replied and, in that moment, she felt sure that he understood what she could not convey, that he knew Spike was...not around.

Silence.

Mentally, she ticked off the beats and when she got to ten, he spoke again.

"As I mentioned, we have been looking for you and your sister. The Blo- Spike - left explicit instructions in the event of his-"

"Whereareyou?" she spoke quickly, before he could utter the words. She wasn't a lunatic, she knew that he was gone but something about the video she saw and the information she had learned (Spike had a will for god's sakes! A will! Why-) was just a little too much reality.

*Because, there was some tiny spark inside that hoped that she had been seeing him, that he was still around somewhere. That he was alive.*

"…get here in the next day, then I can personally assist you." He finished.

*Focus dammit!*

"Sorry, can you repeat that?"

"If you are close to LA and if you can get here in the next day, then I can personally assist you."

"I am in New York. I don't know when the next flight leaves…” she trailed off while mentally she composed a "to do" list. Andrew can call the airlines, she could have a bag packed in minutes, then she needed to think about what she would tell Giles, Willow and Xander.

She felt tired.

"I have...associates...in New York. Give me an address and I will send a someone to pick you up in a few hours. Transportation for you and your sister to LA will not be an issue."

"My sister? What do y-"
"The Vamp-" the voice paused and cleared his throat. "-Spike, was quite clear that you both be present…if at all possible."

She did not hesitate as she rattled off her address first, then the number for the phone in her room. After the call disconnected, she realized she had never gotten a name.

Andrew was still in the hallway when she opened the door. It only took a few minutes to explain the rest of the video that Spike had made and her subsequent phone call. Chagrined, she told him that she hadn't even asked for the name of the person she had called.

She asked Andrew to not say anything to anyone, she wanted a little time to herself before she found Dawn. The were too many thoughts jumbled together in her brain. Or maybe she was just finding a way to postpone the unavoidable- Dawn's opinion of Spike had been at an all time low, thanks to information that Xander had oh-so-helpfully revealed to her and Buffy didn't know if she could deal with any negative comments about Spike, and she had been so reluctant to discuss Spike with her sister that she didn't know if Dawn's feelings had changed.

So, avoid-y Buffy went for a run instead.

When she returned, entering through the French doors at the back of the dining room, most of the residents were awake and eating breakfast, including Dawn.

"Hey Dawnie?" Her sister looked up. "Can we talk?"

Her sister plucked a croissant from a basket of pastries and pushed her chair out from the table. A few curious eyes followed their exit, but the conversation at the table continued uninterrupted.

However, as the fates would have it, her dreaded conversation was postponed when the chiming of the doorbell sounded.

"Hang on, Buffy, let me get the door." Dawn sprinted forward a few steps and grasped the handle of the door.

"Wait, Dawn! May be I should-"

She never got to finish her sentence. The door opened and Dawn emitted a loud squeal.

"Oh my GOD!" She exclaimed and, with an exuberant shout, launched herself toward the figure at the door. "Clem! What are you doing here?"

She grabbed the Luu'sken demon and wrapped her arms around him in delight.

"Hey Dawn." Clem smiled and hugged her back.

Buffy moved to get a better view as Clem stepped forward until he stood in front of her and she realized that he was there for her. Whomever it had been on the phone, the unknown voice that had known Spike, had sent Clem to bring her to LA.

"Hey Buffy." he said with his quiet voice.

She wanted to say hello and how glad she was to see him but the words stuck in her throat.

"He's gone." she whispered.

"I know." he replied and pulled her into his arms.
A wall that she hadn't even known she'd built began to crack, then shattered. Because, out of all of her friends, it was Clem who had known Spike as well as she did.

And, in the gentle grasp of the demon's arms, Buffy Summers cried.

Chapter End Notes

Is it weird to cry when you read your own work? I wrote this chapter months ago and it still gets me when I read the last line.

Stay Tuned :)
"She's lied to you," the relentless voice taunted, "you meant nothing to her; she's used you again and again."

Exhausted, Spike put his hands over his ears, but the soft, insistently spoken words could not be blocked.

"Stop it."

As if he had not spoken, Drusilla –no... not Dru, it- it circled around him, lips twisted in a sneer and dark eyes that glittered with malice.

"You ca--" his voice broke and he squeezed his eyes shut as his head lowered in defeat. "You can't control me."

The whispered affirmation echoed in his mind.

_You can't control me. You can't control me._

The hold the First held over him had broken...right?

"Tsk tsk."

The tone of the voice had changed and he felt moisture gather in his eyes; it always hurt him the most when it assumed Buffy's form and spoke with her voice, injected with just the right amount of scorn and repugnance.

She lowered her head until her lips were a hairbreadth from his ear.

"You never learn, do you? Poor, poor" she enunciated the next word slowly, drawing out the 'th' and emphasizing the 'tic' "pathetic William."

_Not real. Not her._ She couldn't know that about him, not…or did she? It doesn't matter because -

He mumbled something and she emitted a low, throaty chuckle.

"What was that you said, William?" His name was said with that snide tone he had known so well.

Eyes tightly closed, he shook his head back and forth in denial.

"Not William." He protested, hating the pleading tone of his voice. "I am not him, not anymore."

"But you are." She contradicted him.

Unwillingly, Spike raised his head and, this time, Cecily faced him.

"What will she think, when she finally sees what a pitiful excuse for a man you were? How could you think she would ever love a man like… William?" Cecily circled him and, warily, Spike
followed her with his eyes, unable to look away. "Meek? Clinging?"

"She- she," he faltered and Cecily looked at him with pity in her eyes.

"She will use you, but she will... never love you." She walked around behind him and, when it appeared around the other side, it was Dru again.

"She will be the end of you, my darling Spike. Don't you see? She will use you, drain you of your strength, all while promising to 'fight the good fight'," she held up two fists and circled them in the air, like a boxer preparing for a match, "and, in the end, you will be nothing but a forgotten bit of dust spinning 'round, like the funnel of a tornado. When she and her little gang of Dudley-Do-Right's ride off into the sunset, you won't even merit a footnote in their little journals."

Hands clasped piously, she hummed a funeral march as she walked around him.

Spike bowed his head, shoulders shaking and she clucked sympathetically.

"There, there, darling, it's not too late; you can pull one over on the nasty little Slayer." She looked at him, her gaze lascivious, rested her palms on her thighs and slinked toward him.

"She thinks she can use you?" Her voice became low, seductive. "You'll show her, won't you? It will be so easy, you can just sidle right up to her and-" she gave an obscene thrust of her hips to finish her thought and chuckled. "You can play her like a violin—just pluck! Pluck! Pluck!" her long, delicate fingers plucked imaginary stings in the air.

"Get the Slayer all 'Oh! Oh! Ohhhhh'-" She thrashed her head from side to side and Spike raised his head.

They locked eyes.

"That's right, my darling. You know all those little moves, you do, moves that get the Slayer all rrrriled-up" her eyes glowed yellow and ridges popped on her forehead; Spike's face changed at the same time.

"And you will drink her lovely, delicious," Dru licked her lip and hummed happily "succulent blood."

"Because, if I don't, she will use me." He whispered.

"She will."

"And I will die."


"And she will live." He bowed his head, a broken man.

"And leave your dust to scatter to the four corners of the earth." Her fingers fluttered gracefully in the air.

Spike's shoulders shook.

"But it doesn't have to be that way." Said Dru, slyly. "If you live, then she will not."

Spike's shoulders continued to shake, the motion getting more pronounced. Dru paused, a fleeting look of confusion on her face.
Chuckles filled the room until the sound was booming laughter.

"Oh…my…she really has you running scared now, doesn't she?"

"What?" the image wavered for a brief second, then Dru was back.

"Look at you. Can't trigger me anymore, can you? I'm not your little marionette," Spike flailed his arms as if they were on strings and laughed again. "I'm not waiting for you to move me about at your will."

"Scared? I am not scared!" The First's borrowed features distorted into a grotesque mask of rage, its voice morphed into something monstrous that reverberated throughout the cavern. "She is nothing. Nothing!"

Spike laughed again.

Once again he was facing Cecily.

"You would let her use you?" Her tone snide as her lip curled with distaste "You weak, pathetic excuse for a vampire. You got a shiny new soul and you are still inferior."

"Give it up, Firsty," Spike said, cheerfully. "I'm not whistling that tune anymore. You're just scared."

She scoffed. "Scared? What makes you so certain?"

"Because she is going to win; you know it and I know it - you just told me 'She. Will. Live.'."

"And the part where you die?"

"Well…" the tip of his tongue rubbed the underside of his top row of teeth in an open-mouthed smirk. "I can live with that, can't you?"

The air in cavern grew heated, dust and debris swirled around between Spike and the incorporeal being. Spike chuckled at outraged expression on the First's face; the figure changed and showed its true-

~Spuffy~

Spike opened his eyes, instantly awake and alert.

Vampires weren't prone to disorientation upon awakening from a dream – no matter how rare or vivid the occurrence - yet, there was no doubt in his mind that the dream wasn't merely a dream, it was another attempt by the First to undermine the Slayer.

Amongst the usual drivel that the First had spouted ("she is using you, you are beneath her, you are a pawn, blah, blah, blah." The First really needed to get some new material if it wanted to throw Spike off his game), two elements stood out.

Firstly, it was worried…very worried.

Secondly, Buffy was going to live.

The truths that the First revealed was all that mattered. The First rarely lied; distorted the truth for its own purposes, definitely, but lies from it were rare. Lies were a human invention and far less painful than truth because Spike knew all too well the truth cut more deeply, more keenly than any lie.
He ignored the fact that he was told he would not survive, even ignored that the First insisted that he was only a pawn, to be used and discarded.

The light in the room was muted, held at bay by the heavy drapes that Buffy must have closed. Carefully, he listened but no sound reached his ears. Her scent, however, still lingered in the air around him but had faded enough to tell him that she had been absent for at least an hour.

Quickly, he had skimmed the note Buffy had left on the pillow beside him - just a simple request that warned him that, if she was right about her hunch, she wanted to have a meeting with the others later that day and she hoped he would stand by her.

As if he had a choice! How could she not realize that leaving her alone was impossible and he was helpless against the pull he felt toward her?

Since the moment he had first glimpsed her at the Bronze he had felt that pull and, whenever he had left Sunnydale, she was still in his thoughts and felt the constant tug back to her.

The First's words repeated in his head in a way that reminds him of an old record needle stuck on a scratched disc of vinyl.

"Because, if I don't, she will use me."

"She will."

"And I will die."

"You. Will. Die."

"And she will live."

A world without Spike seemed apt, he was after all, an aberration; a world without Buffy Summers, however, was unthinkable.

The Slayer would not die a third death and, if he had to die to ensure that it didn't happen, then so be it, but he'd be damned if he wasn't going to do his best to take care of her. A quick visit to LA may be bad timing, but it was necessary. He felt it in his gut.

Buffy would be fine. She had her sister, the "Wanna-Be-A-Slayer's" and her friends…

Once again, his temper rose and his mouth tightened as he remembered the group he had faced the night before, doing their damnedest to convince themselves that they were justified in kicking Buffy out.

Ungrateful traitors, the lot of them!

Bloody hell!

Muttering a few colorful descriptions of the Slayer's friends (and one silent promise to have a word or two with the 'Bit about her insolent behavior or at least try to have a word as he wasn't at the top of her "Friends-Most-Wanted" list these days), he leapt from the bed and began to search the house. The faint aroma of tobacco still hung in the air and he would wager three Sokoke kittens and a Canadian Sphinx that there was a forgotten pack of cigarettes around somewhere.

Minutes later, a thin white stick pressed between his lips near the corner of his mouth (filtered and light, but with no choice in the matter, he took what he could find), he continued to search the room;
having already found his nicotine fix, he now searched the house as entertainment.

There was enough of his pre-souled personality left that enjoyed rummaging through the guilty pleasures (such as the impressive stash of light bondage porn, the likes of which included magazines, props and DVD's) that people liked to hide.

His practical side however, allowed for him to search for and set aside items that might be useful (he knew Buffy would return to her friends, her conscience would never permit a complete abandonment). A neat stack of blankets, a medium-sized box filled with non-perishable food items along with a decent looking first aid kit had begun to accumulate.

The top of the line digital camcorder and tripod in the back of the closet stopped him in his tracks.

Idly, he turned the device in his hands, thumbs brushing lightly against buttons and switches. He moved a few steps to the side, until he stood in front of a full length mirror on the closet door and smirked at the image of a camera suspended in midair.

He thought of Andrew and the corner of his mouth twitched with amusement. Just the day before, while they hid from the light of the sun at the mission, the kid had complained about the final death of his camera's battery and that he had not thought to re-charge while he had uploaded all of his videos to a remote server in LA before the power had gone out.

A flick of his thumb and the small camcorder hummed while Spike raised the device to his eye. The words "BAT LOW" glowed red in the view finder and he snorted, causing a small expulsion of smoke from his nose and mouth.

No use in bringing the Andrew something that would die after five or ten minutes. It would be like promising a small child a visit to Disneyland, only to do a drive by instead. Spike still prided himself on maintaining some of his former self, but he didn't like the idea of seeing the look of disappointment on the kid's face.

"Soul's making me go soft." He said, out loud.

Just the day before, Andrew had chattered away with his "we could've" plans with his camcorder, had the power in SunnyD had stayed on a little longer. Although Buffy was against the whole "documenting the apocalypse", Andrew had stayed optimistic and continued to film the rest of the potentials and Scoobies, he just tried to be a little less visible to the Slayer when he did.

"If we save the world, it would be proof, that she…that we…" Andrew had said, wistfully.

Never one to be an unsung hero, Spike privately agreed, but he would not go against Buffy, not if she wasn't there. He had said it before, there was value in the proof that the recordings Andrew made. A digital etching of "We Were Here". It was selfish of him, but he liked knowing there was proof that he, Spike, William-the-Bloody, had been one of the good guys.

Yeah, right. Too late now. Power is out and the kid wouldn't get much use from a few minutes on there anyway. Barely enough time for them all to tell their story or, if things were to go south, even say goodb…

The glimmer of an idea appeared and he placed the camera on top of the dresser then sat on the bed, fingers sliding another cigarette from the package he had scavenged.

_The First said he would die._

Eyes focused thoughtfully on the camcorder, he flicked his lighter and slowly pulled a long drag.
He could say goodbye. Say a few last words. Like a -

The cigarette dropped from his mouth and he ground it into the carpet with the heel of his boot as he stood up and moved to the camera, his mind already working through the possibilities.

Time was short, but he wasn't planning on delivering an epic-sized monologue. But, there was no power here, so how could he even guarantee that Buffy would see this? He thought of giving to Andrew, but he couldn't risk the chance that the kid would lose the disk.

If only there was someone who could hold it safe or…

…someplace. Like an off-site server. Andrew's server.

"Right." He said the word aloud and nodded to himself.

With the camera in one hand and tripod in the other, he set up the items in front of the bed and mentally scripted the words he wanted to say.

He did a practice recording of the bed and waved his hand in front of the lens to ensure he had the camera working properly and played back the image. It all looked good. He was ready.

He imagined the look on everyone's face - the Watcher would be wary, that tosser Xander would sneer, the Bit would still be angry and they would all be looking at Buffy, silently asking her what she ever saw in chipped chump like him.

Then, he realized that Buffy wouldn't be the first one to see this. It would be Andrew. It wasn't difficult to picture the look on his face.

Spike chuckled. The kid would be in for a surprise.

He set the camera to "play" and sat down.

"Hello Andrew." It was a good start, he thought.

Less than a few minutes later, with the camcorder in hand, the neat pile of foraged items forgotten after he pulled an old army blanket from the horde, he sprinted out of the door and to the nearest sewer grate. Skin tingling from the marginal coverage the threadbare blanket provided, he popped the grate and jumped into the tunnel. By rote, he navigated his way through shadowed alleyways to where he had last left his car while his mind plotted the fastest route to LA.

Soon enough, the Desoto, a black behemoth of machine that was a throw-back to a time when cars were made to last and not crumple when someone sneezed upon it, sped along the highway.

He stared intently out of the small view of black paint that he had scraped from the windshield and thumped the palms of his hands on the steering wheel to the beat of the song playing on the stereo.

For a change, he had opted for Depeche Mode over his usual Joey Ramone or Johnny Rotten and, when 'Just Can't Get Enough" began to play, it evoked a sudden recollection of the night he had first heard the band live.

That night had marked the first time Spike, frustrated and hurt when he discovered Dru had planned a trip to Rome for the sole purpose to meet up with the pretentious Immortal prick, had walked willingly away from Dru. In the past, the song always evoked mixed feelings of anger, rebellion and freedom. Now, he was surprised to find that his ire had faded, like a scar that ached when pressed
upon but, when left alone, was forgotten.

The usual drive from Sunnydale to LA took upwards of two hours, but Spike closed the distance in nearly half the time, pushing the De Soto to its limits. This trip was important and, with the showdown with the First just around the corner, he felt it was time sensitive.

His girl was going to battle and he meant to stand by her side, even if his gut (and his dreams) told him it would be the last time he stood anywhere.

If he knew the Slayer (and he did), she was not one to stand around and file her nails and wait while her enemy planned its next move. She liked to take control, a side of her with which he was intimately familiar. He could have stayed in Sunnydale and tracked her down, offered his services, but he knew that if she had wanted his help, she would have asked.

He trusted her to get through the present, just as he trusted his instincts on how to get her through the future.

The sun was high when he arrived in the outskirts of the city. He did not drive directly into downtown; he turned toward an isolated factory and wharf district that ran along an inlet. When he reached the furthest factory, a one story structure, he pulled up to a large entry way and blasted his horn three times.

Two demons, one short, the other tall, impeccably dressed in expensive suits, immediately came out through a side door and pushed open the wider entry way so he could drive inside. Behind him, the doors were rolled to a close and he pulled into a vacant slot.

By the time he was out of the car, the two men had moved to stand by an interior door. At a steady pace, he walked toward them and the suit on the left held the door open for him.

Spike looked over his shoulder and the shorter demon's eyes widened before he dropped his gaze respectfully. Spike chuckled, tickled that he still had the power to intimidate. If the place wasn't warded so heavily against all things supernatural, he would have broken out the game face just for the heck of it.

The only powers that worked properly in this building belonged to the male demon that owned it.

Spike walked through the door and grinned at the familiar form in front of him.

"I see the move to LA was good for you" Spike asked, gesturing at the expensive suit, a change from the usual loose leather and flannel ensemble that Clem favored in Sunnydale.

"Well, let's just say, if I wasn't on a self-imposed kitten-free diet, I could afford to dine on Himalayan's four times a day." Clem responded, somewhat wistfully. "The Boss pays well. Thank you for the recommendation, Spike. I have only been here just over a week and, I will say, it feels like a good fit. Good to see you Spike."

"Yeah, you too."

The interior room served as a lobby of sorts, holding crescent-shaped reception desk, manned by a petit female with a sheet of long, ebony hair that framed a thin face and vulpine features.

"Do you have an appointment?" her voice had a slight Indonesian accent (which, courtesy of his soul, brought forth guilty memories of a bloody massacre he and Dru had started in Jakarta nearly a half century ago) and pursed her cherry-red lips with annoyance when Spike shook his head.
Normally, he would have called ahead as these were not the types that took kindly to surprise visits, but with the sun high in the sky and the Sunnyhell power company on an indefinite vacation, it couldn't be helped.

"I'm sorry," her gleeful smile indicated otherwise, revealing a row of sharp, pointed teeth. "Without an appointment, I'm afraid."

"The Boss will see him." Clem offered then added at Spike's start of surprise, "as soon as you were spotted, he was notified."

"Spotted?"

Clem jerked his thumb jovially toward the doors that led out toward the garage. "Your transport isn't exactly low-key."

The phone rang and the receptionist tapped her headset while she briskly slid a clipboard across her desk. Her nails, he noted, were the same cherry color as her lipstick and he couldn't believe he noticed a detail like that! Damn Slayerette's were rubbing off on him, he supposed.

"J'Thar, Kli'nghar and Associates" she began pleasantly into the receiver but directed a displeased frown toward Spike ("Sign In please" she said in an aside) and continued, without taking a breath, over the phone "How can I direct your call?"

Spike signed and slid the clipboard back to the receptionist, who scrutinized the roster as if she could see the future. She sniffed and nodded, grudgingly. Her hand slid under the desk and, as if by magic, a bell chimed as the steel elevator doors opened. Silently, the steel doors opened and Spike stepped inside.

"You coming?" Spike asked.

"Not yet. Boss is sending me on an errand. It shouldn't take too long though. Perhaps I will see you before you leave?"

It occurred to Spike that it would be the last time he saw Clem.

"I hope so."

The doors slid to a close.

The ground floor was actually the top level since the structure itself was ten stories deep and, as the elevator descended, a bell chimed for each level it bypassed.

"...comes now, singing 'Mony mony'." A soft voice, at odds with the music coming from the speakers, alternately sang and hummed, which was odd, because Spike was alone.

"Shoot 'em down...around, c'mon Mony."

He was alone, but he knew that voice. The first few words had been soft, but clear however, the rest became garbled…filled with static, the radio equivalent of audio "snow".

"Buffy?"

"...love...right now." The words faded away and the upbeat music continued interspersed with the chime of the elevator as it descended.
His mind was playing tricks on him, he decided, he was still alone and the mirror only reflected an empty scene. Still, he could easily picture Buffy singing along to this song. She had once drunkenly begged him to sing it and confessed that she was an Idol fan.

Of course, he refused.

Still, as much as he complained about the '80's rocker stealing his look, Spike still knew all the words to all the songs.

The music picked up tempo and he couldn't resist. He considered his Idol impersonation to be better than the real deal itself.

"I said Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!", he closed his eyes and imagined she was right in front of him. "Cause you make me feel –"

The music continued, but the elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

He had arrived.

The foyer was more opulent and luxurious than any high-powered corporate office. The floors were marble, black and glossy with streaks of white and grey; the walls were the color of a muted bronze. Familiar with the layout, Spike did not hesitate as he stepped out of the elevator, walked across the foyer and stood at the top of a short, wide staircase.

A squat figure, dressed in Armani, ascended the stairs and greeted him formally, touched the tips of his fingers to his forehead and performed a series of elaborate hand gestures in which he also touched his chin and finally chest. In return, Spike performed an abbreviated form of the ritual, merely touching his forehead, chin and chest. He couldn't pretend to perform the actions with the grace and fluidity that the ritual required and he would not insult the demon in front of him by trying.

Once finished, both each faced the other, the smaller of the two spread his lips in a fleeting smile.

"Greetings, Slayer of Slayers."

Uncomfortable, Spike looked away.

"Thought I told you the last time I was here that I don't use that title anymore, Marv."

"So you did, Vampire, although, you never mentioned why." Spike said nothing and the Fhrewh'ard continued. "Something tells me, that it's a story that will have to wait for another time."

A long time Spike thought, but nodded agreeably anyway.

Marv turned away and motioned for Spike to follow him down the short staircase and to a set of large pair of ornate wooden doors.

The next room was spacious but less...civilized...than the room they had left. The whole room looked as if it had been cut from stone – the same black stone tile webbed with fine gold lines provided the floor and the walls. The furniture around the room varied from low, cushioned seats to large, plain sturdy chairs of wood and everything in between to include hollows in the stone walls and typical human couches.

It was a room that was more for comfort rather than show, a waiting room that could comfortably seat any type of demon. Marv's clientele was as varied as the seating within the room.
In one corner was a large cabinet. Marv went to the cabinet, opened a few doors and pulled out two tumblers. Near his knee, he opened a small door, pulled out a dark glass bottle and splashed some liquid into one tumbler; from another door, he pulled a different bottle and poured an inky, sludge-like substance into the remaining tumbler.

Meanwhile, Spike sat upon a long couch and waited for the Fhrewh'ard to join him. Making small talk, he began with Clem.

"Clem seems to enjoy his new job."

"He is proving useful," Marv began in his gravely voice. "I thank you for the referral...Protocol Advisors are hard to come by, especially a Luu'sken one."

It was an well-known fact that Luu'sken demons possessed a talent for language that was unparalleled, along with an unflappable disposition and an innate understanding of demon culture, which put them in high demand.

"Clem mentioned Ami-gi was upon him," Spike referred to the Luu'sken term for "full maturity", a period when the Luu'sken male was ready to settle down and find a mate. For Clem, this first meant gainful employment and a steady income. "I thought I would send him to you first."

"Not two hours after I had signed him to contract, a new by employee unknowingly insulted a Draconi by turning his back. Were it not for your friend, my business would have suffered a substantial loss. He not only dissolved the situation before it escalated into bloodshed, he convinced the Draconi to keep doing business with us. I have put Clem in charge of all New Employee Orientations. He will also offer ongoing trainings to my staff on proper etiquette when dealing with various demon cultures."

Next, he inquired about the Fhrewh'ard demon's mate.

"She requires a new dress and is meeting with her designer; her kin is to be mated next week."

Spike grinned and Marv shrugged.

"Personally, I think there are only so many variations on the burlap and blood larvae combination, but she seems thrilled with the design."

Spike chuckled and the squat demon gave him a considering look and handed Spike a crystal tumbler. Spike tipped the glass and hummed appreciatively.

"How do you manage to keep the blood so warm and unclotted? You put most demon bars to shame."

Marv waved his hand dismissively, but Spike noticed that his companion's usual dour expression softened somewhat.

"Another time blood-drinker - it's been less than a year, I didn't expect you back so soon."

Spike sipped slowly from his glass before he replied.

"I thought it would have been longer as well." He admitted.

"You left us so abruptly last time," the Fhrewh'ard began but Spike interrupted before he could continue.
"I was in no condition to be around others." The year before Spike had made a brief stop here before returning to Sunnydale burdened with his new soul.

"The offer of refuge was genuine."

"And appreciated." Spike saluted the shorter demon with his glass. "But as I had said, I was in no condition to be around others."

"Duly noted." Marv tipped the contents of his glass into his mouth in one large gulp. In one fluid motion, he rose, gathered the two, now empty, glasses and walked to the cabinet. He turned toward a large rectangular glass tank that held several large hand-sized spiders. Sensing their lives were in danger, the tarantula's scampered nervously around the terrarium.

"Care for a snack?" he asked as he slid the heavy glass top aside so he could reach inside.

"Pass." Spike replied. He never harmed spiders, having a particularly superstitious nanny had instilled a healthy respect for the arachnids. In fact, it was a superstition that he had shared with Buffy's mum, something they had discovered when he once came to her aid after hearing her scream when he passed by her gallery one evening. He thought she was being attacked only to find her standing on a chair in her office. He disposed of the offending creature and they spent the remainder of the evening discussing mythology and art.

"Can I assume, Vampire, your visit isn't to get reacquainted?" Marv snatched a large tarantula with black and white segmented legs that twitched spastically while he pulled it out of the terrarium.

"Right." Spike nodded, expression switching from relaxed to "all-business". "Remember that favor I did for you in Rome back in '86?"

Marv turned, with the spider clutched in this stubby metacarpus.

"I do," he replied, cautiously.

With a face like Marv's it was difficult to read his expression, but Spike picked up on the disapproval in the Fhrewh'ard's tone. His pause was brief, but he proceeded ahead.

"I've come to collect."

The spider wriggled free from the hand and landed upon the floor. Frantically it skittered away under the couch Spike sat upon. At the same time, just a few feet from Spike, a wooden chair carved from oak combusted. Startled, Spike stood as a few sparks floated toward him.

"Oi! Flammable vampire here!"

He had forgotten about the Fhrewh'ard demon's innate talent for the manipulation of fire and, as Marv owned the building and had personally set the wards, the elemental magic continued uninhibited.

"What do you expect, Spike?" Marv growled and the heat from the burning chair grew hotter. "You come to me and demand payment on my debt."

"I expected," Spike brushed a few small embers from his long leather coat and scowled at the demon "that you would 'pay up' as it were, thought you were a demon of honor."

In a hollow carved into the wall, a fire blazed upon the stone seat, a testament to how upset the short demon had become.
"You question my HONOR?"

"You were quite clear that the favor meant you owed me a substantial debt, collectable anytime I desired." Spike snapped, irritated.

The fire in the wall had grown so hot, the stone began to glow. Abruptly, the fire disappeared and smoke drifted from the small pile of ash that had been only a chair just a minute before. Marv slumped, a picture of dejection and resignation.

"Which will you take vampire? My mate? Or my daughter?"

Astonished, Spike stared at the demon until understanding set in and then he to restrain his mirth. In the 80's, Marv had yet to meet his future mate and had recklessly promised anything Spike wanted as payment for a favor. When Spike had joked "wife or first-born will do well enough, mate.", he had never dreamed that the demon had taken him seriously.

"Is that what got you all riled up? I don't want your mate…or your daughter for that matter –"

"And why not?" Offended, Marv bristled.

Mentally Spike rolled his eyes; he had forgotten how sensitive Marv was about his mate – even amongst the Fhrewh'ard, she was considered unattractive and cursed with an unfortunate skin tone, the combination of which had made her the object of scorn and rejection by her species. When she was mated to Marv, a leader of one of the most respected and powerful of clans of their kind, she was reluctantly given a small measure of respect but she still carried the scars of ridicule.

"Nothing is wrong with your missus or your offspring Marv–" Spike held up a hand when Marv looked like he was about to interrupt. "I need you to make a withdrawal."

After a long look, Marv turned away and went to a sliding door, motioning toward Spike to follow behind him.

"I need a computer as well" he added as an afterthought.

Marv paused.

"Shall we make a list, Vampire?" he asked, wryly. "Anything else? Coffee, tea, more blood?"

Spike grinned. "Well if you taking orders…more blood would be nice."

Marv nodded.

"I don't suppose you have those deep fried onion-flower things?" He chuckled at Marv's incredulous look. "Just kidding, Marv. Blood will be fine."

Chapter End Notes

Yep – went shopping with Canon a little. How much time passed when the power went
out and the battle with the first? No idea – but in this fic, it was a couple of weeks, give or take a day.

Stay tuned :)


Chapter Eight Aftershock

Chapter Notes

A/N: My cart runneth over!

Disclaimer: It is what it is and it is not mine.

Warning: Dawn's a rambler (and a hair puller) – forgive her, she is just a teensy bit wigged out right now and this is how she compensates. *shrugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 8

Aftershock

From the journal of Dawn Summers, June 29, 2003

Okay.

I am the first to admit that I am not the dedicated journal-keeper that I was, once upon an eighth grade, because I saw no point in maintaining a record of my life which, until that point in time, had become a complete and utter lie.

Sure, the memories weren't real per se, but I still remember them; I have those monks to thank for that.

Is it possible to miss something that was never real?

Or could this be a metaphysical question (Yes, I know a little about metaphysics - Tara told me about a class she was taking once over a Latte at the coffee shop. She was awesome that way.) equivalent to the whole "we-are-just-a-brain-in-a-vat-being-poked-and-prodded-by-an-evil-genius and none of this is real anyway" theory or what I like to call "if a mystical ball of energy has unreal memories of writing in a journal, does that make the fake memories real?"

Was there a third gunman on the grassy knoll? Is Schrödinger's cat in the box dead or alive or both at the same time? (Tara made learning fun, discussions of metaphysics branched into fun debates. She would have made an awesome teacher.)

Jeez, I could have filled up pages and pages in my journal just going around and around with the idea.

If I had kept them.

However, in a stupid, and oft regretted, fit of teen angst, I burned them.
(If I had kept them, they would have contained a true accounting of how I learned about the word 'oft'. It involves an embarrassed century old vampire, an unpublished book of poems and an unbreakable vow - which I totally would have broken if I was still writing in my journal – with a double-crossed pinky swear. I wish I had photos. Or a scanner.)

So forgive me if I ramble on and on, but a lot just happened and I am feeling a little all over the place at the moment. I have a lot of emotions to process.

Before TBR, otherwise known as 'The Big Reveal' and the catalyst for an identity crisis of apocalyptic proportions (literally apocalyptic!), I could always count on my journal for letting me sort out the confusing events of my life.

Big Sister not letting me tag-along on her annual Icecapade birthday pilgrimage with Dad? Gripe in my journal and take advantage of uninterrupted 'Mom and Dawn' time.

Xander patting me on the head for the millionth time while snuggling up with his ex-demon hottie girlfriend? Write in my journal, shed a tear (or five) and cheer up because he promised to take me to the petting zoo to see the new bunnies, which weirdly guaranteed an Anya-Free day.

I have (oft) regretted doing and saying a lot of things since I found out I was only a few months old, burning my journals being just one.

Take these first few paragraphs, nothing but drabbles of nothing, but it feels good write again.

Yep, the monks made me from Buffy, so I definitely got some of her finer traits; she and I are neck and neck when it comes to the "finding the point" scale. A big 'ole eight I would say, even a nine...'cause I still haven't gotten to the point have I?

My point is this...

I, Dawn Summers, am a terrible sister.

A waste of a ball of energy made flesh, if you ask me.

However, with the exclusion of the whole "let's throw Buffy from the house" debacle (don't worry - I might write an upbeat journal entry, but I don't think I can ever forgive myself for that show of disloyalty), I thought I was doing pretty good lately. I thought we were doing good. Like, finally we clicked and were as close as sisters...real sisters and not the made-up and magically forced into your memory kind.

Can I even emphasize what that means?

From the moment I found out the reality about myself and my origins, I became suspicious about everything I ever took to be the truth.

First, the obvious doubt: did Buffy and Mom even love me? Or did they just think they did because the monks made them think so? What about Dad? I had all of these memories of him calling me Princess or Dawn Treader (Narnia was our thing; Buffy had Icecapades while Dad and I shared a love of all things Narnia) and how much he loved me, but when Mom died, he barely thought of me. Did some part of him know that I was never really his?

Once I set down the path of my angst-y-stential crisis, I examined everything.

Was blue really my favorite color? Or was it something else? Perhaps my favorite color was purple
or puce or periwinkle or chartreuse. (Bee tee dubs, it is not chartreuse; that shade of green is so not in my color wheel.) How could I know for sure?

From colors, I examined my taste in books, movies and music (bonus discovery! I am NOT a New Kids on the Block fan! Epic fail from the monks there!) Nothing was left to chance.

Even food.

Once, at Janice's, her mom made banana Splits, supposedly a childhood favorite of mine, but, after I took one bite, I found I hated banana’s. Blech.

Thus began the dark period of my life in which I discovered I am allergic to Strawberries (I'm a little sad here…the small bit I got to taste was out of this world before the hives broke out and I was taken to the ER); I adore anchovies (mmmm anchovies) and peas make me want to puke. Yep, I just threw up in my mouth a little at the thought of those nasty green buggers.

So, then my dilemma became "where did those imagined likes/dislikes that the monks first gifted me with come from?"

Elementary, dear journal.

The monks made me from Buffy, so that is where all my traits stemmed, like I was some kind of Slayer clone (but without all of the cool agility, strength and weapon ability). Buffy, who loves banana’s, thinks peas are perfection, loves the color blue and worshiped NKOTB (still does). True fact - when she thinks no one is around, she still hums 'Hang Tough' and 'The Right Stuff'. I have proof or, I had proof until the mouth of hell choked on Sunnydale and took my Princess Jasmine Cassette Player and Recorder with it, because there are some things a little sister never deletes or throws away (I was saving it for her wedding) if she can help it.

When I realized the monks made me into a clone of Buffy's likes and dislikes, I did not take it well. So, yeah, I became a brat.

An angry, screaming, resentful, petty brat.

Not my finest years, because after mom died, it became worse. It was easier to talk to the stray spider that hung out in the corner of my bedroom window (I named her Charlotte because all spiders should be named Charlotte) than my sister. Turns out, spiders are good listeners.

So…

What does my behavior have to do with the value of the yen in china?

Nothing.

Everything.

(And, yes, I know the Yen is used in Japan, but oh my god, that is so not the point!)

The point is my big sister was in the middle of a total eclipse of the heart and I, Dawn Summers, chose to ignore it. Well, sure, I called it "giving her space" and showing the "mature side of Dawn". Instead, I should have pestered her with my annoying younger sister superpower (uh…I call this superpower 'Being an Annoying Younger Sister') until she broke down, then I could have comforted her because she was in. So. Much. Pain.
I mean, I think I could have totally been support-o-sis!

Sure, I might have had a hard time holding back the moniker "rat-bastard" when referring to Spike. And I suppose, I probably would've tried to console her by telling her she was better off without the "soulless devil scum-bag". Then I would have reminded her that I was never going to forgive him for his attempted rape.

Okay.

See?

I repeat…

I am a terrible sister. A waste of a green (which I envision as more of an earthy sage color and, please god no, not chartreuse) ball of mystic energy made flesh because I would have turned my big sister's grief into a very special episode of How Angry Dawn Was With Spike.

Literally, one could have made me into a lifetime movie titled "It's All About Me: My Sister Was Almost Raped (The Dawn Summer's Story)".

And, if I had been writing in my journal over the last couple of years, I would have realized that by now because I have watched enough Dawson's Creek that I am sure I could surpass them in the Self Analysis category.

I am angry at Spike. I miss him. I feel guilty for missing him. I am angry at myself because I feel guilty for missing him. And around and around and around. I am not a moron, I know that deep down, it was easier to be angry at Spike than it was to admit that it did not matter if I forgave him or not, it was Buffy's choice not mine. Still, I couldn't bear to stomach yet another betrayal toward my sister (the first command in the Sister Code of Conduct – Thou Shalt Not Forgive Those Who Attempt To Rape Thou's Sister - even if said sister forgave him.)

Buffy and I were finally in a good place, which is why she never let me see how much pain she was in and my staunch refusal to accept that she forgave Spike would have gotten in the way. I get that now.

My heroic, larger than life (yet two inches shorter than me), blonde – bombshell of a big sister tried to protect that, protect us – our relationship - by keeping the full scope of her grief hidden.

For as far back as I can remember (including those wretched falsified memories the monks planted, although, I will admit that they would be an exact accounting of the events in my life, had I really been born Dawn Summers), my sister does not cry in front of others. Her eyes can fill up and a few tears can leak from her eyes (don't get me started on how unfair it was that Buffy still looked gorgeous when she did that little trick) but she never out and out cries - like snot leaking from the nose, a splotchy-face and puffy-red-eyes crying. I am talking full out bawling.

Never or, at least, not in front of others.

When Dad left, Buffy was upset but she spent more time consoling mom and me. The night he left, I heard muffled sounds of sobs coming from her room, but when I went to have my own epic meltdown, she left her room, crawled into my bed and ran her hands through my hair until I fell asleep.

When Mom died, I knew she must have cried, saw the puffy-eyes, but still never actually saw her break down. Besides my mom, I could count on one finger the number of people around me who had ever seen Buffy lose control and cry…and he died saving our lives just a few short months ago.
Until today.

Today, just a mere forty-five minutes ago, Clem arrived.

In Sunnydale, Clem was…well I guess I would say that he was the closest Spike had to a BFF (yeah…my acronym here, not Spike's).

Anyways, I answer the door and there he is! Clem!

Dressed in a fitted charcoal suit, like he was heading to a meeting in the boardroom of some Fortune 500 company, but Clem just the same; I had really missed him, droopy ears, saggy skin, pink eyes and all.

But, when I heard Buffy, voice choked up and saturated with pain, it started to hit me.

"He's gone." She'd said.

God, I have never, ever heard my big sister sound so small, so lost, not even when mom died.

"I know." He'd replied.

And like a ton of trucks, two things hit me.

Buffy was grieving.

And, although I knew she had felt something for Spike, that she was sad he was gone, I never quite grasped that she really loved him.

I stood, frozen with shock, as I watched my sister let go and my heart broke for her. Clem wrapped his arms around her and she practically disappeared into him because, let's face facts, Clem is a big guy and Buffy is tiny.

I look around and notice the foyer is filling with people. Slayers, eyes all sad, as if Buffy's pain was no surprise to them; Giles, Willow and Xander, wearing identical expressions of worry and concern; a few of the staff, eyes wide at the sight of Clem; and Andrew, with so much compassion in his eyes and not a little relief as well.

Andrew seemed to know what to do. I swear, for all of his childish diversions, he is sometimes the most grown-up of everyone. He moved through the crowd, murmured quietly to people as he went and, in an instant, the foyer began to clear.

Within a few heartbeats, the door to the formal sitting room ajar, Clem escorted Buffy inside and Andrew closed the door tactfully behind them.

I could still hear my sister, great shuddering heartbroken sobs and the low timber of Clem's voice, muffled by the doors and tears filled my eyes.

Yeah, so here is where I stop, 'cause I am all with the choked up right now.

That, and Buffy is standing at the door with her "We Need To Talk About Something" face.

"Dawnie?"
With the tips of her fingers, she pushed gently on Dawn's bedroom door and, since it had already been slightly ajar, it swung wide soundlessly. Dawn lay on her stomach upon her bed, a notebook open in front of her and pen clamped between her teeth. It was a pose reminiscent of Dawn's early teen years and Buffy didn't realize how much she had missed it.

Startled, Dawn looked up, brushed aside a few tears and quickly scribbled a few words before closing the notebook.

She turned to gently shut her sister's door and then pulled a desk chair toward Dawn's bed and sat so she faced her sister, who had changed positions on the bed and was now seated on the edge of the bed.

"I have something to tell you and I need for you to listen, because I don't think I can say it twice." Her voice was shaky and a little hoarse from her recent breakdown. When Dawn nodded, she took an unsteady breath.

"Clem came here because I saw...something." she looked down at her fingers, twisted together and sternly told herself to get it together. Tears blurred her vision and she blinked them away. When she could see, she was surprised to see Dawn hand her a tissue.

She took the tissue but rather than use it, she just blinked a few times and hoped she could get through the next few minutes.

"Let me back up for a minute." She looked down at the tissue and folded it in half. "Before Sp-the battle with the First – Andrew had been working on videos. Remember? Recording me and...everyone," Dawn nodded and she continued "just before the power went out, he saved all of them on a computer server in LA that Warren had set up. Then, a few weeks ago, he remembered them and he made me copies...of some of the recordings."

She stopped and the ticking of the alarm clock on the bedside filled the room and she was grateful when Dawn stayed quiet.

"They were of Spike."

She looked down and folded the tissue in half again then toyed with the square and smiled.

"Some were just snippets - brief moments where Andrew had captured him talking to the girl's, demonstrating some moves or just being himself. Others were longer - one where he was showing Andrew how to use a sword, one where it was just him...even one when we were sparring in the graveyard."

She unfolded the tissue and smoothed it out on her lap, then folded the corners, lost for a moment in the memory. It wasn't until Dawn shifted that she blinked and bit her lip.

"There was one last one, one Spike made himself. For me. Right before..." before he saw me kiss Angel, before the battle, before he sacrificed himself. "...he died." Her voice cracked on the last word and Dawn made a small sound. Buffy held up a trembling hand. "Dawn, please...don't. Not now. I just can't even..."

She focused on the tissue and smoothed it out on her lap again, and took a few shuddering breaths. Please, just let me get through the next few minutes, she prayed.

"It was a will. Spike made a will for me...for us- me and you. He also gave me a phone number to call if he...died." again her voice cracked and she knew, it would never get any easier to say it out loud. "I called the number and spoke with...someone. Turns out, it is Clem's boss. He sent Clem here..."
to come and get me...us. Clem works in LA and he is going to fly us there on his boss' private jet so I can...meet him. Clem's boss. Marv."

Reluctantly, she looked up into Dawn's eyes, wide with surprise and a whole slew of other emotions Buffy did not want to identify.

"You don't have to come with me." Buffy said, quietly. "Not if you don't want..."

"Of course I'll go with you, Buffy." his sister's voice was firm, carried the exact tone she needed to get through the moment.

"Okay." She allowed a smile and then stood. "We are leaving in just over an hour. We shouldn't be gone too long, so just pack a few things." Impulsively, she reached forward and squeezed her sister's arm. "Thank you. For listening and for...not...thank you for listening."

She turned toward the door and was unprepared for the impact when Dawn launched herself off the bed and wrapped her arms around Buffy's waist from behind.

"Mnorry." She said into the small of her back, her words muffled by the fabric of Buffy's shirt. "Mmomomorry."

Buffy reached back and tried to grasp her sister's arm, but Dawn only clutched tighter.

"Dawn? What do you mean?"

"Mmpmomorry." she repeated.

Quickly, Buffy turned until she hugged Dawn, her sister's long hair brushing her cheek.

"I'm so, so, sorry."

"Why?" Buffy felt genuinely confused.

"Because I get it now. What you have felt and why -" a small, choked sob escaped her then she continued "why you felt like you had to hold back from us. From me."

"Oh. Dawn, I can't-" her voice cracked a little and she dreaded the breakdown that would happen if she continued. Before she could continue, Dawn pulled back from the hug.

"I know, and I don't expect you to, not right now but I want you to know that I am here -to listen, to talk or not do either of those if that is what you need."

Buffy took a deep breath and resolved to not fall apart.

"I will remember that." She said softly.

As much as Buffy hoped Willow, Giles and Xander would listen as passively as Dawn, she knew it was futile.

Andrew and Clem stood outside the door, pretending to chat while really they were just looking for an excuse to eavesdrop.

It wasn't difficult. Willow, apparently was nearby on the other side of the door, while Giles' voice carried clearly through the doors.
"So...uh...LA, huh? Buffy told me you got a job there?" Andrew said, after the conversation around the weather in LA versus the weather in New York died a valiant death.

"Yes. I work in as an advisor for my boss." Clem smiled, to soften the short tone of his words. He was reluctant to reveal any more about the exact nature of his job.

"You called a number. What number?" from Willow.

Andrew gave him a considering look, then nodded sagely.

"Ah. Luu'skens make excellent advisors. I bet others have already tried to recruit you away."

"My boss pays me well." Clem stated. The conversation sputtered to a halt when the next words filtered through the door.

"Who is this Marv?" from Giles, accusingly, as if Buffy was hiding something. "He must be a demon. You can't go there Buffy, a Slayer walking alone-"

"As he should." Andrew said and bit his lip as he looked at the closed door.

"I won't be alone. I will have Dawn and Clem" Buffy rationalized and Andrew clenched his fists when he heard the pleading tone of her voice. He knew she wasn't pleading for permission, but pleading for acceptance, for her mentor to trust her. Giles, however, continued as if she had not spoken.

"- into demon territory. It must be a trap."

"It's not a trap."

Xander murmured something quietly to himself but Andrew could not make out the words.

"Of course it's a trap!" Giles exploded and Clem scowled at the door.

"Oh, for the love of - It. Is. Not. A. Trap." Buffy snapped.

Immediately, Andrew and Clem shared a smile.

"You show them, Buffy." Clem whispered.

"Atta girl" Andrew cheered quietly.

Both turned when they heard the repetitive thumping coming from another part of the house, then Faith talking.

"Going on a trip? Let me get that." A few moments later, Faith appeared at the end of the hall, heading toward the foyer, carrying a large suitcase trailed by Dawn, with a rolling carryall.

"How long did you think you would be gone." Andrew asked.

"Uh...one night, no more than two." Clem replied faintly. "Maybe the big suitcase is for Dawn and Buffy?"

"Nope." Andrew smirked. "Buffy already packed and Joe took the luggage out to the limo already.

Faith appeared again and grinned when she saw them loitering at the end of the hall. Andrew placed a finger on his lips and pointed at the closed door.
"...really think that is a good idea, Buffy?" from Willow and they all rolled their eyes simultaneously.

"If I had a dollar every time I heard that little phrase." muttered Faith.

"...do you know anything about him? Other than that he is Clem's boss? And Spike knew him."

Giles scoffed at Willow’s words.

"That should be the reason to stay away."

A loud smash had the small group outside the door jump back in surprise, then Buffy's voice, low and furious carried through the door.

"That's it! I. Have. Had. It. I am NOT asking for permission, I am NOT offering an explanation and I am NOT looking for approval. I am going to LA. Dawn is coming with me. NO," she said this as if someone was going to interrupt. "No, I do not want to hear another word. I am going and you cannot stop me."

"Go, B!" Faith cheered softly, grin splitting across her face. She and Andrew did a quiet high-five, palms barely touching.

"Now, just a minute," Giles' started, but Buffy interrupted, this time her voice close. The trio, jumped back from the door and tried to find something to do.

"Get out of here!" Andrew hissed toward Clem while he pushed him down the hall. "I don't want them to see you and find some reason to start questioning your 'intentions'. You don't need to be pulled into this.." he circled a finger toward the closed door, "...drama too."

"I think I will-" Clem protested, but stopped when Andrew pointed toward the end of the hall.

"Go." he commanded.

Eyes troubled, Clem went.

"No," Buffy said, coldly. "We're done here."

Relieved, Andrew followed Clem.

"You can't just walk away..." "Watch me."

The door opened and Buffy walked out, head held high. Giles made to follow her, but Faith slipped behind Buffy as she walked away and stood in his way.

"Give her space, Giles." her voice was soft but determined.

At the end of the hall, Buffy paused near Clem. "Just give me a few minutes, then we will leave."

"Sure, Buffy, take your time."

Impulsively, Buffy hugged him and whispered a quick thanks into his ear. Then she went to her room.

Her bags were in the car and she had caught a glimpse of Dawn waiting near the door when she left Clem, so there wasn't a lot she could do except pack up the laptop top computer that rested on her
bed. She got inside her room and closed the door, then leaned back, eyes closed. She gave her self a moment to get centered, then opened her eyes and stared at the laptop.

"Fuck it." she said out loud.

In a second, she was on the bed, turning the computer on and opening the small leather pouch where she kept the CDs filled with recordings of Spike. There were not many, the collection seemed woefully inadequate, but they were all she had and she carefully handled each one. Gently, she slid the last disc from the pouch and placed it into the CD drive.

He spoke to the camera, spoke words she had almost memorized to the point where she could mouth along as he talked.

"Hello Andrew." she whispered as Spike's eyes sparkled mischievously. She continued whispering along with the image of Spike as he proclaimed the recording as his last Will and Testament, instructed Andrew on what he needed to do and felt her heart twist at the look of pain in his eyes when he spoke about her dying.

"Hello Slayer." he said and she stopped whispering, her expression rapt as she watched him on the screen.

"I've called you a lot of things over the years - Bitch, Stick-In-The-Mud, Pain in my ass," he chuckled, then his voice softened "Goldilocks, Luv, Pet. I wish, though, just once, that I could have called you..." a wistful expression crossed his face then he shrugged. She knew what he wanted to say though.

Mine.

"Well," he continued as he looked around the bedroom. "Power is out here and I don't have much time." he leaned forward, eyes focused a little to the side and nodded. "Little red light is flashing, so I wager I have just a few minutes left."

"It seems the First thought it could play with me. I had my self a little visit or dream or something, but it was definitely the First. Tried all its usual tricks," he paused for a moment and Buffy shuddered when she imagined what cruel words the First flung at Spike, then he rolled his eyes. "But the First seemed pretty certain on one point. I am going to die." There was a small pause and he looked directly into the lens of the camera.

"I know the last thing you need is another man leaving you, but believe me when I tell you this, it will be for the best. The alternative is-" he closed his eyes and, for what seemed the hundredth time, she wondered what he meant. He shook his head as his eyes opened, his expression, deadly. "It is for the best."

His gaze went off-center again and he scowled. "Damn light is like a timer counting down." he muttered.

"So, if you are watching this and I am dead," she cringed at the ease with which he spoke the word, "then someone should be contacting you. I am leaving for LA after this" he nodded his head toward her, toward the camera, "ends. I will let them know how to contact you. I've lived a long time, Buffy and though I might not have shown it in Sunnydale, I am not without some means."

The corners of his lips crooked up.

"Didn't expect that did you? Acted like I lived hand to mouth, didn't I? Always making the Watcher
"Watching the Watcher's face as he grudgingly forked over a bit of dosh from time to time? Well, a guy's got to have fun, don't he? And, seeing your eyes sparkle with righteous indignation whenever you had to pay me, well..." he bit the inside of his lip and leered, "that was the highlight of my day."

He cleared his throat.

"If my friend doesn't call you soon, call this number." he rattled off a series of numbers. "He will know what to do. Guy owes me a favor, owes me a BIG favor and I'm going to collect. He is a bit of a big-wig among his kind and keeps to himself. He's not going to like that I am bringing a Slayer practically to his doorstep, but when I tell him it's my dying wish, he will follow through."

Each time she heard this part, that familiar fury swept through her. This guy, this...Marv, knew Spike would die and did nothing to stop it. She was positive that Spike would give him all of her contact information...and he still did nothing.

"Buffy...just...be careful, yeah? If he comes to you, that's one thing, but if you are going to him...remember what we talked about, that day back in the crypt. There are rules."

Buffy nodded.

"It's not a grand fortune or anything, but I am leaving it all to you. I want to...take care of you and Dawn. I don't want you to worry, not anymore. Shit, I would have signed it all over to you after you came back if I didn't think you would have thrown it right back at me. Try to find sometime to get away, even if it is just for a little bit. Take Dawn and go on a vacation, see some of those places you, Dawn and your Mum used to dream about going to. Be happy."

"And lastly, Buffy...I lo-"

The camera cut off and the screen went blank.

Buffy closed the lid of the laptop, gathered the cords and placed everything into the case. She placed the strap over her shoulder and left her room.

Halfway down the stairs, she heard the raised voices and would have kept on walking...until she heard Andrew's raised voice.

"...even listen to what you are saying? She is a grown woman-"

"-who has responsibilities that she willfully chooses to ignore!"

"She is NOT ignoring them. Out of anyone, never have I met a person who is more aware of her responsibilities! She is only going-"

"Okay, everyone just take a breath. Giles, listen to Andrew. I think he has a point-" this from Xander.

Buffy turned toward the hallway that would take her to the arguing.

"Xander, she needs to be here...remember, we have plans to get the council going? Giles wanted Buffy to talk to the girls tonight and let them know where they will be going..."

"What do you mean?" this was from Kennedy. "I think you misunderstood, Willow. We had our
own meeting last night and I think we all decided that..."

"I hardly think I am going to let a bunch of teenagers-" Giles started.

"Excuse me?" Kennedy again, her voice ringing above the chorus of exclamations from the Slayers.

"Really, I think everyone is getting a little too excited. Things are getting blown out of proportion here." Xander again.

The closer she got to the room, the slower her steps became. He shoulders drooped and she knew by the time she reached the door, she would not be leaving.

"Buffy couldn't pick a worse time to leave. Look, she hasn't even stepped out the door yet and -" 

"She's going. You can't stop her." Andrew's voice was firm.

"Yes, I bloody well can."

"You would have to go through me first." Andrew said quietly.

"And me." said Faith.

"And me." Kennedy.

"Bìngqiě wǒ" from Cho-Ahn.

There was a silence, then a throat cleared.

"She said, 'And me'." this from Tim.

Followed by each Slayer chiming in their support.

After the last girl said the words, one more voice added to the list.

"And me."

"Xander!" from Willow.

"He's wrong, Willow. Buffy said she needs to do this and I trust her."

"I think if we explain-" Giles' started again and groans came from the room.

"Explain? Is that what you call laying a guilt trip on her so thick that she will never claim a life of her own?" Andrew asked.

"She's The Slayer. It is not a job, it is a calling. It is what she is. It is her destiny to stand against the forces of darkness until..."

The room was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop.

"By the power of Greyskull, Giles! Did you even listen to yourself?"

More quiet, the Giles spoke.

"Yes, well, I suppose that times have changed." he said grudgingly.

"You bet your ass they have, Giles."
"Then, it's settled. Now, if you all excuse me, I need to go see my friends off." Andrew left the room and closed the door behind him. When he turned, he saw Buffy standing alone in the hallway and raised a finger to his lips.

Walking quickly toward her, he grabbed her wrist and tugged her back toward the foyer.

"Don't even think of changing your mind! You are going and that is final."

"Argue with you? I wouldn't dream of it!" Buffy chuckled breathlessly and Andrew winked. He linked his arm through hers and escorted her out the front doors toward the idling limo. "It's like having my very own Andrew-shaped bodyguard!"

"You know it!" Andrew joked. "I'll have you know my services don't come cheap!"

"What's the running cost of guarding a Slayer?" she grinned, enjoying the banter. Andrew had knack for raising her spirits.

"A shiny quarter buys a lifetime of servitude!"

A giggle came from the backseat and a spinning silver disc flew through the air, which Buffy caught. She looked in palm and laughed, then extended her hand to Andrew.

"One shiny quarter!"

Andrew plucked the coin and bit into it, like a pirate testing for gold.

"At your service my lady." he said as he gallantly bowed and kissed the back of her hand.

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek, then climbed into the car, stowing the laptop case near her feet.

Dawn leaned forward and waved to Andrew, who closed the door and then leaned in through the window.

"Take care of these girls, Clem." again that slight note of command in his voice and Buffy grinned. At first glance, he didn't seem that imposing, but when he talked like that, it was hard to dismiss him.

"I will." Clem said somberly.

Andrew nodded and then blew kisses to Dawn and Buffy, he thumped the roof of the vehicle and the car rolled away.

"I am going to miss him." Buffy said and Dawn hummed cheekily.

"Not like that Dawnie. We are friends, that all."

"I know. He's protective of you, but not in an over bearing way like Angel was or even Riley. More like..."

"Like Spike." Clem offered.

"Yah. Like Spike. Not protective like you couldn't handle yourself in a fight but protective like he's..." Dawn stumbled.

"Got my back."
"Yeah. Like that."

It was quiet in the car again until Clem cleared his throat.

"So, how did you meet Andrew?"

"Oh my god! You don't know this?" Clem shook his head.

Dawn lowered her voice, like she was imparting salacious gossip.

"Ever hear of the Evil trio?" she began.

Buffy snorted and shook her head, exasperated.

"Shut up, Buffy." Dawn said affectionately, although Buffy hadn't said a word. She turned to Clem. "So. Once upon a Helmouth, there was this gang of dorks..."

She lay on her back with the palm of her left hand cupping the back of her head as she gazed drowsily at the ceiling of the crypt. She could feel the weight of the measured stare from Spike, but pretended it didn't make her stomach do flip-flops. While one (steadily growing smaller with each visit) part of her reminded her that she should leave now, the other whispered that there was no harm in staying just a little longer.

It was getting more difficult to leave but she told herself that it was only because she searched for an escape from her current reality, not because she had developed feelings for the vampire.

Soulless evil thing.

She repeated the words like a mantra, a reminder that any relationship a Slayer had with a vampire couldn't be anything other than hostile, yet she lay on the mattress, reluctant to move although she could feel the unnatural chill that emanated from his body.

She cursed her complacent demeanor; as a Slayer, she knew better.

Her eyes traced the cracks in the ceiling, thin, delicate lines that radiated outward from a faint impression in the plaster like a sunburst until she her attention was caught by a long forgotten cobweb. Wispy threads of dusty silk dangled downward from the ceiling and only a few of the sticky fibers clung to the concrete overhead.

"It bother you, Pet?"

Lazily, Spike pointed upward toward the web, his voice had found the perfect balance – not too soft that he sounded hesitant or scared he would drive her away yet lacked the biting edge that would raise her temper and into an argument.

She didn't know much about chess, but at times it was like a game and they were the players, cautiously plotting out their next move and anticipating the other's counter-move. She looked for excuses to leave; he found reasons to keep her there.

"No. Webs...spiders....they don't bother me."

His chuckle, low and amused, did strange things in the center of her belly. She could leave (she should leave) and any second now...

"Never thought they did, Luv."
"Don't call me that."

There was no heat in her words, her chastisement was automatic and she barely knew she spoke the words.

"I imagine that is Joyce's influence." He continued as if she hadn't spoken. She shrugged and the sheet that covered her slipped down a little but she refused to look his way when the tip of his finger trailed lightly down her collarbone. "Was at her gallery one night –"

"What?" she interrupted, alarmed as she sat up.

"There had been a series of muggings that year and I used to check the gallery when she worked late and make sure she got to her car safe."

"There had been a series of muggings that year and I used to check the gallery when she worked late and make sure she got to her car safe." The matter of fact tone alleviated her apprehension and she settled back into the covers.

"I heard her scream and broke through the back door, thinking some bloke had her at gun-point," again that low throaty chuckle that made her want to squirm. It was becoming too intimate, she realized. She really should go before-

"After she yelled at me for breaking the door, she pointed at a spider that was crawling across the floor."

Buffy nodded, all too aware of her mother's arachnophobia and rolled on her side to face him. Casually, he moved his arm and she scooted a little closer, her hand skated lightly over the contours of muscles on his chest.

"I went to step on it," Buffy snorted when she pictured her mother's reaction and Spike chuckled again as his arm slid behind her, his fingers rubbing lightly on the back of her neck. "Yeah - more yelling from your mum…apparently she was afraid of the hairy little arachnids, but couldn't stand to see them hurt."

It was true. If Buffy had ever been afraid of spiders, she didn't remember. Perhaps it was the good-natured way her father used to carefully pick up and move the occasional unexpected eight-legged houseguest that had kept her from developing the same irrational anxiety that her mother had suffered from.

Yet, though her mother was afraid of spiders, she also had a high regard for them, due in part, Buffy supposed, to the wealth of legend and mythology that centered upon the creatures. To this day, Buffy – nor Dawn – could harm a spider.

The conversation dissolved into nothing, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. Spike's fingers had moved to her shoulders and she wriggled for a moment. He moved slightly and then her head was resting on a deltoid, her back cradled in the crook of his arm.

It shouldn't have been comfortable, it should have felt more wrong than right.

She should go…

With the tip of her coral colored nail, she wrote a letter on his chest, directly over his un-beating heart.
"I should get back. The gang is gathered at the Magic Shop, researching the Blooper – thingy."

"Blu-Ph'aar, you mean?" His chuckle was a low rumble in her ear.

"You say 'Blu-fuh-har', I say 'Blooper'." She shrugged and she felt a fleeting pressure as he tightened his arms, then relaxed. "Same dif."

"For you, maybe." Again that low rumble under her ear and she suppressed a shiver.

"What's in a name?" She added a flourish on the letter she had absently drawn.

"Pet, when it comes to demons, there is a whole world of etiquette that you and your sort don't heed, but not all of those that come into contact with demons are so lucky."

"Dead is dead. Don't matter what the name is. And what do you mean etiquette?"

"You're the Slayer. This is your turf, so titles, manneri-"

"Hey!" she interrupted, offended and stopped in the middle of her 'Y'. "I got manners. I don't talk with my mouth full, I say 'please and thank you'."

"And, as I said, this is your turf." He spoke slowly and she frowned. "They have to mind their P's and Q's."

"They'd better mind them," she grumbled, "if they want to be something other than dead."

"The same would be expected of you, Pet, if stumbled into another demon's turf."

"They don't like me, they can have words with my friend, Mr Pointy."

"Slayer, here in Sunnydale, not many would take issue with that. Most demons keep their heads down and their noses clean and hope they don't draw your attention; the smart ones clear out when word spreads that The Slayer has claimed a territory as her own to protect."

Her fingertip idly traced the contours of his collarbone.

"So, here in Sunnydale, it's my territory, my rules."

She felt his nod.

"But in other places..."
"It would be in your best interest to find out who calls themselves Master, Lord or…"

"Grand Poobah?" he chuckled at her interruption.

"I was going to go with Clan Leader. Not all demons want to cause mischief and mayhem, some just want to live out a peaceful existence. They will settle in an area under the protection of a stronger or more powerful demon. Protection is granted through a variety of ways — mediation of disputes that could turn bloody or protection from…” he hesitated "…others. In return for the protection, they offer tribute to their liege in the form of food, payment or service."

"Doesn't that seem a little…barbaric? I thought we had all moved past that type of feudalism." She wrinkled her nose.

"Maybe to you, but this system is older than you think and it is still used for a reason. The point is, many a Slayer has lost her life because neither she, nor her Watcher, took the time to meet with these 'protectors' or, failed to show a modicum of respect by following proper etiquette when moving into a new territory. They piss off the wrong demon and rather than facing one on one in combat they face an army. Seen it a few times myself."

A soft smile stole across her face as she pictured such a battle. She and Spike, trading quips and kills, and watching each other's back. They would make a formidable team, she thought.

She frowned when she realized she had just spoken her thoughts aloud.

She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Time with Spike was not about the caring and sharing, it was about the –

"Not so fast, Slayer." Again, that low rumble as one strong, pale arm curled around her stomach and pulled her backward until she lay once again on her back with his weight pressed down upon her, his eyes filled with lust before he lowered his head.

She tensed when she felt his cool, firm lips on her neck, kisses alternated with blunt-tooth nips and she had never felt so precariously balanced between desire and fear.

Desire, because she had learned time and again the heights she could climb in his arms; fear that she had grown weak because at some point in their twisted little game of push and pull, she had come to care for more for the man than she wanted.

He paused, mouth hovered over the artery in her neck and her blood pounded as she arched toward him though her instincts screamed at her to flee. His nose touched her neck and he nuzzled her, scented her as a cat would.

"Trust me." He whispered and, God forgive her for it, she wanted to.

Desire warred with fear until she gripped his wrists, flipped their bodies, and pinned them to the mattress while she straddled his hips.

The cuffs dangled from the rails and with practiced movements, she soon had him restrained. It was an illusion; she knew he could easily pull the cuffs from the metal rails, but he allowed her this small measure of control.

"Never." The answer was soft, but firm. Unyielding.

She pretended she didn't see the quick flash of hurt cross his face, but her hands were gentle when she cupped his face and turned his head aside. She kissed a trail from the nape of his neck down his
When she finally found the courage to look at him again, the hurt (the love) was gone from his eyes and all she could see was desire, want and a need that matched her own.

She pretended that she didn't hate herself just a little bit more each time she hurt him.

To block the guilt, the gentle touches alternated with the rough. She pinched, she soothed; she licked, she bit; she stroked, squeezed and held his release at bay until he shivered blissfully at gentlest of caresses, until she had teased him to the brink of madness and his eyes changed to a dangerous golden hue.

The cuffs snapped (and would later be replaced with a shining new pair before her next visit) from the rails of the headboard. With a guttural growl, he flipped them and slid inside her, hips thrusting in a brutal, punishing rhythm that had her asking for more.

At the height of his passion, he spoke hoarse words into her neck while she tried to hold back shouting his name as her nails raked across his back, adding the scent of blood to the air that was heavy with the smell of arousal.

For a moment, his demon broke free as he pulled back and they locked eyes, but he quickly pulled it back. It was enough, though, to shatter the sense of rightness that she felt with him.

Vampire. Slayer.

Though he did not say a word, the accusation was in his eyes. Against his will, she found clever ways to bring out the demon in him, a visible reminder which she needed more and more lately, a reminder that their passion was not a love story, it was a tragedy.

This time, when she slipped out of the bed, he did not pull her back and she told herself that it was for the best.

The pressure in the cabin shifted and the plane angled down as the "fasten seatbelt" light flashed overhead and brought Buffy back to the present.

The plane was landing.

From private jet, Clem ushered them into a waiting Limousine and Buffy marveled at the changes in her life over the last two months. Gone was the wide-eye stare she had shown during her first limo ride in New York.

Even Dawn seemed to think it commonplace.

Dawn's first ride in such a car had been full of excited exclamations ("Look, it's a TV!" and "I am not going to drink anything Buffy, I just want to look…oh! is that Champagne? Oops! Uh-ohhh… will that wash out?") and the pressing of buttons that raised or lowered windows, turned on or dimmed interior lights, played music and opened hidden compartments (hence the spilling of what Buffy was sure a few hundred dollars' worth of premium imported alcohol).

Now, however, they both slid into the car, with just a quick sweeping glance over the interior and waited while Clem spoke quietly with the driver; a short while later, the car was moving and Buffy's thoughts turned toward their first destination in L.A.

It was Buffy's idea to drop Dawn off at the Hyperion first.
Andrew had called ahead and arranged for them to have a room for the night. Aware that Dawn had matured a great deal over the last year, she tried to tactfully find a good excuse for leaving Dawn at the hotel while she "checked out" Spike's friend and Clem's boss, Marv. Giles might have little faith in her instincts and, though she trusted Clem, her Slayer instincts riled against going into any kind of demon-territory with her sister. No, she felt more comfortable going with Clem first and getting a feel for the place rather than going in blind with her sister.

Of course, she tried the "It will be an opportunity for you to settle in and relax" tactic, but the younger Summers' simply gave Buffy her patented raised eyebrow and unimpressed stare.

Then Buffy threw out random reasons that popped into her head, said that Dawn would be able to call her friends, Kit and Carlos. Next to Janice, they had been Dawn's closest friends, practically inseparable since the moment the three had been trapped in the basement of the so-called 'new and improved' Sunnydale High. There was also an added bonus- they had experienced the Sunnydale version of the Welcome Wagon and were friends who could sympathize with the weirdness that was her life.

Once school started and they became thick as thieves, Xander had jokingly referred them as Scooby v.2.0.

At the mention of their names, Dawn’s face instantly brightened and she immediately pulled out her cell, thumb rapidly scrolling through her extensive contacts list just as the car pulled up to the front of the hotel.

Quickly, they unloaded their few carryalls and Buffy tried not to stiffen when she felt the tell-tale signs of a vampire nearby or when a hand suddenly reached past her into the trunk to pull out the last case.

"Let me get that for you." The hand belonged to Wesley and Buffy offered a sincere smile which the former Watcher returned easily.

"Thank you, Wesley."

Within seconds, her and Dawn's few cases were carried away by Wes, the driver shut the trunk. Clem turned away to get back into the car and Buffy turned to Dawn.

"…in LA, can you believe it?" Dawn's voice was full of excitement. "Ummm…not long. Only a day —" she lifted her eyebrows in silent inquiry at Buffy, who nodded hesitantly. "-but could be longer."

With her sister occupied, Buffy mentally tried to brace herself as she approached the figure that lurked in the shadows of the entryway.

"Hey, Angel." She said.

"Buffy."

"Thanks for letting us stay." God, why did this feel so awkward? Just a few months ago, she had been delighted when she had seen him, had kissed him even. He reached out his arms and she stepped forward, upper body stiff and unable to relax as he wrapped her in a hug.

"It's good to see you." So many memories surfaced and that familiar feeling of happiness swept through her. This was Angel she remembered. When they pulled back, her smile was genuine and her posture a little more relaxed.

"You too."
His eyes flickered to Dawn, who had beckoned to Wesley to get the address of the hotel.

"So…this is just a short visit?" his words were heavy with the weight of his expectations. Hesitantly, she reached around and hugged him again.

"Yeah. Clem is taking me to meet…someone."

"Clem? Spike's friend from Sunnydale?" he frowned and she found her eyes oddly drawn to his forehead.

"Yes. He came to New York to…ask me to meet someone." His expression settled and she still couldn't pull her gaze away. Distracted, she clarified by adding, "His boss. Marvin something, I think. Based in L.A."

He frowned again and Buffy tried to keep her expression neutral.

Wow, Spike had always said that...but I always thought that he was just picking on Angel, but he was right.

With half an ear, she listed as Angel spoke.

"...think everyone knows Marv...quite a reputation with...wants to cross..." She knew he was saying something important and knew she should pay attention, but she couldn't drag her eyes away.

He really does have a big forehead she thought. Mentally, she shook herself and tried to concentrate on what he was saying and tried not to giggle.

"It will be fine, Angel. Listen, I have to go, but I will be back later. Dawn will get us settled and I will be back in a few hours. Tomorrow, Clem will pick us up and Dawn and I will go back together."

"Why did you say this guy wants to meet with you, again?" Angel asked.

"I didn't. I got to go. Bye Angel."

She walked over to Dawn, hugged her and left stern instructions to "behave". Dawn, with her phone to her ear, rolled her eyes and waved her away.

She got back into the Limo.

"Alright, Clem. Lay it on me." she said as she relaxed back into the seat.

"Lay it on you?"

"Uh-huh." she nodded as she stretched. "Give the sitch on your boss. Things I should know, rules I should follow."

"Oh. Wow, Buffy, I wasn't expecting this." Clem sounded impressed. "I didn't know you could be so..." he searched for the right word, not wanting to insult her.

"Informed?" she supplied, archly.

"Informed." he agreed. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about him. What type of demon is he? What kind of abilities does he have? How high up on the food chain is he? Is he considered a master, Lord or Clan leader? How should I greet him?"
Any rituals I should be aware of? Should I offer a gift and, if I do, what should I bring? Do we need to stop to pick anything up? Will there be an interpreter? How many others will be present today? What about tomorrow?"

"You are informed." he said, not without some admiration. Buffy shrugged and turned her head to hide her smile.

"His turf, not mine. C'mon, fess up."

Clem nodded and instantly his demeanor changed from relaxed and friendly to professional and formal.

"Don't try to learn his full name or even try to pronounce it, it will only insult him. Marv is the closest approximation and it works. Among his kind, he is a Clan Leader and highly regarded." Clem gave her a meaningful look and Buffy nodded seriously. Marv had power and a following. She would not want to piss him off.

"A gift is not necessary but would be highly appreciated. I would suggest a tarantula. There is a pet store that we could stop at that carries the more exotic brands. I will help you pick one out. You have a credit card? Good. Marv is a Fhrewh'ard."

"Fire Ward?"

"Fye-rah-ward." Clem corrected, pronouncing it slowly. "However," fire-ward" would be an adequate description of Marv's abilities. Fhrewh'ard demons can manipulate fire in ways you could not even imagine."

"Their magic is that strong?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about his business."

"Marv...protects assets. Demons and humans alike use his services to protect their most valued possessions."

"Ah. He's a banker?"

"Well, I wouldn't call him a banker-"

"These possessions that Marv protects. Where are they kept?"

"Well, Marv has locations all over the world - London, Rome, New York, LA."

"No, Clem. I don't mean which city. I mean where are they kept?"

"Oh. There are vaults." Buffy grinned.

"Vaults! See, he's a banker."

"Okay." Clem surrendered. "He's a banker. Just...don't call him that, please?"

Buffy patted his hand in agreement.

"Thank you. Ummm..." Clem closed his eyes and cocked his head as he thought. "Let me see...greetings. I will make formal introductions today. Once that happens, every time you meet, the
person with the home advantage makes the first move. Since we will be on his turf, he will greet first, verbally then he will offer greeting from the clan with an elaborate series of hand gestures. You do not mimic him, you will not get the sequence right and one wrong turn of the hand, you could start a war. To return the gesture, just touch your head, chin and chest, like so." Clem demonstrated and Buffy repeated the movements.

"Good. That was good, Buffy."

"What do the gestures mean?"

"Marv's movements are formal greetings from his clan. Gestures around the head convey that their is no hidden agenda, around the mouth they will only speak the truth and around the chest means that their intentions are honorable. Fhrew'hard demon's are very straightforward. They do not practice nor appreciate subterfuge. If they were at war with you or your kin, you would know it."

"And this?" Buffy repeated the gestures Clem had shown her.

"Simply conveying that you have no hidden agenda, you will speak truthfully and your intentions are honorable."

The car stopped at a pet store and Buffy spent several minutes examining the spiders on display before selecting a large gray tarantula with beige stripes on its legs. The clerk put it into a card board carrier punched with holes and within minutes they were on their way.

This time, their chatter was more informal. Buffy told Clem about the spell that turned the potential into Slayers and Clem spoke about his job. Before she knew it, they pulled up to a large warehouse.

They were here.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Buffy's memory of Spike was written around the end of chapter two, but I kept moving it forward through the story until I found the right fit. Final draft of this chapter numbered over 13,000 words, so it was almost cut, again! What did you think? Good? Bad? OOC?

Next up - Marv and Buffy meet and Dawn gets letters from Spike! I wrote that scene already but it was cut from here, 'cause I am evil. They are worth the wait, I promise!
(I Can't) Breakaway

Chapter Notes

Warning: The timeline skips around a little, so you need to pay attention to figure out "when" you are reading.

**Major Warning: there is a scene that does NOT show Buffy in a good light. You might not like her very much after reading the scene but, trust me, you can't hate her as much as she hates herself. We are going to get a little dark here.

Thank you to everyone for coming back for updates, even if it takes a few months.

A large thank you to Maire and Blade Redwind for reading through a (very) rough draft and giving me their thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Though he had only been in his position for a short while, it would be an understatement to say that Clem enjoyed his job.

As a young Luu'sken, he had spent close to a decade wandering around the countries of the world in between sporadic bouts of working for various family members and evenings spent in a series of poker games (snacking on Sokoke and Canadian Sphinx kittens when he won big and stray calicos when he went bust). Though intermittent, his past employment history was typical for any Luu'sken youth, and included a variety of intensive "internships" learning from the greatest leaders and advisors his clan had produced.

Among his kind, the laissez-faire attitude was expected, if not encouraged in their youth. Work when you want, play when you want.

Now that Ami-gi, was upon him, he had no regrets regarding his youth and he looked forward to the stability of maturity and gainful employment that would prove he would be a worthy mate. When Spike had mentioned that he "knew a bloke who might have a use for you", Clem was happy to check it out. Finding out that the offer came from none other than Ma'r Vynatch, Leader of the Clan Vynatch of the Fhrewh'ard was just the frosting on the kitten.

By Luu'sken standards, he was still considered young and landing such a prestigious position was quite an achievement.

From the moment he pulled in through the warehouse doors in his red Volkswagon and met with the banshee who ran the Demon Resource Department, he was filled with excitement and purpose. Happily, he filled out the required paperwork and was escorted to the lower levels of the facility for "a short introduction".

Clem was not so naïve as to believe gaining employment with the leader of one of the world's most powerful Fhrewh'ard clans would be so simple and, when he stepped out of the elevator, he was prepared to prove his mettle.

Already, a room full of irate Kungai muttered to one another about the long wait and stared openly
toward a small cluster of Miquot who scowled and threw out a comment that if anyone would be seen first, it would be them. Both species appeared similar in their reptilian appearance, were quick tempered and prone to squabble over the slightest insult.

Unfortunately, a common language between the two species was being spoken and the comments were becoming increasingly derogatory to the other species. When one tall, thin Miquot began to speak snidely about an elder Kungai's "misshapen horn", Clem knew he needed to step in, even if doing so cost him the chance at the job of a lifetime.

The elder Kungai began to growl, his horn glowing and two Miquot flexed their forearms, which in turn released two serrated bone blades into their hands. If Clem didn't act soon, the squabble would become bloody and Clem had no intention of being a casualty.

Taking initiative (and hoping it would not result in an immediate dismissal), Clem greeted each grouping respectfully and announced that he hoped no one would mind if he got refreshment (and by the way, could he get anyone anything while he was at the bar?).

Within a few minutes, each creature held a small tumbler of the facility's finest Yak Urine, a toast of good will was made and no blood was spilled.

When Ma'r Vynatch appeared, the Banshee from DR at his side, the Miquot rose regally and they were escorted through a side door, into what Clem supposed was a private meeting room or office.

Clem spent the next six hours in the waiting room as various other demons arrived and departed. During his time, he diffused four potential "battles to the death", instructed a fellow employee on the finer points of etiquette when escorting a Draconi (to whom one should never, under any circumstances, turn their back), conversed fluently with a mated pair of Fyarl demons and persuaded an impatient zombie master to not leave when his appointment was postponed for another thirty minutes.

At the end of the day, Clem was alone in the room when Ma'r Vynatch appeared. Silently, the Fhrewh'ard regarded Clem then began to greet him formally. When the greeting was complete, Clem performed the same ritual with the grace and precision of a native Fhrewh'ard.

Marv pulled a card from the pocket of his Armani jacket.

"Go see this man, he will get you some proper clothing. Report to me tomorrow two hours after sunrise."

And with that, his employer turned away and Clem began the next chapter of his life.

Now, just a few short months later, he sat in the luxurious vehicle across from one of the most notorious Slayers in history. Since the fall of Sunnydale, rumors had run rampant regarding the infamous Slayer and, while most of the demon world rejoiced in the speculation of her death, Clem held on to the small hope that she survived. He had been stunned when his employer had called and asked him to drive to the grand estate to collect Buffy and her sister.

Now, he watched the woman sit across from his as she gazed out of the car window, her face still carrying traces of her breakdown in New York.

When Spike had first told him that he and Slayer were an item "but let's keep that on the down-low, eh mate?" he had cautioned his friend that perhaps it would be more prudent to keep his relationship with Buffy professional. Clem worried that Buffy was pursuing Spike for all of the wrong reasons but Spike was too besotted to care.
A shadow crossed her face and he wondered if she was thinking about their meeting earlier that morning.

"You know what the kicker is, Clem?" Tears leaked from her eyes in a constant stream and Clem pulled a white silk handkerchief from his pocket. She took the item and balled it into her fist. "The kicker is I wasted every chance he gave me. He was a gift…a gift and I…"

She stalled on the word, little gasping hiccups and Clem scooted closer to her on the settee to tuck her closer.

"Why don't you hate me?" she whispered. "You know…you must have known what I did. How I treated him."

Clem opened his mouth to speak, but she thrust her fist with the handkerchief bunched up toward him.

"What kind of friend are you?" she accused, her voice rising. "Being so nice to me? I don't deserve it…"

"Buffy…" Clem started but she shook her head.

"No. No!"

Her hiccups became more pronounced and she tried to hold back the sobs. Feeling helpless, he pulled her into a hug.

She started to babble in between sobs, but he couldn't understand her words. Instead, he patted her gently on the back and murmured "I know. I know."

When her sobs subsided, he continued to hold her. Gradually, her posture relaxed.

"I belittled him, I scorned him and…god…I used him because I hated…everything…so much." She said. "He was a gift and I just…threw him away. So many times."

Clem said nothing and she pulled back, dabbed at her eyes with the silk.

"I think…" Clem started and she tensed, as if bracing for a physical blow. "you weren't in any condition to be in a relationship."

She nodded.

"And I knew that." She whispered fiercely. "It was all so mixed up. At first, I was so numb and he just made me feel…real, you know? But then the numbness faded and I. Got. So. Angry. And I felt so…impotent. I couldn't lash out at my friends – because I knew if I started, I would not have stopped until they were bloody and beaten and…dead. And they kept telling me how much they needed me…how the world needed me and every time I thought about ending it all…"

Clem inhaled sharply and she nodded.

"It was close…but then the guilt would weigh me down and the…god, the hate…would simmer until it threatened to boil over. I hated them for bringing me back, for making it impossible for me to…leave…and I hated myself because I was so weak."

"But Spike…" she shifted and sat up, looking out the large window at the sky. "I could hit and lash out and he…"
She gave a harsh bark of laughter.

"And they called him the monster. If they only knew. What he did to me? That time before he left and got his soul? It was nothing compared to the shit I pulled on him."

Once again, her eyes filled up and sobs filled the room. He pulled the grief-stricken woman into his arms and this time, she went pliantly.

"I just want...I just wish..." she sobbed. "I know." It wouldn't fix anything, but he just whispered the words over and over and hoped it was enough.

Nothing was what she expected.

Buffy wasn't sure what she imagined exactly; dank, dark ossuaries maybe, perhaps even a dilapidated building or two, but not this.

At first glance, the warehouse seemed abandoned and in dire need of repair, but the two dapper gentlemen that sprinted from the side door were her first inkling that she was in for a surprise. Clem reached over and squeezed her hand in reassurance, as if she were scared or nervous.

Scared? No.

Nervous? Not quite. Unbalanced might be a better word to describe her feelings.

The car rolled through the large doors and Buffy got her first glance of the demon's home turf.

The interior was tidy, with bright overhead lights that chased away any shadows, and a glossy, gray concrete floor that gleamed as if it had been freshly waxed or polished. To one side, a long line of neatly parked cars, SUV's and trucks waited.

Had Spike's De Soto been parked here too, just a few months before?

(Would she see Spike? A voice whispered and she tried to stifle the anticipation because the disappointment always hurt when she thought she would and didn't. She was beginning to suspect that if she were in a place that Spike had once been then his mirror-like image appeared.)

Spike had been here and she wished he were still, to whisper snarky little comments in her ear and offer advice, whether she asked for it or not.

"You once spoke about rules? Rules that I need to know if I am meeting a demon on their turf."

She was on patrol and Spike had wordlessly been following her for a few turns around Sunnydale's finest amongst the graveyard elite. They were at Northwood cemetery, perhaps the oldest gothic cemetery within the town limits, whose large iron gates were guarded by two identical, winged gargoyles sporting mischievous faces. For some reason, during the time when Buffy had run away to Los Angeles, Oz and Xander had christened them as Lex and Brooklyn in some comic book reference she didn't pretend to want to understand.

Their names stuck.

Buffy had left the house alone that night; Willow had a late meeting, still trying her best to move past her magic dependency and thought joining a support group for drug addicts would help her, Xander was still MIA after he left Anya at the altar and this was the first night she had seen Spike since the disaster of a wedding.
She wasn't going to ask about his date from the wedding.

(She wasn’t.)

She was past that.

(God, why wasn’t she past that?)

There had been radio silence between the two of them for the past two weeks and, although she always felt him nearby when she patrolled, she didn’t acknowledge him.

Until now.

Because she missed him, damn-it.

It was wrong, went against her very nature, but she missed him.

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stirred as he walked closer until he was alongside her, matching her stride for stride; he was quiet and didn’t look at her, only straight ahead. Some kind of emotion seemed to vibrate within him and she couldn’t put a name to it.

"Rules." He said finally and she wanted to wilt with relief, though he still didn’t look at her. She didn’t care though, he was beside her and that was all that mattered right now. "You planning to go and invade some demon’s territory, Buffy?"

Buffy. Not 'Slayer', 'Luv', 'Pet’...just Buffy. For so long, she had been telling him to stop calling her names and he had finally stopped.

She frowned.

She should be grateful, because he was getting over her; it was what she wanted, what she had told him to do.

Was he in love with the girl from the wedding? Did they- God, she needed to stop that thought right there, because she so wanted to remain ignorant of any doings between Spike and the goth girl.

"No, just something I was thinking about. You had implied I should know about them…once."

She wasn’t going to tell him that she had spent the better part of the last two hours racking her brain with a topic that would draw him toward her because she missed him, missed trading barbs that always made nights like this more...fun. Less like work.

God, she was pathetic.

"That I did." His hands patted the pockets of his jacket and then he fished inside until he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and the silver lighter he favored. He sparked the flame and inhaled.

They’d reached her destination, the newly buried Carrie Ann Resendez, a twenty-four year old kindergarten teacher and victim of yet another attack of a gang of thugs hyped up on PCP (aka the vamps she dusted the night before, a mere twenty-four hours after they had killed the young schoolteacher).

The freshly packed dirt and unrolled square pats of grass looked undisturbed, a clear indication that the newly turned vampire had not yet risen, so Buffy sat on a nearby tomb stone and faced Spike. He looked past her, over her right shoulder, apparently lost in thought.
"Respect is always important." He still didn't look at her, but he was talking to her and she would take it. "I know it is not a popular theory amongst those that Watch, but it is true. Don't just limit the research to weaknesses and strengths and the fastest way to kill them. Try to find out who you are dealing with upfront, look to see if there can be a peaceful resolution, time permitting of course. If you don't know, then research a little more or even ask them yourself."

"Right," she smirked, "I just walk right up, tap one on the shoulder and ask 'Excuse me Mr. Demon, I might kill you but first tell me about yourself?'"

For one flash of a second, his eyes met hers then skidded away. His refusal to look directly at her left her feeling unsettled and the frozen knot that was at her core expanded ever so slightly, brought forth vague memories of those first few days in Sunnydale after Willow resurrected her, where everything had been too bright, too hard, too violent. Too much.

Back then, her apathy was constant, fading only when Spike touched her and sent sparks of sensation across her skin, bringing each nerve (each sense) alive. Now, with Spike determined to stay away she was terrified that the numbness would return.

"Look, you asked me..." he began and flicked the stub to the ground crushing it under the thick heel of his boot. He turned and she caught his arm.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I am 'All-Ears Buffy' right now." She cupped her ears with the tips of her fingers and wagged them. His lips twitched and she notched another win in her mental tally when he stayed. The spark of amusement faded and his face became a blank mask again, eyes trained slightly to the left.

"Look, respect is the key and it depends on how you ask the questions. Asking questions to gain information so you do not insult who you are meeting with is acceptable. You can ask about hierarchy or rank, demon type and even, in some cases, abilities. You can ask about any greeting rituals or 'show of good faith' – like a gift."

"A gift? I'm sorry," she held up her hand for a moment, "but a gift? Why should I play Santa and give presents?"

"You don't have to, but a little gift goes a long way toward fostering goodwill, if you are looking for parley."

"Parley?" she bit her lip and tried not to look confused.

She thought about making a joke to hide her ignorance ("Parley? What do herbs have to do with anything?") but rejected the idea of making light, he was being serious and so should she. She had come to the realization that Spike had an untapped wealth of information and...and...she didn't want him to leave.

Their eyes connected and he gave her a searching look, quick and wary, like he was looking for a catch.

"Parley." He pronounced it par-LAY. "A discussion of sorts between opposing sides - be it for truce, negotiations for territory or temporary alliance."

She nodded and recalled the two of them sitting at her house a few years ago while they talked strategy on stopping Angelus and Dru while her mother served steaming cups of cocoa. It had been...different...she remembered. All of Giles' information had supported the theory that Slayers
and demons would always and forever be at odds, yet they had worked together and stopped Acathala. Stopped Angelus.

That was before the chip... Spike had sat in her living room, chatting easily with her mother and... God, how had she forgotten that? That fascinated look on her mother's face as she had asked bold questions about Spike's vampire lifestyle ("So you don't sleep in a coffin? And turning into a bat?" her mother had asked and Buffy had bitten back a snarky "Do you want me to get you some paper and a pen so you can take notes, mom?") She remembered the earnest, slightly pleased expression on Spike's face when, unoffended, he answered her mother's questions openly and honestly.

It should have been an eye-opening event for her, allowed her to take that experience and apply it with all of her Slayer interactions. She even vaguely recalled Giles saying something similar once, but prejudice had prevented it. An alliance with demons? She had thought that working with Spike was an anomaly, a one-time act of desperation and had refused to consider it again.

Then Spike was captured, implanted with a chip and she –

She blinked a few times and tried to get back on track.


Spike shrugged and the lapels of his jacket fell open. She caught the flash of a vibrant crimson silk shirt and the snug black t-shirt that he usually wore. She looked up and caught his heated stare before his eyes darted into another direction. A flush crawled up her neck that had nothing to do with the cool evening air.

He still wanted her.

"Depends on the demon, Lu-Buffy." He fished for another cigarette and she bit her lip when she noticed the slight trembling of his fingers. Slowly, she slid from the tombstone, all thoughts of staying on topic evaporated.

"Anything else I should know?" her voice had dropped and she walked slowly toward him. Finally, he looked her dead in the eye as he pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth.

"Buffy, what are you doing?" his eyes were wary, stance defensive, balanced as if she were about to attack him but his voice, oh god, his voice was hoarse, like he had reached his limit. She knew that voice, knew what it meant. It meant... she shivered with anticipation.

"I..." she hesitated. "I just...miss you." She blinked in surprise, because it wasn't what she had meant to say at all.

Eyes troubled, he shifted his stance and relaxed slightly.

"Really?" he asked, softly and she saw the faintest spark of hope.

She knew she shouldn't do this, but she couldn't find it in herself to stop either.

"Really. I miss...you. Your hands, the way they would..." she had moved closer until she stood in front of him barely a few inches between them, but still not touching. He reached out and his hands spanned her waist then skated up her sides.

"Like this?" he asked, lips curving in his trademark smile.

"Uh-huh. And like..." she placed her palms overtop his hands and positioned them right where she
wanted...needed them.

"Anything else you missed?" he leaned forward mouth hovering over hers, voice barely a whisper and his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

"Your...tongue." She whispered back, eyes focused on his mouth. He chuckled and the low rumble reverberated within her. Her fingers hooked into his belt loops and she pulled him close against her.

"Anywhere special, Luv?" her heart skipped a beat at the endearment and she closed her eyes. Why was she doing this? She needed to sto-

"Everywhere. I want..." she said.

Of course at that moment, a hissing came from behind her and the once-lovely Ms. Resendez ("Homecoming Queen three years running and valedictorian in her graduating class at Sunnydale High and at UC Sunnydale" Her obituary had reported) unsteadily stood upon the freshly packed dirt, with bits of earth caught in the tangled curls of her hair.

"Hold that thought." She placed a finger over his lips then pushed into a backflip and pulled out Mr. Pointy. The fight was short and hardly satisfying but before Ms. Resendez's dust settled to the ground, she was back in his arms while his hands were sliding her shirt up and mouth on her shoulder. Her fingers opened the buckle on his pants.

"Maybe we should go somewhere..." he said against her neck.

"Now." She breathed, "No. Now." Because she wanted this, she needed this and if they paused then she was going to find a way to talk herself out of this.

You're selfish. Selfish. Selfish. She chanted in her head and she agreed even as she opened the zipper on his black denim jeans and held his swollen weight in her palm.

Words spilled from his mouth, muffled against her skin, but she heard them all the same.

"Yes. Now. Anything you want, I will give you." Against her neck as she stroked him.

"You know, I am yours...always yours. God, I lo- I would do anything for you." Against her breast, once her shirt drifted to the ground, while one hand tangled in her hair and the other undid the clasp at her back.

"Can't stay away...you know that...I would die for you..." he was on his knees, pushing her jeans down, mouth blazing a trail of fire up her bare leg while he freed her other, her hands threaded through his hair until she pushed his shoulders back toward the grass and straddled him.

"So hot, you're on fire...always so hot. Like molten silk, I...just..." he groaned as she glided down sighing at the sensation. He pulled back and she looked down on him before she claimed his mouth in a kiss.

"God," she groaned when she paused to breathe. She rose up a little and lowered herself again, head thrown back and throat pushed toward him. "You...make...me...feel...so...good."

"You know I do." He growled. "Tell me. Tell me you want me."

She snapped her head up as he thrust into her and she moaned. This is what she needed. His uncanny ability to thaw that frozen core of despair within and forget the hell that was her life; this...
feeling he gave her was all that mattered.

"I want you." The words are pulled from her and she wanted to snatch them back, but they were gone. His eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Tell me you need me." His growl rumbled in his chest and goose bumps pebbled her skin, her hands skated across the muscled contours of the chest she knew so well, she could recognize it blindfolded.

"I. Need. You." A sharp inhale between each word as his quick fingers slid between their joined bodies and she shuddered, on the cusp of release.

"Tell me..." his voice had changed from the low growl when she looked at him. The tone was soft (gentle) and eyes heartbreakingly vulnerable. Her heart hammered in chest as panic raced through her. The friction from his fingers as they rubbed faster made had her arching and, in a desperate move, her hand moved behind his neck, her nails digging violently across his skin.

"Tell me you lo-"

Her nails had never scraped as hard and he groaned in pain when the scent of blood from the lacerations hit, his eyes transformed from blue to gold in a heartbeat, the ridges on his forehead popped and his incisors lengthened when his orgasm hit and she reached hers at the same time.

"Why?" One anguished word and his thoughts are written on his face: Why does she make his demon appear, when he tried so hard to show her he is more than that? Why does she torment him so? Why doesn't she love him?

She had no answer.

Only the panting of their breath was heard for the next few heartbeats as they both shuddered in mutual satisfaction until, shamed, she climbed off him and picked up her shirt, his question hanging between them.

She darted her eyes sideways and he was on his back, naked and exposed, fingers clenched into the ground, his pale skin gleaming in the moonlight and eyes closed. When they opened, he looked at her, expression filled with a terrifying mixture of resentment, betrayal and resignation.

And still there was love.

Horrified, she knew that he would never stop her. She could repeat this pattern over and over and he would let her - this strong, proud man would crumble at the crook of her finger and she realized she had to be strong.

"This can't happen again." For the first time, she spoke to herself, a stern admonishment to her twisted behavior and how it had broken the man beside her.

He gave a snort of disbelief as she pulled the shirt over her head.

"It will." He said hollowly and she wanted to cry.

If her mother could see her now, she thought and pictured the look of disappointment on her mother's face.

"It won't happen again." The words are firm, a vow she would not break again; she could not let herself do this to him.
"You keep saying that." He countered, bitterly, "until the next time. When kitten has an itch that needs scratching and you come to me panting for more...saying 'no' in one breath and 'please, more' in the next."

His hand snatched his jeans from the ground and, still on his back he slid into them and pulled them up, the muscles of his abdomen flexing.

"Maybe." She admitted, because she failed in her resolve before and it was already crumbling at her feet as she watched his body move. His eyes flared in triumph, but went flat at her next words.

"You don't have to say yes, you could say no." It would be so much easier if he wouldn't let her do this to him, so much easier if she placed the blame on his shoulders.

"I can't say no," though quiet, the words were spoken with such ferocity it was as if he shouted them. She started in surprise and he continued. "You know I can't say no. I can never say no. Not to you."

His tugged the hem of his shirt down and she turned back to face him clothed.

He rolled to his knees in front of her and she let him wrap his arms around her waist; let him inhale deeply when he buried his nose in her stomach. She placed her palm on his cheek and he leaned into the touch, such naked longing on his face.

"I've said it before. I'm a willing slave."

"I am sorry." She said. Was it an apology? Was she asking for forgiveness? She didn't know. She walked away and he stayed where he was.

"It's not enough." His bitter words carried through the air, "but I'll take it."

When she got home, she cried herself to sleep and dreamed of her mother, who held her in her arms stroking her hair as she spilled her shameful secrets.

She woke the next morning feeling drained but for the first time she knew she would not waver in her resolve. She wouldn't let him be used by her anymore.

It would stop.

"...ffy?" Clem sat across from her, a question on his face. She shook her head and smiled in apology.

"Sorry. I was just thinking that Spike was here, not long ago."

The car had stopped and the two gentlemen that had allowed the car inside waited impassively beside a set of double doors. Clem seemed in no hurry to rush her out of the car. His fingers flipped a switch and a small bar rose up in front of their seat. He snagged two short tumblers and a glass bottle filled with amber liquid that he splashed into each glass, offering one to Buffy.

"He didn't say goodbye," Clem confessed as he swirled the contents of the glass around and looked into its shallow depths, like a gypsy scrying the future. "I knew something was up because he came here in the middle of that crap that was going on in Sunnydale, but I just thought...I don't know what I thought."

"You didn't know? That he knew he was going to...die?" God, it really would not get any easier saying it out loud, she thought.
Clem shook his head.

"I had to leave on an errand and when I got back...he was gone. He had waited for a bit, I was told, so I think he meant to say something, but the meeting I had went long and when I got back..." Clem shrugged, passed the tumbler from one hand to the other causing the amber liquid to slosh gently.

"And...if you had known? If he told you what he knew?"

"He would never have driven back to Sunnydale alone. I would have gone with him and, no matter how much he would have said otherwise, I would have made sure he told you or told you myself, would have tried to...do something."

She nodded. It was enough.

Clem saluted her with his drink.

"To Spike."

"To Spike."

They drank quietly then Clem put aside their used glasses.

"Okay," she said, "let's do this."

Mindful of the rules, Buffy tried to maintain a pleasant demeanor with the receptionist, but it was difficult. The woman (creature? Definitely not completely human according to her Slayer senses) condescending and Buffy tried to remind herself that she could not lose her cool, that it would not make a good impression and foster goodwill if she ripped the head off of the first (demon?) creature she met. She could not afford to offend this Marv, not on his own turf and certainly not before she found out what he had for her.

When the woman was satisfied that Buffy was, indeed, an invited guest, Buffy offered the least sincere of her smiles and thought "There are twelve different ways I could kill you in this room alone."

The woman's complexion paled and Buffy's smile became a touch more genuine.

There was a quiet ping and the elevator opened and she and Clem stepped inside.

As the doors closed, she noticed the mirrored interior and her heart sped up.

Would she see Spike?

Granted, it had been a little while since the last "sighting", but any mirrored surface still caused her heart to jump into her throat.

The ride down, however, was uneventful and the silence was filled with instrumental elevator muzak and the periodic ping! as the elevator passed a floor, in her hand she carried the cardboard box that tipped from side to side when the large spider inside skittered around.

When the elevator stopped, the doors opened and Buffy followed Clem out of the door, posture straight, and walked out, the very picture of strength that hid the jittery bundle of nerves she was inside.

*Never let them see you falter, Pet. Confidence at all times.*
With a quick, sweeping glance of the room she noted two doors that could be used as exits, a wide staircase with perhaps ten steps leading down into a sunken room with odd seating and only one other individual present.

Although she had five snarky quips on the tip of her tongue, Buffy held them back and waited, tempering the compulsion to barge brashly forward while she took a moment to observe the creature she presumed to be Marv.

Humanoid in appearance, with a thick, rough looking hide that was a soft shade of mocha and eyes a warm shade of amber that reminded her of a Mesopotamian broach her mother once showed her, he seemed unassuming. Height wise, she had the advantage of being a good five-or-so inches taller, while his limbs were easily twice the width of her own – a build her mother would not-unkindly refer to as stocky.

Physically, she could take him easily in a fight; she had fought bigger and brawnier without chipping a nail.

It was the aura of power that surrounded him like a second, invisible skin that would have given her pause, though. The air around them practically vibrated, like a sub-sonic hum that she could feel rather than hear. In a way, it reminded her of Willow at her darkest, where power waited unseen but easily within reach.

"Easy, now Slayer. By all means, stay alert, but don't walk about all tense and ready for a fight before talks have even begun."

Buffy waited.

Marv would never admit to such a weakness, but the idea of a Slayer walking around the halls of his livelihood (and so close to his family), no matter how thoroughly warded against all manner of threats, set his teeth on edge. He had lived a long life, even by Fhrewh'ard standards, and had accomplished this by being smart and by staying far from the watchful stare of any Slayer.

Though he respected their abilities and their strength, he mistrusted a Slayer's complete and total faith in the archaic teachings of their Watchers, who had a well-documented history of discouraging a Slayer from anything remotely resembling independent thinking.

He had said as much to Spike just a few months before and the vampire had chuckled out a reply.

"This Slayer might just surprise you, Marv."

Marv had merely grunted and agreed, with great reluctance, to carry out Spike's wishes.

Contrary to the opinions of the Watcher's, Fhrewh'ard demons were a neutral species, neither on the side of good nor evil. In fact, the classification of Fhrewh'ard Demon itself could be considered something of a misnomer – a Watcher from the first crusades had stumbled across their kind and, due to their innate ability to manipulate fire and the description of the sweltering inferno of their dimension (not to mention their apparent demon-like appearance), had promptly classified them as demon from a hell dimension.

The assumptions were flawed, but the title stuck.

Marv, along with others of their kind, knew better than to waste time trying to correct the inaccuracy, hardly concerned to be afraid of the young Slayers. By their very nature, they were an arrogant species, unparalleled in their ability to manipulate fire and resistant to most magic (particularly magic
Few demons who went against a Fhrewh'ard lived to tell the tale and, in fact, until a mere decade ago, Marv had never learned fear.

Then he met his mate, Shaylindrea, whose lack of magic and thick, iridescent hide made her an outcast amongst their kind. Alone and unprotected, she had come to him after her kin had passed from this life into the Garondaria- The Blazing Beyond, where all Fhrewh'ard go into the afterlife. The depth of his feeling for his mate never ceased to grow and only deepened when she bore his little Shri'taria.

However, with his ever increasing love, he had discovered the true definition of terror; while the wards held true against magic, they were no defense against physical violence.

The seemingly defenseless woman before him had first gained notice when she avoided the harvest and then when she defeated The Master of Sunnydale. With each victory, her notoriety spread and he scoffed at the fools that sought her out.

He had laughed at Spike when he had first learned of the blood drinker's murderous obsession, but he stopped laughing when Spike failed to kill her. Marv may have considered Spike the antithesis of caution – the vampire was impulsive, passionate and had tendency to jump headfirst into any fight and laugh, even if he was on the losing side - but he had earned his title as "Slayer of Slayers".

The most shocking aspect of the tumultuous relationship between the Slayer and the Slayer of Slayer's was that either could not kill the other. As the Slayer's notoriety grew, so did Spike's, a fact that Marv did not hesitate to point out when Spike was the subject of ridicule. Master Vampire's, Hell God's, a pure serpent demon , not to mention that ridiculous "Slayer-Fest" – she defeated them all, yet Spike lived.

He would not underestimate the Slayer and, though he had every intention of keeping their meeting free from conflict, he still took certain precautions.

If he lost his kim-ri, his family, he would be devastated. Encouraging his two most beloved to take an impromptu trip to the south might not have been necessary, but he was grateful to know they would be safe. Alternately, he was aware that should anything happen to him, his beloved kim-ri would be defenseless against the vicious backbiting of their kin.

With the knowledge that his kim-ri were safely away, he would play the genial host, allow the Slayer entry into his territory and he would honor the vampire wishes.

Clem had stepped out first and the young Slayer behind him, which surprised Marv. Based on their brief phone conversation, he expected her to barge into his space and demand explanations. But, instead, she gave the room a sweeping glance and then looked expectantly at Clem.

"Ma'r Vynatch, may I present to you, The Slayer, Miss Buffy Summers."

Eyes on the Slayer, Marv stepped forward and performed the formal greeting ritual that their introduction required. Her expression was neutral but she watched his motions carefully. When he was finished, Clem continued.

"Miss Buffy Summers, may I present to you, Ma'r Vynatch, Leader of the Clan Vynatch of the Fhrehw'ard. You may address him as Marv."

Buffy turned to Clem, handed him a box.
The Slayer turned toward Marv and gracefully touched her head, chin and chest.

"Miss Summers, you honor me with your presence."

"Marv, I thank you for your invitation." she replied with a fleeting smile as she took the carton from Clem and presented it to the Fryrew'h'ard. Her manner was formal and respectful, if not a little stilted, her attitude a far cry from the anecdotal reports that had been regaled to him over the last few years.

"Please accept this small token," she continued, "I appreciate the lengths that you must have gone through to find me and my sister." For a brief moment a hard look flashed across her face and Marv withheld a disapproving grumble at the inferred censure.

Beside her, Clem shifted uneasily, poised to intervene if the meeting veered from cordial and one of them were to take umbrage with the other; Marv was not known for possessing an easy going nature and Buffy had always been encouraged to negotiate with whichever weapon was handy. His reputation was such that he could afford to indulge in fits of temper as there were few who could hold their own against him. However, he was not willing to test his elemental abilities against the Slayer.

Instead, took the carton and hummed appreciatively at the sound of the creature within skittering around.

"A gift you choose most wisely, I am certain. Please," he gestured toward the room behind him, "join me for a drink."

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Argh! Everyone is very patient with this fic and I appreciate all of the reviews, favorite's and continued alerts! I have a vague timeline and wanted to end at a specific place before the next chapter. I was having problems with the flow of this chapter and it was keeping me from posting – creating a history/demonology for Clem and Marv without too many contradictions was a challenge! Each line of their background has been re-written more than once and led to more development (some obviously remained in the fic; most was cut out, never to see the light of a computer screen again). It wasn’t a lot of extra information but it did cause a significant delay in posting.

Sorry for ending here…there is more to come. After all the build-up, I have an obligation to you all to make sure it is done right. Some of it is written, but trying to finish the scene would have delayed posting even longer!

Meanwhile, I have written another fic that is posted and near completion. It is called "Postcards From Sunnydale" and is a Buffy/SPN crossover with a Sam/Buffy friendship/romance. Please check it out on and on A03.

The good news? Buffy has finally met Marv and will shortly be on her way back to NYC. And Andrew. (squeals happily!) Feedback? Thoughts? Predictions?

MTFBWY my friends
Stay tuned…
A/N: So, this chapter is a bit of a Mexican Jumping Bean and bounces around the past and present. It is a chunky chapter but I couldn’t bear to cut it up into two chapters, so you get it all. Also, a small confession: I was never a big AtS fan *gasp*. I have seen the shows, but don’t know them like I know BtVS. So, once again, canon is my shopping cart and sometimes I leave stuff on the shelf.

Disclaimer: Joss is da boss (I am not Joss).

AND finally…who is excited about Nathan Fillion and Alan Tudyk reuniting for the web series Con Man? Looks awesome. I donated on Indiegogo because reasons and now I will get rewarded with merch. If you don’t know about ConMan, google it and see the clip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From the Journal of Dawn Summers

After we landed, a sleek, gray Limo carried us to the old hotel that Angel owns. *Sigh* Yes, that Angel. As in Buffy's ex, the guy with more (head) games than Hasbro…which worries me more than I can say. Being near Angel is not good for Buffy right now, she is just too raw, too vulnerable and, well, Angel is…not what she needs.

Apparently, the L.A. crew have gotten themselves their very own demon law office and Angel is the boss…even though he doesn’t have a law degree. The LA crew all walk around in Armani now and to say it feels weird being here is an understatement.

Wesley helped me get our luggage to our room and, I have to admit, he sounded a little out of breath as we reached the door.

"How long," he began, with a slight wheeze, "are you and Buffy staying?"

"Oh," I felt a rush of heat on my cheeks and cringed guiltily as I unlocked the door "uh...I think Buffy plans for us to leave tomorrow night."

I (almost) felt a desire to defend my need for a varied wardrobe, but I quickly squelched it. Perhaps five pairs of shoes and six changes of clothes for an overnight stay was a little extreme...but they are new and after losing everything in good 'ole Sunny D, I found myself reluctant to leave everything behind.

I felt a little useless as I held the door open for Wesley as he carried our suitcases into the room and dropped them unceremoniously on one of the double beds.

I listened with half an ear as the former Watcher fussed around the room – opening drapes, showing me the bathroom and talking a little about the building’s history which I would have found fascinating, had I not been so preoccupied with the panorama before me.

The sun was still up and the city smog light enough that I could see some of L.A.’s most famous
landmarks from my hotel room window and memories came to the forefront of my mind, which of course, led the way to all things that are mom-shaped: shopping with mom for my first bra and after school visits Buffy and I made to the gallery where mom worked before The Big Split and those quick, spur-of-moment trips to the city to cheer one of us up after the subsequent move to SunnyD.

Being so close to Sunnydale-That-Was brought to mind the most painful reminder that no longer could I go visit mom's grave when I needed the comfort that only she could give, even if she was dead. Or even other, more routine urges - like how I used to try to convince Carlos and Kit to walk by "Bean There, Done That", the café where my latest crush Trevor, a SHS sophomore, worked as a Barista.

My mind conjured an image of Trevor's green eyes and crooked smile and I hoped he was lucky enough to escape the devastation caused by Sunnydale's demise.

Eventually, Wesley's small talk died an awkward death and he made a few noises about coming back later with some food. He has just left the room when my phone rang. It wasn't a surprise when I saw Carlos' name on the caller id and I felt a rush of giddiness.

"Hey Summers!" he cheerfully greeted.

"Hey yourself, Nevarro." I rejoined. I couldn't help the huge grin that split my face. Talking to Kit just a short while ago and now with Carlos, made me realize how much I had missed them. He had already spoken with Kit and both of my friends were on their way to come and see me and I could hardly wait. Our conversation was short, filled with interjections from Kit, who had no qualms about yanking the phone from Carlos' hand and hijacking the conversation.

Kit had said they would be here in just under an hour-

Dawn paused in her writing to check her watch for what seemed like the thousandth time in half an hour. Finally deciding she was too excited to stay focused, she bounced off the bed and closed her journal. She looked in the mirror, fussed with her hair for a moment then screwed up her face and, in a girlish impulse, stuck out her tongue at her image.

She tucked her room key into the front pocket of her cut-offs and left the room.

By her watch, she still had thirty minutes before the arrival of her friends, so she wandered aimlessly down the corridor. When she reached the elevator, she pressed a button on the old-fashioned panel and, while she waited for the elevator to arrive, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine what the hotel had been like in its early years.

Wesley had mentioned that the hotel was built in the early twenties and rumored to have contained a speakeasy hidden somewhere on its premises. He'd confided that he and Lorne were in competition to find its hidden entrance.

The arrival of the elevator was announced with a soft ding and she stepped inside, so lost in her musings she was hardly aware of her surroundings.

Dreamily, she pressed a random floor button as she pictured the people who would have been drawn by the thought of visiting such a forbidden and scandalous place - men in their snappy suits and spit-shined spats, women wearing beaded, flapper style dresses and hats, chattering excitedly with each other as the elevator carried them to their secret destination.

After a brief trip, the gleaming brass elevator doors opened and she stepped out. Lightly, she dragged her finger along the wall as wandered down the dimly lit hall. When she came to a T-shaped
intersection, she took a left. The lights flickered briefly and she paused when she realized she was about to walk into a door.

She reached out a hand then paused. What if the door was locked? (Although *that* never stopped her. In the past, Dawn had proved quite adept with a lock pick, opening doors with an ease that she suspected her sister was secretly envious.)

Unfortunately, she didn't have so much as a hairpin about her person and, if the door was locked, she was out of luck.

Her hand made contact with the doorknob and, to her surprise, it turned but before she could open the door, her phone rang. It was Carlos. Her friends had arrived.

With a squeal of joy, she pulled the door closed and ran back the way she had came. Within a few short minutes, she was enveloped in her friends' arms, laughter spilling from her mouth and tears spilling from her eyes.

Clem had arrived in Sunnydale shortly after Spike and had been happy to hear that his friend was staying nearby. From the moment Clem had stepped into Willy's, their reunion had been monopolized by Spike's plans for the Slayer's downfall.

By Vampire standards, Spike had always seemed to have an abundance of passion – for Drusilla, for a lot of mayhem, but never had Clem seen his friend so preoccupied with a human. He was aware, as were most of Spike's acquaintances, of Spike's obsession with Slayer's in general, but, even in the beginning, Buffy seemed to preoccupy Spike's thoughts and dominate the conversation.

"Dru seems to be doing better. Somethin' about the Hellmouth, I imagine, that seems to put a spark in her eyes and a spring in her step. She is still rather…delicate… and I heard that the fine demons of SunnyHell have Slayer problem." His blue eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Do you mind keeping an eye on my lady while I go scope out the situation?"

Long before he had met Buffy, Clem had heard the stories about the young Slayer's attitude toward demons of all types and few walked away after they met her. However, in spite of her ruthlessly efficient patrols in which she culled the demon population as fast as it multiplied, the pull of the Hellmouth was irresistible to most demons.

Those new to Sunnydale were quick to underestimate the blonde Slayer, deceived by her self-proclaimed affordable, yet stylish wardrobe, vulnerable façade and flippant attitude. He had heard stories about the Slayer, whispers amongst the community were as abundant as the first-hand accounts Spike shared, but the first time Clem had actually met Buffy was when Spike had brought her to a poker game.

Tipsy, pouty and judgmental, she hadn't made the best impression and Clem had laughed along with the rest of the group once Buffy had left, unable to reconcile the Slayer he had met with the stories Spike had shared and the whispers he had heard.

It was Willy who set them straight.

"Yeah, she might look like a fragile little flower, easily picked and crushed in the hand" he warned them while changing out a keg, a blend of hops and Bolivian yak piss he brewed himself, "but you guys do not want to get in her way."
The motley crew of miscreants snickered, but Willy just shook his head at their reaction.

"Keep in mind fellas, this is the girl who stopped The Harvest, defeated the Master, halted an Ascension..." he continued further, ticking off each of the Slayer's victories on his slender, nail bitten fingers. With each tick, the sounds of amusement turned into under the breath grumbling.

"Never knew you were such a fan, Willy," drawled Rack, a warlock with special abilities who made his profit from those who delved too deep into the black arts and became addicted. "You are the first to complain about the Slayer not keeping her nose out of your business."

Unexpectedly, Willie grinned.

"I'm a glass half full kind of guy, Rack. The Slayer knows all about my place – where it is, who I serve and, for the most part, she leaves my place alone." Testing the hook up, he poured a glass of his finest and, with a practiced twist of his wrist, slid it down the battered bar top into Rack's waiting hand. "Bottom line - I'm still alive, boy's, and that leaves me a lot to be grateful for."

With a cocky tilt of his head, he winked then spun on his heel, cheerily whistling tunelessly as he walked toward his back storeroom.

With a shake of his head, Clem pulled his thoughts back toward the present. Though he had arranged for his mate and daughter to leave L.A., Clem knew his boss would not relax until the meeting with The Slayer had passed. If he were to be truthful, Clem did not feel as calm about Buffy's meeting with Marv as he appeared.

Most of his job was to pacify the clients, train employees on developing their interpersonal skills when dealing with their diverse clientele and working as an intermediary between some of their less civilized clients and his boss.

Formal introductions over, Clem focused on the body language, taking note of the slight tilt of Buffy's head as she glanced around the rooms and the stiffness of his boss' stout frame, which eased somewhat as he opened the top of the carton Buffy had handed him.

"Excellent choice, Slayer." He breathed and Buffy responded with an uneasy smile.

"I am glad you are pleased." she replied.

Marv's eyes gleamed, a subtle indication that The Slayer had just moved up a few notches in the stout Fhrewh'ard's esteem. They shared a look as he passed the carton to Clem.

Holding the carton, Clem led the way into down the marble steps toward the cabinets. As he carefully lifted the cover of the tarantula's temporary home, his friend and his employer engaged in small talk. Two spiders skittered about as he gently tipped the carton to add the newest addition. After replacing the cover, he moved to the cabinets and counter area that served as a beverage station.

Behind a counter was a small, hidden fridge. Clem pulled out two chilled bottles of water and poured the contents into two crystal goblets then served them as Buffy and Marv sat down.

The chilled water was refreshing and Buffy was pleased that she was offered a beverage that neither looked nor smelled funny. Though she knew she couldn't allow herself to completely relax, some of the tension drained away from her as she followed Marv to a seating area. Once again, the stout clan
leader demonstrated his manners as he gestured for her to choose a seat.

Call her predictable, but she chose a wide, cushioned chair that allowed her to sit with her back to the wall while Marv selected an adjacent stone bench. Feeling a little bit antsy, she sipped at her water and tried to appear calm. A million questions were at the forefront of her mind and it took a tremendous amount of self control to keep herself from blurting them out. She searched for a neutral topic that (she hoped) wouldn't offend her host.

"Clem seems very happy with his job. It is obvious how much he admires and respects you."

The Fhrewh'ard grunted, the sound low and ominous, but his amber eyes warmed at the compliment.

"Young Clement is loyal, honorable and discreet, I am most pleased. I have the Va-Spike- to thank for the recommendation."

There was a pause in their stilted conversation, each lost in their own thoughts about the dead vampire.

"How did you meet him?" her quiet question broke the temporary silence.

"At a poker game in New York, some time ago." he answered.

The Slayer looked at the Fhrewh'ard and bit her lip hesitantly. She looked young and vulnerable and he could easily understand why there had been so many who underestimated her.

"What - what was he like, back then?"

He looked down at his goblet, tilted it slightly and peered at the clear liquid.

"Cocky. Brash. Belligerent." she gave a startled burst of laughter and their eyes met again. She nodded.

"Arrogant." she added, thinking of that first year she had known the bleach-blonde vampire. "Unpredictable. Impulsive."

The Clan Leader took another sip of water and then continued.

"Fearless."

She nodded, a soft-smile on her face. She thought about Drusilla, her mom, Dawn. "Protective."

"He was at that." there was another small pause, then the creature continued. "I enjoyed his visits immensely."

"I am glad, that he had...friends like you. And Clem."

"I have never met another like him," Marv admitted. "As a vampire, he was...unique and I valued his friendship."

He heard the Slayer's breath hitch, like she was about to ask a question. Her eyes sparkled with moisture, but then she pressed her lips firmly together and looked down at her glass. Marv grunted and stood, taking her glass in hand and turned to walk to the low counter nearby.

While his back was turned he heard her voice, low and pained.

"If you had such high regard for him, then wh-why didn't you stop him? He told you he was going
to his death and you...just let him go."

He paused and took his time with the answer, sensing the underlying grief and anger in her question.

"It was at his request. I owed him a debt. He asked that I handle his estate and-"

"And that is how you repay him? You just let him go-"

"Careful, Slayer." he warned. His power flared within and it took a great deal of control to keep it from bursting outward.

"I-just don't understand. You could have sto-"

"I could do nothing." His power flared once more and a wave of heat burst forth. Frustrated, he placed the glasses on the granite counter and turned to face the Slayer.

"A long time ago, Spike saved my life and, in doing so, saved the life of my entire species. In gratitude, I promised him Rey Drathor. It is debt that, if unclaimed, can be passed down from parent to child for untold generations. Anything you can imagine, Slayer, he could have asked for and I would have given it to him. Yet, all he asked was for my promise, that I would carry out his wishes and not intervene. I know you cannot comprehend why such a vow could not be broken, but, trust me when I tell you that Spike knew that I would not break my word."

He did not tell her how bitterly he had chastised the blonde vampire after completing the sacred rite that bound him to his vow and how he had taken himself to another realm where he could allow his anger to be expressed without fear of bringing harm to his staff or kim-ri. These details were personal and served no purpose.

Clem was just about to seat himself when he heard the chime of the elevator. Knowing his boss would not want to be interrupted while Buffy was on the premises, he discreetly made his way to meet the new arrival. He was certain Marv would have strongly encouraged (frightened) his employees into making themselves scarce. Who would dare to interrupt?

The doors silently slid open to reveal the kitsune from reception. Her normally cold composure was absent though; instead she looked pale and shaken.

"What's-" Clem was interrupted before he could finish his question.

"They are on their way back!"

"Who?"


"Why? The boss arranged for-"

"She doesn't care. She left. Apparently, she overheard two of the clan elders discussing little Shri'taria. Their words....were highly offensive. You know how she is. She is the most mild-mannered of creatures and is able to ignore almost any criticism directed toward her. But, Shri'taria?" The kitsune shrugged. "Shaylindrea thought it was best to leave before she caused a war with the clans."

Clem looked at his watch. "It's about a four hour drive-" he stopped when she shook her head. "How
much time do we have?" he asked faintly.

"With the way traffic is at this time of day? Half an hour would be a generous guess. You know why the boss worked so hard to make sure his family were as far from The Slayer as possible. If she- "

Clem nodded and quickly interjected. "I'll take care of it."

Agitated, the kitsune chewed her lip and glanced toward the Slayer and her boss.

"I hope so. For all of our sakes. If they return and the Slayer is still on the premises…" her fox-shaped eyes shifted to their boss.

Clem nodded and took a deep breath.

"It won't come to that." He pressed the button to open the elevator doors. "Go back upstairs, have the car waiting and act as if nothing has happened."

The kitsune looked doubtful as she stepped back into the lift, but before the doors slid closed, she gave him a hesitant nod. As he walked back toward Buffy and Marv, Clem tried to organize his thoughts.

Buffy tried but she couldn't understand how someone who counted Spike as a friend could just sit idly by and let him walk away to his death and do nothing.

*Couldn't? Or Wouldn't, Pet? His turf, his rules, remember that? Take a breath and just think it through, for a moment, won't you Luv?*

Clem walked up to them and they both turned. Her friend looked worried and she gave them a half-hearted smile as she pushed back her anger. Clem apologized for the interruption and requested to speak with her boss. Marv grunted and Clem said something in a foreign language.

The Fhreywh'ard blinked and responded with a sound similar to a growl then spoke to Buffy.

"If you will excuse me for a moment, Miss Summers, it seems there is a …situation that requires my attention."

Buffy inclined her head and, without further ado, the creature rose and walked toward the wall. He muttered a few indecipherable words and a panel slid to the side. Marv walked through the opening and the panel closed.

She looked toward Clem and raised an eyebrow. The Luu'Sken leaned down, his expression earnest.

"Buffy, do you trust me?"

"Of course, Clem."

He reached forward and clasped one of her hands between his own. His voice lowered to almost a whisper.

"I beg you, Buffy. When Marv comes out, do not make a scene. Your meeting is going to be cut short. If you can, refrain from asking questions. I'll still escort you back to New York."

"Clem—"
"Buffy, please," the pitch of his voice changed and he sounded almost…desperate. "No questions. When Marv comes out, just allow him to cut the visit short. I know this is asking a lot, but please take no offense."

She has a million snappy retorts on the tip of her tongue, but she held them back. Instead she gave a slight nod. Clem gently squeezed her hand and whispered, "Thank you."

The panel in the wall slid open once more and Marv appeared, a large white box between his hands.

"Miss Summers, unfortunately, I need to end our meeting this afternoon and will not be able to meet with your young sister tomorrow. I regret this very much." To her surprise, she sensed that he was speaking the truth.

The Fhreywh'ard continued.

"Shortly after we made our acquaintance, Spike approached me and asked if I would help him sort out his…assets. For many years, he trusted me to handle those assets. He did not consider himself a wealthy man," Marv paused, a chuckle shaking his burly frame, "but that is because I could never get him to sit still long enough during our yearly meetings."

"I had hoped…well, that is neither here nor there. Before we discuss his estate in detail, I would like you to look over the items in this box. I will be in touch."

He extended his arms and presented the box to her.

She carried the box in her hands and the trio walked toward the elevators. Clem pressed the button to call the lift.

She stepped into the elevator, the soft muzak playing a familiar tune and evoked such a strong memory that she forgot about the box in her hands.

"Fancy a turn around the dance floor, Luv?"

She didn't jump or give any outward expression that he startled her, but goose bumps appeared up and down her arms. She glanced sideways and in a single heartbeat, she took in his appearance. Typical Spike outfit with snug, black jeans and a tight black t-shirt but missing his long leather jacket; the bruises on his face, courtesy of Glory when she had captured him just the night before, had already changed to a swirling mess of purple-yellow and he leaned sideways against a wall.

She glowered, annoyed with him already and ignored the clench in her gut; he smirked, seemingly pleased by her expression.

"Since when do we dance, Spike?" she asked and looked away.

The bronze was crowded tonight, despite the late hour. Dawn was spending the night at Janice's, Willow and Tara had already left, Xander and Anya had not shown. She had debated leaving herself, but was reluctant to give up this small moment; research on Glory, the Hell-Bitch, was as tedious and as frustrating as ever and she needed this break.

No matter how small, no matter how brief.

Scanning the crowd, she was irked to see more than one patron glance coyly in their direction – well, in Spike's direction – and she glared. It was because she was annoyed with Spike…it had nothing to do with the attention (female and male) that he got just by standing still.
Stupid sexy vampire.

A small sound of movement and his mouth once again near her ear.

"It's all we ever do, Pet. But if the idea of dancing with me is too intimidating…"

He let the thought dangle in the air between them and she huffed in annoyance. When she stepped away, he grabbed her wrist and tugged her toward the dance floor.

She narrowed his eyes at his impudence, but didn't offer any resistance.

The music changed to an erotic mix of Gregorian chanting and techno dance music that had been popular a few years before and the sudden influx of couples on the dance floor soon had them pressed up to each other.

"One dance."

His hand against the small of her back and the other curled around her hip and her posture stiff with arms over his shoulders with her fingers barely grazing the back of his neck, she was disconcerted at how easily they fit together. And why, oh why, did the reality of her body pressed against him feel so…good?

She did not look in his eyes, but instead inspected the fading bruises on his face, the wounds a testament to his steadfast protection of Dawn against the fury of Glory and slowly, degree by degree, she let herself (thaw) relax. He had protected Dawn, after all, she thought grudgingly.

The one dance turned into one drink and six (or was it seven?) drinks later she was loose limbed, relaxed and actually having a good time.

Then, she sloppily placed her drink on the bar and, for the first time, grabbed his wrist as a familiar tune sounded.

"Here she comes now singing Mony, Mony."

"I LOVE this song!" She exclaimed then began to sing, aware that her voice was lost in the bass of the beat as she shouted the lyrics with the rest of the crowd and pulled him along toward the dance floor.

As she jumped to the beat, one hand clasped loosely in his and the other raised toward the ceiling, it was easy to forget that she was with Spike, her natural enemy and, no matter how much he helped her out, the only reason she wanted him close so she could use his strength to fight Glory and to keep her sister safe.

In the past few years, each time she hear the familiar Billy Idol song, she remembered that night at the Bronze and, now more than ever, wished she could go back. Instead, she closed her eyes and resurrected the image of him that night, eyes glittering as the strobe lights flickered around the dance floor and watching her as she shouted out the lyrics.

A chime sounded, signaling the elevator's ascent toward the surface and she blocked it out, focused on the tinny music coming from the speakers above.

"Here she comes now singing Mony, Mony." She sang.

"C'mon Spike, don't tell me you don't know the lyrics, because I won't believe you."
"I don’t know the lyrics."

"I don’t beee-lieeeve you." She announced in a sing-song and giggled when his lips twitched. She lifted his hand and then twirled around under his arm.

"Shoot ‘em down, turn around, come on Mony." Even in the elevator, she remembered the heat of the club and the smell the sweat of the other bodies all bouncing along to the song.

"Hey! She gave me love and I feel all right now." She got into the song just a little more only vaguely aware of another ping! From the elevator. She smiled, bit the edge of her lip and nodded her head.

She continued to sing, moving her shoulders and remembered how it felt in the club with him pressed against her back.

"I think you should sing this song." She shouted during the bridge. The instruments were loud, but she knew he had no trouble hearing her words.

"Oh you do, do you?"

"Yup." Another tipsy giggle. God, when had she ever felt so…free? Like she could do anything. She knew it was just a small interlude in her life, but for one second, it felt good to pretend that she was just a girl flirting with a guy. Tomorrow, she would worry about Dawn, about Glory and feel that weight pressing down on her shoulders until it stole her breath.

But tonight…tonight, she was just a girl, dancing with a guy.

She spun around and tugged him against her back, until it felt as if he was hugging her. She turned her head and looked at him with a smile.

"You should do one of those talent shows and sing it; I bet your impersonation would be as good as the real deal."

He tipped his head down.

"I'll tell you a secret, Pet. I'm better than the real deal." She tipped her head back and laughed. His hands tightened around her wrists and then she was spun again, laughter trailing behind her and mixing with his.

This time, she caught the movement of his lips and she grinned with delight.

"I said Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" with each repetition, they pointed toward each other.

"Cause you make me…feel…so…good."

That...was not her voice and her heart skipped a beat.

"Spike?" It had seemed so clear, like his voice was in her ear, singing along. Eyes open, she looked in the mirrored door of the elevator, heart thumping like she had run a marathon.

"Please." She begged and watched the girl in the mirror tighten her grip around the stone box, like she was staring at a stranger and not a reflection of herself. "Please…don’t take this from me. I just want…"

Ping!
The elevator paused and her breathing seemed ear-shatteringly loud in the small space. She wanted to crumple to the floor, curl up into a little ball and just fade away.

Something between them had changed that night and the memory of that night was bittersweet. For the first time, she let herself wonder how her life would have been different had she not died just a few scant days after the interlude at the club. The way she treated Spike when she was brought back from the dead…if she had lived, would she have…would they have…

The space between the doors widened and she tipped her head backwards, like a prayer to the heavens. Then she straightened and walked out, nodded coolly at the receptionist and toward the waiting car, the very picture of strength but inside, she had never felt so breakable, weak, like the slightest breeze would scoop her up and carry her away.

It was late when Dawn parted ways with Kit and Carlos. Long, tight hugs were exchanged with both of her friends and she wondered if she imagined that Carlos held her just a little bit longer. Her eyes were a little bright with unshed tears and she thought she would be able to keep them at bay until she saw Kit brush away a few tears of her own. Her face crumpled and with a sob, Kit pulled them all into a group hug.

"God, we missed you, Dawnie!"

"I missed you guys too."

A few fat tears rolled down her cheeks and Dawn nodded, her throat too tight to speak.

With arms around each other's shoulders and heads bent toward the middle with foreheads touching, the trio stood under the awning of the hotel for countless heartbeats. Finally, with one final squeeze, they parted ways, Wesley's offer of a ride home had been accepted by both her friends.

She was about to turn to go inside, when she saw a familiar figure approaching the hotel. Dawn paused and as she walked closer she could see how tired her sister appeared.

"Buffy, you're back." she wrapped her arms around her sister and smiled when she felt Buffy return the hug.

"I got back a few hours ago, but I didn't want to interrupt your time with your friends. I decided to go for a walk."

"How did your meeting with Clem's boss go?"

"It- umm...good, I guess?" the older Summers sibling sighed. "It was uncomfortable and weird, but it's over now."

"What time...?" Dawn let the question hang in the air. She wasn't sure how she felt about going to meet the mysterious Marv but Buffy's answer had her exhale in relief.

"We won't. Something came up, so our meeting was cut short. Clem will escort us back to New York in the morning."

Dawn nodded.

Arms linked, the sisters walked into the hotel just as Angel was walking down the staircase. He still
wore the same expensive suit she had seen on him earlier that day and Dawn wrinkled her nose. *Pretentious, much?*

"Buffy!" he greeted with a smile. As an afterthought, he nodded at Dawn.

"Angel. How was your day?" Buffy asked.

"Not very productive." The souled vampire gave the blonde Slayer a meaningful look. "I was distracted. I was worried about you."

"You were?" Buffy wrinkled her brow in confusion. "There was no need, I was-"

"I wish you would have let me go with you, Buffy. I did not feel comfortable with you there on your own."

Arms still linked, Dawn felt her sister flex her arm, pinning her arm against her sister's side.

"I wasn't alone," she said evenly. Dawn raised an eyebrow when Angel interrupted before she could finish.

"The Luu'sken?" his snide tone had young teen bristling with indignation. "Given his choice of-"

Dawn huffed and gave him an unimpressed look.

"Buffy, I'm tired." she announced.

"Okay, Dawnie. I'll walk you up."

Angel frowned at Dawn. "Buffy, I think we should-"

"I'm tired too." Buffy interjected quickly, "I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight Angel."

"Goodnight, Buffy."

The sister's walked up the stairs and Dawn felt the disapproving stare on her back from the vampire. She resisted the childish impulse to turn around and stick out her tongue.

*Poofier.*

Buffy walked her sister to the door of her hotel room. When Dawn unlocked the door to her room, Buffy placed her hand on her arm.

"I have something for you, Dawnie."

She reached into the inner pocket of her jacket and withdrew two long, slim envelopes. She held them in one hand and used the forefinger of her other hand to lightly skim across the edge. After a moment, she held them out, toward Dawn. However, when Dawn reached out to take them, her sister pulled them back.

"They're- they are from Spike. Before you take them, you need to promise me that you won't throw them away. It's okay if you don't want them, I'll keep them. Just - don't throw them away, okay?"

Dawn was silent. She looked at the two envelopes and ...then gave a jerky nod.
"I won't throw them away, Buffy. I promise."

Her sister released a shaky breath, then passed the envelopes to Dawn.

"Goodnight, Dawnie."

"Goodnight, Buffy."

Once inside her room and the door closed behind her, Dawn looked down at the two slim envelopes in her hands and the elegant scrawl that was her name.

So many feelings swirled within.

Loyalty to her sister and that tiny voice in her head that worried she was being disloyal to Buffy by wanting to read the letters and the desire to break her promise by tearing them up. No matter how much Buffy seemed to forgive Spike's actions, she felt as if there was some unwritten code that told her that as the sister to the victim she could hold those grudges.

Curiosity, because, she was dying to read them, even if she refused to let anything he wrote absolve him.

Sadness, because the moment she split the seal, it would be as real to her as it was to Buffy, that meant Spike was gone.

Guilt, ever present, reminded her that she should harbor anger toward him for all eternity.

Nausea…because she was pretty sure that fish she'd eaten at lunch had a funky taste.

Once she was in her room, she flipped the switch to turn on the lights and walked over to a large chair near the window that enveloped her like a hug when she sat down as she ran the edge of her thumbnail to open the seal on the first envelope.

The paper she pulled was wrinkled and torn in a few places as if it had been scrunched up more than once, then painstakingly smoothed out.

It was…surprisingly short.

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Dawn-

If you are reading this, then I am gone.

And so is she.

I might not have lived a fancy life in Sunnydale, but I am a man of means. All that I possess now belongs to you, to do with what you will. There are a few homes scattered around the world, nothing too fancy but they are not crypts either, in fact, you might be surprised.

I know I am no longer at the top of your "Favorite People in the World" list anymore and I don't expect you to forgive me.

That is not what this letter is about.

This is about you.
After your sister, you are at the top of my "Favorite People in the World" list.

Don't isolate yourself, Dawn. You have friends who care about you and I am not talking about those traitors in Sunnydale, either. I mean your mates from school, Kit and that Carlos bloke.

They are good people, Dawn. I know this because I checked them out – you might have forsaken me, but, as long as I am around, I will keep you safe even if that means running the equivalent of a demon background check.

Being evil and with no conscience when it comes to your safety, I even had a few of my contacts offer them incentive to give them information on the Slayer and her sister. We are talking a substantial amount of dosh…and they didn't even blink before telling them where to stick it.

Put away that scowl, Bit. I would do it again and you know it.

They're good people Dawn.

So is Andrew. Take care of him, Dawn. He…needs people who believe in him.

Yours,

Spike

Tears gathered in her eyes and she brushed them aside then opened the second letter.

Dawn-

I won't ask for your forgiveness, I don't expect it and I don't deserve it.

But, I hope, one day, that you might be able to remember me and, maybe one day, with a smile. Remember that I would do anything to keep your sister safe and, if I could, I would give her the world. She deserves happiness; it does not matter if I have no part in that.

Your sister deserves loyalty, and although she gives her loyalty whole-heartedly, she does not demand it back, no matter how much she should. I am counting on you to be the one to give it to her, even if it means standing against them.

I saw how their betrayal (and yours-I hate to say it Bit, but it was badly done of you. Badly done.) almost broke her last night. If something had happened to her I would have torn each one of you asunder and not even a bevy of wanna-be Slayers could have stopped me.

Not even Faith.

She's good, but she isn't Buffy, even Faith knows that.

So, I am leaving you with a bit of advice.

Grow up, Lil Bit and leave girlhood behind you.
Become the amazing person I know you will be; let go of the bitterness of the past, the mistakes of your youth and the missteps of your sister's inexperience. When this fight is over, help to surround your sister with people who will stand beside her and not against her.

I have one request, which might involve some manipulation on your part.

Lower your eyebrow, it isn't anything bad. You act like I'm evil or something.

Over the course of my undead lifetime, I have acquired a few places – one in England, another in Rome and a few others. All homes and assets belong to myself and are not entitled to any descendants. This means, I can do with them what I will and bequeath them to any person I choose.

I choose Buffy.

I am sure, at this very moment, the Watcher is plotting and planning on how to get his little council up and running (with himself at the head, I've no doubt), he might be considered a maverick among his own kind, but he is nothing if not predictable. I am certain his plans all hinge on a certain Slayer being the one to shoulder the burden of the world once again. I know the Watcher cares for her, but he is also the product of generations of misguided dogma and indoctrination, where the Slayer would be nothing, if not a tool.

Do not let him use her, Dawn.

She is near her breaking point and she needs to get away, let Faith shoulder the burden, even if it only for a little while.

Use every weapon in your arsenal, 'Lil Bit – the pout, the stare, the eyes and throw a tantrum if you have to (I know you can do it), but find a reason (any reason!) and get her away. It won't be permanent, I know Buffy wouldn't allow that, but if anyone deserves a break, it is your sister.

Don't do it for me, Lil Bit.

Do it for her.

Yours,

Spike

For the next few hours, she looked out the window, curled up on the window seat and pondered the words. She remembered the vampire she admired, the man she looked up to and the person she had decided to hate. A few times, she forgot herself and smiled.

When sleep claimed her, she dreamed of Anya, who sipped cappuccino with her in an outdoor café on the cobbled streets of Rome, chattered merrily in Italian and leered at the handsome Italian men that passed by them; of her mother, who took her on a tour of a museum; and of Tara, who took her to a school.

When Dawn woke, she had a plan.

And it was a good one.
The air was chilled and Buffy pulled her cardigan tighter against her body, trying to hold back a shiver. Grimacing, she rubbed her arms.

"This is ridiculous. I am the Slayer. I shouldn't let a thing like chilly temperatures bother me." She mumbled the words and glared at the headstone of one Martha Robertson, the seventy-something retired librarian who died due to the ever-common "Bar-B-Q fork in the neck" phenomenon.

Buffy hoped she would make her appearance soon.

"I just need a little action and I will warm right up." She said aloud.

"Ah, Slayer, you sure know how to make a fellow tingly in all the right places."

She did not turn around, merely turned her head to look over her shoulder at the lithe form leaning nonchalantly against the wall of the Alpert crypt.

She scowled.

"What are you doing here?" It was difficult, but she did not make eye contact, her gaze focused on the scar over his left eyebrow instead. If she was mean enough, maybe he would leave. If he stayed, he would bring up the one thing that she did not want to discuss.

"Can't a bloke go for an evening stroll without the third degree?"

From the pocket of his leather jacket, he pulled a pack of cigarettes; the action drew her attention to his fingers. The memory of those fingers sliding across her back and in her hair the evening before came to mind and she shivered as she recalled the feeling.

Recalled the kiss – that heart-melting, foot-popping, curtain-dropping kiss.

Maybe, she decided, it wasn't the act of the kiss itself. They were still under Sweet's spell for a few minutes after the dancing demon had vanished and the kiss had been accompanied by the swell of a full orchestra. Take away the seventy-odd violins, cellos, flutes, drums and all you were left with were just a boy and a girl locking lips.

Still the memory of it caused her heart to beat just a little faster.

It had been one thing to wonder, under the cover of darkness, alone and safe in her room, what it would be like to kiss him, though she would never admit to anyone that she indulged in such thoughts.

However, the reality of kissing Spike was beyond anything she had ever imagined. He kissed her like he wanted to devour her. She had never experienced anything like it, had never felt that level of need, of want. Not even with Ang-

The sound of his lighter sparking brought her thoughts back to the present.

"Well, you can go stroll that way," she pointed north, toward the wooded area that led, well nowhere, "and I will stroll that way." She circled her finger in mid-air, which implied she would go anywhere else.
If she hoped to piss him off, it did not succeed.

"Oh I see." His lips curved into a smirk and her fingers itched to smack it off. She should just go away and ignore him. In fact, that is what she was going to do. Ignore him.

She gritted her teeth and he grinned.

"See what? What do you "see"?" She winced at her sharp tone. Why could she never just walk away? And...dear God, WHY is he so attractive?

"Slayer is afraid to be alone with the Big Bad." He raised an eyebrow and grinned. "She's had herself a taste and..."

"...and nothing. Go away Spike." She turned her back, made to move forward, but his voice stopped her.

"It happened, you can't deny it happened."

Her breath hitched and she bit her lip.

"Yeah, it happened." She admitted quietly. "But never again."

She expected a shout of denial or a burst of petty words, she never expected small, confident smile.

"You've said that before, Pet. 'I'm never going to work with you again, Spike.' 'Next time I see you, I am going to stake you Spike.' 'I'm never let you in my house again, Spike.'" With each sentence he took a small step toward her until their bodies were a scant inch apart, yet still not touching. He tilted his head slightly and continued in a quiet voice. "'I'll never going to protect you again, Spike.' 'I'll never going to buy you blood again, Spike.'"

He moved his head until his lips hovered above hers, yet still they weren't touching. Every nerve in her body tingled, as if an electric current raced within her, searching for a way out.

"Damn you." She whispered and arched upwards to meet his lips.

"Too late, pet. Already damned." He said then their lips crashed together.

She woke, the memory fresh in her thoughts and she turned her body. The pale stone box rested on the nightstand and she stared at it. Other than a quick look when she had returned from her meeting and extracted the two notes for Dawn, she hadn't looked at its contents. Slowly, she sat up and with unsteady hands, she picked up the box and placed it on her lap.

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**Rome**

When news of the assassinations first spread, Lydia Chalmers, like the others, had spared little thought to the valuable resources that were lost in the bombings carried out by the First's minions. Concern was directed to the deaths of friends and family.

The loss had been devastating, both professionally and personally as Lydia had considered many of her colleagues as family.

An only child, she had been close to her parents, Jane and Peter Chalmers. Her parents enjoyed a modest income; Peter, a mid-level accountant for a large barrister firm and Jane, a secretary to the Dean of Chatham College, one of Oxford University's many academic institutions.
In the blink of an eye, Lydia lost her parents in a traffic accident while they were commuting from work to her school to pick her up. Shattered by the loss, she was placed in the home of a distant relative, a great aunt named Mybritt, who reluctantly took custody of Lydia and brought Lydia east to live at Chalmers Hall, a moldering old estate near Norwich.

Prior to the death of her parents, Lydia had been an out-going child, with an imaginative and mischievous nature that was wholeheartedly supported by her parents. Together, they had created a fantastic world, were girls could grow up to become warriors with superpowers and fight the darkest of foes.

Life with Aunt Mybritt was decidedly less adventurous.

Though one would hesitate to label her aunt as beautiful, she did possess something of a commanding presence and did not care for activities that she considered frivolous. In her opinion, which was given whether wanted or not, Lydia had the potential to become one of the brightest minds of her generation and Aunt Mybritt took it upon herself to stamp out fanciful notions encouraged by her parents. Under the stern, watchful presence of her Aunt, Lydia excelled academically, which left little time to pursue friendships and romantic relationships.

Her dedication was rewarded a full scholarship to Oxford and Lydia experienced the terror and exhilaration from being truly on her own for the first time in her life.

Though there was more than enough family money, her Aunt remained frugal at the best of times. Lydia vowed to become as independent as possible. Her inheritance would remain in trust until she reached the age of twenty-five. Her part time job at the prestigious university's Bodleian Library had been a dream come true, where she could study during quiet times and have access to its restricted collection of rare books.

She had only been at the university for a few, short months when she gained the attention of the Watcher's council and discovered that the stories her parents used to tell her were not stories after all, but actual events. Through her work as an novice Watcher, she had access to materials that would have astounded her Aunt – Watcher diaries that were so old, their fragile pages were practically transparent and yellowed with age; sketches of creatures that the rest of the world thought were myth; volumes of tombs that traced the Slayer lineage back to pre-biblical times. There were accountings of events so terrible and tragic they brought tears to her eyes. Detailed descriptions of creatures so diabolical she shivered with revulsion when she read them (and other descriptions of creatures so fascinating she spent her spare time searching for more.).

Now, the years as a novice behind her and in the wake of the tragic loss of most of her brethren, Lydia had a new obsession. It began with the discovery of a journal.

A journal written by her great, great grandfather, Walter Chalmers, who had met and fallen in love with a feisty Italian milliner some hundred odd years ago. Though they had settled and lived in England, for some reason unbeknownst to Lydia, the journal ended up in the Council's Rome archives. She had been surprised, and not a little curious, when she had found the battered leather journal with her family name embossed in faded, flaking gold on the front.

The entries were short, boring anecdotes that chronicled some research around a scroll that her ancestor had found. His excitement was due, in part, to his belief that it was not an ordinary scroll. Walter believed it was a prophecy…a Slayer prophecy.

The difficulty lay in the language. The scroll seemed to be written in Summarian however, once translated (to Greek then to English), the words made no sense. Undaunted, Walter tried a variety of other languages, all to no avail.
The first few entries had been filled with promise, but the long deceased Watcher Chalmers’ excitement fizzled quickly into something which Lydia could only describe as impotent frustration. Certainly, if not for the familial connection, Lydia would not have given the journal more than a cursory glance before moving on.

Of all the languages she had come into contact with over the course of her years spent working with the Watcher's Council, it was Summerian she hated the most. It was a tricky language, full of guess work, uncertainty and, when working on translations, relied solely upon syntax. Misinterpretation of one word often spelled disaster.

Among her peers, she was commended as a talented researcher. Though Traver's took the credit, it was due to Lydia's diligent hard work that the Council even had information on the Hell-God that called itself Glory. However, loyal Watcher she was, Lydia did not begrudge Traver's the credit. It was the way the Council worked, the way it had always worked. After all, they all shared the same goal, did they not?

Or so she thought.

It took some time, after the havoc wreaked by the First, for the Watcher's to seek each other out. She had thought to go to California, to join the battle with Giles and his Slayer, and entertained herself with the idea of finally getting her Watcher's feet wet, so to speak.

Thoughtfully, she tapped the scroll against her chin. She could think of two individuals that had the knowledge to help her translate the scroll. One recently died saving the world, but the other was alive and well. And in Rome.

It was time to seek out a legend.

TBC (I promise...)

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm curious, what are your theories about why Spike and Buffy can’t see each other in the elevator mirror?

Also- hope the abundance of Spuffy interactions make up for the lack of Spike POV. How sweet was that scene in the club? I totally think it could have been canon.
As the dust from the third vamp drifted to the slimy concrete ground, Faith pursed her lips and exhaled. The first two vamps had been mere fledges and dusted with barely a poke of her trusty stake but the third...well, the third had been a scrappy one. His frame was lean and light and she judged him to be in his early twenties. She’d thought he would dust as easily as his counterparts, but from the first hit he’d proven to be surprisingly agile – leaping from the floor as if there were springs beneath his feet, somersaulting easily over her head and able to duck away from her most brutal hits.

Had Buffy been with her, the fight might have been more fun, but the blonde Slayer wasn’t due to arrive back at the mansion until just before noon the next day (or later this day depending on the point of view). The entire time Faith fought the vamp he spoke a never-ending string of unintelligible words, warm brown eyes sparkling with amusement. From the sarcastic tone of his voice, Faith assumed he was taunting her or hurling insults in a foreign language. Eastern European, she thought, Russian, Bulgarian or Polish were her most (un)educated guesses. To amuse herself, after she lost track of how long they had been fighting, she faux-translated what she imagined he said and responded with random eastern European words of her own.

Childish, perhaps, but it passed the time.

“You are much too fast for me, but it is nice that you let me have false hope that I will walk away from this fight as a winner.” The vamp smirked after he dodged a front kick to the stomach.

”Pirogi!” she responded as she hit him in the chin with her right elbow.

“I am Tarzan, you Jane.” he taunted as he bounced backwards into a double (triple?) somersault - this dude had some mad skills in the gymnastics department.

”Mikhail Baryshnikov!” she retorted as she cartwheeled forward, her foot clipping him on his left shoulder.

”I will avenge the deaths of my brethren!” he declared when he squatted and swept his leg parallel to the ground.

“Borsht.” She chuckled as she jumped easily over his leg. Annoyed he brought out his game face.

”I want to suck your blood.” He jeered as he swiped his hand toward her shoulder, fingers splayed like claws.

”Bucharest.” She dared him when she dodged the blow. He stumbled and she took advantage of the
moment and pushed him forcefully into a wall.

“You. Hit. Like. A. Girl.” He panted as she hit him with a right cross-left cross-right cross-left cross combo.

“Spasibo.” She countered when her stake pushed through his chest and he exploded in dust, slightly out of breath from her efforts. It was a shame, really, the kid could have a good future as an acrobat working in one of those pretentious Cirque du Solei shows she had once seen advertised on her way through Vegas.

The fight triggered the oh-so familiar buzz that left her feeling antsy and dissatisfied. Unfortunately, the rest of her patrol was uneventful, demon-wise at least. She spent her final hour completing a thorough search of an annex in one of the abandoned subway tunnels, but got nothing more than a few sticky cobwebs in her hair and something unspeakably slimy (and smelly) stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

Later, she leaned back in the limo’s leather seat and looked through the tinted windows. Despite the late hour, there were enough people spilling from the variety of bars and clubs that the traffic was sluggish.

One couple, for no particular reason other than they were in her line of sight, caught her attention. They were ambling slowly along the sidewalk, fingers tangled together and exchanging shy glances. Something about them just screamed ‘first date’ despite the late hour. A gust of wind must have blown a strand of hair across the female’s face. Just as she reached up to move it away, the young man gently pushed her wrist down and then carefully moved the strand off the woman’s face. The look on the young woman’s face was a combination of expectant and hopeful.

A year ago, she would have been callously cruel in her observation of the couple, and would have described their interaction with words like “simple”, “weak” and “pathetic”. Back then she felt nothing but contempt for the humans she was supposed to protect. Now, she understood that it wasn’t contempt she had felt all those years. It was (bitterness. disappointment. longing) envy. Always the outsider, Faith didn’t get the loving mother, the camaraderie of close friends, the first date…

The light changed and the town car moved forward while the man put one finger under the woman’s chin and lifted it as he inclined his head downward. Before their lips touched, Faith looked away, an ache in her chest and blinking rapidly at the unexpected moisture in her eyes.

The traffic thinned and the car began to pick up speed as it left the city and headed toward the estate.

(There had been a moment, once upon a time. Laying in the dark with him, fingers entwined, her head on his chest, his heart beating a rapid tattoo against her ear. A trembling hand gently brushing her hair behind her ear and whispering “I never knew it would be like this…” and she remembered thinking how innocent he seemed and how difficult was to prove to him that girls like her didn’t belong with guys like him.)

She didn’t notice they had reached their destination until the car stopped moving and Joe opened the passenger door.

The windows in the mansion were dark, the hour too late (or too early, depending on one’s point of view) for people to be moving about. Inattentively, she nodded a farewell to the chauffeur and veered to the left to walk along one of the lit paths. When the path split in two, she went right, toward the pool. Deep inside, she could still feel it, that antsy, restless sensation she always felt after a fight. A swim, she decided, is just what she needed. Her stomach growled, reminded her that she
hadn’t eaten since earlier that evening. A swim, she amended, followed by some more of that decadent coconut cloud cake that the cook had served after dinner.

A decorative hedge separated the pool house from the path. Just before she turned through the archway she began to unbutton her snug leather vest. At the sound of running water being turned off, she paused, her fingers toying with the final button near her waist. Curious, she turned into the archway and then stilled.

In high school, he had recurring dreams where he was a soldier. Ever since that one Halloween, it happened sometimes. Occasionally, he dreamed about war-torn countries and bombs exploding; other times he was marching with his platoon through the humid jungle, sweat steadily soaking through the thin material of his undershirt and stinging his eye(s); once he dreamed of standing guard during a frigid night. After he graduated, those dreams had stopped, with only an occasional reappearance.

After the battle with the First, they had returned, but with a twist. He still navigated around exploding bombs, tramped through tropical jungles and stood guard during an icy night but in these dreams, he knew his mission. Save. Rescue. Protect.

He never saw (who) what he was meant to protect, but deep down he knew these dreams were a subconscious manifestation of his guilt over Anya’s death.

In…two three four. Out…two three four. In…two three four. Out…two three four.

Xander had repeated his mantra so many times he had lost count. His mind was pleasantly blank, his only thought on the next breath of air, the next drag of his arm through the cool pool water and the fluttering of his legs propelling him forward.

When his muscles began to tremble, he followed the pattern he had set over the last few months and pushed himself for one final lap. When the lap was complete, too tired to pull himself up and out of the water, he rolled onto his back and floated near the edge of the pool. He remembered his first experience in water outside of the bathtub. Jessie had moved to Sunnydale in the second grade and it wasn’t long before he joined Xander and Willow’s little group of outsiders.

One hot July day, Jessie’s mother took the trio to the beach. Xander can still recall the heat of the sand on the soles of his feet, the smell of the salty air and that first dip of his toe in the warm Pacific water. It was a sad truth, from the very beginning he felt more comfortable in the water than he did in his parent’s home. It was the beginning of many trips to beach chaperoned by Jessie’s mom. Her large floral patterned beach bag overflowed with snacks, beverages, towels and other necessities. After she thoroughly coated them with sunscreen, she waved them toward the water and settled against one of the many pieces of driftwood scattered across the sand to read whichever novel caught her fancy.

Willow and Jessie were happy enough to splash at each other in the shallow waters and creating “masterpieces” in the sand, while over the course of the summer (and the summers that followed) Xander progressed from a dog paddle to side stroke and then to front stroke.

When they were freshman, Willow encouraged him to try out for the swim team, but a push from his father caused him to fall and fracture in his femur. (He told everyone that he wiped out on his bicycle but he could tell Willow and Jessie suspected the truth.) By the time his leg had healed, the team had been formed and it was too late.
After graduation, Xander rarely found the time to swim. He hadn’t realized just how much he missed until his first morning after arriving at Kennedy’s home. That evening, he waited impatiently for his companions to retire. When the house was quiet, he grabbed a towel and swim trunks and furtively made his way to the pool. The pool had underwater lights that cast a bluish tint through the water and parts of the deck. In a darkened corner, he stripped and changed into his shorts, his fingers hovering uncertainly before he removed his eyepatch.

At the edge of the pool’s deep end, he paused, losing track of the time as he hovered at the edge, his eye scanning the surface of the pool and his heart pounding with something that was part excitement and part (dread) uncertainty. For a moment, his mind conjured an image of his lifeless, one-eyed body being found by a gaggle of Slayerettes the next morning.

“What are you waiting for, Harris?” he had whispered to himself. He flexed his toes and bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, arms raised in preparation for his first dive, took a deep breath and… did nothing. With a long, slow exhale, he relaxed his arms and lowered his body until he was sitting on the edge, feet dangling in the water.

With his palms curling around the beveled edge of the pool, he slowly lowered his body into the water. Gently, he used his hand to push away from the edge and drifted for a few moments before treading water. Lacking the depth perception that two-eyed people took for granted, the pool looked (and felt) bottomless. Taking a deep breath, he stopped treading and let gravity pull his body downward, silently counting in his head until his feet touched the bottom of the pool and opened his eye.

The water was so clear, he could see the where the bottom of the pool gave a sharp incline, but he was unable to judge the distance. He extended his arms above his head, palms touching. Once his toes pushed him upward, he turned his palms outward and brought them down to his sides to propel his body toward the water’s surface. Slowly, he did a few laps, counting the strokes. Two laps became twenty and then he lost count…

After that night, he waited until he thought everyone was asleep, then made his way to the pool. He swam until the ache in his arms became a burn and his mind gloriously blank.

Now, looking at the deep indigo sky, it occurred to Xander that his abusive father probably saved him from turning into a creature from the black lagoon. Had he joined the swim team in his freshman year, he would have been one of the guys inhaling the swim coach’s special concoction that turned the team into something akin to a creature from the black lagoon.

He lay on his back for another moment and then rolled toward to side of the pool. He placed his palms on the ledge and pushed his body up from the water. Rolling his head from side to side, he walked to outdoor shower beside the pool house and rinsed the chlorine from his body. A few minutes later, his eyepatch dangling from his fingers and a long pool towel slung over his right shoulder, he walked through the archway and smacked into…

“Faith.”

“Xander.”

For a moment neither moved. Then, inwardly cursing, Xander lifted the eyepatch to his face and tied the leather cords at the back of his head.

“Bit late, isn’t it?” he cringed at the faint note of accusation in his voice, but he couldn’t help it. He hated feeling so (exposed. vulnerable) out of his depth, but it wasn’t an uncommon reaction for him whenever he was in her presence.
“Or early, depending on how you look at it.”

“Yeah,” he shuffled to the left then continued, “you can…” his voice trailed off and he flailed his arm in the direction of the pool.

Faith didn’t move and he really needed to be going.

“So, I’ll just…” he used his thumb and index finger to indicate his intended direction before walking away. He was halfway down the path when he heard her diving into the water. He was almost in his room when he realized Faith wasn’t carrying a swimsuit on her way to the pool. Later, when he slept, his dreams were a jumble mixture of memories where he lay in bed and held a dozing Faith protectively in his arms while another Faith stood to the side and sneered that he was a fool.

Chapter End Notes

Next up...Buffy opens Spike's box and returns with Dawn to NY! Which means...more Andrew (YAY!).
Bisection

Chapter Notes

Woo-hoo...back to back chapters. Yay me!

This chapter begins with a flashback vaguely placed in Summer 2000. For those that want a more precise timeline, I would place it about two weeks before Buffy meets Dracula.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Summer 2000

It was later than Buffy promised she’d arrive, but as she walked through the gallery doors, she was already formulating her excuses...

“Mom, it’s me.”

There was no response, but Buffy heard muffled voices. As she got closer, her mother’s voice got clearer.

“...there’s really no need to leave, you know.” the amused exasperation in her mother’s voice had Buffy lifting her brow in surprise.

There was a pause, then the sound of laughter. Male laughter.

“Oh well,” her mother continued as Buffy steadily made her way to the storage room. “If you must sneak away like a thief, don’t let me stop you.”

There was the sound of the delivery door closing just as Buffy reached the threshold of the storage room. Parcels wrapped in brown butcher paper were stacked neatly against the wall, next to the delivery door, while other boxes had been emptied and flattened. Against another wall, Buffy could see framed art stacked against the wall. A third wall was lined with shelves filled with an assortment of tribal figures, carvings and small sculptures.

Her mother was looking toward the delivery door when Buffy stepped into the room.

“Mom,” Buffy began but before she could ask the question on the tip of her tongue, her mother smiled in her direction.

“Buffy, you’re here. Wonderful! I hope you are ready to work. I know the gala isn’t until next week, but this delivery arrived this morning and I really want to get everything sorted before the weekend. Are Willow and Xander still coming over to help?” Buffy nodded and her mother smiled in appreciation before she gestured toward the stack of boxes in a wordless command. No stranger to helping her mother unpack, Buffy began with the top box.

“Who was that?” she asked as she picked up a well-used box cutter from one of the shelves and used the tip to slice through a seam across the top of the carton.

“Hmmm?” Already distracted, her mom was standing in front of the frames and bending over to
pick up the first frame. “What was that, dear?” she asked as she held the frame out from her body and gave the painting, an angry swirl of bold red strokes on an indigo background, a considering look.

“That man. I heard you talking to a man just now. Who was he?” Buffy pulled open the cardboard flaps to reveal crumpled and tightly packed tissue paper. She wrinkled her nose at the color, the most nauseating shade of yellow-green she had ever seen.

“Just a friend.” Her mother answered, a faint note of amusement in her voice.

“A friend? A man-friend?”

“Yes, my nosy little daughter. A man-friend.”

Buffy was pulling out tissue paper by the handfuls and tossing them into another box that was acting as a trashcan of sorts. She paused as a thought occurred to her.

“He’s not an evil robot kind of man-friend, is he?”

The sound her mother made was part snort and part exasperated huff. Buffy grinned cheekily as she removed another handful of paper, revealing the corner of something glossy. With a slight hum of interest, she pulled a few more handfuls of the tightly packed paper, absently dropping the bunches of chartreuse tissue paper on the floor until the object was no longer hidden. A shiny black envelope addressed to her mother in copper lettering lay on top. With two fingers, Buffy plucked the envelope from the cardboard box and, without taking her eyes from the object, waved it in her mother’s direction.

“Hey, mom…this is yours.”

Her mother hummed in that distracted way she had which meant she was totally engrossed in her perusal of canvases. Buffy’s fingers itched to pick up the object so she impatiently waved the envelope around in the air again.

“Mom,” startled, her mom glanced up, a question on her face and Buffy continued, “it’s a letter or something for you.”

Curious, Joyce stepped over toward her daughter and took the envelope. Immediately, Buffy reached to pick up the object. It was a box, she realized, and heavier than she thought it would be. A small smile on her face, Buffy brushed her fingers across the smooth, cool surface.

“Oh my,” she breathed.

Her mother looked up from the letter she was reading and gave a startled exclamation.

“Oh! She found it!” her eyes were glowing with happiness when they met Buffy’s. She reached out to take the box into her hands, Buffy made a small noise of protest, strangely reluctant to let the box leave her hands. “It’s just as he described it…”

“Who found it?” Buffy asked, trailing behind her mother as Joyce walked out of the storage room and carried the box to a desk in the adjoining office.

“Tessa Wakefield.” the elder Summers’ replied, referring to an old roommate from College who specialized in art from the Victorian era.

“Is it for the Gala? If so, I can –“ Buffy reached her hands out, fingers quickly closing and opening
but to her disappointment, she didn’t get to complete her offer before her mother interjected.

“No, this is for … a client.” Gently, her mother set the box upon the padded leather desk blotter.

“A man-client?” Buffy teased.

Joyce just shook her head and switched on the desk lamp.

The stone was a shade of pink so pale it was almost the color of cream, swirled with thin, faint veins of gold. Faint impressions at the corner of the box caught her eye and her fingers itched to pick up the box to get a better look.

“It’s not like that, Buffy.” Joyce chided as she adjusted the angle of the lamp. The lamp was small, but cast a powerful light. When Joyce gently removed the lid to the marble box, there were a few small royal blue velvet pouches. Her mother carefully picked up one of the pouches and, once it was opened, tipped the small bag so its contents spilled into the palm of her hand. Buffy’s breath caught as the light caught the jewelry.

The cameo was about two inches in length and depicted a small winged child riding on top of a lion. Her mother started talking, taking on the all too familiar tone of someone used to giving museum tours and describing historical items. Buffy hardly paid attention, her attention totally caught by the simple beauty of the small item, but her mind registered the odd word. “…museum quality… incredible detail… mix of Greek and Roman myth…”

All too soon, her mother placed the cameo back into the pouch and pulled the delicate golden string to close the little sachet.

“…took longer than I thought, I was about to give up hope, Buffy, I really was. Even after I reached out to Tessa… I’m sure you remember her, she’s the one who sends us those hand-painted Christmas cards every year.” The excitement in her mother’s voice kicked up another notch as she continued, placing the box into its original container. “She manages a historical museum in the United Kingdom now…it was a shot in the dark, it really was…but I had to try, you know? It still took over a year to find this.”

Her mother looked at her watch.

“It’s too late to call her now,” Joyce murmured, “but I will have to call her later to find out how she was able to find them.”

Quickly, she pulled on a jacket and then picked up the cardboard box.

“I won’t be long, Buffy…thirty minutes max,” she paused and looked at the storage room, with its remaining unopened items. She must have sensed Buffy’s protest because she faltered for a moment.

“I really shouldn’t, not with the gala so close…” her eyes traveled around the cluttered storage room and then lingered on the black envelop. With the slightest of nods, she propped the box on her hip, picked up the envelope and looked at Buffy.

“He’s been looking for so long, you see,” she turned to Buffy, with a conflicted look that implied she wanted to say more. Then she gave a slight shake of her head. “I’ll be back soon.”

Then, Joyce left through the delivery door. As she unpacked the remaining boxes, her thoughts meandered between her mother’s mysterious man-friend and her latest dream-conversation with Faith (weirdly, Faith had been pinning up posters in the same bedroom their dream conversations happened, while Buffy was stacking black and white composition notebooks on top of one another
into a closet that looked like someone had just finished a shopping spree at Justice, the retail store
that seemed especially popular with middle-school girls. These dreams about Faith always unsettled
her, her feelings split between a disquieting not-quite-fear type of feeling and a sense of kinship.

It seemed an unlikely coincidence that it was the same box she had one held in her mother’s gallery,
but as she brushed her fingers across the smooth stone surface Buffy knew it was the same. Her bed
table lamp didn’t glow as brightly as the lamp in her mother’s office, but Buffy could make out the
faint pink hue marbled with meandering veins of gold. Lightly, she traced one of the veins to the
corner of the lid. With the pad of her finger, she felt the faint indentations and placed the box on her
bedside table, directly under the light.

Bending her head, she peered at the markings and bit her lip at the etched letters and numbers:

\[ \text{A.J.P. 1847} \]

Gently, she removed the marble lid of the box and placed it on her bedspread. Inside were three
envelopes, a small key, and three royal blue velvet pouches.

She considered the slimmest envelope, labeled with her name in the same, elegant handwriting that
was on Dawn’s envelopes. Slowly and carefully she pulled out the single piece of paper from inside.

Slayer,

I must be dust, because you wouldn’t be reading this otherwise.

This box has special meaning for me and I want it to be yours. It belonged to my mother, a courting
gift from my father and she treasured this box and its contents above all others. The jewelry he had
commissioned to celebrate their first anniversary. Over the years, he gave her jewelry set with the
finest of gems, but this set, for all of their simplicity, was her favorite. For many years I wish I had
the time to write pages and pages, I could fill volumes with things I’ve left unsaid. Oh Slayer, I have
so much to say, yet as I sit here writing this letter my thoughts are consumed with you. Somewhere
nearby, there is a clock and each tick a constant reminder that you are out there and those traitors
alone and as much as I want to take the time to write all I feel I should say, there is something inside
me urging to return to Sunnydale as soon as possible.

I don’t expect to live out the week...had myself a little visit this morning from the First and I
must say, Slayer, you have it shaking in fear. You will find a way to vanquish it, I believe this with
every fiber of my being. It’s what you do. I can only hope that I know you have moments when you
doubt yourself, but you really shouldn’t. I wish I could have spent many years hunting Slayers
across the globe, finding out all I could and I can say, without a shadow of exaggeration, that you
are the best of them all.

I’ve written somethings for Dawn as well. I hope she reads at least one of the letters even if she
burns them up after.
I was not a man without means and all I have is yours. You can do with it what you will. Use it to start over. I know I don’t have any right for a final request, luv, but I hope you will indulge me and at least visit my properties before you decide what to do. Take some time, Slayer, and get away when this shit storm is all over.

It has been my greatest pleasure to these last few months to fight by your side.

Yours, forever and always,

Spike

She opened one of the blue pouches and tipped the pouch until the cameo dropped into her palm. She looked at the image of a child with wings riding on a lion and wished she had paid closer attention when her mother had first described the item in that storage room at the back of the gallery. If only I had known...she thought to herself. When another thought occurred to her, she frowned. I would have scoffed and derided her for helping Spike. It was the truth, she realized. Instead of seeing Spike as a son, who loved his mother and just wanted to find a few pieces that meant something to her, she would have questioned his motives, berated her mother for being so naive and been the horrible bitch that she was.

She gave the cameo a caress with her thumb and regretfully returned it to the sachet. I don't deserve this, she thought as she put the sachet back into the box. Instead of picking up the other blue pouches, she picked up the second envelope.

It a large, thick manila envelope, stuffed to capacity and fastened with a piece of thread wound once or twice around a flat paper button. Her fingers hovered over the half inch of thread which dangled from the button. (The dream...the tapestry...the snarled thread...). Her heartbeat quickened as she plucked the thread and slowly unwound it. She felt a little silly, really, thinking how one thread could possibly change her life.

Once the thread was loosened, she held the envelope upright and stared at the layers of folded papers, some she could tell were single pages, others were bundled together and tied with a ribbons and twine. Carefully, she used her thumb and forefinger and pulled out one of the bundles. It wasn’t one of the thickest bundles in the package and consisted of a few thin envelopes and single pieces of neatly folded papers.

She tugged on one end of the twine to loosen the string and slid one of the envelopes from the bundle. She recognized the return address of her mother’s gallery typed neatly in the top left corner. The envelope was directed to a Los Angeles post office box. The side edge of the envelope had been carefully cut and she was able to pull out the paper inside.

As the letter originated from her mother’s gallery, she shouldn’t have been surprised to recognize her mother’s handwriting, but she was. She felt a faint ripple of shock at the date printed in the top right corner of the page. The letter, she realized, had been written after Spike and Drusilla had left Sunnydale following her high school graduation and the destruction of the school.

Spike,

I hope this letter is directed to the correct post office box. When you called last month, the quality of
the connection was terrible – filled with static and your voiced faded in and out. As I mentioned on
the phone I hadn’t forgotten about our conversation a few months ago. Unfortunately, my area of
expertise is, as I mentioned before, tribal art and, although this includes other cultures across the
world, does not include the Victorian era in England. If you recall, I mentioned an old college
roommate of mine who had moved to England after we graduated from college. I have reached out
to her, but she has been out the country these last few months. Her assistant has assured me that she
will have my friend reach out to me upon her return.

I don’t suppose you have any photographs or drawings of the items you mentioned? Your
description was very detailed, but the more information you can provide will help.

I probably shouldn’t mention this, but you sounded upset on the phone and I have been worried.

Joyce

From the same bundle, she pulled another envelope. Like the previous note, it came from her
mother’s gallery. She opened the carefully slit opening on the side and withdrew another note…and
a photograph.

Spike,

I regret to say that Tessa has not returned to her gallery yet. I can only imagine your
disappointment. However, when I spoke to Tessa’s assistant, she suggested a few antique stores I
could check out. I made copies of your sketches and though they couldn’t help locating the box or
jewelry, one store recognized the twin mirrors. Of course, I didn’t want to spend your money unless
you could confirm that they were indeed the mirrors you remember, but they were happy to accept a
deposit so they wouldn’t sell the mirrors to anyone else. I had to wait two days for them to email me
a copy and I was on pins and needles the whole time!

If it is indeed the mirrors you have been searching for, then I will await your instruction.

Joyce

As she read the note, Buffy could almost hear the warmth in her mother’s voice, as if she was
narrating it herself. Her heart ached…a little for her mother, whose absence was still profoundly felt,
even over three years later and a little for the man she had treated so callously for far too long. The
photograph was the standard size, with the mirrors taking up the majority of the space.

Curious, Buffy looked at the photograph. Identical is size and appearance, the wooden frames
looked heavy, with elaborate scroll work carved at the top and bottom of the mirrors. Another
envelope contained some receipts, along with another note.

Spike,

I was thrilled that the mirrors were the pair you have been searching for all these years. I am so
glad that you were so happy. Thank you for sharing your story with me. It is obvious to me that you
loved your mother very much and your bond was a close one. There is no need to feel foolish
because you got sentimental.

Attached is the receipt for purchase of the mirrors and a receipt for the delivery to the address in LA
that you gave me.
Joyce

P.S.  Good News!  Remember the College roommate I mentioned?  Her assistant called, she is returning to work next week.  Are you sure you don't want to work directly with her?  I feel you are being cheated, by working through me, my knowledge of the Victorian Era is rather limited.  Please consider it.

The third envelop was smaller than the others. Inside there were three business cards. The first card brought a smile to her face as she read Clem’s name and accompanying phone number. The second business card was identical to Clem’s in design and texture with Marv’s contact information. The third card listed a familiar name:

Tessa Wakefield  
Curator, Pratt Hall  
London, England

On the back of the card, there was a long string of numbers, which she assumed to be Tessa’s phone number.

A quick series of raps on her door from Dawn reminded Buffy that it was almost time to go back to New York. Quickly she deposited the envelopes back into the stone box as Dawn walked into her room.

“Clem’s here,” she announced.

"I'll be right along, Dawnie." With a nod, her sister turned away and, Buffy presumed, went to meet with Clem. On a stool near the closet, her suitcase lay open. She went to the little bathroom and gathered up her remaining toiletries when she felt someone standing nearby.

"You can come in, Angel." she said as she walked out of the bathroom and dropped the items into her suitcase. As Angel walked into her room, she flipped the top of the suitcase over her clothing and toiletries and tugged the zipper to close it.

"So, I take it that you are not staying." he sounded hopeful, like she was about to say something to contradict her words and she felt a small flash of regret. For a moment, she was a young teenager, picturing a life of happiness with the dark haired man beside her. for years, all of her fantasies had centered around this man, that happily-ever-after could be a reality if only...

She turned to him with a smile and for a second his face lit up, then faded as he looked at her face. 

"You're not staying." he repeated his last words again, this time his tone was flat.

"No. I have to..." her eyes roamed around the room and lingered on the pale stone box, Angel's eyes following hers. "I have to get back."

"You're not coming back, are you?" he asked, quietly.

Buffy bit her lip and shook her head, in wordless agreement. Then, she stepped forward and placed her palm on his cheek. Raising on the tips of her toes, she placed her lips to his with a lingering, chaste kiss. She took a moment to breathe him in and somewhere inside that young, teenaged girl sighed with longing.
"Goodbye, Angel." she whispered.

Turning, she picked up the stone box and tucked it under her arm. She went to her suitcase and pulled it from the stool, by its handle. Then she walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Ooops, I lied...no Andrew until the next chapter.
Outburst

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance. I have always been fond of narrative vs dialogue. This chapter is heavier one the first and lighter on the second. So the chapter was so big, I decided to break it into two parts. Enjoy, Gentle Readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vi shivered as the relentless rain fell, each drop a sharp sting upon her arms. The wooden stake felt slippery in her grasp. Overhead, a sharp crack of thunder startled her so badly, the stake dropped from her hand. The vampire in front of her laughed and with a burst of speed leapt over the headstone of the grave before her. Heart thundering, she backed up a few steps as the vampire advanced, bright yellow eyes aglow.

“I can smell your fear.” Slowly, his teeth elongated a fraction of an inch at a time. He tilted his head and sniffed the air. “Do you know what fear smells like to a vampire?”

Shaking her head, she continued to step backward until her foot stepped into a slight hollow on the ground and she lost her balance, falling backward with one hand behind her. The mud was slick between her fingers as she panicked and scrabbled backwards on all fours, while the vampire prowled closer.

Suddenly, her fingers scraped against the rough outer wall of a crypt and Vi realized she was trapped. The vampire laughed as she tried to curl into a little ball and wrap her arms around her head as his hands splayed toward her. Strong fingers gripped her wrists and she shrieked in terror.

“No, stop!” she cried.

Within a heartbeat the grip on her wrists lessened.

“Aw, bloody hell,” Spike said softly.

From her left, Vi heard Buffy sigh in disappointment.

“Okay... let’s review. Who can tell me where Vi went wrong?”

“Went wrong?” Karen shouted over another crack of thunder. “Went wrong? Everything about this is wrong! Maybe if it weren’t raining and it weren’t so frickin’ cold, Vi might have stood a better chance!”

“So, it’s not Vi’s fault?” Buffy asked as Vi shuddered, trying to regain control of herself. Next to her, Spike extended his arm but quickly withdrew his hand when Vi flinched.

The chorus of “no” from the other potentials was immediate.

“It wasn’t a fair set up,” Marie began, but was interrupted by a variety of other protests.

“She’s exhausted from the training we did earlier...”
“It’s raining cats and dogs!”

“… there is mud everywhere…”

“…slick as hell!”

“… didn’t even have her stake…”

“…cornered her on purpose!”

“How could you expect anyone to…”

A low snarl silenced their voices and every eye looked toward Spike. There was no enjoyment in his glowing eyes, they were the flat stare of a predator.

“Looking for a fair fight? Think you can,” he waved his hand in around, “control the weather? Want the Big Bad to stop if you drop your weapon?”

“Spike.” He tensed at the sharp command in Buffy’s voice then whirled around and advanced toward the Slayer. His tone was angry when he started speaking again.

“I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again,” he narrowed his eyes when the Slayer started to walk backwards. His vampire face returned and Vi wondered if it was just her imagination or were his eyes just a shade more predatory, his teeth and nails just a little longer than before. (Was it possible, she wondered, that he had been going easy on them before?) “A vampire always has his weapon.”

“And you can stumble,” he continued. Suddenly Buffy, stumbled and her foot slipped on the ground and within seconds, her pose mirrored Vi’s earlier position, on the ground with the wall of the crypt at her back and nowhere to go.

“Your heart can be pounding in fear,” for the first time, his voice slightly garbled (altered, Vi realized, by the even longer pointed teeth protruding from his mouth). “but that won’t make them stop.” He reached down and grabbed Buffy’s wrists, roughly yanking her up from the ground and a few of the girls inhaled sharply.

He raised his hands in the air and Vi noticed that Buffy’s feet dangled inches above the ground. A few of the girls shifted nervously. Buffy’s eyes were wide, and she twisted her body ineffectually trying to escape the vampire’s grasp.

“And you might be weaponless and the only thing you will have is…” For a moment, the downpour lessened like nature was holding its breath.

“Me.” And suddenly, the Slayer exploded into action. Her wrists were still in the Vampire’s tight grasp, but she brought her feet up together and kicked into his chest. Startled, he released his grasp and she fell downward. She hardly hit the ground when she tugged into a backward roll and stood a split second later. Spike was already rushing toward her, a low menacing growl but just when he got within arm’s length, the Slayer hit him with a powerful backhand.

Stunned, Vi and the other girls could only watch as the Slayer and Vampire fought with kicks and hits, neither one appearing to give any quarter; Spike in total game face the whole time and Buffy with only her fists, elbows, and feet to protect her. Once in a while, Buffy would grab something from the ground. She threw rocks (which Spike easily dodged) but she didn’t give up. She used overhanging tree branches to grab and give her the momentum to swing her feet toward him and send Spike crashing to the ground then let go of the branch and somersaulted through the air.
The rain was continued, each drop like a hundred needles stabbing at her skin, but for a moment Vi forgot that she was weary, drenched, and chilled to the bone as she watched the Slayer and Vampire battle each other. They were relentless, tireless in their battle. Fingers splayed, Spike swiped with unnaturally long nails which the Slayer avoided and retaliated with powerful kicks that knocked the vampire backward. And just when Vi thought they had both exhausted themselves, their punches and kicks increased in speed.

“Jesus...” from her left, Vi heard Marie exclaim. Then more voices chimed in.

“...but it's Buffy. She’s the Slayer and…”

“Oh my god, did you see that flip she just did? I get dizzy doing a somersault. They don’t expect us to...”

“...think he was actually going easy on Vi?”

Vi was unable to tear her eyes away from Buffy and Spike. They duo were still trading hits, but their bodies were much closer than before. The Slayer back-handed Spike with her left hand, but he caught her wrist. She saw his lips move, but the rain drowned out his voice. Buffy’s lips curved in a smile that caused Vi to flush. Buffy reached up with her right hand but Vi didn’t think she was going to hit Spike. Still, the vampire caught the wrist in his hand. The pair stood perfectly still and Vi could almost see a current of electricity run back and forth between them. Overhead, the sky flashed rapidly, then thunder rumbled so loud that Marie shrieked in alarm.

Vi wasn’t sure if it was the rumble of the thunder, the lightning flashing in the sky or the potential’s panicked shriek, but in an instant Buffy was striding toward them and telling them the lesson would be continued another night. Behind her, Spike stared at the Slayer’s retreating back. Once again, his lips moved but Vi didn’t think she was going to hit Spike. Still, the vampire caught the wrist in his hand. The pair stood perfectly still and Vi could almost see a current of electricity run back and forth between them. Then, Buffy turned back to the group letting them know it was time to go back the house.

Vi saw a slow smile cross Spike’s face and she thought she recognized the expression upon his face.

Hope.

Vi opened her eyes, confused for a moment by the lack of thunder, lightning and rain. The dream had been so vivid, that she felt transported in time. Had it not been for the warm, comforting weight of Daniel’s arm slung across her stomach, she could have sworn that she was still in Sunnydale preparing for the most terrifying battle of her life.

She lay still for a few moments, listening to the quiet, steady breaths of the man beside her. Carefully, she rolled to her side and moved her legs to the side of the bed. She wriggled her toes slightly when they touched the thick plush carpet and stood, facing the long, narrow French windows. Opened earlier that evening, there was a warm breeze stirring the air in her room. With practiced ease, she sat sideways on the seat and hugged her knees. From the window seat, she could see the wide expanse of the back lawn, the stables a short distance to the East and the pool to the west. Vi couldn’t count the number of hours she spent sitting on the window seat learning to communicate with Cho-Ahn or nestled in her boyfriend’s strong, muscular arms trading stories about
their childhoods or just in quiet contemplation.

Tonight, her eyes lingered on the twinkling stars until the echo of water splashing drew her eyes to the pool. The lights from the bottom of the pool allowed her eyes to easily find Xander as he came up from a dive and began his nightly ritual. Behind her she heard the rustle of blankets and the pad of bare feet upon the hardwood floor. At the touch of fingers upon her shoulder she sat forward and made room to Daniel. It took a few moments for them to get situated but soon enough her head lay on his chest and his hand upon her head.

“Why do you think he only swims at night?” Vi wondered. “Every night, without fail, he comes out for a swim. Yet, during the day you wouldn’t know that he could swim – he doesn’t go near the water at all.” She felt Daniel’s shrug.

“Not sure – he and I haven’t said more than a few words to each since you arrived. I will say that if I didn’t know better, I would swear he was training to be a contender for an Olympic medal. He appears to have the same kind of drive that professional athletes have.”

“He wasn’t like this when I met him. I mean he could handle himself in a fight alright, but it seemed that he was too busy working or fixing stuff around Buffy’s house to spend time at the gym. He didn’t get like,” she fluttered her fingertips toward the window in the pool’s general direction, “that until…we arrived here.”

They were quiet for a while; Vi blinking drowsily as she stared at the lone man swimming lap after lap. They couple lay together until Daniel nudged her. When they rose to return to the bed, she noticed Xander was still doing laps.

The next morning, Vi sighed with contentment and leaned back in her chair, her hands patting her full belly in an imitation of a rim-shot. As always, Kennedy’s staff put out an amazing breakfast buffet worthy of a five-star rating. In the chair beside her, Cho-Ahn gave the most unladylike of burps. There was a pause at the table and then various giggles broke out around the table but were quickly smothered as Giles gave an annoyed snap of his morning newspaper.

Vi stifled her sigh as more than a few Slayer-shaped frowns were directed toward the Watcher. Things in the house had been a little tense since Buffy and Dawn had left with the pink-eyed demon. Unfortunately, Giles and Willow made no effort to censor their conversations and more than one Slayer had overheard their plans for a new Watcher’s Counsel “once Buffy comes around and everything goes back to the way it should be”.

A few of the girls tried to speak out, but Giles’ condescending attitude had them quickly walking away for fear they would lose their temper. Last night, she ran into Marie, who was walking away from the dining room, her expression murderous.

“Buffy can’t come back soon enough,” Marie had hissed through clenched teeth, her fingers tightly curled against her palm.

It wasn’t the first time she had heard the sentiment that that day and Vi didn’t think it would be the last. Giles’ was a little more vocal regarding Buffy’s “preposterous” idea and while Willow didn’t outright agree with Giles, she didn’t disagree with him either.

Vi picked up a large glass decanter and poured more water into her glass.
Conversation at the breakfast table dwindled to a few murmured words here and there. Vi was just about to clear her plate, when Giles stood up and looked at his watch. He paused at looked around the table at the girls and for a moment Vi thought she saw something akin to regret on his face.

“Well, I have some calls to make.”

His words were ignored by much of the room and he stood awkwardly for a moment then gave a small sigh and left. Not more than a moment later, Andrew and Faith entered the room. Faith paused in the doorway, her eyes scanning the faces of each Slayer seated at the table while Andrew headed straight toward the buffet.

“Brioche!” he declared with such delight that Vi found it hard to suppress a smile as he speared a slice for his plate. Happy sounds continued to emanate from him as he perused the lavish brunch spread atop the sideboard.

Faith’s attention remained directed toward the group seated at the table.

“Let me guess,” she began as took a vacant seat next to Rona. “Giles got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?”

“Try every morning.” Rona muttered darkly, stabbing the last chunk of her French toast with deadly precision.

“He’s such an arrogant ass.” Helen contributed

“Ching-wah tsao duh liou mahng.” Cho-Ahn added. Vi choked on a mouthful of water, half-amused and half-horrified.

“Mei-mei!” she chided her friend, shocked.

Cho-Ahn shrugged unapologetically and Vi shook her head in amused exasperation as the girls clamored to know the Chinese-to English translation. Finally, Vi gave in.

“It’s one of her favorite curses and certainly not appropriate for conversation around the dinner table.” Vi gave her “little-sister” an affectionate shove on the shoulder before she continued. “I will tell you this. It implies one is sexually interested in frogs and their mother is a female dog.” She finished just as Andrew took a seat.

“That’s certainly creative.” He gave Cho-Ahn an admiring glance. Her friend and she must have understood the compliment because she preened, a smug smile on her face.

Smiling, Faith went to the buffet and filled a small bowl with Greek yogurt which she topped with a myriad of berries while the conversation continued.

“Oh, you have no idea.” Vi said, then added, “Chinese curses are creative, hilarious and often shocking all at once. You should see the look on Tim’s face when I make him translate. He blushes and stammers…it’s so sweet.” Everyone laughed in good humor, but Cho-Ahn turned to Vi with a quizzical expression.

“Tim?” she questioned.

“Tim,” Vi paused then patted her own cheeks and then stammered and exhaled in an imitation of how Tim looked whenever Cho-Ahn said something outrageous. Cho-Ahn’s expression cleared and she let out a peal of laughter, nodding.
“Tim gāngà!” She said, between breathless chuckles. “Exactly!” Vi agreed. The two girls giggled again then Vi translated ’gāngà’ meant awkward.

For a few moments the room was quiet. A few of the group had finished eating yet remained to enjoy one more cup of coffee. Vi noticed Andrew quietly savoring his first bite of the brioche, his eyelashes fluttering in shameless enjoyment.

Helen was the first to break the lull in conversation.

“Anyone know when Buffy is coming back?” she asked, blowing gently before taking a sip of the steaming coffee.

“Soon, I hope.” Marie returned, her expressing quickly turning glum. “I heard Giles and Willow talking yesterday and it’s obvious they want to go back to the old way – Watchers telling the Slayers what to do, where to go.”

“Buffy will fix that.” Helen re-joined. “Once she comes back, she will set them straight.”

“Well,” Marie dragged out the word, “Giles and Willow seemed pretty confident that Buffy will set us straight.”

As the discussion continued, no one noticed Andrew’s increasing irritation each time one of the Slayers said, “Buffy will” or “ask Buffy to”. Suddenly, with a loud clatter, he dropped his fork on to his plate and pushed it away. The conversation halted to a sudden stop as each girl turned to the blonde, mystified.

“I’ve lost my appetite.” With a sigh, he placed his hands on the edge of the table to push his chair away and left the room.

The conversation became muted, reduced to just a few softly spoken word. Vi wondered if the other Slayers were replaying the previous conversation in an attempt to discover what might have caused Andrew’s sudden change in behavior.

__________________________________________________________________________________

Chapter End Notes

So, in my head-cannon, Vi has a backstory (most of which was cut out the chapter.). Her father was in the Army (mother died when Vi’s younger sister was born). After 9/11, she and her younger sister were sent to live with their grandmother on a farm near Cleveland while her father was deployed. About six months after deploying, her father was returned home minus a leg. However, he committed to rehab and remained physically active (and mentally sound). Her family is by no means dysfunctional. Still, Vi does want to be closer to her family and she is bothered by Giles’ and Willow's talk about "placement".

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