Taking Chances

by sandy_s

Summary

Someone dies and has a regret. The regret requires fixing. That fixing involves Spike and Buffy. Of course, it all goes haywire. Or does it? Set in the future and in season 4 of BtVS. (Hints of events in AtS.)

Rating: R (for language and sexual situations)

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Joss owns all.

Author's Note: The song sung by Celine Dion (Taking Chances) is the theme song for this fic. This fic was inspired by several of the challenges in the challenge section of Elysian Fields, but it fits none of them perfectly. (Started this back in March 2017, but it’s been on the back burner to Seasonal Spuffy and Finding the Way Home.) Huge thank you to Ceruleansoul for betaing this fic around about chapter 12 or 13! Your help is so appreciated!

*hugs*

Dedication: This story is dedicated to all my Spuffy friends from long ago who read all the old fanfic just like me. And a very special thank you to eyesthatsslay who is reading all the chapters as I write them and has been encouraging me to keep on going with the tale. *big squishy hugs* The banner you made for the story is absolutely gorgeous!!
In a moment, wood pierces his heart, he is dust in the wind, and his life is over.

His soul hesitates as if he isn’t sure what just happened, and he catches the briefest hazy glimpse of the creature that took his life.

Before he can wrap his mind around it, there’s darkness, a distinct scent of cinnamon, a hard tug and a whooshing sound, almost like he’s being sucked somewhere else. The part of him that can still think wonders if he’s going to heaven or hell or some variant in between, and then. . .

There’s nothingness.
His consciousness comes back online without fanfare, and he gasps though he hasn’t needed air for as long as he can remember. He’s surprised to recognize that he can feel his limbs and body, and he tentatively moves them in wonder before opening his eyes.

He discovers he’s lying on his side and that the cool dampness beneath his fingers is the dew on grass in a small forest clearing. Trees of a type he doesn’t recognize tower above him, oddly shaped leaves on thick branches canopied over him and only letting past stray beams of light. As his hearing returns, he realizes that the world around him is as quiet as an empty church except for a light breeze that rustles the limbs above.

He glances down at himself and sees that his body is whole and clad all in black, and he wonders what this means for his afterlife. He pushes himself off the ground and looks all around him, searching for some sign of what he’s supposed to do... where he’s supposed to go. He sees nothing... no path, no buildings, no signs of any beings besides himself.

When he’s about to choose a direction, a familiar voice fills his ears from behind, “Hey, stranger.”

He spins to see if what he’s hearing is real, and his jaw drops. “Cordy.”

“So you finally left the mortal coil, huh?”

He’s stunned because she looks beautiful, her dark hair long and wavy and her smile bright and vibrant as ever, and all he can manage is a shrug and sheepish, “Yeah.”

There’s an awkward silence, and then, he grunts as she throws her arms around him. “It’s so good to see you, Angel!”

He hugs her back and buries his face in her hair, inhaling her familiar scent. She’s warm and feels so alive. He can even hear her heartbeat. “W-where are we?”

She draws back from him, her hands resting on his biceps. “Well, we’re in a little bit of a holding area.”

“What do you mean?” Angel is confused but doesn’t want to move away from her. He drinks her in with all his senses; he hasn’t seen her in too long.
“Well, here is where we review your life, go over the highlights... the regrets... before we move onto the next step. Don’t worry. I had to do this, too, and it’s easy peasy. They,” she waves her hand around, “whoever they are aren’t exactly mean about it. They don’t make you completely relive the parts that are super painful.”

“Oh.” Angel thinks for a second. “Wait. Where are we going?”

She kisses his cheek. “Don’t worry. You’re coming with me... it’s peaceful. You’ll like it there.”

Angel is surprised... not that he thought he was for sure going to heaven or hell... he really didn’t know.

“Don’t look so shocked. You more than earned it. You’ve been a good guy now for a lot more centuries than you were doing not so great things.”

“Like murdering and torturing people. I didn’t know there was a checks and balances thing.”

“There isn’t. No one knows exactly how the Powers or whoever’s out there decides where you go. All I know is that it’s not a mathematical equation.”

Angel decides not to question it too much. He’s just grateful to be in Cordelia’s presence again for however long he gets to be. “Great. So let’s get reviewing.”

She hesitates, steps slightly away from him, and tilts her head to one side, her eyes flicking away from his as if she is listening to something he can’t hear. “There’s one caveat.”

Angel feels his stomach sink if he still has a stomach. “What?”

“When they review your life, they identify your biggest regret, and you get the chance to go back and fix it. Well, it's not really a choice.” She frowns. “Huh. I didn’t have to do that. Not sure if that’s a blessing or a curse.”
“Great.” How is it that he ends up with something unusual like this even in the ultimate death? "How am I supposed to..." His words are cut off as all control over his ability to communicate, move, and have conscious thought is taken from him. Thousands of memories suddenly pour through his mind beyond his power, but for some reason, he doesn’t feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable. Within what feels like a few seconds, he is let loose, and he staggers a bit.

Cordelia reaches out to steady him. “How was it? Are you okay?”

Angel can’t put words to how he’s feeling, so he offers, “I’m okay. Thank you.” He smiles at her. “Now what?”

“I really have no clue.”

“Any more,” Angel points to her head, “you know, communications?”

She shakes her head. “No. Nothing. Ugh. It’s so frustrating! Reminds me of how I had no control over those visions. Only with much less pain.”

“Well, that’s good at least.” He strokes her arm, and she slides her hand into his. He squeezes it in return.

They both look around the clearing, not sure what they’re searching for, and then, there’s a small knocking sound, almost like a woodpecker is pecking the inside of the largest tree nearby. Cordelia and Angel stare, unsure what to do as the sound gets louder and louder until there’s a small pop, and a perfectly round circle forms and a chunk of wood falls to the ground, leaving a small hollow hole the size of a hand in view.

“Well, that’s... interesting.” Cordelia doesn't stop herself from being sarcastic. It’s not as if she can get kicked out of heaven.

They approach the damaged tree with caution, and Angel searches the small space, which is at his eye level.

“See anything?” Cordelia asks.

“Nope.”
He reaches in without a lot of forethought. After all, what could possibly happen here in a supposedly good place? His hand closes around a small piece of paper that’s rolled up like a tiny scroll. He unfurls the document and skims over the neatly scripted words. “Oh.” He reads the message twice.

“What does it say?!”

“It says that my biggest regret has to do with Buffy and Spike.”

Cordelia tries to peer at the note. “Huh?” She's a little annoyed that his biggest regret doesn't have to do with her, but then, she decides not to complain about it because he's here with her now and will be going with her when he's done.

He dips the paper to show her. “It says I regret not encouraging them to be together sooner.”

“But that makes no sense. . . Buffy and Spike have been gone a long time. They're at peace. . . in different places but at peace.”

Angel is silent for several seconds before he looks Cordelia in the eye and is honest with her, “Yes, but they could have had more time together if I hadn’t played some role in keeping them apart.” He thinks about how hard his grandchilde tried, how he started doing good before he got his soul, and how he treated the newly souled vampire after he came back through the amulet. Angel also considers how much he loved and will always love Buffy even if she wasn’t meant for him in the long run of his life. Out of jealousy, he hadn’t wanted Spike to be with Buffy and consciously and sometimes unconsciously prevented their connection. “I understand why this is one of my biggest regrets, especially given what happened to them. Maybe not my biggest regret, but that’s apparently not my decision.”

“But what happened wasn’t your fault,” Cordelia reassures him.

Angel meets her gaze. “I think I know what I have to do. . . how to fix it.”

“How? You have to choose a point in time to go back to and do something different.”
“I’m not sure how, but I gue. . . .”

Angel feels another tug but a less bewildering one this time, and he is gone.
An Unusual Wedding Day

Giles puts his hand over his eyes and wishes harder than he’s ever wished that what he’s hearing isn’t real. He knows the power of the wish, and he’s grateful that Anya isn’t here to chide him on being careful about what he says and where. If he wasn’t somehow very blind, he would take the stairs double time and find a pair of earplugs. . . either that or he would make Buffy tie Spike up again and duct tape his mouth, so he doesn’t have to hear the unending. . .

For some reason, there’s a sudden cessation of the kissing between his Slayer and the vampire. Alarm bells go off, and Giles sits bolt upright.

“Buffy?” He’s pleased that he sounds more annoyed than panicked.

“Giles? Is everything okay?” Buffy perches next to him on the sofa and gently touches Giles's arm. She’s genuinely worried about her father figure. He’s lost his eyesight after all.

Before Giles can answer, the phone rings.

“I got it!” Spike’s voice is way too cheerful, but Giles notes that he has never heard the vampire sound truly happy. All Giles can conjure up in his head regarding Spike is the smirking expression that always seems to be on his face, the unending sarcasm, and an uncanny ability to point out things that make them all a bit uncomfortable.

“W-wait. . .” Giles has no idea who could be on the other end of the line, but he imagines that they could potentially be alarmed to hear the vampire’s voice answering the phone.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Rupert Giles residence. How can I help?” Spike is in love with his mortal enemy, something that he never thought possible. . . not that somewhere in the unconscious reaches of his mind he didn’t harbor some long interest in Buffy. Dru had even noticed. With his love somehow being returned by the Slayer, he feels magnanimous. He listens to the voice on the other end of the line. “Uh huh.” He paces as far as the phone cord will allow. “Uh huh.”

Back straight and hands in her lap, Buffy watches her new fiancé with growing curiosity and eager alertness.

Giles sighs and holds his hand up. “Spike, please bring me my phone.”
Spike covers the mouthpiece and whispers, “Hold on, Rupert, it’s actually about our wedding.”

“Y-your wedding?” Giles is incredulous. How did they plan a wedding so quickly?

Buffy bounces next to him. “I’m so excited!” She gives her Watcher a little hug. “This is the most romantic day of my whole life.”

Giles rolls his eyes. “Obviously, something is very very wrong here.”

At the same time, Spike hangs up the phone and turns to Buffy who misses Giles’s mumblings and eye rolling. “So? Who was it?”

“Somehow, love, the word is out that we’re getting married, and that was Judge Durbin over at the courthouse. He’s used to doing late night weddings.”

“Must be the demon crowd,” Buffy reasons. She looks at Spike with a question in her eyes. “Do demons get married?”

“Of course they do! They don’t all do the standard marriage vows, but they do. The judge has high tolerance for unusual rituals and what not. . . or so I’ve heard.” Spike recalls how Dru wanted to have her dolls get married and how he researched all this when she was in one of her moods. He shakes his head. Best not bring the Dru bit up with Buffy, and he really doesn’t want Buffy to know what lengths he’d go to for the person he loved lest she use him the same way. . . well, Buffy wouldn’t . . .

“Spike?” Buffy sounds confused.

Spike brightens. “Bloke can squeeze us in tonight. Do you have time to get your dress?”

“Really?!” Buffy jumps up and throws her arms around Spike’s neck. She hops back and frowns a little. “I mean, there’s that one dress shop in town, but they’re closed until tomorrow.”

“I can get us in, and you can pick out any dress you set your heart on,” Spike offers.
Buffy hesitates. “As long as we leave money for what I pick?”

Spike nods. He thinks he has enough cash to cover something simple. “If you want.”

“Um, I simply must object to this madness,” Giles interrupts from where he’s now leaning forward on the sofa and reaching out with one hand in their general direction. “Buffy, something is obviously going on here if you’re talking about condoning breaking and entering.”

Buffy shrugs. “I did it with Faith. Faith did not pay. You can pick the lock, right, honey? I mean, so we don’t damage their store?”

“Of course!” Spike doesn’t think that really matters, but he’ll do it if his Slayer wants him to.

Giles sighs and slumps forward with his forearms on his knees. “See... terribly wrong.”

Buffy hugs Giles. “Don’t worry. We’ll have a more formal ceremony and reception after we figure out how to fix your vision. I don’t want you to have to walk me down the aisle not being able to see.” Buffy registers the dismay on her Watcher’s face. “Don’t worry. You’ll come with us now, and we’ll protect you from anything happening to you while you’re blind.”

Giles bows his head in defeat. There’s clearly no stopping Spike and Buffy, and he honestly can’t think with them under his roof. He has no doubt that Buffy can hold her own out in the night, and he needs to call someone else... someone less insane. “No, no. You lovebirds go along.”

“Okay.” Buffy kisses his cheek. “We’ll hurry.” She snags Spike’s hand in both of hers and backs toward the front door, smiling broadly at her fiancé. “I can’t wait to be married to you.”

At the entrance to Giles’s apartment, Spike grips the door frame and glances back. “Don’t worry, Rupert, I’ll take care of Buffy.”

Giles hears a short smack, and Spike’s voice, “Oww, love! What was that for?”

“I don’t need you to take care of me!”
Their voices start to fade, and Giles calls out to them but trails off, “Don’t forget to close the bloody door. . . .” A few seconds later, he frowns to himself. He doesn’t remember Spike or Buffy calling the courthouse or, in point of fact, using the phone at all. . . the phone. Where did Spike put the phone? Giles feels his way in the general direction of the phone jack. He must call Xander and Willow.

* * *

Buffy gazes with longing at the dresses in the window of the bridal shop, which is mostly dark and impenetrable. Spike left her to run by one of the places he stashed valuables to pick up more money for the dress and a tux as well as the court fees. Buffy puts her hands on the glass and tries to see deeper into the shadows of the store, but she really can’t make out much.

“Buffy? Buffy Summers?” a familiar voice calls from behind her.

Buffy spins around, a bit embarrassed that she’s been caught window shopping in the middle of the night in Sunnydale. Hands behind her back, she recognizes Riley, her tall, slightly awkward crush from psychology class. All crush-worthy-type feelings have now dissipated since she and Spike realized how much they love one another. “Riley! What’re you doing out here?”

“I could say the same thing about you. You should be getting home. It’s not safe to be out so late.” His expression tells her that he’s worried, which means he probably won’t go away.

She waves a hand at him. “Pshh. I can take care of myself. Trust me.”

“Really? I mean, you can’t be too careful . . . a young woman like you out here in the dark.” When Riley realizes that Buffy isn’t buying his concern, he brings out his statistics. “Have you heard about how often women get hurt after midnight on college campuses?”

“No, but I bet it’s more here than any other college campus in the country.” She wants to say unless there’s another college campus on a hellmouth like in Cleveland, but she somehow manages to stop herself.

“Y—you’re right. I can’t remember the exact numbers, but Professor Walsh was running those stats for the psychology department’s safety awareness campaign.”
“See. I’m in the know. I can take care of myself.” Now go away, she thinks. She wants to shoo him away, but she doesn’t want to prolong the conversation.

Riley blinks. “Wait. Why are you standing in front of a wedding shop?”

Buffy lights up. She’s so excited to be able to share her good news with someone besides Giles. “I’m getting married!”

Riley’s jaw hangs open in shock, but before he can produce any comprehensible words, Spike appears out of the shadows, his duster swinging around him as he strides over to slip his hand into Buffy’s... a marker of his territory. She’s his Slayer now. “We’re getting married.”

“W-why didn’t you mention this before? I would have never... well...” Riley barely glances at Spike with his bleached blonde hair, all-black clothing, and Doc Martens. Riley thinks for a second that the guy looks strangely familiar, but he dismisses the inkling. More than anything, he finds himself wishing he could have another one of those talks with Willow about Buffy.

“Never would have what?” Spike demands.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Riley starts to back away; his mind is so befuddled by Buffy’s strangeness that he can’t put clear thoughts together. His pager suddenly beeps, and his hand automatically moves to where the small device is clipped to his jeans. As he reads the small message, something in his expression shifts, becomes more certain. It’s a 911 from Professor Walsh. “Well, good night. Stay safe out there.”

As Riley rounds the corner, Buffy turns to her love. “Are you ready to pick out wedding clothes?”

Spike isn’t falling for the change in subject. “Who was that berk?”

Buffy kisses him gently, and he relishes the affection. She leans her forehead on his. “No one you need to worry about. . . .”

“Buffy, we promised to always tell each other about stuff like this. He obviously fancies you.”
Buffy experiences a flash of annoyance but chooses assertiveness over her usual inclination to punch Spike in the nose. “I don’t have to tell you every time a guy flirts with me just like you don’t have to tell me every time a girl flirts with you ‘cause that’s just going to get majorly ridiculous if we do.”

Spike can’t resist her, and studying his hands, he concedes, “You’re right, pet.” He pauses before he adds with surprising candor, “With my history, I get insecure.”

Buffy strokes his cheek. She knows about how much Dru hurt him over the past century. “I know, and you don’t have anything to worry about with me.”

“I know that, love, I do.”

“Shall we do this?” Buffy inclines her head toward the shop door.

Spike links his arm in hers. “We shall.”

“And remember, we pay for what we take.”

Spike fingers the wad of money in his pocket. He hopes he has enough. “Right.”

Buffy catches the worry in his eyes. “I have some money, too.”

“Thanks, love.”

* * *

The office of the justice of the peace is quiet and empty, and Spike and Buffy easily find Judge Durbin in his office. To Buffy's surprise, his spacious work space is spotless and homey with a wall of dark wood bookshelves filled with leather bound law books, a large heavy wooden desk, thick brown carpet on the floor, and two comfortable looking overstuffed chairs across from him. The judge is typing on his computer when they appear in the doorway. A cup of what looks like tea is steaming on a coaster near his hand.

He smiles but doesn't look away from the computer screen. "Come in. Come in. I've been expecting you.” His tone is soft and gentle but firm.
Holding Spike's hand, Buffy hesitantly enters the office and sits on the edge of one of the chairs. Their hands part, and her fingers smooth the hem of the simple white dress that Spike chose for her. Spike sits next to her with equal reverence for the judge. Buffy peeks over at him and notices how handsome he looks in the equally simple black suit. He refused to wear a tux because the garment was too stuffy and formal. The suit was their compromise and Buffy realizes this is likely the first of many compromises she'll be making as a Slayer married to a vampire.

Judge Durbin stops typing, folds his hands, and smiles again, the light in his eyes making him look younger than the grey in his temples suggests. "So, I hear you want to get married."

Spike and Buffy look at one another and smile.

"We do," Spike says with certainty.

The judge slides a piece of paper across the desk toward them. "Lucky for you, you already have a marriage license, so you don't have to go through the typical application process or pay the usual fee."

Spike picks up the piece of paper and studies it, holding the document so that Buffy can see what's written on it, too. Both of their names are written on the paper along with the date; there's even an official seal like it's been notarized or something. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, but then, neither of them has gotten married before.

"Lucky for us," Buffy says, dismissing any nagging doubt in the back of her mind about how this was even possible.

Spike is relieved he doesn't have to pay for something else; after all, he just spent all his blood and cigarette money on their outfits for the ceremony. He’s equally grateful he doesn't have to produce the usual picture identification that most official endeavors tend to require. "Good. We want to get this done as soon as possible. So what do we do now? Do we need vows?"

"Actually, the ceremony is fairly simple, and you don't need vows. . . just agree in the right places. And you need a witness."

"A witness!" Spike's eyes widen as if he should have thought of that. "Where will we find a witness at this hour?" He glances at Buffy. "We should have brought your Watcher with us."
Buffy pouts. "What do you mean 'good' about getting this done as soon as possible? This is special, and I want it to be memorable!"

Spike sighs. "I think the bigger problem here is our lack of witness."

"What's a witness if you can't even slow down and take our commitment seriously? Is this how you're going to treat our marriage... like some kind of chore that you want to hurry up and get done?" Buffy stands to her feet, ready to leave. "'Cause if that's the case, I don't know if I want to..."

She stops mid-sentence as Spike grabs her hand, not in a harsh way but an urgent way. He doesn't want her to leave. "Wait, Slayer... Buffy, love. I didn't mean that I want to hurry things up in that way. I want to speed up things, so we can make it official. So we can get to the good parts... the parts where you and I..."

He raises an eyebrow in that provocative way of his, and Buffy feels something inside her melt. She can't wait for that part either. After all, if Spike's kisses are any indication of how he is at making love, she is undeniably excited. She sits back down, holding Spike's hand, and says with determination, "Okay. How do we get a witness?"

The judge is somewhat amused by the couple's banter. He's married plenty of unusual pairs in the past, including demons of vastly different species whom he wasn't sure how they could even remotely be interested in one another, but this is different. He's never married a Slayer and a vampire, and he can tell there's a lot of passion between the two, which he knows from experience could either make or break them as a couple. Over the years, he's seen a lot of the couples he's married come back around to his courtroom filing for divorce, and he's gotten good at predicting which ones would. This couple... he's not sure about yet. "Don't worry. We always have a witness on stand by for the late evening ceremonies."

"Oh," Buffy says. "Where is he... or she?"

"Mike!" the judge bellows with uncharacteristic volume and a slight edge. Noticing Buffy and Spike's reaction, Judge Durbin explains, "He's a little hard of hearing."

A large demon of a type Buffy has never seen pokes his round grey head into the room. "You rang, your honor?"
"We have a marriage ceremony!" The judge shouts.

"Oh goodie!"
The Morning After

Buffy wrinkles her nose and groans as her brain comes back online. She stretches in her bed but then decides to hide under the warm sheets. She doesn't want to get up. Her head hurts like the morning after she had too much beer. Stupid beer. She remembers how everything reeked of the alcohol the next morning. . . her clothes, her hair. But this morning, she doesn't smell beer, she smells. . . rose petals and the faintest scent of cigarette smoke.

Someone rustles in the bed behind her, and Buffy realizes that either her dorm room bed has grown larger, or she's not in her dorm room. Come to think of it, the sheets are softer, a bit more worn than the new sheets her mom bought her from Target. Buffy’s hand goes her to forehead, and she holds her breath. Did she hook up with some guy that she doesn't remember about? But there wasn't any beer, so how come she doesn't remember?

Wait a second. . .

A cool bare arm slips around her equally bare waist. Her body reacts without her permission, and she snuggles closer to the person behind her. His body. . . and he is definitely a him. . . molds perfectly around hers, and part of her wants to slip back into dreams for just a little while longer.

Her eyes fly open in alarm when she realizes his body is too cool to be human, and Buffy scrambles out of the bed into the coldness of a room that is decidedly not her dorm room. Her trembling fingers fumble with the crooked lamp beside the bed, and grabbing a blanket that's tangled around her feet on the floor, she draws the cloth to her chest to cover her nakedness.

To her horror, a familiar bleached blonde head shoots up from under the sheets that remain on the bed. His bare chest is pale but well-muscled in the lamp light, and he blinks his eyes. She can tell he's as startled as she is, but she can't help but react. "Spike! What did you do?"

The vampire's shock disappears off his face and is replaced by a smirk. If she could read his mind, she'd realize how dismayed he feels, too, but he's had over a century of disguising any fear or hurt with largely false bravado. "Well, well, well. Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Honeymoon over already?"

"Oh my god." Buffy takes a step back and almost stumbles over a toppled coffee table in what surprisingly appears to be a not-so-cheap motel room. She catches herself on the arm of an askew sofa, clutching harder at the blanket. "Did we. . . we didn't. . . did we. . . ?" Her voice rises in pitch with each addition to her question, and her brain keeps telling her that this can’t be real. . . that she didn’t sleep with Spike. Worse, she was completely in love with him.
Spike briefly closes his eyes and realizes how much he enjoyed making love to the Slayer. When he re-opens his eyes, he comprehends that she’s still in shock and likely didn’t notice his little moment of reflection. He decides to jostle her out of her state. "I believe all evidence points to yes, love."

Now Buffy is pacing, which is hard to do with the blanket dragging around her feet and the random items tripping her up. "What's happening? This can't be happening." She glares at him. "And don't call me 'love.' I'm not your love!"

"You didn't seem to mind it so much last night," Spike notes, a light tone in his words. Behind the calm manner, however, his emotions are tumultuous, and he can’t grasp onto any one of them to sort them out.

Buffy scans the ground to find her clothes; all she can find is her wadded up... dress. "That's because we were under some kind of spell." She proceeds to try to pull the dress over her head while still covering herself with her shield.

Spike is amused by her struggle as she finally gives up, drops the blanket, and turns away from him to successfully pull on the wrinkled garment. He admires her skin that’s been kissed by the sun and the sweep of her golden hair falling over her back, but then, he reminds himself that he's a vampire and turned off by... Sod it all. He can’t deny it. He enjoyed himself. He muses that it’s not every day that a vampire who's killed two slayers bags a third in a different sort of way... in some ways, a much more satisfying way.

She finds a shoe and tugs it on. "We have to go find Giles and see if he... oh my god, Giles! He's blind! I can’t believe I almost forgot about that! This whole thing has to be some kind of demonic scheme." She pauses and stares at him. "Did you do this? Some nefarious plan to sleep with me? Ughhh... stop looking at me!" She wants to tell him that he’s disgusting, but she made love to him last night, and for some reason, the feelings still linger. Therefore, she can’t bring herself to completely degrade him. “Put some clothes on!”

Spike is pissed and a tiny bit hurt as he snags his dress shirt from where it's hanging from the headboard. He forgot he'd worn a suit... all those bloody buttons. "You wish that was my intention, Slayer. If I was gonna do something to you lot, I'd definitely not choose a magic spell."

Buffy doesn't react to his little speech or ask him what way he would try to harm her loved ones. Instead, she suddenly sits on the bed again. This time, she's staring at her hand. Through the magic-induced haze, she remembers that Spike proposed to her with one of his rings that was way too big for her finger. Now on her left ring finger, there's a simple gold band, one with a dainty filigree design engraved in the precious metal. When she turns her hand, the light catches the etching and
makes the gold sparkle.

Spike slides over the bed to sit next to her, studying her slender finger. "That's my grandmother's ring."

"I remember." Her voice is soft. She also remembers the story he told her about his family the previous night. . . how much love and reverence he had in his voice when he told her that his mother had given him his grandmother’s ring to give to the love of his life. . . that the ring had never seemed right for Dru. Buffy recalls feeling touched and honored that he had been saving the gold band for just the right person. Part of her still feels that way and that frightens her more than a little. Her stomach aches.

She bolts away from Spike, but something stops her from throwing the ring in his face, so she says, "Let's go. We have to get to the bottom of what's going on. I have to check on Giles. We'll get the marriage annulled later."

Striding toward the door before Spike can respond, she notes the sunlight outside, bends to pick up the blanket she dropped, and tosses it at her. . . husband. Swinging open the door, she strides into the sunlight.

* * *

Somehow Buffy and Spike arrive at Giles's apartment without killing one another, and Spike is hugely relieved that the day became very cloudy with the heavy threat of a downpour, a nice parallel process to how they're both feeling about one another.

For all Buffy's boldness about stomping into the sunlight, she finds that she doesn't really want Spike to die, not if he can help her out with the spell and the yet unresolved problem of the army guys in town. Plus, there's the nagging little change in her emotions since they. . . consummated the marriage.

The front door swings wide open with a simple touch from Buffy's hand, and she hesitates because there is an unusual silence about the Watcher's usually warm and inviting dwelling.

Spike pushes a little bit behind her because he's eager to get inside just in case the drizzle lessens and the sun decides to peek out again.

"Hey!" Buffy protests in an emphatic whisper.
"Sorry, love. Sun." Spike is curious that the chip in his head doesn't go off if he doesn't have the intention of truly hurting her, and he files that little bit of information away for later pondering. "Rupert!"

Buffy sighs. So much for the element of surprise if something dangerous is lurking in the shadows. "Giles? Are you here?"

Buffy notices that the furniture is shoved around but not overturned, and there's a glass of alcohol turned over on the floor, the carpet still damp from the spilled drink. Several books are opened and piled on the coffee table, but her eyes skim over them because she sees her mother's brown leather messenger bag on the sofa.

"My mom was here!" Buffy calls out to Spike who's gone upstairs to check the bedroom.

Spike runs halfway down the stairs at the fear in Buffy's voice; her mum was always kind to him. "Joyce?"

"Something's wrong because she left her bag. She never leaves it." She runs to the phone to try to call her house, but the phone's been ripped out of the wall, the delicate end of the cord smashed.

Spike scans the scattered volumes and picks one up. "Um, love."

Not bothering to correct the vampire's second use of the moniker, Buffy drops the broken phone on the floor. "What?"

Without warning, Spike shudders. Bookmarking the text with his finger, he rushes to the kitchen. "This is not good." Various splashes of bright green viscous bodily fluid puddles on the counter tops, thick drops congealing a darker shade where they slid over the cabinets toward the tiles. He doesn't have to smell the substance to identify it because blood is blood no matter what species it comes from or what color it is. His eyes focus on and recognize the reason for his instincts going off. "This is really not good."

"What is it?" Buffy is at his side, stake out and her muscles ready for a fight.
He points and explains, an edge of authority but also fear in his voice, "That's Dynas blood, and that's the portal they create when they go back to their home dimension to have their offspring."

Buffy can see the waviness in the wall next to the refrigerator. It's almost like someone liquefied the wall. "So? What does that mean?"

"It means, pet, that a Phut demon was here to open the portal because a Dynas can't do it on her own, and that means that your lot's in trouble because Phut demons are not known for liking humans very much."

Before Buffy can respond, there's a flash of light and the smell of burning incense in the living room, and Willow's voice calls out, "Buffy!"

"Willow!" Buffy flies over and hugs her best friend tight. "Thank god." She takes a step back and examines her friend. "Are you okay?"

"Where have you been?" The redhead's clothes are the same as usual, but her hair appears thicker and longer, and something about her skin almost... glows.

Buffy is embarrassed by Willow's question and stumbles over her words. "Well, um." She glances at Spike who gives her a little nod, which oddly enough gives her the confidence to say, "W-we were under some sort of spell, and well..."

Spike holds up Buffy's left hand. "And if the clothes don't make it bloody obvious, we got hitched last night."

Willow's eyes fill with tears. "Oh. Oh no." She covers her mouth in dismay.

"Willow. It's okay. We're..." Her eyes drift to Spike again, her expression giving him a little warning to shut up and not say anything about the wedding night. "We're okay. The spell... it's... the soldiers. I think they were behind it, and somehow it went kablooie... it wore off or something."

The tears pour over Willow's cheeks, and she shakes her head, her eyes downcast.
Something dawns on Spike as he takes in the witch's appearance and her reaction. Anger flashes through him. "Hey! You cast the spell! Don't you know how dangerous that is!?"

Buffy's eyes widen, and she looks to Willow to deny Spike's claim. "Willow?"

"It was me," she confesses. "I-I was so upset about Oz. The way he left... he was my... everything, and then, I didn't have... him, and everything just felt so... my life felt so out of control. I cast a 'My Will be Done' spell. I-I thought it didn't work and that I even failed at that. And before I knew it, everything I said... it started coming true, but I didn't know it. I was so angry with everyone for not being there for me... not taking what I was going through seriously. I-I made Giles blind, and Xander was a demon magnet... . . ."

"And we got married," Spike finishes. He leaves out the part about how there are... were feelings involved – magically-induced feelings but feelings nevertheless – behind said nuptials.

Buffy pulls her friend in for another quick hug. "It's okay. We're not under the spell anymore. Somehow it wore off. Where is everyone? My mom was here and there's a portal in the kitchen. I'm worried. Do you know anything?"

Willow's eyes fill with tears again. "That's my fault, too. All these demons kept coming after Xander, and we couldn't find you. Giles called your mom looking for you, and she came right over." She sobs.

Buffy gently grips Willow's forearms to ground her. "What happened?"

"We figured out it was my spell, and Giles helped me reverse it, but right as he was doing it, these two demons showed up. One knocked down the door. He was really really big... bigger than the door."


Buffy glares at him.

Willow continues, "And the other one was small... really small and furry."
"They really are opposites," Spike confirms, glancing at the ceiling like he's never thought about it that way.

"There was a big fight. The big one wanted to attack Xander and cornered him in the kitchen. Giles and Anya went after him, and the little one, she followed. Giles accidentally cut her, I think. That's why all the blood, and the big one knocked him unconscious. Your mom tried to bring Anya some weapons, but this big portal opened up, and they all... they all got sucked in. It's still open." She points.

"We got that, Red." Spike narrows his eyes. "What were you doing while all the hubbub was going on?"

Willow's wide green eyes plead with Buffy to understand. "I-I didn't know what to do. T-this demon guy showed up, and I felt so much...he had this robe and horns and was s-so... he made me an offer, and I didn't want to..."

"And now you're a vengeance demon!" Spike realizes, his brain putting together what his senses and his gut have been telling him.

Burying both her face in both her hands, the redhead sobs louder.

At a loss for words, Buffy stands in shock for a long moment. Then, she switches to problem-solving mode. "Okay. There has to be a way to fix this. Did you get a talisman or anything like that? Something we can smash like Anya's necklace that she told us about?"

Willow shakes her head back and forth.

"Well, how do we summon this demon guy... the one who made you a..." She can't say the words out loud.

Willow shakes her head again.

"Something's different," Spike guesses given that Willow isn't exactly thrilled with her new gig.
She nods. "Y-yes. I agreed to a temporary trial run. If he doesn't like my work at the end of it, he'll let me go. And everything will go back to normal." Willow doesn't say even this makes her feel second best. Even when she does something bad, she doesn't do it badly enough.

"So just mess around. Do bad vengeance. How long is the trial?"

Willow hiccups. "He didn't say, and I can't just do bad vengeance. He'll know I'm not trying, and he'll kill me."

Spike understands the stuck feeling. "Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Willow nods. "Buffy, he didn't give me a choice about it."

Buffy makes deliberate eye contact with her friend. "Spike and I are going to go after my mom, Giles, and the others. Can you come with?"

"I-I don't think so."

"You'll have to find some way to hold your own until we get back." When Willow balks, Buffy takes her friend's hand and squeezes. "You can do this, Wil. You can."

Some sign of strength lights in the witch's eyes. "I'll do my best." She cocks her head as if she hears a sound Spike and Buffy can't hear. "He's calling me. I have to go."

A flash of bright light makes them squint, and Willow is gone, her final message trailing back to them, "I owe you cookies!"

Without missing a beat, Buffy strides to Giles's weapons chest, which is shoved into a corner and digs through the weapons, hefting a few to test them out.

"How am I going to be any help?" Spike asks, part of him trying to figure out how to get out of going to an alternate dimension that he knows isn't likely to be very friendly to outsiders and part of him wanting something interesting to do. "I can't hit anything."
Buffy shrugs. "You're going to be my guide because I have no idea what I'm getting myself into." She tosses him a large sheathed knife, which he deftly catches. He's pleased to see his instincts are still sharp.

He nods, surprising himself by his decision. "Never been there myself, but I can do that. Know a bit about the demons involved." He twists the knife up and down. "Not that this will help me."

"In case I need a backup weapon," she explains.

Tucking a stake in her sleeve and choosing another sharp blade for herself, she closes the trunk. Grabbing her mom's work bag, she swings the flap open and empties out the contents except for the pair of scissors and bottle of Tylenol. She hurries to the kitchen and opens several cabinet doors, grabbing bandages, string, a small pouch of supplies Giles always makes her take, water, and a handful of protein-rich granola bars. Spike follows her, deftly avoiding the demon blood, and he snags a couple of thermoses of blood from the fridge to hand to Buffy.

"Let me carry the bag, pet. You're not going to need any distractions being that you're the only one who can fight. At least I can be useful for something."

Hit by a wave of uncertainty too complicated to elucidate, Buffy wavers but then hands him the supplies. He slings that strap over his head.

Realizing something as she watches Spike, she looks down at her outfit. She’s still wearing her wedding dress. “Crap. We can’t go like this.”

“You keep a spare change of clothes in the hall closet,” Spike reminds her.

She narrows her eyes at him. “How do you know that?”

He can’t help feeling a little defensive. “ Been living here, haven’t I? ”

“Stalker much?”
“Observant,” he reframes.

She hurries to the closet and pulls out the outfit she almost forgot she’d stashed there when they started using Giles’s apartment as Scoobie-central. Next to Giles’s coat, she notices a couple of black T-shirts and a faded pair of jeans. “Hey! You have clothes here, too.”

“And I repeat. . .”

“You’ve been living here. Yeah. Yeah.” She pulls out a shirt and the jeans, which are surprisingly clean.

Spike gratefully takes the familiar clothes. At least he’ll be comfortable where they’re going. Buffy moves to change upstairs.

“There’s no time for that, love.”

Before the spell, Spike would have been the last person that Buffy would ever change clothes in front of, but she turns her back to him and starts to tug off her dress, convincing herself that he’s right. This is more efficient, and she’s terrified about what’s happened to her mother, Watcher, and friends.

Spike’s mouth drops open, but he almost immediately claps his jaw shut again. Can’t let Buffy know that he even cares. She’s been naked in front of him twice in one day. . . and not under the influence of any sort of magic. The sight of her bare skin reminds him of how her body felt gliding over his, and he chews on the inside of his cheek in an effort to ignore the wave of desire he feels.

She glances over her shoulder at him. “Aren’t you changing?”

He smirks at her to further disguise the familiar yet unfamiliar feelings and quickly pulls on his jeans and t-shirt.

Not daring to look at him lest she be reminded about his. . . well-formed body and how much she wanted him on their wedding night, Buffy braids her hair with quick efficiency and picks up her weapons again. "Let's go."
"Right."

Holding her knife at the ready and squaring her shoulders, Buffy marches through the portal. Spike shakes his head, grits his jaw, and follows.
Traveling between dimensions is nothing, but what really knocks Buffy off her feet is the wind. The cold gush of air pummels her body, sweeping her braid to the left. She staggers in an attempt to stay upright. Her feet stumble over the gravel on the ground, and she squints into the darkness, thankful for the light from what looks like a moon and stars shining down from above.

Something opaque and thick juts out into her field of vision, and she grabs at the object to stop moving, feeling the familiar texture of wood or some form of solid vegetation under her hand. At the same time, a body barrels into hers, and she hears a familiar grunt, and then arms circle tight around her midsection.

Reacting without thinking, Buffy squirms to get away, but the arms hold her firmly, and she hears him hiss in her ear above the roar of the gale, "It's me, Slayer. Try not to move."

She clings hard to her anchor but stops trying to extricate herself from Spike's arms.

"There's a cliff to your right there," he explains.

Her right foot slips a bit and almost downward, sending a shower of gravel over the edge and confirming his observation. "Thanks."

"No problem, pet."

Before Buffy can figure out what to do next, a roar sounds above them. She and Spike both tense at the same time. The single snarl is followed by a cacophony of more roars of varying pitches and tones.

"Let me guess. The Phut guys?"

"Sounds like." Spike honestly doesn't know if there are other kinds of demons here besides the Phut and Dynas variety. All he knows is that he and Buffy need to get away from the throng of Phut demons. They don’t take kindly to intruders.
The wind relents for a moment, and Buffy squints against the night to try and find a way out of their predicament, but their predicament is impossible. . . unless.

Twisting in Spike’s arms, she turns to face him without pushing him away, careful not to lose her balance or knock Spike off kilter as the wind whips around them. Now that she’s not panicking, her body relaxes against his, and she carefully and slowly slips the knife into the waistband of her pants, raising both arms to clutch the seemingly sturdy piece of wood above them. She feels relieved that the wood isn’t lower and that she went first through the portal. Otherwise, she might very well be alone here in this unfamiliar world without a guide and with Spike disintegrated to dust and floating off into the darkness.

“What’re you doing, love?” he shouts.

“Going up.” She glances toward the sky and starts to pull herself out of Spike’s embrace.

“Are you crazy? There’s god knows how many demons up there!” He isn’t sure what he feels about the Slayer, but he sure as hell doesn’t want to take on such odds if he can’t even fight.

“It’s the only way out of here,” she insists. “Don’t sound so worried.” Without thinking, she brushes her lips over his; she figures it may not matter what he thinks about this tiny affection if they don’t survive the upcoming battle. “For luck!” she explains and kicks upward, landing on the branch with surprising ease. Then, she waits for a break in the wind, bends her legs, and jumps up to the top of the cliff just as easily as she jumped over the fence around Sunnydale High all those years ago.

Not sure what to think of her kiss, Spike growls in frustration and chooses his only option: follow the Slayer yet again. With nothing to hold him in place, his launch is wobblier. After a couple of unsteady leaps, he lands in a crouch next to Buffy on the cliff edge above. Without thinking about whether his chip might go off, he automatically unsheathes his knife. The wind is virtually non-existent, and he’s able to take in the scene before him.

“Well. Crap.”

“Yeah.” Buffy’s eyes are shining in the moonlight. “There are a lot of them.”

Dozens of giant Phut demons stand before them, weapons raised. They’re no longer howling, and the contrasting silence is eerie. Then, one from the back emits a high-pitched whine. As one, the demons advance, their thick skin dark and mottled in the moonlight. They have horns poking out of
their skulls, and their eyes are glowing green.

Buffy is ready for them.

Addressing the throng, she shouts, "So any chance we can sit down and have a friendly chat over a cup of coffee?"

"They don't speak English, pet."

"I know that. Girl's gotta try though."

The first demons swipe at her and Spike, and Buffy hurtles into the fray, slipping into the familiar fight. Spike dodges and moves around her, and Buffy does her best to survive and protect him. Demon body parts fly here and there, and she feels lucky that this particular species is rather clumsy when it comes to landing blows and grateful that she's much smaller than them. More than once, her dodging and weaving leads the demons to bash into − and even kill − one another. At one point, Spike picks up one of the bodies and uses it as a shield, and he tosses Buffy his knife when she drops hers. Feeling a bit like a squire in a medieval battle, he rolls between creatures to retrieve her fallen weapon.

Buffy is strong, but even with all her strength and Slayer endurance, she begins to tire, and the demons keep coming. One demon lands a particularly hard blow to her left calf, and her leg crumples under her while another demon rams a fist into her cheek. Collapsing to the ground, her vision blurs and fades for a moment.

Spike sees Buffy fall and calls her name. Fear grips his heart, not fear for himself but for her. He's not sure where the feeling is coming from, but he knows he can't lose her. Without thinking, he steps between the fallen girl and the demons and raises his fists, chip be damned.

He mentally braces for the shattering pain in his skull, but when he lands the first punch, nothing happens − no pain − a mild stinging in his fist but not even a twinge in his head. He bounces back a little and cocks his head. "Huh." Then, he grins, and fueled by adrenaline and the joy of realizing he can hit something living, he picks up where Buffy left off, fending off the attackers until Buffy is able to recover.

Buffy shakes her head and pulls into a sitting position. She blinks in disbelief and relief at the sight of Spike fighting around her. She doesn't even stop to wonder how he's doing it, and she clamors to her
feet, snagging her dropped blade and joins him.

"You okay, pet?" he asks as he ducks a punch and kicks a demon in the gut.

"Yeah. You?" She moves back to back with him.

"Never been better!" The happiness is evident in his voice, and she surprises herself by being glad he's cheerful.

They slip into a rhythm that Buffy's never experienced before with anyone else. . . not Faith, not Kendra, and not even Angel. She relaxes into the fight with him, and bodies fall all around them, some unconscious, some dead. Somehow, they keep going.

Buffy starts to wonder if this will ever end and what they'll do when it does when a loud boom resounds all around them, and a loud voice echoes across the plane in English, "Cease!"

The Phut demons pause and fall back from Buffy and Spike. Panting, the Slayer and vampire glance at one another, and Buffy sees that Spike has slipped into his vamp face and blood flows from a large gash on his right temple.

Her green eyes flash with concern, and as he slides his fangs and face away, he gives her a little nod and eyebrow lift to let her know he's okay.

The never-ending surge of Phut demons parts to reveal a much smaller hooded figure. "Why are you here?" The voice is feminine and kind of garbled like she's speaking through a mouth full of marbles.

Buffy decides to tell the truth, "To find our friends."

"Funny way of finding friends." The creature reaches up and pushes back her hood, revealing a much shorter, somehow more female version of the Phut demons they've been fighting. "Why have you killed so many of us?"

"Um, you started it," Spike points out.
"What did you expect? My sons don't appreciate the intrusion. When we've met you before, your kind has brought nothing but interference and destruction."

"You're the ones that come into our world and use it for your symbiotic mating ritual, and opening portals isn't exactly good for dimensional stability."

Buffy is glad she brought him along because maybe Giles would know the nature of these demons, but she certainly doesn't. "What he said. And what do you mean? I've never met you before. How have we brought 'interference and destruction'?"

The demon grimaces in irritation. "How do you not know what happens in your own home? You are the Slayer."

Spike holds up a hand as Buffy opens her mouth. "She's been trying to suss it out; it's just that the Slayer doesn't exactly do much about human activity in general. Humans do all kinds of destructive, abusive things to one another. The Slayer only handles things of the supernatural variety."

"You don't call what the humans are doing underneath your city to be of the Slayer's concern? You should know. You were there, vampire."

Buffy's eyes widen. "She's talking about the army gu..."

Spike interrupts Buffy, "Yeah, I was there. I know what they did to your little Dynas submissive. Buffy and I... she's been... we..."

"We've been working on it," Buffy finishes for him.

"Not good enough," the female Phut booms, the light in her eyes pulsing and her fists clenching.

With no further discussion, the ground shakes and rumbles beneath Buffy and Spike's feet. Their foundation suddenly disappears, and they free fall.
Spike groans as his consciousness floods back. His head throbs, his arms and legs are stiff, and the ground beneath his palms is made of damp clay that sticks to his skin. The air smells like wet dirt, and his ears scan the darkness because he discovers that there is absolutely no light to see by. He faintly hears Buffy's slow steady heartbeat a few feet away. He doesn't have the energy to stand, so he pulls himself to her side and clumsily inspects her body for broken limbs. Finding none, he collapses again, his hand over her warm arm.

Buffy wakes next, and in the total blackness, she is glad Spike is touching her even in his unconscious state. Unbeknownst to her, she performs a similar inspection on the vampire, ignoring the pain in her left leg and in her head. The lack of breathing frightens her because she really has no sense of whether he is actually alive or not. The one thread she hangs onto is that at least he's not dust.

She discovers he still has her mother's messenger bag strapped to his body, and she turns him so she has access to the contents. She rummages around inside and palms a small flashlight. Clicking the button, the device emits a thin beacon of illumination, and she scans her surroundings.

She and Spike are in a confined space surrounded by smooth dirt walls with no entries or exits. When she shines the light up, the darkness completely swallows it, and judging by how far they fell, there's no way to climb or jump out. They're literally in a pit with no discernible way in or out, and Buffy's stomach sinks. She sits with her back against the cool clay, trying to remain detached but finding herself caught up in the desperation of their situation. Hot tears slip over her cheeks before she can stop them, and she buries her head in her hands.

Spike wakes to hear the Slayer sobbing, and despite how badly he's hurting, he finds himself summoning the energy to struggle up beside her. Her face in shadow, he can see her body shaking in the thin light from the flashlight. Watching her for a few moments, he makes a decision. He picks up their light source and clicks it off to save the battery, and then, he puts his arm around her shoulders.

She stiffens, and he almost pulls away, but his sharp reactive anger dissipates when she relaxes against him, her head on his chest. His shirt is soon soaked with tears, and he doesn't say anything for a long while until she quiets.

"You know, pet, all's not lost."

"It sure feels like it." Her voice is a bit muffled. "We're stuck in this pit with no way out in a hell dimension and my mom, Giles, Xander, and Anya are all missing here and likely dead because if
they ran into those Phut guys, they wouldn't stand a chance."

"I have no doubt that while your Watcher is a pain in my. . . I have no doubt that he can finagle his way out of some pretty dangerous spots, and your mum – your mum's a strong lady. Do I need to remind you about the ax?"

Buffy laughs despite herself.

"And I've been in worse predicaments," Spike adds.

"You have?"

Earlier in the day or yesterday, Spike would have rolled his eyes at this query because what self-respecting vampire wouldn't feel trapped if he couldn't even eat properly? This is not earlier though, and he's a married vamp. That changes things in his mind even if he's bonded in holy matrimony to his mortal enemy. He reasons that at least she took him in when no one else would. "Well, yeah."

"Worse than this?" She plays with the cotton of his shirt; it's soft under her fingertips.

"Much worse, and I'm still here."

Her sense of humor peeks out. "Like a bad penny. . . or a cockroach."

"Hey now!" He's tempted to give her a little shove, but he doesn't know if the chip will go off because he might want it to hurt – a little.

Buffy sits up and reassures him with her tone, "I'm actually okay with that."

"Really?"

"Yeah. What's that saying? 'Better the enemy you know than one you don't?'"
"You don't usually marry your enemy though. . . fight or kill but don't marry." He wants to add that one certainly doesn’t shag his or her mortal enemy either, but he doesn’t.

"Well, we'll remedy that after we get out of this predicament."

Buffy's words are light, but Spike isn't sure how he feels about the meaning behind them. "Right. Glad to hear you're feeling more hopeful."

"Got the light?"

"Yeah." He turns the flashlight on again, and Buffy searches through the bag they brought for a granola bar. She tosses Spike one of his thermoses of pig’s blood.

"What do you know about the Phut demons and what they might do to us?" She unwraps her snack and takes a bite. "And what was she talking about with what happened with the army guys and the dinosaur demon?"

"The Dynas," Spike corrects. "I was in a long hallway of vampires, but there were lots of holding cells, and periodically, they'd escort other demon types down my way. There weren't bars per se on the cells. It was more of an invisible electrified wall, but I could still smell and hear what was going on outside. One of the days I was there, they hauled a Dynas by."

"Hauled?"

Spike nods. "As in dragged by the throat. They had a little shock collar on her that shocked her every time she tried to break free, and she fought them tooth and nail. Took them a long time to get her very far."

"Them as in the soldiers?"

"Yeah." He takes a sip of lukewarm blood.

Buffy frowns. "They seem to like electricity and shocking things. Seems inhumane."
Spike raises an eyebrow.

She shrugs. "There's gotta be a better way to stop demons from hurting humans besides punishment. Punishment doesn't actually create desirable changes in behavior." Riley and Professor Walsh would be proud that she retained something from psychology class.

"So are you saying that I shouldn't have this chip in my head?"

Buffy hasn't thought of this, and her immediate response is, "No." Then, she thinks for a few seconds but can't look at him when she says, "Maybe." Does he mean that he wants to change? Can vampires make that kind of change? She definitely has to ponder this some more when they're not in a life or death situation.

Spike decides to leave it for now, too. "Then, I didn't see the Dynas for several days. When they brought her back again, there's was something definitely different."

"What?"

"She was pregnant and not in the usual ways Dynas demons get pregnant."

Buffy is confused. "Do I want to know how they get pregnant?"

"Well, it's complicated, but long story short, they carry the seed of their offspring in their mouths, come to our dimension, ingest a particular form of plant that I can't remember the name of right now, something in the plant triggers something in the seed, and their young come to life."

"And then, the Phut demons, what? Bring them back here? That seems like an awfully convoluted way to have babies and why do the Phut demons even care?"

"They eat the offspring, the ones they can catch, once they're big enough."

Buffy's eyes widen. "Oh." She pauses, "That's messed up."
"Circle of life, pet."

"How did they make her pregnant?"

"Who?"

"The soldiers."

"No idea, but she was screaming and not the way they usually scream when they're happy, and they're usually happy when they're expecting. Plus, something smelled off... not the way their young usually smell."

"So they did something to her... the way they put that chip in your head... like an experiment."

"Seems like."

She narrows her eyes. "How do I know that I can trust what you're saying? You could be doing this all as an elaborate scheme to get rid of all of us... to get in my head."

Spike lets out a snort of annoyance. "You think I wouldn't be honest about something like this when we're trapped here... when I was experimented on, too? I can't do anything... can't eat, can't fight. Don't you think I'd want to get to the bottom of this so I can get my life back once we get out of this literal hell hole?! You think I'd orchestrate this whole mess... almost get killed by an army of Phut demons just to get to you?!"

Buffy pushes away from him. "I wouldn't doubt it! You're a vampire. And stop shouting! My head hurts."

"Welcome to the club!"

They both sulk in silence for several minutes, their fragile trust broken.
Then, Buffy offers an olive branch, sneaking a glance at Spike, "I did notice that you could fight the demons."

"Yeah. Not sure why, if it's just here in this place, but I'll take it." The corner of his mouth lifts a little. "Felt good."

“Maybe the chip’s broken? Short circuited or something?”

“Maybe.” He considers what he noticed when he pushed Buffy earlier at the Watcher’s flat. Has it been broken all this time?

“Remind me to tell those soldier guys when we meet them that they kinda suck at their jobs.”

Spike chuckles, noticing that she seemed to be including him in her “we.” “They don’t seem to think out their experiments very well.”

Without warning, the end of a thick dark vine thumps to the ground between them.

They stare at the trailing plant for a moment and then exchange a look. Unspoken communication complete, Buffy gathers up the flashlight and her mother's bag, shoving the remainder of the granola bar inside. She grabs onto the only exit strategy they have and begins to ascend.
Angel tumbles into a roll as whatever force is hurtling him through time spits him back into that strange world with the trees. He is pleased to see that although he’s in the same place as before, he’s not alone. Cordelia is still here.

She turns from where she’s staring at a tiny portal-looking display in – surprise, surprise – a tree trunk. Crossing her arms, she doesn’t give him the greeting he was expecting. “Well, that’s an interesting place to intervene.”

Angel pushes himself off the ground and dusts off his hands. “What do you mean?” He doesn’t ask how she knows anything because well, nothing surprises him at this point.

Pushing a thick dark lock of hair behind her ear, she says, “You chose before Spike has a soul for one, and your choice somehow made Willow a vengeance demon.” She gestures one arm back toward the window to the past. “I’ve been watching the whole thing on live TV!”

Joining her, Angel crosses his arms and squints at the scene in the tree. “Ah. You can see everything.” He watches Willow trying to follow D’Hoffryn’s bidding and looking completely distraught and panicked. Oops. “And oh. Yeah. She is one. She looks really stressed out. Probably not good.”

Cordy grits her teeth and widens her eyes. “Isn’t that what I’ve been saying?!”

Angel takes in her frustration. He’s feeling amused and can’t believe how much he missed her. Putting an arm around her shoulder, he pulls her close until she relaxes a little against him. “Let’s just see how it plays out for a bit. I’m sure whoever is directing this will send me back if need be. There’s a reason they sent me back here now, right?”

She circles her arm around his waist. “The reason could be that you fucked up royally, and they, he, she – whatever – need you to see the error of your ways!”

He smiles at her. “Whatever the reason, I’m going to enjoy this moment with you.”

“Fine.” She relaxes a little more and hugs him. “I think I can handle that.”
They watch for several minutes, and then, Cordelia remembers something. “What about his soul? How’s Buffy supposed to fall in love with him if he doesn’t have his soul? You know Buffy. The soul thing is everything.”

“The soul thing is everything with me,” Angel corrects her. “With Spike, not so much. Spike’s journey is different for a lot of reasons.”

She feels impatient because she doesn’t really care all that much about Spike’s journey, just Angel’s. “Don’t need all the reasons. Bottom line.”

Angel considers how to summarize it. “Demons don’t need human souls to love, and Buffy isn’t really all that different than Spike.”

Cordy frowns. “That is a terrible explanation.”

Although many years have passed since Cordelia died, Angel still remembers the time around her death with startling clarity. “You missed a lot.”

Sadness makes her heart ache. “I know.” Then, she switches gears. “You know what would make this whole exercise more tolerable? I mean, besides you being here.”

A smile pulls at the corners of Angel’s lips. “What?”

“Chairs. . . no scratch that. A big fluffy sectional. The kind that’s good for snuggling. I mean, ‘cause if we’re going to have to watch this whole intervention in some random forest in god knows where, we should at least be comfortable.”

“I second that.”

With those words spoken, a soft sound like wind chimes tinkles behind them. The smell of roses fills the air briefly, and a light breeze rustles the leaves around them. Then, without much fanfare, a grey sectional appears.
They stare at the furniture with the thick plush cushions and large matching throw pillows. Then, they look at each other.

“Huh,” Angel says.

Cordelia breaks free of his embrace and sits gracefully back on the sofa, propping her feet on the extension foot rest. “C’mon!” Angel joins her, and Cordelia curls up with her head on his shoulder. She sweeps a wave of brown hair over her shoulder. “You know what would make this even better?”

Angel leans his cheek on the top of her head. “What?”

“A glass of wine.” She holds out her hand, the air shimmers again, and a delicate long-stemmed glass full of red wine appears in her fingers. She takes a long sip, closing her eyes. “Nice.” Then, she glances up at him. “You should request something.”

He smiles down at her. “Nah. I don’t need anything else.”
Chapter Four, A Momentary Climb in the Right Direction

Following the taut vine, Buffy discovers that the rope doesn’t lead all the way back from the place they fell. Instead, her fingers discover a narrow tunnel in the side of their prison. A pair of bright red luminous eyes blinks at Buffy as she pulls herself up into the shaft, and she balks and instinctively backs up as the owner of said eyes twitters at her.

Spike grunts as the sole of the Slayer’s boot shoves into his forehead, but he doesn’t protest because he doesn’t know why she’s backing into him. He figures that with the way things are between them now, she must be doing so for a good reason. Then, he hears the familiar cheeping and clucking sound, and he muses – not for the first time – that the Dynas demons sound a bit like a cross between a chicken and a warbling vireo.

Pushing his palm against the heel of Buffy’s shoe, he says, “It’s okay, pet. It’s a Dynas demon. They can’t hurt you.”

“Oh,” she says and moves upward again and into the shaft. She crouches beside the small demon whose form she can’t really make out beyond the eyes. She notices that the creature smells a bit like honey, and she feels a rush of anger toward the army guys. Who could hurt something that smells so sweet?

Spike pulls up next to her and clicks on the little flashlight. Buffy feels grateful to see his familiar blue eyes. She glances at the little furry brown demon and tries to imagine the pointy snout carrying a baby Dynas.

The Dynas blinks at her, makes a tiny noise, and waves a clawed hand. Buffy glances at Spike again, and he nudges her. “Go ahead. He says to follow him.”

“You speak their language?” She raises both eyebrows at him with an incredulous expression on her face.

Spike shakes his head. “No, well, maybe a little, and he’s getting away.”

Buffy turns to see the demon in the distance. “Dang. He’s fast.” She scrambles after him.

“All the better to dodge the Phut,” Spike calls up to her.
She thinks back on the clumsy but very big and strong demons. Her head throbs with the memory. “Makes sense.”

The Dynas leads Buffy and Spike through a winding hamster habitat-like system of tunnels. Eventually, a soft glowing light pinpricks the darkness. Spike turns off the flashlight as the luminance grows brighter and fills the widening space. The Dynas rushes forward with more speed and eagerness, rapidly chirruping.

On her feet again, Buffy finds herself in a small cavernous room with yellow incandescent lights unevenly dotting the walls. Carpets and furniture of a style that Buffy has never seen on Earth decorate the room in rich browns and deep greens, and several Dynas demons of various shapes, sizes, and colors are lined up and watching her and Spike.

Spike ducks his head a little to accommodate the low ceiling, his forearm brushing Buffy’s. She doesn’t move away, and her thumb subconsciously runs over the gold ring on her left hand. Watching Spike in her peripheral vision, she feels a wave of what’s becoming frequent gratitude that he’s here with her now.

Spike notices her lack of disgust toward him and realizes that he is rapidly becoming used to her company. He also knows it won’t last. After this mission to rescue her pals, they’ll go right back to hating one another as is the way of things between vampires and Slayers.

The Dynas that rescued them scurries forward and continues the chirping-clucking noises. The other Dynas seem to be listening closely.

“What’s he saying?” Buffy whispers.

Spike’s lips brush her ear as he softly explains, “He’s telling them who we are and what we did. Sounds like the others are agreeing that we’re not so bad since we took out so many of the Phut demons.”

Buffy relaxes, her upper back grazing his chest. “Well, that’s of the good, right?”

“Yes.” Spike fights the urge to wrap his arms around her, mostly because he thinks she’d punch him in the nose.
Buffy leans closer, relishing his touch and feeling oddly comfortable – kind of like she did when she woke up in the hotel room bed with him. She makes a mental note to ask Willow about spell remnants when they get back to Sunnydale. . . if they get back to Sunnydale and if Willow finds a way not to be a vengeance demon. “Can you speak their language enough to ask them if they’ve seen my mom and everyone?”

“I can try, pet.”

Buffy views what transpires next with wide-eyed awe. Spike squats next to the Dynas that led them here. In a series of awkward noises that Buffy isn’t sure is anything close to the Dynas language, Spike communicates with the smaller demons. His expression is serious and his eyes are earnest, and whatever the reason – alternate dimension, spell leftovers – Buffy finds the vampire incredibly attractive. She flushes and hopes that Spike doesn’t notice.

Spike catches her staring. His eyes gleam in the firelight, and then, he focuses back on the Dynas who is now seemingly answering Spike’s queries with a string of trills and clucks.

“What’d he say?” Buffy asks when the little demon finishes.

“Best I can make out, he said that some people looking like us went in search of a place of mythical energy that allows for easy portals to different worlds. The Dynas don’t have to use those methods to cross into our dimension because they only cross when they need to have offspring, and in those times, the Phut assist.” Spike doesn’t tell Buffy that the likelihood that they’ll find said mystical energy might be like finding a needle in a haystack because he knows if anyone can tackle something like this, it’s the Slayer. . . well, this particular Slayer anyway.

Buffy feels hope spring a small rivulet in her heart. “Great. So which way did they go and how do we get there?”

Spike nods and turns to the small creatures again. Another awkward conversation ensues and then, Spike glances back to Buffy, not leaving his crouched position. “Our best shot at getting out of Phut territory is taking a boat down the river of darkness. That way, we can avoid more confrontations.”

Buffy crosses her arms and frowns. “‘River of darkness’? That sounds not so fun.”

“That’s why the Phut stay away. Apparently, there is a legendary creature that inhabits the waters. A
“Oh. Well, that’s a lovely thought.” Buffy imagines what they might have to tackle and wishes she had taken a larger weapon with them. What had she been thinking?

“It’s a myth because they’ve never seen it. Well, the Dynas haven’t. They’ve offered us a boat. The river’s current is strong. All we have to do is let it carry us along.”

“And hope no legendary creatures swallow us whole or some other disaster happens to dash us on the rocks?”

Spike sighs at Buffy’s dramatics but refrains from rolling his eyes. “It’s highly likely the story was created a long time ago to keep the Phut in line.”

“And what about the sun? I’m assuming this world has a sun. You’re kinda flammable.” She touches his bare forearm then and tries but fails at ignoring her own body’s reaction to his. God, was she destined to be attracted to vampires?

Spike can sense – and smell – the change in her, and he likes it far more than he ever thought he would. Holding her gaze longer than he usually dared, he continues, “The Dynas said it has two, but they rise and set together, and the days and nights are particularly long, so we’ll be in darkness most of the journey.”

She breaks eye contact first. “Darkness on the ‘river of darkness’ sounds ominous. Well, hopefully night will stick around long enough that we can find everyone and get home.”

Spike isn’t sure whether she mean that she hopes he makes it back with them, but he decides to assume she does. “Hopefully. And if not, the boat has shade.”

“Good.”

She turns to the furry demons and gives them a little bow of her head. “Thank you so much for your help.” One of the smallest of the group hops, walks up and nudges his or her fuzzy head under her palm, warbling at her. Buffy smiles at the creature. “So soft,” she murmurs. Who knew demons could be so kind and gentle? She catches Spike watching her again, his expression unreadable.
“What?” she asks.

Spike isn’t sure what just happened or what he feels, but he knows something is continuing to shift in his un-beating heart. Bugger that. “Let’s go.”

* * *

As expected, night still reigns the world above ground, and Buffy, Spike, and their Dynas companion reach the river’s edge without fanfare or confrontation with any grumpy demon sorts who might want to kill them.

The long handmade wooden boat before them is large enough to hold several of the smaller demons. Half the boat is covered by a shelter that will protect Spike from the sun’s rays. The river is indeed fast moving but is much wider and likely deeper than Buffy anticipated. As she boards the vessel, she can already feel the power of the water beneath her feet, and she is suddenly grateful that she doesn’t get seasick.

Spike thanks the Dynas the best he can in the native language before he unties the boat and climbs aboard. The river’s current picks them up straightaway and moves them away from the shore. Spike notes the long paddles and the bucket stowed inside the place where he will be hiding from the suns’ rays. A large rudder – no doubt useful for steering – is attached to the back of the boat.

Uncertain what to say to her now that they’re alone again, Spike comments, “It’ll do.”

Buffy perches on one of the tiny seats near the water. “Hopefully.”

After stowing the messenger bag in the shelter, Spike joins her, sitting on the opposite side. His knee touches hers. She doesn’t make a move to shift away, and they ride in companionable silence for a while.

Buffy focuses on the scent of the water, the sound of the liquid lapping on the sides of the boat, and the moonlight skimming over the surface of everything. Trees and brush thickly line each side of the river, hiding the view of the world beyond. It’s both scary and strangely comforting – kind of like how she feels about her accompanying vampire.
“Those little demons were. . . nice and more than a little bit cute,” Buffy finally says.

“Don’t sound so surprised, love.”

“Do I? Sound surprised?”

“Yeah. You do.”

She detects the double meaning behind his words, and a flash of annoyance shoots through her. “I’m not so obtuse as you seem to think I am. It’s not like I see all demons in black-and-white, evil-good terms. It’s not like I go around to all the demon bars in Sunnydale and slay all the patrons.”

Spike moves his knee away from hers. “No, but you bloody well slay all the vampires you can get your grubby Slayer hands on!”

“My hands are not grubby!” Realizing she reacted to the wrong thing, she switches gears. “And my job is to kill vampires! Vampire Slayer here!”

Because he’s lost his temper, Spike can’t decide what he’s mad about. “You’ve yet to put a bit of wood through my heart. I call that falling down on the job!”

“No, that’s not it!”

“What is it then?” Spike doesn’t just feel angry; oddly enough, he feels hurt, too.

Buffy can’t answer his question yet, not when she’s still unsure what the emotions in her heart mean. But the change in his tone allows her to have the space to wonder how they ended up sniping at one another again. This leads her to admit, “You’ve been. . . nice to me. Maybe it’s because we’re stuck with each other in this world.”

Spike isn’t ready to let on that he’s finding it easier to be around her. “More likely than not it has something to do with Red’s spell. We don’t exactly know how she reversed it. Or if she included us in said reversal.”
“Maybe.” Buffy thinks maybe he isn’t right at all but isn’t sure she wants to go there either. So, she changes the subject. “So how do you know so much about Dynas demons?”

Spike is quiet for several seconds and softens because she does. "Long story. Go with me here."

“Okay.”

“Remember how I told you they like to scream when they're happy?”

"Vaguely. They scream when they're happy?” Without quite realizing it, Buffy’s knee settles against Spike’s thigh.

"Oh yeah. Screams that'd peel paint off the wall and shatter a human's eardrums."

Buffy is amused because she can’t imagine the little creatures screaming that loud. Never underestimate the underdog. She suddenly likes the demons even more. "Not vampires' eardrums, I take it?"

"Well, no. I had to wear earplugs."

A soft giggle escapes Buffy’s lips at the image of a very irritated Spike wearing earplugs. "Ah. When have you been around them?"

"Dru had one as a pet once. Bloody girl was unhappy, too. Dru kept feeding her plants and hoping babies would pop out, but they were the wrong plants. Needless to say, it didn't work out in the end, and I let the demon go when Dru went out on one of her long walkabouts. Didn’t mind so much when Dru let her pets die, but I didn’t want to mess with a demon, particularly a demon associated with the Phut."

"Dru went on long walkabouts?" Buffy is curious about this given how devoted Spike was to her. She wonders what “long” means to a vampire. . . to Spike – days, weeks, years? And for the first time, she considers that this might be painful or lonely to the vampire sitting next to her.

"Yeah, following some whimsy or premonition or some such. She'd sometimes go for a few years at
a time." Spike isn’t about to tell Buffy how this impacted him and how he always pretended like he didn’t care when she returned. Dru very rarely gave any warning and just took off.

"Is that where she is now?" She wants to ask if Dru is going to come back but is a little afraid of the answer. She’s also curious about Harmony and if he and Dru have an open relationship when she leaves him, but she makes a deliberate decision not to go there, not now.

"No." Spike says. He's starting to understand that maybe there is something to Dru breaking things off with him, but he isn't sure he wants to tell Buffy that.

Buffy gives him a questioning look. "That was emphatic."

Spike avoids her gaze and runs his fingertips over the uneven edge of the boat. He picks at a stray twig and wonders not for the first time if even such a tiny bit of wood could cause him to be dust in the wind. "We broke up."

"Oh." Buffy can tell he doesn't want to talk about it, but she can't stop herself from asking, "How come?"

"Does it really matter?" He leaves out the part about whether his answer matters to her in particular.

She reaches over, crossing the gulf between them, and tentatively touches his hand. "Not if you don't want to tell me."

He's silent as he tries to work out whether he wants to tell her or not and what it might mean if he does. After a few seconds, he can't work out the math in his head and quietly admits, "If you must know, she thought I was in love with you."

"And that's logical how?" Buffy instantly regrets her tone and choice of words.

Spike draws his arm away from her. "It doesn't make any sense to me either."

"You love Dru; I mean, why else would you want to get her away from. . . " Buffy can't talk about Angelus. She still feels so much guilt about what he did. . . what she allowed him to do and how
Angel had to suffer for it, how her friends and family had to suffer for it.

"Yeah, you'd think she'd see that, but she really didn't."

Buffy shakes off the emotions that this brings up. Now a different vampire sits before her in a different kind of pain, and with the events of the last few days, she wants to be present with him in a different way. "I'm not saying she's right because that would be way weird, but love doesn't always make logical sense. We don't get to pick the people we fall in love with... or stay in love with." She thinks about Xander and Anya and about Willow and Oz... even her and Angel. “Didn’t you say something about that once – only much more eloquently - and well, bluntly?” She remembers what Spike said as clear as day because even now, his words strike a chord with her.

The corner of his mouth lifts at her admission of his rightness and at how she actually paid attention to him. “I did.”

Buffy returns the smile, but their reverie is disrupted by something very big slamming into the side of the boat with a muffled thud.
An important chapter ahead...

And check out the beautiful art from eyesthatlslay! I put it in the first chapter...

The boat angles sharply from the weight of whatever hit the bottom, and the fast-moving water takes advantage of the shift to shove the vessel roughly up and down. The messenger bag shifts out of the storage space, and one of the paddles sails through the air.

Buffy dives for the bag of supplies, managing to snag the edge of the shoulder strap. At the same time, Spike lunges for the paddle, his fingers fumbling to grasp onto the wooden handle.

Whatever hit them comes back around and whams them from the opposite direction and slightly below, and the boat tilts greater than forty-five degrees one way and then the other before slamming back down into the water. The motion forces Spike forward, and he barely keeps the wooden pole from plunging into his heart. Buffy doesn’t fare as well, and while she strengthens her hold on the bag, she topples into the water with a little shriek like someone shoved her into a swimming pool, a sound that doesn’t match the dangerousness of their predicament.

As the boat zigzags, Spike quickly scans the churning dark waters, straining to catch a glimpse of the Slayer in the moonlight.

“Buffy!” he calls, his voice heavy with more emotion than he expected to have for her.

The only sound he detects is the movement of the water, and his stomach sinks.

As the craft resumes its forward motion, he hears a sputter, gasp, and splash behind him and to the right. He tries to paddle back in that direction but feels helpless as even with his vampire strength, the water current is too strong. When he spies the dark silhouette of her head and arms pushing through the stream, he fights with renewed energy until the gap between them begins to close.

Swimming as hard as she can, Buffy feels grateful that the water’s push is working for her, and between strokes and kicks, she keeps her mind focused on the glimpse of the boat’s shape and
Spike’s bleached hair in the moonlight. When her fingers finally brush over the rough wood of the boat’s side, she surges upward, and he grasps her forearm with his fingers, bracing her with his own arm and pulling her up. She smiles in relief at him and is surprised to see her relief mirrored on his face.

“Hi,” rushes out of her mouth as she swings one dripping leg over the side of the boat, the very wet messenger bag somehow slung across her body.

“Hi, yourself, Slayer,” he returns, his voice low.

Before they can rest, however, the same large something pushes up underneath them again, this time holding the boat completely out of the water. Buffy slides over the edge of their vessel again, the sole of her right boot hitting something firm; she falls forward, her fingertips grazing over a scaly hide.

“What the bloody. . .” Spike’s voice is full of awe.

A huge reptilian head turns back to stare at them and bobs slightly. Golden irises blaze around slit pupils, and a short semi-alligator-shaped jaw slightly parts to reveal giant, razor sharp teeth. Warm breath scented like rotting meat washes over them as the creature emits a guttural growl.

“Spike, what’s this?” Buffy pulls herself into a crouch and tries to keep her voice calm and even. She’s fought creatures bigger than this. Demon Mayor comes to mind. But with him, she at least had help of the human and explosives variety, and she was on her own turf.

“Apparently Nessie’s not so much a myth.” Spike wields the paddle like a much flimsier version of a quarter staff.

The creature suddenly snaps its jaws at Buffy, narrowly missing her arm, and she fumbles with the saturated material of the bag, her fingers finding and grasping the handle of one of the knives. She has no idea where the other is and glances at Spike with an apology in her eyes.

“S’okay, love.”

The lizard creature ripples the powerful muscles in its body, and Buffy, Spike, and the boat go flying. The boat plunks into the water, and somehow the Slayer and the vampire manage to land on the monster. A fight in the dark begins in earnest, water splashing and gushing up all around them.
The great beast thrashes, bites, and slashes as the river continues to pull them along. As with the Phut demons, Buffy and Spike somehow slip into an easy rhythm, defending one another, dodging attacks from their enemy, and landing blows – blows that barely seem to make a dent in their dilemma, partly because their weaponry is seriously lacking.

Buffy imagines that she’s trying to ride the creature’s body like a surfboard, a very unpredictable and unsteady surfboard, bracing her legs and trying to get closer to the head. She figures the only shot she has is to slide the knife through the eye into the brain, something that sounds way unappealing. Focused on her ascent, she doesn’t notice the barbed tail snaking up behind her.

Spike is further up the demon’s body and sees the movement in the corner of his eye. He immediately changes tactics from one of climbing and trying to stay balanced to one of strategic poking with the paddle. Though there’s no way the wood can pierce the thick hide, he packs a punch with his incessant thrusting.

The lizard’s tail slides away, but before Spike can celebrate his triumphant use of distraction, the creature brings a clawed forearm up and swipes him into the water. The water sweeps over his head, and he barely hears Buffy call his name as he struggles to break the surface. Inanely, he thinks that at least he doesn’t have to breathe, and then, he goes with it, pulling the damned paddle vertical and close to his body and kicking deeper underwater.

Buffy’s heart skips a beat in its already adrenaline-fueled tempo when Spike slips under the surface, but this somehow heightens her anger, and she scrambles up the thrashing body toward the head, staying out of reach of tail and claws. The closer she gets to the head, the more the demon swings her through the air, but still, she maintains her hold. From her vantage point, she has a new view of the world around them, and though she still can’t see past the trees, she notices the water is becoming choppier than before, even more than expected with the lizard thrashing around, and in the not so far away distance, the water just disappears, and there is only darkness.

Before Buffy’s brain can make sense of what she’s witnessing, the demon whips back, screeching and then losing its balance and flopping on its back. The water hits Buffy hard, knocking the wind out of her. Luckily, the demon rises up again with the buoyancy of the water, and she gasps as the air rushes around her. She swears she catches a glimpse of Spike’s bleached hair. Seeing him appear somehow gives her the strength to push the last bit forward, find the creature’s reptilian eye, and plunge her blade so deep that her arm is up to the shoulder in vitreous fluid and brain matter.

The lizard monster emits a loud, gutteral howl of agony, and as Buffy pulls the blade back through the tissues of her target, the stability of the rushing rapids suddenly falls away. Gravity takes over, and there is only air around her for what feels simultaneously like forever and no time at all. As her body collides with and is consumed by water once again, she loses her grip on consciousness.
Buffy wakes up floating on her back, arms and legs buoyed up by warm liquid’s gentle caress. The sound of the waterfall in the distance makes everything more peaceful. For several seconds, she considers that maybe she’s dreaming and will shortly wake up curled up in her cozy bed at home with her mom cooking breakfast downstairs. Her eyelids slowly close and reopen, and thousands of pinprick stars remain tiny companions of the full-bodied moon. The water sloshes as her limbs come alive, and she remembers what happened and where she is.

Panic fuels her, and she spins in a circle in the much slower moving water. She searches for any sign of Spike. Her eyes first light on the boat that’s docked a bit sideways on the river bank before spying a dark human-shaped form floating several feet away. Without thinking, she kicks and glides to his side and discovers that the vampire is indeed hers and is face down. She quickly turns him over to find that he’s unconscious. Her feet don’t touch the river bottom and examining him is awkward as she treads water to stay afloat, so she slips her arm around his chest and pulls him toward their boat.

When she finally reaches the vessel, she pushes it back so that its belly is immersed in water again. Then, she scrambles on board. Once she regains her land legs, she reaches over and tugs Spike after her with a grunt. His body remains limp as he hits the wooden bottom, and she wishes that he would open those blue eyes of his and . . .

She shakes her head. No time for imagining kissing the husband she didn’t intend to marry. Besides, he’s not exactly Sleeping Beauty. Her thumb finds her ring finger again and rubs over the band’s filigree as she examines Spike. She quickly discovers that his shirt is torn on one side and a large gash splays his flesh open, cleaned out by the river water but puckered. Her fingers discover that the wound is also inflamed and hot to the touch.

She tries roughly shaking his shoulder because she can’t bring herself to hit him, not anymore. “Spike! Wake up!” she demands as if commanding him could do the trick.

Nothing. Spike doesn’t even so much as twitch.

She considers waiting him out to see if his vampire healing will take over sooner than later, but she’s never been good at waiting when she could try something else. Plus, they’re in another dimension with who knows what dangers ahead, and she still feels desperate to find her mom.

Memories of another vampire fill her mind, one who drank her blood to the point she almost died. Her blood had saved him from dying from a poison that infiltrated and decimated his body.
She knows the same solution for a similar problem is quite the long shot, being that whatever is causing Spike to be unconscious and unresponsive is completely different. But she isn’t one to let grass grow under her feet, not when she’s faced with life and death, not when the people she cares about are in danger. And in the back of her mind and heart, she’s starting to realize that Spike might be included in that group of people, too.

She lost her knife somewhere in the river, and rummaging through her mom’s now half-empty messenger bag proves fruitless. She simply doesn’t have anything sharp enough to slice open a vein. She considers her teeth, and she knows it’s possible but would probably be very messy. There isn’t the problem of healing because she has Slayer healing. She just can’t bring herself to bite into her wrist. Her eyes light on the piece of wood that Spike was playing with earlier, and she silently thanks the Dynas for not being highly advanced creatures who finish their boats with smooth, polished edges.

Reaching over, she grips the bit of wood that’s sticking up and carefully pulls against the grain until the wood snaps. Taking a deep breath, she drags the pointy end down and through the skin on the underside of her forearm. She bites her cheek to manage the pain, breathing out again as she withdraws the wood and tosses it aside. Her blood immediately wells up in the short cut, flowing darkly over her flesh. She quickly holds her arm over Spike’s mouth, aiming the drops over his lips. He doesn’t stir, and her life force slips over his pale cheek.

Buffy scoots closer to him, her legs bent under her, her thigh pressing into the side of his chest. Leaning forward, she pushes the tiny injury in her arm more firmly to his mouth.

“Drink, Spike. Come on. You can do this.” She wills him to respond. When he doesn’t, tears of frustration and desperation fill her eyes. “Please. I need you.”

She feels a little tug on her arm as his lips part and latch onto her arm. Her blood stops splashing uselessly to the deck of the boat. She sniffs and hastily wipes her tears away. “That’s it. Drink. You know you want to.” When his throat shifts, indicating that he’s swallowing, she uses her free hand to swipe his damp curls off his forehead. “Enjoy it while you can,” she teases in relief. “Don’t get any ideas though. I’m not like those other Slayers. I don’t want to be dead.”

Still unconscious, Spike growls, and Buffy feels a sharper jerk on her arm as the vampire starts drinking slowly but in earnest.

As he consumes her blood, she starts to feel lightheaded, and her whole body is simultaneously awash with electricity. “H-holy... crap,” she whispers. All she wants to do is curl up next to him as he drinks even as the rationale part of her mind tries to stay online. Her other arm comes down to
brace her body up right, but her efforts are in vain, and she slides down until her body is flush with his, her leg lazily thrown over his midsection.

She feels like she could lie there forever, and she closes her eyes.

* * *

Spike becomes aware first of the blood in his mouth, barely rolling over his tongue, the taste like heaven as if he’s been wandering the desert - lost and without sustenance for weeks. His body demands more even as he starts to be aware that something is wrong; his mind becomes aware of deep pain radiating and pressing with angry fingers over his torso. Blood is needed for healing, so he swallows and then clamps down harder on the source of the manna, requesting more.

He keeps drinking, focusing only on the growing release in wounds.

As the blood enters his body and does what it’s supposed to do, he finds that his arms and legs can move again, and he recognizes that someone is pressed up against him. His hands fumble a bit, but he discovers her waist and recognizes her familiar scent. Without much thought, he pulls her damp body into his embrace. Her wet hair drags over his bicep, and his frontal lobe starts to put some pieces together... pieces that reveal the owner of said body... the owner of the blood he’s drinking.

Buffy.

The Slayer is... his mind can’t even fathom it.

He pushes weakly up onto one elbow, and with a mix of reluctance and fear, he turns his head and closes his mouth to her beautiful, life-changing blood. He’s never tasted a Slayer quite like her, and he somehow doesn’t want her dead.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his free hand, he fumbles a bit. “Buffy. Love. Are you okay?” His side twinges at him but with much less forcefulness.

Through a haze that he’s all too familiar with his victims, she seems to be trying to blink away some curtain over her consciousness.
“What did you do?” He cups her cheek, which is still much too warm for imminent death, and shakes her upper body. “Buffy... Slayer.”

“Wha...” Something shifts in Buffy’s eyes, and Spike realizes that he can see her more clearly because the sun... suns are starting to rise.

She smiles at him, lips tugging up at the corners. “Y-you’re okay.” Buffy is so happy to see the blue of his eyes so close to hers that she follows some feeling that she can’t consciously name and brings her mouth gently to his, not caring that he tastes a little metallic from her blood.

Spike startles when she kisses him. What the hell could she possibly be thinking?

Buffy deepens her affection, relishing the feel of his lips, lips with which she so recently spent a lot of time becoming acquainted.

After a brief hesitance, he follows her lead and focuses solely on the dance of her mouth with his. When she presses her tongue past his lips, he groans and takes her movement as permission to enter her mouth in return. She pushes up against him so that her legs slide around his waist, her long wet hair hanging in chunks around them, her lips never leaving his for longer than a second or two. His arms sweep up her back as he sits up further, getting lost in the heat of her touch, and she starts to move her hips against his.

Something trips in his mind, and he realizes that what they’re doing... he isn’t sure Buffy will be okay with herself if they go this way, not when she’s under a spell of a different sort again. He’s surprised that he even cares because not too long ago, he wanted to kill her... or so he told himself. There’s also a little matter of the suns.

Reluctantly, he pulls back from her lips.

She blinks at him in dismay, her palm on his chest. “Why are you stopping?”

He finds that he can’t go there with her... not about his own emotions because he doesn’t know how she feels, so he shifts the blame. “Sun, love. There’s sunlight coming.”

Her green eyes widen, noticing for the first time that he’s right. “Oh!”
She moves away from him, her legs still around him, and he suddenly feels the contrast of the loss of her warmth with the breeze from the river.

“Should we?” She inclines her head toward the boat’s shelter.

“Would be best.” He avoids her gaze lest she see how much he wants her, how much feeling he has for her, feelings he didn’t know were possible. God, he feels like such an idiot. Dru, the crazy bint, was right all along.

Buffy, for her part, notices the evidence of his desire for her, and makes an impulsive decision, a decision likely born from the vestiges of their wedding night, something she is now allowing herself to think maybe wasn’t so bad. In fact, being with him felt pretty damned good.

She stands more quickly than she should, experiencing a wave of dizziness from loss of blood, no doubt. Spike steadies her, and she gives him a grateful smile.

She caresses his cheek before he can say anything and says, “I want this.” Spike stares at her in disbelief, his lips slightly parted, so she continues, “Do you?” Her tone is confident, but her heart fears his rejection. After all, last time she went this direction with someone, he wasn’t so kind afterward, a milder recapitulation of her first time, a time when her heart was subsequently shattered.

Unable to ferret out a snarky comeback with which to protect himself, Spike searches her eyes and swallows. “I do.”

Her grin lights her whole face, and she brings her hands down, hooks her two index fingers in the loops of his jeans, and tugs him forward and down into the shaded space. Within seconds, they shed their clothing, mindful of their injuries but eager to be consumed in sensation. Spike lets out a soft moan as his cooler skin glides over her warmer flesh, and with a little exploration, he discovers that she is more than ready for him.

Her body aflame with desire, she kisses him with more urgency as she wriggles and bucks up underneath him. Gripping him by the shoulders, she makes certain that he views her certainty before whispering again, “Spike, please.”

With the utterance of his name, he slowly enters her, and for the first time not under a spell, they begin to make love.
The tree’s looking glass into the past goes dark, and Cordy slumps back from where she was sitting on the edge of the sectional.

“Well, holy crap is right.” She pats Angel’s thigh as she leans her head on his shoulder, her half-empty glass of wine swinging loosely in her hand. “That didn’t take long. And much less angsty than before... from what I’ve heard.” She twists sideways to face him. “You know what? That place kinda reminds me of Pylea? Two suns?” She tilts her head and chews her lower lip. “Well, that’s about it for similarities.”

Picking up a leaf that fell from above, Angel flicks it away, shifting uncomfortably and wishing now he’d requested a shot of something alcoholic. “I’m wondering if we should even be watching this.”

Cordelia sets her lips and takes in the look on his face. “Jealous?”

“No, it’s not that.” He even notices that his denial is a little too quick.

“Thought you were long over her by now. And aren’t you the voyeur? I guess we’re both voyeurs in this case.” After a few seconds, she sits up again and glares teasingly at him. “Should I be jealous?”

Angel can’t help but laugh. God, he’s missed her. He waves a finger in a little low circle. “Which area should I address first?”

Cordy smirks as she raises her glass and takes a sip of wine. “You pick.”

Angel considers how to answer her without digging a very deep hole for himself. He grabs her by the waist and pulls her into his arms. She shrieks and giggles and somehow manages to not spill her wine. Then, she then relaxes against him.

His lips over her ear, he whispers. “Cordelia?”

She shifts her face toward his but closes her eyes, relishing the touch she’s been missing for too long. “Mmhmm?”
“You shouldn’t be jealous.” Angel can’t help but wonder if he can make love without the consequence of his curse in this new existence.

She laces her fingers through his. “Good.”

They pair rest together for several minutes. Angel can’t believe he’s here with the woman he loves, sitting in a beautiful but eerily quiet forest with the sun shining above them. Cordelia is so comfortable that she almost falls asleep as Angel strokes her hair. When her glass threatens to tip over, he gently removes it from her hand and balances it beside his foot. She draws her boots onto the cushions and snuggles closer then, her head on his chest.

Then, Angel reluctantly asks the question that he has been avoiding because he doesn’t know what it means for them. “Well, now that Buffy and Spike are together and earlier than before, what do we do now?”

“Sleep,” Cordelia murmurs. “Comfy.” As soon as she finishes speaking, the same rat-a-tat-tat from earlier barks out from the tree. She sits up, her hair falling over her forehead. She attempts to blow a strand up with her mouth. “Goddamn it.”

Angel straightens her hair around her part and tucks the errant pieces behind her ear. Raising his voice above the persistent noise, he says, “I have a feeling I know what it’s about and what I have to – ”

The familiar tug pulls him away from the little safe haven in the woods, and he disappears without much fanfare except for the spilt wine glass, leaving Cordelia to deal with the irritatingly noisy tree. She stands up and pulls out the slip of paper inside the reappearing hole. Unfurling the tiny scroll, she sees that Angel was right.

Sighing and hoping Angel won’t be gone too long, she plops back down on the sectional, swings her legs up into an Indian-style position, and settles back. As the hole is replaced by the viewing screen, she wishes for Ben and Jerry’s and a spoon, just in case she has to be that specific. Digging said spoon into the conveniently appearing ice cream, she takes a bite of Cherries Garcia and wonders just how Angel’s going to fix the little problem of Willow being a vengeance demon. She’s sure he’ll figure something out. Her vampire is nothing if not resourceful, and he does, after all, owe Willow more than one favor.
Chapter Six, A Bit of Pillow Talk

Even in the discomfort of the boat, Buffy Summers has never felt so perfectly and incredibly sated. . . not after sex with Angel and most definitely not after sex with Parker even though she convinced herself of such at the time. She decides to allow herself a few minutes to enjoy the afterglow before getting on with the need to find her mother and friends. Shoving aside the rather large pang of guilt, she rests her head on Spike’s chest and tries to mindfully focus on the lulling sway of their vessel.

Spike is afraid to open his mouth because he might provoke the Slayer – something he knows he’s good at doing. He’s enjoying the heavy weight of her body against him following much different sex from their wedding night.

The wedding night had been no holds barred, loud, and intense and all of that more than once. It was amazing that they hadn’t roused all the hotel patrons and gotten themselves kicked to the curb. There had still been feelings there, so it wasn’t just fucking, but the reality was that the feelings were magically-induced or at the very least, enhanced. This . . what just happened between them was. . . Spike can’t put it into words, and now, she’s cuddled up with him, limp and satisfied, and he feels kind of. . .

All he knows is that something momentous has happened with her and within himself. He traces two fingertips over her hip and closes his eyes in the tiny shelter.

Buffy shifts her head so that her chin props up on her hand and she can see his face. “Spike?”

“Yeah, pet?”

“Are you still. . . you?” She’s a little nervous about how he’ll react to the question and hopes he doesn’t take it as something to take away from what just happened between them.

Spike feels her holding her breath, and this stays his usual reactivity to allusions of Angel. “Hell’s bells, Slayer. Of course, it’s me.” He shifts his hand from her hip to her waist and draws her closer.

She places her cheek back against his chest. “Sorry. I just, uh. . .”

“He told me. Long time ago. So I understand why you’re asking.” Spike knows that even though he has no soul to lose, she’s still afraid he’ll be different – cruel – now that they’ve had sex. Lord knows
he’s deliberately said hurtful things to her before.

“What part?” Buffy knows what part. Pain stabs momentarily in her chest, but it dissipates more quickly than it used to.

Spike doesn’t answer her question and instead says, “If you must know, I’m scared, too.” He opens his eyes and gazes at the cloudless green sky above. . . green like her eyes. Huh. He hadn’t expected that.

“You are?”

“Of course.”

“Of what?”

“Lots of things like for instance, what happens after we get out of this dimension and we’re around your Watcher and your pals again? What will your mum think? Will you even tell them? And. . .” Spike trails off, uncertain whether to admit his deepest fear of the moment, which has more to do with what she thinks just happened between them. Instead, he goes with the easier thing to fess up to, “I haven’t exactly had the greatest track record with women.”

Buffy thinks about scary-crazy Drusilla and how Spike was willing to form an alliance with her – the enemy – to get his dark princess away from Angelus. She always assumed that Angelus and Dru had emotionally hurt Spike in some way, and now given what he told her earlier on the river, she wonders just how much. Spike and Drusilla had been together over a century, so Buffy imagines that there could be quite a lot of potential for pain. If what she’s learning about Spike is correct, he probably wasn’t the one doing a lot of the hurting. “What about Harmony?”

Spike snorts. “Harmony doesn’t count.”

“Poor Harmony.” Buffy is starting to think that maybe Harmony was his rebound relationship kind of like Parker was hers.

“She finally got up the kahunas to kick me out though when I got the bloody chip in my head.” Spike pauses and recalls just how pissed he’d been but also how badly he’d treated her. “Just as she should have.”
Buffy laughs. “Good for her.”

After several seconds of silence, Spike runs a hand over her forearm to find her damaged wrist, which is already healing nicely. He skims his thumb over her puckered skin, and he hopes it doesn’t leave a scar. Buffy studies his hand touching her, exploring her and ignores the wave of desire this incites.

His voice is deep in her ear. “What made you decide to? I mean. . .”

Buffy’s response is automatic. “You weren’t responding; I got scared; I didn’t really think about it. I just did it.”

“Oh.” He can’t hide his disappointment.

She kisses his chest. “I’d do it again.”

“How’d you know I would stop. . . that I wouldn’t drain you and leave you for dead?”

Buffy considers the broken chip in his head. He could hurt her, even kill her, now if he wanted to. “I dunno. I just took a chance. Followed my instincts. Why’d you stop?”

Spike considers this. “S’pose I’m following my instincts, too.” He asks the next question before he can talk himself out of it. “And after?”

Spike’s earlier admission of fear gives her courage, and she pushes the back of her hand against his palm and entwines her fingers with his so that his grandmother’s gold band presses up against his empty ring finger. “It felt right. I’d do that again, too.” She swears she feels him relax behind her.

After several more comfortable minutes pass, Spike breaks their reverie first, dragging her shirt over her torso. “We should. . .”

Buffy’s guilt surges forward. “Crap.” She hastily gets dressed. “I’ll get the boat out in the water. You
stay here. The current here is slower but should be enough to keep us going.”

Spike threads his arm through and rings his head with his still damp shirt. He claps a hand on her uninjured arm as she starts to duck into the sunlight. “Hey.”

She glances back at him, worry and fear for her family and friends all over her face.

“Don’t beat yourself up, love. You needed time to heal, as did I. We’d be no good if we didn’t get a bit of rest after that last fight.” He views the guilt lighten in her eyes, and he feels glad that he can relieve that burden at least.

She smiles. “Thank you.” She swings her legs over the side of the boat, and Spike hears her splash into the water.

* * *

Buffy relishes the warmth of the dual suns’ rays on her back, especially given that she’s soaked and cold again from the river water. They’re moving along at a slower clip now because the river isn’t rushing toward a giant waterfall, but at least their speed is fast enough that Buffy doesn’t feel the need to pull out the paddles – or rather, paddle – to help the boat along.

The visual of the river monster’s hulking carcass wedged in the river bank near the base of the waterfall was enough of a reminder that there could be danger lurking. So now, Spike is watching the rear from inside the shaded shelter, and Buffy is alert to the front. She also scans the water and surrounding forest for signs that her mom, Giles, and friends have come this way.

Spike is just out of her reach but close enough that Buffy senses the palpable physical connection between them. He doesn’t even have to touch her, and she knows something’s different between them. God, she still can’t believe she let him drink her and then have sex with her – and of her own volition. And they’d even had a decent conversation after. She didn’t realize he could be so kind and compassionate. . . and real with his feelings.

“So,” she starts in an attempt to distract herself from the seriousness of their situation, “did those little Dynas demons tell you anything about what happens after we get out of Phut territory?”

Spike keeps his eyes focused on as many distant focal points as he can. As the intimacy of the earlier
post-coital conversation evaporates, he feels increasingly unsure of his own feelings as well as hers. Not looking at her helps. “No. I’m afraid I was doing good just to get what I did from them. My bet though is that something is going to come up that’s going to help us out. I highly doubt that we’re going to be stuck out here with no leads.”

Buffy shifts uncomfortably on her seat, the unhewn wood rough on her bottom. “You’re right. Someone has to leave us a clue.”

“My money’s on your mum.”

“Why do you say that?” Buffy is genuinely curious. Spike has an affinity that she doesn’t quite understand for her mom, and from talking with her mom about it, the feeling is mutual.

Spike scans the shoreline for movement or anything that seems different. “Well, your mum is the least touched by the supernatural world. She’s going to be more open-minded, alert, and aware than any of the others.”

Buffy considers this for a moment. She thinks it’s an argument about the difference between beginner’s luck and experience. “That could make sense.”

“And she’s a smart, observant lady.”

“Are you saying Giles, Xander, and Anya aren’t?” She still can’t get over that the sky is green.

“No. Just that the three of them have a filter on the world that your mum doesn’t.” Spike tries to think of the softest way he can put his assessment into words without completely alienating the Slayer. “Rupert and the boy have a stick up their arses.”

“Okay. Really.” Buffy bites the inside of her cheek, surprising herself by not reacting. “Meaning?”

“They hold on tight to their view of the world because it makes them feel safe.” Spike doesn’t know all the reasons for this, but he knows enough from staying at the two men’s respective homes. “Like they have the answers. There’s comfort in that to a point, but it makes them blind. Vulnerable.”
“And Anya?”

“From all accounts, she’s caught up in the whelp."

Buffy squints as one of the suns peeps out from behind a cloud to send rays into her face. “She’s lost the edge that being a demon gave her?”

“Something like that. More like she’s still getting her human legs, and she’s leaning on her boy to help her out. How long was she a vengeance demon?” Spike has no clue how she’s adjusting to being human; he only knows that he would have a hell of a time with a transition like that.

Apparently, Buffy agrees. “Longer than you’ve been a vampire.”

“Right. So there you go.” Spike sneaks a glance at the Slayer’s face to see how she’s taking what he’s been saying.

Buffy meets his gaze, and with her next words, she sounds surer. “My mom’s got this.”

He gives her a small smile. “Let’s hope so, pet.”

“So how does all of what you just said... how does it apply to us?” Buffy has some thoughts, but something about this whole situation is making her more inclined to listen to Spike, someone she never in a million years considered would be worth listening to.

Spike chuckles. His girl is smart. Wait. Did he really just think of the Slayer as his girl? He decides he better check himself if he thinks she won’t put the pointy end of a stake in his heart given the right set of circumstances. “That’s a good question. Do you think you have preconceived notions of what demons and vampires are?”

“Maybe. I only know what I’ve been told and what I’ve experienced.” She shifts her tone to one of levity and says almost drone-like, “Must kill demons and vampires. Must avert apocalypses to save the world.”

He can see she’s thinking by the far off look on her face, so he keeps quiet, letting her continue.
“And I know it’s not all black and white as I said before. I mean, what allowed me to partner with you... what happened with Angelus and Angel and sorting through my feelings about all of that... deciding what to do. Dealing with Faith and her actions. All of that means I can and do step outside of the box of my stated job description. Well, the Council’s mandated job description for Slayers.” She finally returns his earlier smile and keeps going, “They really don’t make a handbook for that part of the job. Not that I’ve read the handbook. If a handbook even exists.”

Spike suddenly realizes that her stepping outside of the box is some of what makes Buffy so attractive... so appealing to him on a gut level, and he leans forward, his forearms on his thighs, wishing the clouds would allow enough cover that he could kiss her. “Right. And that’s what makes you a decent Slayer.”

She’s a little amused and a little offended, but her eyes sparkle and her tone comes off as playful. “Just decent?”

He decides she’s not ready for part of what he wishes he could say, and while in the past, he would have said exactly what he thought without sugarcoating it, he finds himself wanting to allow her time to digest things. “Well, you’re not dead yet.”

“Gee. Thanks.” Silence fills the air for a few seconds, and then Buffy asks, “So, Mr. Vampire, what about you?”

He lifts an eyebrow at her.

“How have your life and circumstances skewed your view of things?”

The sound of the water and the steady thump of the turning rudder quiet Spike’s mind, allowing him the space to consider her query. When he responds, he isn’t sure he’s exactly answering her because his words have nothing to do with being a vampire. “The time period I grew up in and my experiences have skewed my view of women and what I believe I deserve in a relationship.”

“And what, pray tell, do you believe you deserve?”

“Not very much.”
This isn’t what Buffy expects by a long shot, and hearing the vulnerability in his voice tells her everything about how she could destroy him if she wanted to. Him telling her makes her want to do the opposite. God, all that swagger and snark to cover this. Her heart aches a little at the thought.

“And that is my weakness,” he concludes, averting his gaze and staring to the left so that he can’t even see her, his face neutral.

He startles when she puts a warm hand over the top of his cooler one. She doesn’t say anything, just simply squeezes his hand and regards him with such genuine kindness in her emerald eyes that he doesn’t know what to do.

“You should eat something,” he finally says when he can bear her tenderness no more.

“Have you seen what’s left in Mom’s bag?”

Spike reaches back for said bag and rummages around in it. He holds up and examines a very squashed granola bar. “Doesn’t look too worse for wear. No holes in the packaging.”

At the sight of something even remotely edible, Buffy’s stomach growls. “Fine.” She snatches the bar and rips it open. The most delicious almonds and cranberries she’s ever tasted fill her mouth as she resumes her mission of scanning their environment for clues. Funny how hunger changes the taste buds. “Mmmm.” She swallows. “Protein is of the good.”

“And there’s one more where that came from. And thermoses of water and blood. No weapons and the first aid supplies are gone.” Spike glances up, and almost immediately, his eyes light on something that Buffy missed in the trees. “Hey!”

Buffy swallows another bite of granola bar and swerves around, making the boat sway. “What?!”

“Is that red over there –”

Buffy squints. “I think it’s a scrap of Xander’s Hawaiian shirt!”

“And another Dynas boat. Wedged there in the brush!”
“I see it!”

They grin at one another.

Buffy hands Spike the rest of her meal and begins paddling against the current, Slayer strength coming in handy once again.
Standing in the shadows at the edge of the forest, Spike holds the bit of red fabric to his nose and inhales. The scent of the whelp fills his nostrils. It's not exactly a welcome scent – a mix between stinky socks, cheap cologne, and something he can only define as human – but it is familiar.

“So you can just follow the trail like a bloodhound?” Buffy is more than amused by this little tidbit. She had no idea vampires could do this. Angel never told her about it.

“Something like that.” Spike rips the cloth in half and tucks one piece back in place in case they need to find their way to the boats, which are now more carefully hidden using the natural foliage. He sniffs the air around them into the forest, and he experiences a rush of new smells which he has a hard time differentiating because he doesn’t know their origins. At least in their home dimension, most scents are familiar and easier to pull apart.

Buffy shifts from foot to foot and watches Spike’s expression, which she decides is a mix of annoyance and focus. “You look so thrilled about it.”

“Not exactly high on my list of fun things to do in the middle of the day.” Spike steps further into the forest, which is decidedly cool and damp and luckily provides enough shade from the suns. Closing his eyes and breathing deeply again, he tries to relax and allow the smells to spread apart for him, and when he puts less effort in, Xander’s scent distinctly pushes forward in his mind.

Buffy is quiet until Spike adjusts his direction and moves forward with more certainty. There’s no visible path in the wild vegetation, but the trees and brush are far enough apart that they can pick their way through them. Shifting the messenger bag on her shoulder, she trails Spike and asks, “What is on your list? I’m so curious what vampires do in the middle of the day.”

“Sleep. Most vampires are nocturnal for obvious reasons.” Spike takes a large step up and over a fallen tree, its trunk blocking the way. Without thinking, he turns back and offers the Slayer an unneeded hand up.

Buffy from a day or two ago would have made a face at his chivalry and shoved his hand away, but today, she runs her fingers over his cool, dry palm and hops up with his help. “Obviously. So no daytime television for you? I thought you liked the soaps?”

Spike lets his hand linger on hers as they continue moving. “Not soaps. One soap. Passions. And I
taped it. On a VCR.”

“You have a VCR?” She knows that he has a history of somehow finding a way to have modern conveniences in unusual living circumstances, but she wants to keep the lightness of their conversation going.

Spike follows her lead with the conversation but takes another sniff of the air to find the boy’s scent. Locating it, he shifts directions slightly. “Had a VCR. I’m homeless now, remember?”

“But you’re not homeless. You have a place to stay. And it’s a home.” Buffy ducks under a low hanging branch and adroitly avoids getting her foot tangled in a mass of tree roots.

This comment pushes a flash of irritation through Spike, and he says through gritted teeth. “Couch surfing tied to a chair or chained in a bathtub does not make a home.”

“That’s true,” she quickly says to assuage his feelings. She thinks about her brief escape to L.A. by herself and how her little bare space was far from home.

Spike softens his tone in response. “Though I do enjoy the air conditioning and other modern conveniences that reliably function.”

“And you have good personal hygiene.” She wrinkles her nose as she pushes up a throng of leaves. “Not all vampires do.”

Spike shrugs. “Probably depends on a lot of factors. Different vampires are. . . different.”

He means in more ways than just hygienic practices. “I’ve noticed. You’re a lot different than Angel.”

This elicits a snort. “Stating the obvious.”

Buffy stops and touches his shoulder. “Different in a good way.” She’s not sure what she’s thinking but instinctively knows this is what she believes, what she’s noticed but hasn’t put into words.
Spike looks into her eyes and sees that she’s telling the truth, and before he can talk himself out of it, he dips his head and kisses her gently on the lips. She leans into the affection and is slightly sad when he breaks to forge ahead. She sighs. They really should keep going.

“So how come more vampires like you come out of the proverbial closet so to speak? I mean, it seems like they could then enjoy the perks of modern civilization, and said civilization could provide some containment for them? I mean, what separates humans from savages is the culture piece, right? The ability to think and reflect and imagine. The desire to connect on said reflections.” Buffy remembers a particular lesson in Dr. Walsh’s class about the distinctions between humans and primates.

Spike is quiet as he considers what Buffy said. “Humans aren’t ready for vampires. Not really. Anne Rice is about as close as most people can get without either being completely in denial or going the way of what was the boy’s name? The sick one?” Spike remembers how he turned the boy. He tasted funny as humans often did when they were terminally ill.

“Forb. His name was Ford.” Buffy still feels sad that her friend thought becoming a vampire was the way to solve his problems. Staking him is not something that she relishes thinking about with any frequency.

Spike senses a shift in her demeanor and makes an assumption. “I’m sorry about your friend. Killing someone you care about is never easy. It haunts a person if you’re not careful. Did me.”

“You killed someone you cared about?” Buffy considers that maybe he killed someone he loved after he was newly turned, and although before she would have said there’s no way he could be haunted by anything, now she’s starting to believe him.

“Yeah. Wasn’t what I wanted though,” he says. He can’t tell her he killed his mum after making her a vampire. He doesn’t know how she’d take that.

She holds aside a curtain of vines and steps through behind Spike, intentionally brushing his arm. He smiles at her as he passes by.

Buffy continues the earlier thread, “Or the other option is that they come out of denial, can’t see beyond their beliefs about what they learned, and go all witch hunt-y.”
Spike hops down a sharp incline, careful to keep his fingers out of the mud, and Buffy grunts a little as she lands next to him, one palm landing in the muck.

“What do you mean, pet?” he asks after she gets her bearings.

Buffy wipes and shakes the damp clay off her hand but manages to transfer it to the fingers of her other hand. “My mom. She got sucked into this thing by this demon. She and Willow’s mom started a group called Mothers Opposed to the Occult or MOO. God, they made buttons... you know those little things you pin on your shirt when you want to show your support for something?”

Spike vaguely knows something about this type of thing, so he nods.

Making a face and spreading her hands and fingers wide like that will help her mud predicament, she continues, “They came after me and Willow and Amy, Willow’s friend who is a witch. Almost burned us at the stake. Amy turned herself into a rat to get away.”

“A rat?” Spike is half listening, more amused by the expression of disgust on her face in reaction to the mud.

“Uh huh.” She slips her thermos of water out of her bag, swirls open the lid, pours a few drops of the precious liquid over her hands to loosen the thick grey earth.

“That must have been entertaining.”

She smears the softened muck onto the closest tree trunk and absentmly gives her now clean-ish hands a happy smile. Then, she unexpectedly makes eye contact with Spike and says firmly, “Being almost burned at the stake was not entertaining.”

He’s tempted to pick up her hand and nibble on her finger... maybe entice her into a little repeat of what happened between them on the boat. Instead, he teases, “You lived, didn’t you?”

“True. But Amy’s still a rat. Willow’s been taking care of her.”

Spike shrugs and moves past Buffy, hunting for Harris’s scent again. “Her own fault really.”
Buffy can’t help it; she laughs even though she knows she shouldn’t. She takes a sip of water and spins the lid so that it’s loosely closed.

They dodge around a patch of sunlight that’s skirting through an open space in the trees above. Buffy glances at Spike to make sure he’s not going up in flames. He smiles at her concern.

She doesn’t look at him when she says the next part. “You know, I kind of have to sometimes think in black-and-white terms to do my job.”

Spike gets this more than she knows. “The us versus them dynamic is really powerful.”

“It is.”

Spike considers where to take this line of discussion and chooses academic. “And evolutionarily important. It helped humanity survive. It helps vampires survive if they band together properly.”

“A long time ago vampires and other demons were in the out group for humans.”

Without obvious signs, Buffy and Spike happen upon a curved solid wall of stone covered in green that prevents them from going straight. Exchanging a look, they silently agree to head left to go around the barrier. Buffy wishes they had another scrap of cloth or something to go on, but Spike seems confident. What if Slayers had that sense of smell? She almost immediately decides she wouldn’t want it. It wouldn’t be as bad as reading everyone’s thoughts, but some smells she wouldn’t want heightened . . . like dumpsters in alleys.

She refocuses on what Spike is saying to continue their conversation, “They’re in the ‘them’ group for good reason. We eat them or kill them. . . depending. Killing vampires and demons allows humanity to survive but perpetuates the us versus them fallacy.”

“Which sometimes you have to abide by to survive.” She stumbles a bit, but Spike catches her elbow to steady her. She gets the good shivers at the unexpected contact and discovers that she doesn’t want to punish herself or him because of it.

Spike stays just behind her left side and marvels that he’s attracted to the fact that her blonde hair is
curling in the humid air. “Right. Survival is key.”

“But it’s a fallacy because it isn’t true in every case. Like those little Dynas demons. They don’t hurt humans at all.”

She’s starting to get it. Spike resists the urge to shout hallelujah. “But even within species, there is diversity. So in the Dynas group, odds are there are some Dynas that don’t do such great things.”

“Like humans who kill other humans.” She offers Spike his thermos of blood, but he shakes his head, so she slips it back in the depths of the bag. “So you’re saying that vampires aren’t created equal. Duh. I already knew that.”

Lukewarm pig’s blood sounds bloody awful right now. Might sully the memory of how her essence tasted on his tongue. “Oh really?”

“Well, there’s Angel.” As soon as she says the other vampire’s name, she knows she screwed up.

Spike stiffens, and he moves ahead a little to get away from her. “Angel is not a bloody saint. Just ’cause he has a soul. He was killing even after he got cursed with the bloody thing.”

“I-I didn’t know that.” How is she going to fix this?

Spike doesn’t care that she seems rattled because his pride is hurt. He huffs, “Well, he was. Didn’t know what to do with himself, so he kept right on killing despite the guilt and the soul.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. He had a sodding choice.”

Buffy is silent for a long moment, not sure what to say to the fuming vampire. She wants to say that she knows Angel’s not a saint, but that might provoke him further, so she instead says, “You have a choice. The chip that keeps you from hurting humans is broken, so now you have a choice.” The ramifications of what it might mean for her world view if he does make a different choice than she’s been told to expect. . . somehow, those implications aren’t unfathomable not after. . .
“Buffy! Look out!”

Without warning, Spike’s form is hurled backward past her, and as he crashes into a tree, her eyes take in the large, very hairy creature that is the likely cause of said crash. Buffy hears a loud, possible battle cry behind her, and she whirls to see two similar hairy creatures swinging through the trees just above them.

As one lands on her head, she drops her water bottle, and the liquid splashes across the forest floor as the bottle spins out of sight. Buffy brings her arms up to protect herself and shove the creature away. Maybe it’s the element of surprise, maybe it’s the friendly-appearing primate-like face that her brain barely registers, but she hesitates. The demon emits a high-pitched howl, opens its smiling mouth and latches onto her the bare skin on her bicep. Buffy tries and fails to fling the creature away, and another jumps down and latches onto her other arm. Within seconds, she feels her heart skip a beat and a heaviness settle inside of her gut, leaving her feeling like her body is shutting down. Her hands brush helplessly at the creatures, and she falls to her knees.

Using the tree trunk to brace himself, Spike sinks to the damp earth with the weight of the demon heavy on his torso. As Spike fumbles behind him for anything he can use as a weapon, the demon growls at him and swings its face toward Spike’s arm. It opens its mouth wide and latches onto his flesh. Almost straight away, the demon recoils, spitting and gagging and rolling on the forest floor.

As the demon recovers and grabs the vampire’s ankle, Spike uses a good old fashioned fist to knock the demon unconscious. “Uh huh. I’m dead. Didn’t expect that, did you?”

Then, Spike turns his attention to Buffy. “Bloody hell.” No grey here.

Spike charges forward to aid the failing Slayer and tries to haul the smaller demon off her, but both are firmly latched. Eyes rolled back, they’re focused on doing whatever they’re doing to hurt Buffy, so Spike uses their distraction to hook a finger in the mouth of the closest one. He tears the creature away, the mouth popping on Buffy’s skin as it unfastens. Picking up the heaviest branch he can find, he hits the demon in the head before it can recover enough to come after him.

Although Buffy’s head is lolling to the side, Spike sees that she’s valiantly trying to summon the energy to fight back. Her efforts are sorely lacking as her limp hand vaguely pushes against the creature’s head.

Spike brushes her wavering hand aside. “Let me, love.” He pops the demon’s mouth free with a
forceful jerk, and Buffy crumples to the ground.

The bigger demon snarls at Spike, dodging the vampire’s attempt to brain him in the head. “Why is a vampire protecting a Slayer?” The demon’s voice is deep and almost unintelligible in the non-native tongue.

“That’s a very good question.” Brandishing the bit of wood, Spike ducks as the primate-like creature swings an extra-long, well-muscled arm at him. “I’m not sure of the answer yet.”

As Spike springs back up, the creature leaps, grabbing hold of a vine and kicking Spike in the head. He staggers and drops the branch as he smashes again into a nearby tree. His head spinning, he thinks, if I don’t get staked in this fight with all the wood around, it’ll be a bloody miracle.

Using the tree as leverage, he pushes off and hopes to high heaven that his instincts are sharp. As luck would have it, he rams his whole body into the demon’s stomach, and the creature lets out a yelp of pain and falls to the earth next to the Slayer. The momentum carries Spike, and he drops on top of the demon.

Before the creature can regroup, Spike pushes off its chest, grabs its head, and violently twists to the left. The neck breaks with a satisfying crunch, snuffing the demon’s life out. Spike quickly clamors to his feet, wiping his hands with satisfaction. The kill feels more gratifying than his battle with Phut, probably because he isn’t cowering and hoping the damned chip won’t go off.

Turning his attention to Buffy, he gently scoops her up in his arms, making sure to secure what’s left of their supplies. She stirs and manages to pull up enough to wrap her damaged arms around his neck.

Spike murmurs in her ear, “C’mon, love. Let’s get out of here before the other two wake up.”
Spike can tell when Buffy starts to wake, mostly because her heart rate increases at first and then slowly her breathing starts to speed up. This is all new to him; he’s used to being with a woman who doesn’t have a heart beat and doesn’t need oxygen to function.

He hefts the Slayer in his arms; he’s not tired, but he’s been carrying her and walking through the forest for what feels like hours. The sky is darkening above, and the shadows are lengthening. New sounds of life are emerging around them, and he doesn’t know where the hell they are.

He does know one thing; they haven’t been going in circles. He’s at least got that much of a sense of direction, and he smells water ahead, but the aroma is distinctly different than the river. Unfortunately, he lost the whelp’s scent long ago. He doesn’t know how he’s going to tell Buffy that little tidbit.

When Buffy lifts her head just a fraction, she realizes that even with her eyes closed, the world feels spin-y. Her arms feel like they’re on fire. She lays back down and strives to focus on the steady arms holding her and the solidness of his chest. Thank god for solid chests. If only he’d stop moving; that would make everything better.

“Slayer?” Spike’s tone is gentle.

“Mmm.”

Best not to ask how she’s feeling because he can tell from the way she’s breathing that she’s in pain. “It’s getting dark. We need to find a place to rest and regroup. The trees are denser here, but I can see a cave of some sort ahead. I think that’ll do.”

“O-ok. Cold.” She shivers, goosebumps flying over her flesh.

“We’ll build you a little fire, pet.” And hope to high heaven that it doesn’t attract any more demons.

She shakes her head. Her eyes are still closed, but Spike catches the furrow of annoyance between her eyes.
“No to the fire then?”

She briefly squints at him. “You. Dust.” Still with the dizzy and pain, but she made her point.

He can’t help but chuckle at her delirious attempts to protect him. “Ah, love, don’t worry about me. Been around all manner of torches and candles and other flame-y whatnots, cigarettes included. I can handle the fire.”

As they near the cave, Spike keeps quiet, his ears alert for any signal that they might be in danger. He climbs up the incline to reach the shelter and discovers that the space is tucked in the side of a hill. The darkness is getting deeper, but as he ducks his head to enter the stone room, he can still make out that it’s large enough for a small fire to warm the Slayer while still being ventilated enough to allow her to breathe. He only hopes that the smoke won’t attract known or unknown enemies.

Mindful of the wounds on her arms, Spike gently lays the Slayer down, propping her against a larger rock. Opening Joyce’s bag, he finds the flashlight, pushes the power button to find that it miraculously still works, and tucks it against Buffy’s palm. Her fingers close around the metal. Then, he hunts around and finds the flint and steel he thought he saw earlier when he was looking for food for Buffy. He, on the other hand, left his zippo in his suit pocket along with his cigarettes. Bloody suit.

“I’ll be right back, love. Going to find some wood.”

Buffy opens her eyes a slit again. She’s amused that she can only see the white blonde of his hair. She coughs a little instead of laughing. “B-be careful.”

Spike nods though she can’t see him and hurries to catch the last of the suns’ rays in search of suitable wood.

He doesn’t know too much about the trees in this dimension, but he knows he’s on the hunt for softwood and preferably a dead branch or two still attached to the living owner, so they’ll be dry enough. As luck would have it, there are a variety of trees in this dense and tangled forest, and Spike is able to quickly find a few different good sized branches within arm’s reach. He pulls each one down, breaking the dead limbs off at the base. Testing them with his thumbnail, he finds a couple that are soft enough to dent.

The suns slip below the horizon just as he gathers up his bounty, and he hurries to reorient himself to
the direction of the cave, so he doesn’t have to try and follow Buffy’s scent. In doing so, his eyes catch a glimpse of water through the trees.

Then, he picks his way back through the potentially very hazardous obstacle course toward the cave. A thin beam of light shoots out through the darkness, and he realizes that Buffy is lighting the way for him. When he arrives at the cave entrance, he ducks in to discover that she’s sitting up a little better.

“Hey,” Buffy manages, aiming the beam out of Spike’s face once she recognizes him.

Spike notices that she’s found a stake in the bag. Girl’s still got some fighting sense about her even in her weakened state. “Got wood.”

“Yay.”

Spike rests back on his heels and begins to arrange the wood, placing a good number of the stones around it to hopefully keep Buffy warm once the fire burns out. Then, he pulls out the flint and steel, and quickly starts a fire. When the nurtured flame is happily dancing on its own, Spike joins Buffy, slipping his leg around her and drawing her back against his chest. She’s moving better, so she snuggles close and hugs his arms over her abdomen.

The flames are low and golden yellow and orange. She already feels warmer.

He nuzzles her temple. Her hair is soft even without styling products. “Better?”

“Much. Except still kinda groggy and weak. And what’s wrong with my arms?” She lifts said limbs to try and study the barely closing wounds that wrap around her biceps. “What were those things?”

“Not sure what kind of demons they were, but they seemed to be draining your energy. Must require living creatures. The one who tried it with me didn’t stay latched on very long.”

She rests her arms back down on top of Spike’s. “So like vampire monkey creatures without the blood part?”
Spike nods. “Right. And without the allergy to sunlight.”

“Apparently.” She takes a deep, contented breath. “Thank you for saving me.”

He resists the urge to kiss her ear and says, “Starting to become a pattern. You helping me. Me helping you.”

Maybe it’s the effect of the demon attack or maybe it’s because she has her eyes closed and is only immersed in Spike’s low voice as it rumbles against her back, but Buffy’s admission comes easily. “I think you’re right.”

Spike speaks without thinking, without considering the ramifications of what he’s asking. “What are we going to do about it?”

Buffy’s forehead wrinkles. Her brain is fuzzy. What’s he asking? “About what?”

“About us. What are we going to do when we get back to the real world?”

Buffy’s stomach plunges, and her heart rate picks up, which Spike probably detects right away. Fuzziness officially gone. What will she do? She told him that they’d get their marriage annulled, but to get a marriage annuled, doesn’t she have to have a reason? The only reason she can think of is not consummating the union, and well, they’ve done that multiple times now. What will her friends, her mom, and Giles think? Spike is lacking a soul after all. Does she even care? And what if she wants to stay with him? What if he doesn’t want to be with her? It’s really too many questions for her brain, a brain recently manhandled by human-life-force-sucking demons, to handle. “I don’t know.”

Spike senses the changes in her heart rate and finds himself stiffening at her words. His question to Buffy was meant to be casual, and he has no idea why he’s reacting to her response in this way. Why should he care what she decides? Her decision only likely makes a difference in whether he’s tied up again or not – whether he’s a prisoner or a comrade. He should care about the prisoner part at least. Normally, he’d pick a fight and get defensive, but he’s trapped here with her in this sodding cave, and he doesn’t know what the hell is out there in the night. “I don’t know either, Slayer.”

Buffy’s heart aches a little at his choice of nickname, but she’s too weak to react. Instead, she grounds herself by focusing on the flames and the warmth they’re lending them both. The gold of the ring on her finger glints in the light. The ring means something to Spike, and she’s starting to realize that it probably means something to her, too. She remembers what he said about his luck with
women and how much pain seemed to be behind his words.

“Hey.” She tries to infuse the single word with gentleness.

He relaxes a fraction. “Yeah?”

“All I know is that something shifted for me here, and I can’t quite wrap my mind around all of it.” She threads the fingers of her left hand through his and squeezes.

He squeezes back. “Lack of food and water will do that to you.”

She lifts her head for a second and glances at her mother’s bag. “Speaking of water. I lost my thermos.”

“I know. We’ll sort that out tomorrow. Boil you some water in mine.” He leans his cheek against her head.

Somehow, his touch makes her feel safer. “After you drink the blood and clean it out?”

“What do you think?”

She smiles in reaction to his sarcasm and continues, “Besides the lack of food and water though. Something’s different between us.”

“I can agree with that.” Bloody hell. He can’t deny it and that scares him more than a little bit.

His agreement gives her courage. “Maybe it’s the being stuck with each other here, but maybe it’s not, and I don’t know what it means for us when we go back. I don’t know if I’ll know until I get there. Until I’m faced with it.”

“I hear you, pet. S’pose I could say the same thing.” He can’t admit – even to himself – that he has some clue exactly what he’d do if she let him.
She yawns, and her brain fogs over again from the exertion of trying to make sense of their situation. Her eyes drooping closed, she pushes up closer to him with her hips and wiggles her shoulders a bit to settle in. “Sleep?”

Exhaustion overcomes Spike at her query. “Yeah, love. Sleep.”

With the fire casting a blanket of warmth over them, the vampire and the Slayer fall asleep together.

* * *

When Buffy wakes, the first thing she notices is that the world is still dark outside, the fire is out, and she is still wrapped in Spike’s arms. This brings her back to waking up in the very deep, dark hole the Phut dropped them into. She doesn’t take time to make sense out of anything but nudges the vampire behind her with her elbow.

He grunts and moves. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” she whispers worriedly, turning to face him. She slips her arms around his waist and presses her cheek into his now familiar chest.

Her tone tells him everything, and he runs one hand down the curve of her back. “I’m fine. Surprised is all.” This time, he allows himself to ask, “How are you feeling, pet?”

Buffy did a quick scan of her body. Mind clear. Body stronger. Less pain. “Much better. Needed the sleep.” She wants to add that she needed the sleep with him but isn’t sure how he’d react to that. “Now I’m just hungry and thirsty. And I forgot that it would take a while for the sun to come up.”

Spike moves his free arm to the messenger bag and roots around for the remaining thermos. “Let’s make a fresh fire and boil you some water.”

Buffy wrinkles her nose. “Ugh. Hot water.”
Spike lifts an eyebrow that Buffy can’t see. “Better than dehydration.”

She sighs. “Or accidental poisoning. Not that we really thought about the possibility of bad air here either.”

“We didn’t exactly think. We did what needed doing. We took action.”

“I really should start thinking.” She’s the Slayer and shouldn’t be caught up in spells like the one Willow cast. She should have been able to overcome the effects, and then, no one would be in this mess. Her family and friends wouldn’t be in danger. God. What if something horrible happened to them? She’d never be able to live with herself.

“Or maybe it hurts to think too much.” If Spike lets himself think, he’ll wonder what the hell he’s doing here, in this alternate world, getting all touchy-feely with the Slayer. He’s supposed to be trying to kill her. Right?

Buffy pushes up and back so that she’s sitting up. So far so good. No dizziness. “Did you completely lose Xander’s scent?”

Spike watches her testing out her body. “Yeah. Somewhere in the getting away from that last batch of demons.”

Buffy bites her cheek to stave off her tears. “It’s okay. It was bound to happen.”

Spike knows the odds of finding her friends and family are now slim, but he doesn’t need Buffy to be upset and hopeless, not when they both need to be in problem solving mode. “Look. Let’s focus on what we can do. First things first. Water.”

Buffy nods even though he can’t see her. “Yes.”

Spike chugs the tepid pig’s blood with only a small grunt of disgust. Then, using the flashlight and the now bright moonlight above, the pair venture back into the forest. Spike teaches Buffy what kind of wood to look for to restart their fire, and because his vampire eyes are more used to utilizing the least amount of light to see, he leaves the flashlight with her and picks his way to the water’s edge.

Despite all that he’s seen in his time either alive or undead, he is still touched by nature’s beauty. His finger lingering on the rough bark of the final tree blocking his view, he stares at the vastness of the
lake before him. The water’s surface is still and almost glowing with the borrowed light from the
round moon and the millions of stars shining down from above. He wonders, not for the first time,
about who or what might be out there among the stars and whether the same lifeforms inhabit the
planets of this dimension as the ones in his own. The lake spans as far as his eyes can detect, and two
shadowy islands are the only objects that push up in the distance to disturb the pristine surface.

Never one to be fooled the appearance of splendor, Spike scans the area closest to him in case more
local wildlife or demon-life might harm him in some way. Detecting nothing obvious, he keeps his
senses alert and walks slowly forward before cautiously squatting in the mud at the water’s edge.
The water is clear as he immerses the thermos and begins to rinse the last vestiges of the blood from
the container. He hopes that the blood doesn’t attract some other predator.

As if on cue, a deep voice resounds in his head. *Hello there. I’ve been waiting for you.*

Spike rises from his position, examining the world without speaking. He can’t find any obvious
external source for the voice.

*You heard right. I’ve been waiting.*

In the distance, Spike sees the smaller island begin to move with much more dexterity than an island
should be able to move, causing large ripples all the way to the edge of the water where he stands.
The island is coming toward him.

*Don’t move.*

Spike tries to hightail it back into the forest behind him and finds that he can’t. His thoughts fly to
Buffy. Where is she? He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out, and he can’t warn her.

Oh, fuck.
This time, Angel manages the transition back to his forest with Cordy as best he can, considering he’s unceremoniously dumped on his behind. He grunts as the leaves crunch underneath him. He pushes himself to his feet with one of his hands and dusts off his palms. The sun is still shining softly through the tree branches above, and he sees that Cordelia is curled up asleep on the sectional. Her dark hair is piled behind her, and her mouth is open and slack as she dreams. A bit of drool dampens the corner of her lips.

He crouches in front of her, tilts his head, and smiles as she emits a tiny snore. He traces his fingertips over her forehead and down her cheek, which has the effect of waking her as he hoped. She smacks her lips a little, and her eyes flutter open.

Then, she sits straight up so that his hand falls away. Her eyes are wide as if she hasn’t been asleep at all, and her hand goes up to the lock of messy hair falling over her field of vision. “You!”

Angel decides she sounds mad. Uh oh. “What?”

“I’m very confused.” Cordy crosses her arms and glares at him.

“About what?” He really is innocent in this whole situation.

“They’re even worse off than when you left. You didn’t change anything! And I thought the Phut demon army and that river lizard monster were bad!”

Now he’s confused. . . and a little annoyed. He doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing. “I’m doing the best I can.” Then, he realizes he doesn’t know what she’s talking about. “Wait. They’re worse off? Spike and Buffy? What did you see?” His eyes flick to the tree. It’s blank.

She softens when she comprehends that he went back for the Willow situation. “I guess it went off when I fell asleep.”

“What’s going on? What’d I miss?” Did he want to know if Spike and Buffy were having sex again? He sat down next to Cordy on the sectional.
Cordelia props one elbow on the back of the sectional and fills him in. “Buffy got mauled by some sort of life-sucking non-vampire demon monkey creature. She almost died, but Spike saved her. I think you may be onto something with him having some sort of potential before he got his soul. Though I wouldn’t have believed it ‘til I saw it with my own two eyes.”

“But Buffy’s okay?”

She nods. “I think so. Spike built her a fire, and they slept in a cave. Well, after they got away from the monkey creatures.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Some of the tension loosens in Angel’s chest.

“Well, now they’re trying to boil Buffy some water, but Spike got paralyzed by some sort of giant telepathic lake creature while he was cleaning his thermos.”

The tension returns. “Where’s Buffy?”

“Gathering wood. God, this all sounds so weird.” Cordelia never thought in a million years that she’d be sitting here, discussing Spike and Buffy with Angel of all people.

Angel frowns. “Oh. That sounds worse than the Gbahali.” He knows Buffy and his grandchild. They can hold their own in a fight, but Angel’s not sure about psychic monsters who don’t have to lift a finger to incapacitate.

“What was I saying? Confused over here!” Cordy’s eyes widen. She’s not sure why she’s here other than to guide Angel in some way, and now she feels like she’s failing to make an impact. “What’s the Gbahali?”

“The Gbahali is the river monster that Buffy killed.”

“Oh.”

Angel can see that she’s genuinely worried. “Have a little faith, Cordy. I know what dimension they’re in. They’re resourceful. They’ll figure it out.”
Cordy’s volume raises. “Not if they’re dead! Where did you send them anyway? This place is worse than Pylea! It’s like totally uncivilized.”

“Trust me. They got this. I don’t know all the ins and outs of the place, but they needed the time with just them.” As much as he hates to admit it.

“If you say so. This is worse than the Hunger Games or the Ice Sheet Wars.” Honestly, she wishes this whole thing would hurry up and resolve, so she and Angel can get on with their afterlife together.

Angel sinks back against the cushions. “Okay. I could use a drink. How do I make that happen?”

Cordy smirks. Holding up her hand, she says, “Red wine please.”

At her request, the breeze lightly blows coupled with the wind chime sound and scent of roses. Then, the air shimmers, and a full glass of red wine appears in her hand.

She grins at Angel. “I feel a little bit like Olivia Pope.”

Angel frowns. “Who?”

“A character on a TV show on Earth. Ran from 2012 to 2018. Geez. Without me, you’d have no clue about pop culture.”

“You watch TV in your place of peace?”

“Duh!” She takes a sip and then holds up her glass, jiggling it at him. “You try.”

Angel awkwardly holds up his hand. “Whiskey. Neat. Better make it a double.” Within seconds, his requested drink materializes. He takes a big gulp and relaxes, laying his head back.
Cordy leans back next to him, her shoulder touching his. “So what happened with Willow? I mean, how did you think that was a good idea?”

He turns his head toward her. “Okay, okay. I can tell you think I’m an idiot.”

She looks at him and smiles. “You’re not an idiot.”

“Well, you’re calling into question all my decisions.” He’s serious.

“You’re right. You’re right. I’m sorry.” She pauses and then adds, “But hasn’t that always been like. . . my job?”

He chuckles. “Yeah. I definitely needed. . . need you.”

They both face forward with their drinks on opposite knees. A leaf falls, landing on the sectional armrest, and the sun still shines.

Angel explains, “And if you must know, it was the only way I could think of to protect Willow from D’Hoffryn.”

“Who?”

He sighs. She seems to have pop culture materials in Heaven but no knowledge of basic demon players. “The being who creates vengeance demons. You saw him earlier with Willow.”

“Oh.”

He raises his head to gaze at the tree trunk. “Should we keep watching?”

Cordy reaches for his hand. “Of course!”
The tree viewing portal reappears and flickers back to life.
Chapter Nine, The Discovery of an Unforeseen Similarity

Buffy dumps the wood she gathered on the cave floor. Spike isn’t back yet, and that’s immediately strange to her. All he’s supposed to be doing is rinsing out a thermos. She clicks off the flashlight and peers into the darkness but can’t make out anything even when her eyes adjust to the change in brightness. Damn it. If he’s deliberately delaying, she’s going to give him a good scolding for scaring the crap out of her.

Still nervous about what might be out there in the night, particularly the possible return of the monkey demons, Buffy doesn’t call the vampire’s name. Listening for anything out of the ordinary, she slowly moves in the general direction Spike went. She’s not exactly used to having to sneak around given that she knows the nooks and crannies of Sunnydale like the back of her hand. She’s also used to announcing her presence and loudly. When a twig or two snap under feet, she winces and takes a moment to scan her surroundings before moving on.

Finding the water seems like it takes forever even though it’s probably not too far from their shelter. The trees start to thin out a bit, and Buffy catches a glimpse of Spike’s bright hair and lean form. She opens her mouth and starts to call out to him. Instead, she freezes because she notices that he’s standing still, completely unmoving in a very unnatural way even for a vampire.

Screw the stealthy! She runs forward, her feet creating all kinds of noise, and she grabs his arm, which is stiff and barely pliable.

Spike’s pale face is still in the moonlight, and the only sign that he’s alive or undead is that he’s blinking. What the hell?

Hello. You must be Buffy.

The voice is low and resonant. And it’s very much inside her head. She suddenly finds that she can’t move. Great. She’s paralyzed and going crazy. This is worse than the monkey creatures.

You’re not hallucinating, and you’re not crazy. And I’m not here to hurt you. I am nothing like those filthy demon monkeys. The brutes. They are bullies. Thank goodness they do not prefer to dwell in the places I prefer in your world.

Buffy strains with all her might to move. No dice. All she can do is blink. Damn it.
Maybe you will trust me if I tell you about your friends?

Okay? Buffy wills her brain to convey her sarcasm.

Your mother, your Watcher, your friend, and the ex-demon came through these parts. I helped them as I will help you.

Oh really? Why should I believe you? Buffy blinks and wishes she could glare or see anything besides Spike’s torso and some trees.

Unlike my counterpart, I mean you no harm.

Counterpart? Now Buffy’s really confused. There are too many bits of information without context.

I’m going to let you both go, starting with you, and you will see. I’m sorry. I had to freeze Spike’s mind in addition to his body. Your vampire was not amenable to rational communication though I did retrieve some information from his mind.

With little fanfare, Buffy can move again. Her body goes from zero to one hundred as it gears up for a fight, and she falls into a ready stance. . . and almost topples over from the shock. She stares, mouth open.

A dinosaur head is hovering three feet from her face, face gently curved to a short snout, wide dark eyes gentle and alive with intelligence. Buffy peeks around and takes in the thick, elongated neck stretching out from a massive body floating in the lake beyond. A long tail barely breaks the surface as it lazily moves back and forth through the water. For such a large creature, he barely makes a sound when he breathes, and she can swear he’s smiling at her – a dinosaur-Mona Lisa smile.

Unable to stop her heart hammering, she observes, “Y-you’re a Brontosaurus or Brachiosaurus or whatever those dinosaurs were in Jurassic Park!”
I am not a Brachiosaurus, but I am warm-blooded like a Brachiosaurus. I’m actually a demon like all creatures here. You might know me as Mokèlé-mbèmbé.

“Not the Loch Ness Monster? The actual Loch Ness Monster.”

Laughter resounds in her mind. *No. I only spend time in Africa. Your Loch Ness is my cousin. She passes through this dimension, too, but she is not here now.*

“Where are we?”

*We are in a dimension that exists as a crossroad between other dimensions. This is one of many crossroads and is most often used by creatures that spend time on your earthly plane. There are native demons but also many that simply pass through as part of their journey.*

“So that’s why there are only stories but no actual proof of like say Nessie?” Buffy borrows Spike’s misplaced term when she intentionally or unintentionally brushes his arm with her own. She suddenly feels protective of him and finds and holds his unmoving hand.

*Exactly. Humans would not know what to do with such evidence, and many of us fear that they would destroy us. Plus, most of us do not like to be tied down to one place. Some of us like to travel.*

Another us against them scenario, Buffy thinks. “Well, you’re a little too late on the not being destroyed front. I think I killed one of your friends back there in the river.”

The dinosaur demon huffs. *Pish. The Gbahali should not have attacked you. He should have known better than to try and take on a Slayer. He’s always been reckless.*

“You know about Slayers?” Buffy is surprised, but maybe she shouldn’t be.

*Of course. Slayers are like us. We know our kind. We respect our kind. Well, most of us do.*
“What do you mean?” More bits she can’t make sense out of. She draws in a deep breath, trying to tamp down the impatience that’s starting to rise within her. “If you’re here to help like you say you are, let go of Spike. Now.”

As you wish.

Spike stumbles as the forces he’s been straining against dissipate and he regains control over his body and mind. Not letting go of his hand, Buffy catches him to keep him from falling, and he looks her up and down with worry on his features.

“I’m okay,” she reassures him, searching his blue eyes. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” He shakes his head, rubbing his thumb over hers. “Don’t much like being controlled like that. Worse than the bloody chip.”

“Me either. Sorry it took so long.” She shivers at his touch.

Spike glares at the dinosaur demon. “You didn’t mention that you saw our . . . her friends and mum.”

You didn’t let me.

Spike emits a little snort, and then, he concedes, “That’s true.”

“I want an explanation for what you meant.” Buffy’s not going to let this one go. She sets her jaw and gives the demon her best Willow resolve face.

The dinosaur lifts his head. About what part?

“About Slayers. Being like your kind.” Duh. The interesting part. The part that’s making her heart speed up, and her mind go fifty directions.
You don’t know? Disbelief is evident in his tone.

Buffy restrains herself from rolling her eyes. “I wouldn’t be asking.”

The demon looks pointedly at Spike. How does she not know?

Spike shrugs. “Slayers. They’re taught to believe they’re different. It’s how they can do their job. It’s how the world is.”

Feeling like she’s on the outs with some big secret that she doesn’t quite get, Buffy drops Spike’s hand. “What do you mean? You know this, too?”

The dinosaur creature glances back and forth between the vampire and the Slayer. Then, he addresses Buffy. I believe he thinks it’s self-evident. Or maybe he didn’t think it was relevant to tell you? You are, after all, set to be enemies. I’m surprised that he’s even here with you, holding your hand. Are you... in love?

Buffy’s even more thrown by this query, and she momentarily forgets her other question. Her eyes flick to Spike, who is intently watching her expression. Thank goodness she didn’t flinch or make a face. God, she doesn’t want to hurt him. What is wrong with her? And oh my god, does she love him? It’s going too fast for it to be love yet. Right? She smiles uncertainly at him.

Spike is so taken aback that all he can do is stare at the Slayer. Under the spell, he would have said yes, he was in love. No hesitation. But now? He feels a bit like he might throw up the stale blood he drank earlier, but he isn’t sure if it’s because he wants to say yes and she might say no or if it’s because he can’t fathom loving a Slayer. Feeling sick is a sign that something’s very wrong. Right? Screw it. He doesn’t have an answer except to smile back.

And I can see that the answer to that question is yes.

Buffy ignores the giant demon and picks up Spike’s hand again. She really wants to know the answer to the first question; she’ll address the feelings piece at another time when it’s just her and Spike. “Tell me the truth. Am I... is part of me demon?” As soon as she says the words aloud, she knows the answer.
Spike reads her eyes and knows that she knows, so he nods.

“Oh.” Buffy’s mind reels as she tries to incorporate this piece of knowledge with her view of herself, her calling, the world, her friends’ opinions of demons, the Watcher’s Council, all her conversations with Spike in this dimension, and... “Oh.”

Spike watches her. She doesn’t let go of his hand again, so that’s a good sign. He laces his fingers with hers to help steady her. He’s pleased when she clasps tighter.

She takes a deep breath and keeps her eyes steady on his. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

The demon’s tone is kind. *I imagine that perhaps the knowledge is not commonly discussed as it would confuse things for Slayers. They usually have such short lifespans that knowing their heritage would probably cause some of them to lose sight of their mission.*

“I’m going to have to have a conversation with Giles,” Buffy decides, her voice hardening. “A very serious conversation.”

“I doubt Rupert knows,” Spike assures her. “A lot in history gets muddled as it’s passed down.”

*This is very true.*

Buffy shakes her head. She has to find Giles, Xander, Anya, and her mom. She can interrogate Giles once she knows he’s safe. She faces the gentle monster. “You helped my friends and family? Can you take us to them?”

The demon bobs his head once. *I did, and I will take you to where I last saw them. They have already left this dimension for home.*

A huge weight lifts off Buffy’s shoulders. “Are they okay? How did they make it home?”

*As far as I could surmise, your friends were intact. The went through the portals, which are located on the island behind me.*
Buffy lets out the breath that she’s been holding, and tears of relief swell in her eyes before she blinks them back. No time for crying now.

Spike remembers what the Dynas demon said. “They’re probably the portals we’re looking for, pet.”

_They are the only portals in this dimension besides the ones the Phut create for the Dynas. The dinosaur creature lowers his head and long neck. Climb aboard. I can carry you there; it will be much faster than swimming._

Buffy and Spike climb along the demon’s neck and settle onto its broad back. The creature waits until they’re seated before slowly swimming into the deep lake, and soon, they’re far from the shore.

Spike discovers that riding on the back of a brachiosaurus-brontosaurus-sauropod demon and sliding through the water is relaxing, especially with his arms wrapped around a willing Slayer. The way she reacted when the creature asked if they were in love tells him a lot. Her response to finding out she is part demon tells him even more. He absentmindedly strokes her belly, and he can sense her heart rate accelerating and her desire for him increasing.

A few days ago, he would never have anticipated this in his wildest dreams, and he’s had some pretty wild dreams. He considers that he might somehow owe the witch something when they return to ole Sunnydale. Picking up Buffy’s hand, he kisses the warm skin over her knuckles, and to his surprise, she shifts then and turns to face him, wrapping her legs around his waist and slipping her arms around his neck.

Buffy regards the man before her. He’s become less of a monster and more of a man. . . for a lot of reasons now. She doesn’t really want to analyze it, so she threads her fingers through his loose curls and kisses him instead, relishing the soft but gentle firmness of his lips gliding over hers in an unhurried, achingly tender dance. Her fingers move over his cheek as she feels the need to breathe, and her pounding heart belies the easy slowness of what just happened.

As Buffy pulls back, she gazes up at Spike with wide eyes, and it’s his turn to be taken aback by how much feeling is there. . . for him. With anyone else, he’d dive in and take advantage of that, but he slows down with her because she is here and real and present in a way no one has ever been. He wishes that he could freeze the moment because he knows it can’t last. They are in the last leg of their journey.
And just as Spike expected, the ancient creature stops moving.

Spike can’t help himself then and gives her a quick kiss in return for her vulnerability, a gesture that conveys the best promise he can make to her... that he isn’t going anywhere yet.

The demon wisely doesn’t peek back at the Slayer and vampire. *We are here.*
Chapter Ten, The Reality of Going Home

After their sauropod companion bids them goodbye and swims away in search of food, Buffy and Spike survey the long stretch of beach along the island’s coast. The white sand glows silvery in the moonlight, gentle dunes paving the way to the distant castle ruins beyond which lay the dimensional portals and their ticket home.

“Shall we?” Spike asks Buffy, inclining his head toward the dilapidated structure. For some reason, he’s hesitating now that the end of their journey is in sight. He’s not exactly sure why.

Buffy takes his hand in hers, trying to seem as confident as she felt not even five minutes ago when they were sailing along on the faux-brontosaurus’s back. “Yes.” As they begin walking along the shore, she remembers something. “Good thing we’re almost there. I left the bag with all our remaining supplies back at the cave.” This isn’t what she really wants to say. The simple observation is easier than all the other swirling thoughts and feelings that she can’t quite grasp onto.

“Good thing.” The words are flat and dull. He mentally shakes himself. What’s wrong with him? Buffy just showed him how much she cares or at least wants him, but now he’s not feeling right. The feeling makes him antsy like something irritating is crawling under his skin.

Buffy wants to find the easy depth of their other conversations again, so she tries the first thing that flashes through her mind. “Do you think I have a soul?”

That’s it. He can’t contain the niggling bit anymore. Spike drops Buffy’s hand and pushes past her, striding over a particularly large dune.

Buffy catches a glimpse of anger on his face. Shit. That isn’t the reaction she expected. She runs to catch up to him. “What? What’d I say now?”

“It always comes down to that with you, doesn’t it?” he growls, refusing to look at her.

“It’s a valid question!” Annoyance flashes through her. He’s not explaining, and he’s not slowing down. He’s throwing a temper tantrum. This isn’t how she wanted things to go! “Slow down.”

He rolls his eyes. “You can more than keep up, Slayer.”
She grabs his arm to get his attention, to get him to ease up so she can try to wrap her mind around what’s happening. “I know I can keep up, but going fast isn’t what I want right now.”

He stops abruptly and stares at her, blue eyes flashing even in the moonlight. She just doesn’t get it. Here she claims she’s different, and now, with one question, she proves she isn’t. He knows he’s being an ass about it, but he doesn’t. . . shouldn’t care. “What do you want?”

Buffy’s mind skips from one thought to the next but can’t make sense of any of it. “What do you mean, ‘What do I want’?” God, she feels so helpless. There. There’s a feeling she can label. “I wanted to have a conversation with you.” Can’t he just go back to being less prickly? She’d give anything to rewind time and take back what she said.

“About what? Souls?” He won’t look at her. “So you can talk yourself out of you and me? So you can force things to go back to the way they were before we started this between us? Well, guess what? I can’t go back.” He doesn’t realize the truth of the last four words until he says them out loud. Bloody idiot that he is; who’d he think he was fooling?

Buffy feels the anger and exasperation heating her face, and she can only latch onto one part of what he’s saying. “Go back to what?”

“I can’t go back to being chained up, to being tossed about like a piece of unwanted garbage, to being treated like a. . .” He glances at her and then away again. “Thing.”

Buffy glimpses the tears in his eyes. There he is. Thank god. She feels like she can breathe again. Her voice softens. “Y-you’re not a thing or a piece of garbage.”

“Ha!” He snorts, glaring at her to disguise the sodding tears that briefly welled. “You’d like to think that you don’t think that, but I’ve been around you long enough to know how you really feel about me deep down. This. . . all of this.” He throws his arms wide and then twirls his index finger in the air, gesturing at the entirety of their surroundings. “It’s just flash in the pan of Buffy Summers’s life. Everything that’s happened here is subject to plausible deniability.”

Now she’s hurt with a side of pissed. “Be honest! You’ve lived for over a century. You don’t think that maybe I’m a ‘flash in the pan’ for you?”

He stares at her, tears gone and eyes clear.
“Yeah, that’s right.” She waves an arm at him, her volume increasing and not sure she’s making sense. “You have opinions about me, too, that you’ve apparently conjured up. Opinions that aren’t exactly accurate. You think I see myself in some holier-than-thou way, but god, I don’t. You ever think my confidence might be a cover sorta like the way you snark or lash out or make comments that dig in and hurt just the right way? I go into cemeteries every night to kill vampires and do my ‘sacred duty,’” she makes little quotation marks with her fingers, “and every night, I think maybe it’s the night I could die. That a vampire or a demon could. . . dispatch me without a second thought.” She can’t bring herself to say “kill.” “I have to convince myself that I’m confident to keep going. . . to protect my friends and family from knowing just how scared I am because if they knew how scared I was, they wouldn’t know what to do. It’s a tall order being strong for everyone else most of the time. It’s a rare moment that I can just relax and be vulnerable. And I thought. . . I thought that I maybe had that with you!” Tears well in her eyes. He’s just like everyone else. . . Giles, her mother, her friends, even Angel. None of them see and accept all of her, and she can usually live with that. She tells herself that most people don’t have that. But now that she’s had a taste of someone truly understanding and. . . getting her, she doesn’t want to lose it.

Spike’s mind flashes to the moment on the boat when he shared how little he felt like he was worth. He hadn’t shared that with anyone in decades, and she merely smiled and touched his hand, not trying to fix it, not running away or poking fun at him. He wants to take her in his arms, but he can’t now, and he doesn’t know what to do, so he stands there like a ponce and stuffs his hands in his pockets. Plus, there’s still the matter of the soul or rather, his lack of one. “I still don’t have a soul. And that. . . that little fact matters to every single person in your life, including, I imagine, your mum. It’s the world we bloody well live in, or at the very least, the one you live in, and you can’t deny that. And yes, you bloody well have a soul, Buffy. You’re human with a side of demon. That gives you strength and power and a destiny.”

His words are quieter, his voice deep with emotion, which allows Buffy to put herself in his shoes a little bit. Her heart aches for him because part of her knows that he’s right about her soul and others’ opinion of souls. So, she steps forward, crossing the new gulf between them. She slips her arms around his waist, laying her ear on his chest where his heart doesn’t beat. “I can’t go back anymore either, and I don’t want to deny what’s happened here. I can’t.” She doesn’t know if it’s love she feels, but she knows that she has strong and very real emotions for him.

Spike’s muscles loosen at her touch. He didn’t realize he was so tense. Freeing one hand from his pocket, he strokes her back. “Good.”

“And I don’t know what it means that you don’t have a soul. All I know is that ever since Willow’s spell. . . ever since we got married, something’s different between us. All I know is that you helped me here, and I helped you. We would have died without one another.” She pulls back a little and holds up her hand so that his grandmother’s ring sparkles in the moonlight. “And this. This means something. Not because marriage as an institution means something to me. Well, it does, but that’s beside the point.” She shakes her head because she’s digressing and really doesn’t want to go into her parents’ divorce and how her view of commitment became something more sacred and special to her. “This ring means something because you mean something to me.”
Spike almost can’t believe what she’s saying. “And if it’s all a nefarious plan on my part to . . .”

Buffy interrupts him by looking up at him with both eyebrows raised. “To what – get me in the sack?”

Her humor throws him for a loop for a moment, and then, he smirks. “Maybe.”

“Well, if it is, I very much enjoyed being in the sack with you . . . and want to do it again . . . and again. Please.” She punctuates the “please” by teasingly grabbing his butt.

He lowers his head so that his lips are millimeters from hers. “Not here in the sand, love.”

She shivers at his lips millimeters over hers, and her body is awash with tingles. She wishes he would take her right here. “Why not?”

“Sand. Everywhere.” He twines his fingers in her messy hair, gently cupping the back of her head. “Not exactly comfortable.”

“Ohhhhh.” Her heart is racing, and she feels the fingers of his other hand work their way into her pants and rub places that make her squirm.

He kisses her thoroughly until he knows that she’s breathless, and his fingers tell him how slick and ready she is for him. Then, he pulls back. Never hurts to leave her hot and bothered for more. He nibbles her ear, and she moans. “Want to know where I want to get you in the sack?” he whispers.

“W-where?” She can hardly think, but she knows she’ll go wherever he wants.

“Your bed. At home. Without your mum there, of course.” He trails little kisses down her neck. “Sleep next to you. Maybe fix you breakfast in bed.”

“Without my mom at home? Not very evil of you,” she jokes and then wonders if she’s taken it too far. “And you can cook?”
He isn’t so ruffled this time. “I respect your mum, and of course, I can cook. Used to cook for my mum all the time. She needed the help.”

This surprises her for a moment, but then, she decides this fits him. “How very... traditional of you.”

He shrugs and tilts his head, eyes filled with mirth. “We can use the other rooms, too. I figured you wouldn’t want that though.”

She really hasn’t thought about this because she’s not so experienced in the arena of having sex, but she’s definitely not opposed to the idea. Doesn’t he remember their wedding night? “I’m not that boring. I can be a little adventurous.”

Spike briefly kisses her once more and then reluctantly begins to move toward their destination. He tucks Buffy’s hand in the crook of his arm. He has a feeling he can coax more than a little adventurous out of her given time. “How about in your dorm room with the studying little co-eds all around us, knowing you’re getting some? Red avoiding us, knowing what’s going on.”

Buffy blushes at the thought and smiles up at him. Maybe she can even talk him into drinking her again. “Why not?”

* * *

The castle ruins are piles of stone, many distinctive as parts of walls or doorways. All are overgrown with dark vines and vegetation. If Buffy squints, she can imagine the structure in its prime. Based on the demon life she’s seen in this dimension so far, she wonders who or what built this place and what happened that their world then fell into detritus. Whoever lived here was likely a guardian of sorts for the portals, and now, there’s no one here to guard or regulate the flow of demons to and fro. She isn’t sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. It’s probably a bit of both.

“Dunno who lived here, but they’re long gone,” Spike comments, noting that Buffy hugs his arm in response.

“Let’s hope that we don’t run into trouble. What do they say about waterholes and danger?” She vaguely remembers Professor Walsh talking about studies of some sort related to rats being shocked when drinking water.
“Well, you never know what kind of danger lurks around crossroads. At least, we have our fists and fangs. Well, fangs in my case. I highly doubt the portals are filled with water though. . . ” As they round the side of the castle, Spike trails off. Bloody hell.


In opposition to the decay of the castle, a vast, carefully landscaped lawn sprawls before Buffy and Spike. Three large natural-shaped ponds are evenly spaced several yards apart and filled with said liquid. The edges are neatly encircled with haphazardly-shaped stones of varying shades, and in the center of each body of water, a cylindrical brick well juts up. Water pours over the edges of each well into the pond it services. The lawn is empty of all visible life forms.

“How do they work? Are these even portals? They don’t seem like the portal at Giles’s apartment,” Buffy says anxiously.

Spike can feel the undercurrent of untapped magic in the air. “Oh. The portals are there. Vampires can sense that kind of magic. I can feel them. They’re just dormant.”

“How do we turn them on?” Buffy squirms a bit. She feels antsy now that the possibility of going home is in her field of vision.

Spike frowns. “No clue.”

“I have a clue,” a voice comes from behind them.

Buffy detaches from Spike and spins to see a familiar face. “Cordelia. What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be in L.A.?”

Cordelia laughs. “Well, sorta.”

Just the bint he doesn’t want to see. He doesn’t want her to remind Buffy about his little failed adventure to L.A. to retrieve the Gem of Amarra. Spike’s muscles tighten; he’s ready for a fight if need be.
Buffy shifts uncomfortably. Last she heard, Cordy was working with Angel, and she doesn’t want Angel brought up now. . . not when she and Spike are so new. She’s not so much worried about what Angel’s doing and more about how it might impact Spike to hear about his grandsire. Buffy squints at Cordelia. The brunette’s wearing a long white gown, which is something Cordelia would never be caught wearing in high school, and something about her seems. . . older. Had moving to L.A. aged her that much? “How are you here? And what are you wearing?”

Cordelia gives Buffy a knowing onceover, and Buffy suddenly feels very self-conscious about her own appearance. She must look. . . and smell horrendous. What did they say about staying out in the wilderness too long? A person starts not even realizing that she smells. She longs for a shower with shampoo. . . and maybe Spike to wash her hair.

Cordelia decides not to make Buffy of this time too uncomfortable and grasps both sides of her dress. “It’s sorta shapeless, huh? I didn’t exactly pick it out.” She shakes her head, her long curls swaying with the movement. “I’m actually not the Cordelia you know. Well, not the me from your time.”

“Oh! You’re from the future!” Buffy concludes. Now the age thing makes sense.

“Right. Something like that.” Cordelia can’t tell them that she’s long dead and that the Powers – or whoever is in charge – probably sent her here as part of fixing Angel’s regret about Buffy and Spike. She imagines that would require too much explanation and would probably ruin – or at least badly mess up – whatever Angel has planned.

“How do we know you’re not some kind of bad guy disguised as Cordelia who was sent to kill us?” Buffy narrows her eyes.

Cordelia raises her eyebrows at Spike who almost meekly adds, “What she said.”

Cordelia sighs and glares up at the sky, palms up. “Seriously?” she asks the heavens, obviously not talking to Buffy and Spike. Then, she addresses the pair, “You think I’d come all this way from the future dressed in this get up to kill you? It’s not exactly conducive to fighting. And why on earth would I take on a vampire and a Slayer? Angel may have taught me a few moves with the sword, but human here. Duh!” She doesn’t have skull splitting visions anymore, and explaining this would take too long. Cordelia huffs and throws out the first thing that comes to mind that Buffy of this time might remember. “Okay. Remember our fabulous homecoming together when I confessed that I loved Xander, and you told me that you spent a year’s worth of your allowance on that cheap-looking dress?”
Buffy rolls her eyes. “Okay. That’s the Cordelia I know.”

“She does smell mostly human,” Spike notes, grateful that she didn’t choose her brief time with him to jog their memories.

“Did you help my mom, Giles, Xander, and Anya, too?” Buffy asks. She wonders how Anya reacted to Cordelia now that the ex-demon was officially together with Xander.

“No.” Cordelia’s answer is a little too strong. She wasn’t expecting to be here at all. There she was enjoying a nice glass of wine all snuggled up with Angel, and then, suddenly she was here. Dressed like Princess Leia. At least, she doesn’t have the damn cinnamon roll hair buns. She also has no clue what to tell Buffy and Spike to do.

“Then, why us and why now?” Buffy crosses her arms, her tone clearly suspicious.

Spike moves protectively forward. His chip doesn’t work, and he thinks he can take the brunette if need be. He doesn’t know how weak Buffy might be considering the earlier demon attack and lack of food and water. “Something’s not right, pet.”

“Now hold on.” Cordelia is about to start spewing the truth like Old Faithful because she doesn’t know what else to say or do when information pops into her mind like someone turned on a faucet. Huh. With the water metaphors. Ironic. At least the information doesn’t come with a walloping lot of pain her skull. “There are three portals. One is to the past, one to the present, and one to the future.”

“Well, how the hell are we supposed to know which is which?” Spike grouses.

Cordelia shrugs. “You drink from each well in the middle until you find the right one. Then, if you belong in that time, the portal opens. You go through said portal and end up in a safe place.”

“What happens if you don’t belong in that time? Electrocution? A slap on the wrist? A bunch of demon types come out of nowhere for a fight?” Buffy can think of many potential consequences – all of them of the bad.

Cordy bites her lip. She doesn’t exactly know, but she wants to give them something. There’s nothing in the mental manual that says anything about severe punishments for drinking from the wrong portal. “All good questions. I think the portal just doesn’t open, and you try the next one. It’s
the magic’s insurance that demons with nefarious motives don’t mess with timelines.”

Nefarious. Ha. There’s that word again, Buffy muses.

Spike is displeased about relying on magical travel in the first place and the lack of information is just... He grits his teeth. “You think? And what’s the sodding purpose of having portals to different timelines? Seems right dangerous to even have ones to the past and future if you ask me.”

“Sorry. I don’t have anything else for you.” She doesn’t even want to be here in the first place. “And you’re right about messing with timelines. I didn’t make the damned portals, so don’t ask me.”

Without warning, the smell of cinnamon fills the air. Buffy and Spike inhale the sharp scent, and Cordy sighs.

“That’s my cue, guys. Good luck!” Cordelia’s voice gets tinier and more far away as a rush of air curls around them. Then, she disappears with a little popping noise.

Buffy and Spike regard one another.

“Huh,” Buffy says. “Do we trust her?”

Spike’s mouth is a grim line. “Don’t see that we have much choice, love.”

“Well, she did seem like Cordy.” Buffy tries not to let doubt creep into her voice.

They pivot and face the potential portals together.
Cordelia appears back in the forest with Angel who leaps to his feet with question marks and concern written all over his face.

Cordy is pissed, and the damned sunshine and pretty trees piss her off even more. She storms right up to Angel, giving him a little shove of frustration. “What the hell, Angel? This is not my regret. It’s yours!”

Angel raises both hands defensively. “Don’t ask me. It’s not like I chose to send you.” He’s tempted to fill her in about what happened before she arrived on the scene, but he decides she probably won’t care. He also considers telling her that she takes his breath away in the white dress she’s still wearing, but she doesn’t seem to be in the mood for compliments. So, he enjoys the gloriousness of her fiery spirit.

The brunette glares up at a different sky than the one she just left. “What the hell, whoever’s in charge?!”

“Maybe you’re here to help me with making changes?” Angel offers.

“No what I signed up for.” She yells at the sky, “Again!” She stomps to the sectional and flops down with a huge sigh of frustration. “I was perfectly happy in my place of peace, and then, you die, and all of a sudden, it’s ‘Angel needs your help,’ and I said, ‘Sure, why not? I love the guy so, of course, I’ll help.’ There was absolutely no discussion of me going back in time and potentially messing things up.” She slices her hands through the air in a horizontal line and draws out the last word. “None.”

Angel hovers next to her, metaphorically wringing his hands. “You love me? Even after all this time?”

Anger still on her face, Cordelia raises her eyebrows at him. “Duh! Of course, I still do!” She calms down and smiles sadly at him. “You were kind of it for me, you know?”

Angel slides onto the sectional and pulls her into his lap. She puts her arms around his neck.

“Thank you,” he whispers, nuzzling her cheek. “I love you, too.”
She gazes into his deep brown eyes – eyes she’s really missed gazing into. “You’re welcome. I guess you’re kinda worth it.”

“You look beautiful, by the way. Like the dress.” She really is his second chance at love, and the irony of his compliment is not lost on him.

She punches him in the arm. “Of course, you do.”

He grins and kisses her. He intends to make the most of his place of peace. If they ever get there.
Buffy and Spike choose the closest portal. Wading out into the water, Buffy discovers that the liquid only comes up to her knees and doesn’t get deeper as they approach the well in the center of the pond. The water flows over the edge of the rounded bricks like a mini-waterfall, and Buffy muses that drinking from this thing may be very akin to going over an actual waterfall.

She reaches for the well first. “Let me.”

Spike bats her hand away. “I got this, love. I’m in better shape than you, and if something goes haywire, I know you have my back.”

Buffy starts to protest but then sees the reality of his statement. She becomes more keenly aware of just how exhausted, hungry, and thirsty she is. She doesn’t have to like it though. “Fine.” She stands on tiptoe to give him another kiss for good luck, only this time, it has much more meaning than when they were standing on a cliff about to jump into god-knows-what with the roaring Phut demons. His lips are soft, cool, and pliant, and she lingers. “When we get back, things are going to be different.”

“What about what I’ve done before?” Spike knows it’s last minute, and he’s probably crazy for bringing it up now, but he discovers that the question – with all its layers – is a must.

This is a problem that has probably been percolating in the back of Buffy’s mind because her answer is decisive and clear. “I know that I can’t sugarcoat your past. I don’t think that I should, but you can’t change the past. . . only the now. And you have changed the now since we’ve been here even without the chip causing you pain.”

Spike opens his mouth as if to speak, but Buffy lays a hand on his arm. “I trust you; I trust that you can choose to do things differently and that you can choose to put your heart in the right place for you and me and us, If I. . . if we can’t trust each other, we have nothing. I don’t expect you to be perfect because god knows, I’m not. And I know no one else is going to think we make much sense together.” She can almost hear her friends and Giles now. “But it goes back to what I’ve experienced with you here. . . back to what I feel. A-and my emotions and instincts are an important part of who I am. I’m not a robot-by-the-book Slayer who blindly follows what the Council dictates as rules; I’m human. And what I’m starting to understand is that your emotions and instincts are an important part of you, too. You are part human after all. Same as me apparently.”
She takes a deep and needed breath. “I’m banking on that emotional thread between us to get us through this next part because I know it’s not going to be easy, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to fight like hell to try.”

Spike swallows past the lump forming in his throat. “That’s quite a speech, pet.”

Buffy is a little surprised by what she just said, too, and equally surprised that she can genuinely add, “I meant every word.” She searches his eyes, trying to find some sign that he can give her something back.

Spike catches the small flash of fear that flickers across her face, and he knows where it comes from. She’s been hurt too much for someone so young. He can relate to that pain, and he wants to assuage it. So he traces her lip with his finger and then kisses her gently before resting his forehead against hers. “I’m here. With you. Whatever the hell comes up next.”

He hesitates, but he hopes she can tell the wavering is more about his own fears and nothing about her. “I promise.” There. He’s said it, and he doesn’t make promises lightly. He still doesn’t know if he loves her, but what he does know is that more than anything in this world, he wants to find out if he does and if she can love him in return.

She beams at him and cradles his hand in hers as she moves back. “Okay.”

“All right.” Spike returns her smile. “S’pose I should take that drink now.”

Scooping water from the well into his palm, Spike takes a large draught.

The water is ordinary – mundane even, and he grimaces at the flat, slightly earthy taste.

He casts a perplexed glance at Buffy who is watching him with expectation on her face. He’s about to comment on how the prom queen was wrong when all his senses are overtaken by a rush of sights, sounds, smells, and physical sensations. He feels his eyes roll up into his skull and vaguely hears Buffy calling his name.

Images flash through his mind. He tries to focus on any one of them, but the rapidity of the pictures is making the whole of his world tilt and skew. Instead of trying to see, he attempts to concentrate on uncovering what’s at the center of the storm. One sense – vision – down, he tackles the others. Smell
is easy; he simply doesn’t breathe. That leaves sound, taste, and physical sensation.

Spike hears lots of voices murmuring, talking, yelling, crying, laughing, but he can’t make out what anyone is saying. Through the din, Buffy’s familiar voice thrusts forward accompanied by another female’s voice... a younger one, but he doesn’t recognize her. What they’re saying is unintelligible, but the feelings... the feelings are palpable and raw and real. With some difficulty, he realizes that the primary emotion that swells inside of him is abiding love for and from the owners of both voices. The depth of the emotion is staggering, and he gasps with the ache and joy of it. He wants to open his eyes to see... to understand, but he’s afraid he’ll lose hold of what’s happening.

While he’s being flooded by emotion, he becomes aware of a force that starts soft and feather light against the skin around his ankles. As seconds tick by, the force presses harder and harder into his nerves, moving up his body in a spiraling fashion, scraping over his flesh, going faster and faster until it forces open his mouth and shoves its way inside. At first, whatever it is inside him feels light and good and right. But the bright, happy feelings begin to dissolve only to be replaced by the heavy weight of grief and sadness and guilt that bring him to his knees. Tears push past his closed eyelids and cascade over his cheeks, and the whole of his heart, lungs, brain, and gut is on fire, searing him from within.

Just when he reaches the point where he can bear it no more, a hand touches his arm, and now familiar arms move around his midsection, holding and soothing him and keeping him together until his insides feel right and whole again but somehow... different, stronger, and... warm?

Without fanfare or warning, he opens his eyes to find that he’s back in the pond with Buffy, her arms bearing him up and her wide eyes filled with worry.

“Thank god. Spike? Say something.” Buffy hasn’t thought of this consequence... that she might lose him from some internal attack. She supposes she should have anticipated this given the brachiosaurus demon’s powers.

Spike blinks like he’s trying to shake off some form of deep sleep. His boots slip in the soft mud on the bottom of the pond, but Buffy catches him.

He finds that he has enough strength and control to hold onto her. As he regains his balance, he clears his throat and finds his voice and sarcasm again. “S-something.”

Her laughter contains more relief than any genuine mirth, and she hugs him with all her strength. “Ha ha.”
He emits a soft “oof” at her gesture of affection. “I’m okay, pet.”

“You better be. Don’t know what I would do.” She kisses his chest, the fabric damp from the pond water. She takes care not to lick her lips. “So, I take it this is the wrong portal?”

“Yeah?” Blinking, Spike shakes off the vestiges of whatever bit of magic consumed him.

She inclines her head toward the water around them. “Well, the portal’s not doing anything.”

He scans the pond all around them. No visual manifestations and no magical ones. “Oh. You’re right.”

“So what happened? Which one is this? Or can you even tell?”

Spike isn’t sure until she asks, and even though he has no bloody clue how he knows, he’s certain beyond a shadow of a doubt. “This one’s a gateway to the future.”

“Oh.”

He starts making more connections as if his brain is taking its sweet time to reboot. “And I think I saw a glimpse of mine.”

“Really? Anything I should know?” Buffy asks the questions, but she isn’t sure she really wants to know. Should she be party to such information? She knows plenty of people who’d jump at the chance to know their future, but mostly, she’s afraid to find out that she or those she loves are dead.

“It’s all a bit of a blur really.” He probably shouldn’t tell her anything. What if it changes things between them? Or leads her to be hurt or killed?

She waits for him to continue or not. She decides that it’s his choice.
“Maybe he’s meant to tell her? Spike makes a split-second decision to tell her only, “All I know is that you were there.”

“That’s it?” She tries not to sound disappointed at the lack of detail.

“Yep.”

“Well, that’s a letdown.” She’s joking, but inside, she can’t help but feel some relief.

“How so? You’re alive in my future.” Spike realizes that this is what’s most important to him. He still doesn’t understand that last piece though. He has some inkling what it was, but he doesn’t believe it’s possible, and he doesn’t know if it’s something he even wants. He shoves it aside for later consideration.

“I suppose that’s of the good.” Buffy leads Spike, and they start to slosh their way out of the pond.

Spike draws his hip closer to his. “It was to me.”

“So you and I... we’re?”

“Still together. But honestly, pet, I don’t know what it means.” It could mean that they were still together as friends, comrades... enemies. The thought saddens him. “All I’m certain of is that it was the future.”

“We should try the next one then. My turn,” she insists.

He almost protests but recognizes that he doesn’t know if he can mentally handle another experience like the one he just had. “Okay, love.”

After climbing out of the future pond, Buffy and Spike head toward the second one, Spike now able to walk on his own.

Spike notes that the sky has started to lighten, and the stars are a little more faded, the sky a smidge
greener.

“Suns are coming up again.”

Buffy sees it, too. “We better hurry.”

As they press on, Buffy’s eyes skim over the rocks and she spies a swatch of bright red against dark brown. “There! Is that a piece of Xander’s shirt?”

Spike jogs forward and sniffs the air, catching the faintest of scents. “That’s his scent.”

“This is it. This one is the way home.” She was afraid and nervous before, but not now, and she really needs the basics like a hot shower, sustenance, and her own bed for sleeping. The only difference from the past is that now she wants her vampire – her husband – with her in all three.

They climb into the second pond and journey to the middle.

When Buffy drinks the water from the second well, nothing happens at all. Well, nothing like what happened to Spike when he drank from the well of the future. She doesn’t almost lose consciousness, and she definitely doesn’t experience anything that makes her cry happy or sad tears.

The water simply begins to ripple, and the ground shakes and rumbles like there’s a minor earthquake. A soft pink glow is born around the base of the bricks and rapidly spreads until the entire body of water is brilliant with light that overshadows the coming suns. The air is infused with the smell of cinnamon and cloves, and a light breeze weaves around them, carrying the sound of wind chimes like the ones on Buffy’s back porch.

Spike and Buffy look at one another and smile, and he takes her warm hand in his cool one as has become the norm between them. When he opens his mouth to say something, a popping noise reverberates, and the Slayer and the vampire disappear.

* * *

Without fanfare or any sort of warning whatsoever, Buffy and Spike stumble into the living room at
night on Revello Drive in Sunnydale, California on planet Earth... the living room where they reached a tentative truce and planned to stop Angelus together. And just like then, Joyce is there, too, an expression of utter shock written all over her face.

“Mom!” Buffy cries, letting go of Spike’s hand and throwing her arms around her mother as she rises from the sofa.

“B-Buffy?” Joyce closes her eyes and inhales her daughter’s familiar scent. “Thank god. I’ve been so worried.” Still holding Buffy by the shoulders, she surveys her face and body. Intact, alive, breathing. She hugs her again. “Thank god.”

“I’ve been so worried about you.” Buffy’s voice is muffled against her mom’s shirt. “When did you get back here and how? Where are Giles, Xander, and Anya?”

Joyce drinks in her daughter’s appearance again, and this time, she moves beyond the intact-and-alive piece and sees that Buffy is completely disheveled and dirty and has dark circles under her eyes. There are pinkish-red marks on her arms that indicate – what Joyce now knows – are likely significant wounds that have been healed by Slayer powers. And does Buffy look thinner? She undeniably looks thinner. “Everyone is safe. We got back about a day ago. Giles, Xander, and Anya are at Giles’s apartment doing research about how to find you.”

Buffy has a million questions for her mom, but she starts with the most pertinent. “Has anyone seen Willow?”

Joyce shakes her head. “Willow left a note. She’s taking a break after the spell she cast, doing some soul searching.”

Buffy glances at Spike who is hovering the background, watching her family reunion. “We have to find Willow.”

Joyce brings out her mom voice, “No. You will take a break first. You will shower, and I will fix you something to eat. Then, you will sleep. You have fresh sheets on the bed. That other dimension place was rough; we all took a break here. That’s why I’m here now.”

“She’s right, love. We have a lot to sort out ahead of us. You won’t be any good unless you take a respite.”
Buffy finds his blue eyes with her green ones. Her body suddenly feels very heavy, and she’s hungry and thirsty. Plus, she smells. He’s right and so is her mom. “Fine.” Spike doesn’t appear any better. “Only if you do, too.”

Spike smiles and tilts his head, still in awe of how they are with one another. “All right.”

Joyce takes in the exchange between the vampire and her daughter, and her stomach aches with sadness and relief. She decides to confirm what she already sort of knows. Picking up her daughter’s hand, she fingers the gold band on her ring finger. “What’s this?”

Spike halfway expects Buffy to jerk her hand away and deny any meaning behind the ring, but she glances back at him with such tenderness in her eyes that his chest tightens with his own emotion.

Buffy turns back to her mom who is watching her expectantly. She decides to break it to her mom gently because she always wanted to be a part of Buffy’s wedding day. “Willow cast a spell to have her will done, and she sort of, kind of wished that we’d get married. And somehow, we went to the courthouse and did. We’re not exactly sure what to do about it now that the spell is broken.”

Joyce is nothing if not perceptive. Although she didn’t know that her daughter was the Slayer for several years, which Joyce now attributes to the stress of her sinking marriage to Hank, she can see how relaxed Buffy is with Spike. There was always tension between them in Joyce’s previous encounters with the vampire, but now, the vibe is very different. After what she currently perceives and what she learned very recently, Joyce decides that now is not the time to force her daughter into a decision based on her parental instincts. Look what happened last time. Her daughter ran away to L.A. for months. Knowing what Joyce knows about what’s coming, she doesn’t want to lose any more precious time with Buffy. “You go shower. Spike can help me in the kitchen.”

Too tired to question things much, Buffy studies but can’t read her mom’s reaction. “Okay.” Buffy reaches back for Spike, touching his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Go.” He inclines his head toward the stairs. “Save me some hot water.”

Buffy smirks and gives him a little salute. “Will do.” Then, she heads up the stairs.

Spike hangs back, fidgeting and trying to think of a way out of this, while Joyce is already halfway to the kitchen. He can face a whole slew of Phut demons without being able to fight them, but he’s nervous as hell about facing Buffy’s mum and having a talk about his relationship with Buffy. God,
he’s such a berk. Then again, he doesn’t have much of a template for meeting the parents of the lady he’s courting.

“You coming?” Joyce calls from the kitchen.

“Yeah,” he returns, trying to sound enthusiastic. He takes a deep unneeded breath and exhales, his shoulders sagging. Is this what his unlife is destined to be like from now on? Is this what he wants? Then, he heads to his doom.
Joyce turns from the breakfast bar as Spike crosses the threshold into the kitchen. Propping her hands on the surface behind her, she regards him evenly, her stomach nauseous.

“I’m going to die.” She pauses to make sure Spike hears her and then adds, “Soon.”

“What do you mean?” Spike stops mid-step. That’s the last thing he expected to fly out of Buffy’s mum’s mouth. His mind quickly makes connections as the vestiges of his anticipatory dread dissipate. Keeping his tone gentle, he says, “You drank from the future well.”

Joyce nods, unable to put words to the incredible sorrow that’s settled in her chest.

Why the hell did Rupert let Joyce drink out of any of the wells? Spike finds his feet again and pulls out a stool for her before perching on one himself. “How do you know you’re going to die?”

Joyce sinks onto the seat. “It’s not anything specific. I mean, drinking out of the well didn’t exactly give me clear indications of anything. It was sort of hazy, but I-I knew because there was a cut off in my own personal feelings. L-like a blank space, and all I felt was Buffy’s sorrow.” She makes eye contact with the vampire. There was someone else – a girl – crying, too, but she still isn’t sure who it was. All she knows is that she felt a mother’s love for the girl, which makes no sense whatsoever. “I-I heard her sobbing. Felt her feelings like they were my own. Only they weren’t. It’s hard to explain.”

Spike knows exactly what she means, but he isn’t keen on telling her that. Not now. Now Buffy’s mum’s in pain, and she’s always been there for him with a sympathetic word and a bit of something sweet. “Not something one would expect to experience.”

Joyce’s eyes shine with unshed tears. “No. No, not at all.”

Spike reaches over and strokes her shoulder, and they sit together in amicable silence for several seconds. Tears fall over Joyce’s cheeks. Spike doesn’t try to problem solve; he just sits with her while her shoulders shake. . . until the tears slow their steady trek down her face and neck.
Then, Spike offers, “Do you want some tea?”

Joyce wipes her face with the tips of her fingers and sniffs. “Sure.” She starts to stand, and Spike waves her to sit.

“Kettle’s on the stove. Do you still keep the tea next to the hot chocolate?” Spike retrieves said tea kettle.

“Yes. You have a good memory.” Joyce swivels and places both forearms on the surface in front of her. “Thank you.”

“You were kind to me when I needed it. A bloke remembers that sort of thing.” Spike flips on the tap water on and starts to fill the kettle. “How’d you get nominated to take a sip?”

She smiles at Spike’s question, and Spike swears there’s a bit of Buffy’s strength lurking in her eyes. He decides that’s probably why he’s always liked the lady.

“You mean from the well? I volunteered after Mr. Giles drank out of the well for the past.” Joyce couldn’t let Xander or Anya drink, not after how the first well affected Rupert.

“Like Buffy that way, eh?” Spike wonders how taking a peek at the past would feel. He isn’t sure he wants to do that because he doesn’t know how he’d feel about it now. The beginning and the now weren’t so bad, but the middle was. . . well, the middle was bloody, and he enjoyed a lot of it at the time. He runs his tongue over one incisor and flips off the faucet.

Joyce’s isn’t sure what to make of Spike’s question. Ever since Buffy told her she’s a Slayer, she’s had a hard time seeing herself in her daughter. “What do you mean?”

Lighting the gas on the stove, Spike settles the pot in place. As he aims for the cabinet where he recalls Joyce stores the tea, he pauses to lift an eyebrow at her. “Brave. Willing to put others’ needs before her own. Think on your feet. Trust your instincts.”

Joyce shakes her head. “I don’t know about. . .”
“You’re the one who thought of tying Harris’s shirt onto things to leave us clues.” Spike rummages around in the cupboard until he locates a box of tea. He pulls out a couple of bags.

“H-how did you know?”

He shrugs. He doesn’t feel like explaining his whole theory about who he’d put his money on surviving in the other dimension. “Seems like something you’d do.”

No one’s ever seen Joyce this way before. She doesn’t quite know whether to believe him.

Spike catches the doubt in her face as he tosses the tea bags on the bar. “You came here alone without help to give Buffy a fresh start. You didn’t put up with some bloke being an ass and cheating on you. You handled finding out that Buffy is a Slayer the best you could. Do you know how many Slayers’ parents disown them or send them off to live with their Watchers and fight against the darkness alone?”

Watching Spike retrieve two mugs, Joyce remembers how she’d tried to console the vampire by validating his feelings about his girlfriend cheating on him. Joyce shared her own story in hopes that could give him some belief in himself that he could make it on his own. He’d been heartbroken and more than a little drunk, so she didn’t realize he’d taken it all in. Now, he’s flipping it around and reminding her of who she is – comforting her. “Which is why I’m telling you about this.”

“About the dying. Help me understand what bend you went around there.”

Joyce accepts the mug that Spike passes her. His blue eyes are clear and curious and filled with compassion. She doesn’t know much about vampires other than that her daughter is supposed to slay them, and there must be some reason Buffy hasn’t slain Spike. He’s different than Angel in more than just appearance, and this trip to the other dimension made her realize that her daughter needs someone supernaturally strong to be there for her. . . to have her back emotionally and physically. Joyce isn’t sure how to explain to him how hard it is for her to accept that her daughter will never have the life Joyce planned and wished for Buffy when she was young.

So, Joyce tries, “I don’t want to tell Buffy about it. I don’t want her to worry or lose sleep over it because if it’s going to happen, I want her to have as many carefree moments as possible. She doesn’t have many of them. . . not since she became a Slayer. She can mourn me after I’m gone but not before.”
“You want to protect her.”

Joyce nods. “I can’t protect her from much. This I can do.”

“What are you telling me this?”

“Because I need you to promise me something.”

Spike realizes in that moment that he’d do anything for Buffy’s mum and not because she’s related to Buffy. Seems he’s making all kinds of promises he never expected to make. “Name it.”

“I need you to promise me that you’ll be there for her when I go. That you’ll protect her heart and hold her when I can’t anymore.”

The tea kettle whistles that the water’s reached its boiling point. Spike ignores the noise and holds Joyce’s gaze. “I can promise that.”

“What’re you promising?” Buffy asks, coming around the corner and moving the tea kettle off the lit burner.

Her hair freshly washed, she’s wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. Spike thinks that she’s never looked lovelier.

Joyce brushes Buffy off the trail and hopes that her daughter is too tired to notice that she’s been crying. “He’s promising me that he’ll make you take a break.”

“About that,” Buffy says. “I need to tell Giles and the others about Willow being a vengeance-demon-in-training.”

Joyce stands. “Let me. I’ll tell him. I don’t know what it means, but I’ll tell him. Vengeance-demon-in-training. Got it. You need to rest and eat.” If she stays, Buffy will know something is up and ask questions, and she suddenly realizes that she needs to see Rupert again. She grabs her purse off the
counter and searches for her wallet. “I’m sorry there’s no home cooked meal ready for you.”

“Mom. I don’t expect anything. You just got back, too.”

“I’m happy to deliver your message. It’ll give me a chance to be a good host and pick up some blood for Spike, too.” Joyce holds out the money to her daughter.

“The Watcher keeps some for me in the fridge,” Spike notes. “I’ll get it when we head over there. No need to make an extra trip.”

Buffy stubbornly crosses her arms and addresses her mom. “I want you here. Safe. Where I can see you and protect you.”

Spike studies Joyce’s face and recognizes that she needs the space in light of their conversation. He takes the money from her outstretched hand and turns to Buffy. “We’ll order a pizza. I know you’re worried, love, but your mum can handle herself on a drive across town.”

Buffy moves to her mom and hugs her close. “That’s not what happened last time she – you went to Giles’s.”

Joyce lets Spike continue because if she says anything, she’ll start crying again.

“She’ll call us when she gets there,” Spike says firmly.

Joyce kisses her daughter’s head, relishing her baby’s unique scent. “I will.” She pulls back and holds her Buffy by her elbows. “I love you.”

Buffy sighs. Clearly, she is being ganged up on by her mother and her lover. “Okay. I love you, too.”

Tea forgotten but the gesture not unappreciated, Joyce grabs her car keys and heads out the door before she reveals anything else.
Buffy gives Spike a onceover, noting his torn shirt and dirt-covered... well, everything. “Shower for you, mister. I’ll order the pizza.”

“Order me some wings?” he throws out as he heads toward the stairs.

“Ugh. Really?” she calls as he disappears.

“Everyone likes wings,” he calls back.

“Everyone?” she teases.

He pokes his head back around the corner. “Well, most demons do.”

She rolls her eyes. How does he know this? Did he take a poll amongst the Sunnydale demon crowd? “Fine. What flavor?”

He gives her a look like it’s obvious. “Buffalo. Spicy.”

“Okay.” She leans over, careful not to get dirty again, and deposits a kiss on his lips.

* * *

Spike discovers that Buffy did indeed save him some hot water, and she set out a towel for him and some clean clothes that are likely her father’s because he doesn’t know anyone in Buffy’s circle who wears sweatpants.

Her bathroom is clean and white, and even though she lives in the dorm on campus, she obviously keeps spare bathroom supplies here. Spike notices a toothbrush in the holder, and suddenly, his mouth feels like it needs a good scrubbing. The bristles are damp from recent use, but he decides to use it anyway, squirting the toothpaste tube in the middle. He runs water over the prepared brush and pushes the minty end into his mouth.

As he cleans his teeth, he stands in front of the mirror because that’s what humans do. It’s not
something he often thinks about, but he wonders what he looks like. . . what Buffy sees when she gazes at him. He and Dru had photos taken decades ago, but he lost them in the fire at the factory. He wonders if he looks different now that he’s falling for the Slayer.

After he finishes, he rinses the brush and stows it back in its home. Then, he turns on the shower and strips off his clothes, folding them neatly and setting them aside. Probably should chuck them.

The steam from the pouring water curls out from behind the shower curtain, beckoning him.

As he enters the shower, his senses are flooded with the essence of Buffy. The scent of her vanilla shampoo and soap mingle with the way her skin smells when he nuzzles her neck. His mind is suddenly reeling, and he feels his body automatically reacting as he borrows her soap and rubs it all over his limbs and torso. He closes his eyes and lets the hot water cascade over his body and imagines her with him now, touching him and kissing him and pressing her. . . He groans. He knows Buffy’s exhausted, so he better finish himself off now. Hell, he’s knackered, too.

He’s caught up in stroking himself when he hears the bathroom door open, and his eyes fly open again.

“You okay in here?” Buffy’s voice is tentative. She wants to join him, but she’s unsure. She’s never showered with anyone before. And being caught in the rain or river or whatever source of wetness didn’t count.

“Yeah, pet,” he chokes out, somehow managing to sound calm. Just hearing her voice, his body’s reacting. Over a century of experience, and he’s acting like a bloody schoolboy.

Spike hears some rustling, and then, Buffy touches the edge of the shower curtain, her fingers curling over the fabric and plastic. “Mind if I come in?”

“You mum call?” he stupidly asks.

Buffy’s hand draws back. “Yeah. She made it safely. Thank goodness. She’s going to be there a good while. Something about having a headache and needing to lay down.”

“Glad she made it. Hope she’s okay.” Fuck. Way to kill the mood, Spike.
“Pizza’s coming in an hour. With wings. Extra spicy.” Buffy takes a deep breath and pulls back the curtain, stepping over the porcelain edge before Spike can say anything else.

Buffy’s heart pounds in her chest as she studies him. . . naked and vulnerable. . . all lean and muscular. . . and already ready for her. His blue eyes are tender and open and full of emotion. He’s beautiful. He’s hers. He isn’t even touching her, and she feels her body awash with heat and hunger for his skin on hers.

Maybe because it’s not life-or-death or maybe because she’s in her own bathroom at home, she’s suddenly shy. She picks up one of her bottles. Squirting some of the shampoo into her palm, she rubs her hands together and confidently says, “Bend down.”

Spike takes in her hesitancy and reaches for her hips, tugging her gently forward and pressing himself against her belly. He bends his legs a little but lets her stand slightly on tiptoe so that her nipples graze his chest. Her fingers twine in his damp hair as warm water falls all around them, and she massages his scalp while he traces circles in the small of her back.

Buffy can hardly breathe or focus as her fingers cleanse his curls, but she keeps moving slowly because she is mesmerized by the expression on his face. She’s never anyone smile – eyes closed – from happiness while in the throes of passion. She wants to capture the moment. . . treasure it, and she realizes for a second time that she could break him. The way her heart is hammering, he could break her. She is scared and happy and delirious all at the same time.

As the last of the soap rinses away, she kisses him on his eyelids and then on his mouth, shivering with desire as he follows her slow movements with increasing urgency. When his hands knead her buttocks, she gasps and pushes her pelvis into his.

Continuing to kiss her, he reaches back and turns off the spray and then picks her up. His Slayer. His wife. He emits a soft growl. Her legs automatically go around his waist, and opening his eyes to find her green ones, he thrusts back the curtain and climbs out.

Goose bumps roll over Buffy’s skin in the contrasting air temperature, and she pulls back with questions in her eyes. She hops down, and grabbing the towel, she dries them both off, running her towel-covered hand over his desire for her with slow pressure.

“Bedroom?” he barely gets out. He knows it’s probably crazy, but he wants her in her bed. . . the place where she’s been dreaming since she came to Sunnydale. College campus lodging doesn’t count.
Buffy’s mind can’t form coherent sentences, but with a nod of her head, she manages, “That way.”

Spike scoops her up in his arms and carries her. The moonlight through her bedroom window gives his vampire vision enough light to maneuver, and he pulls back her comforter and lays her on the bed, her head cradled by her pillow. Once she’s situated, he nudges her nose with his, and when he has her attention, he gives her a little grin and proceeds to trail feathery kisses down her neck and over the gentle rise and fall of her stomach and hips. He wants to drown in her soft skin and heady scent.

When Spike’s head and ministrations go lower than anyone’s gone before, Buffy cries out as sensation completely takes hold of her brain. As he slowly brings her to the edge and back again, she wriggles with impatience and desire. When she can stand it no longer and wants him inside her, she literally flips the tables with her hips and legs, pinning him beneath her.

Buffy slides onto him, and she’s rewarded with his sharp intake of breath. Then, she bends close to his ear. Nipping his earlobe and slowly raising her hips, she whispers, “Two can play that game.”

* * *

The pizza and wings arrive past the scheduled hour.

When the doorbell rings, Buffy snuggles closer to Spike. “Don’t want to move.”

Spike remembers Joyce’s directive to him and feels weird about having just made love to Buffy after her mum’s revelation. “You need to refuel.” He pats her naked thigh... one of the pair that just gave him the ride of his unlife. Somehow, they didn’t break the bed. “I’ll get it.”

Buffy makes a noise of protest as Spike starts to extricate himself from her embrace and the tangle of sheets.

He kisses her forehead. “Be right back, love.”

Spike trails to the bathroom and tugs on the sweatpants before loping down the stairs and throwing open the front door. He snatches the pizza and extra bag, which no doubt contains his wings, and
starts to slam the door shut.

The delivery boy slaps his hand on the wood and regards Spike with a bored expression. “Dude. You have to pay for that.”

Spike, who is already poking his nose in the bag, glares at the boy. He’s tempted to flash a bit of fang at him to scare him away, but then, he sighs. Choosing to do good also means paying for services rendered. Bugger. His last thought was even in Rupert’s tone of voice. “Hold on, mate.”

Snagging the money from the kitchen, he pays the boy but doesn’t give him a tip. Sodding boy was late. The wings might be cold.

Buffy is redressed and coming down the stairs when he turns around bearing food stuffs. Her stomach growls and loudly. “I forgot we needed drinks. Well, I do.” She sniffs at the food and slips her arm around his waist. “It smells delicious.”

“Want one of my wings?” he offers generously.

“What one?” she teases.

He shrugs but holds onto the bag protectively. “Well.”

Buffy grabs the pizza box and winks at him. “Just kidding. The wings are all you.”

He grins. He can’t remember the last time he felt content, and he considers that Joyce is right in preserving Buffy’s carefree moments. “Thanks, pet.”

“And you have to brush your teeth again before bed. No Buffalo breath while we’re sleeping.”

Spike glances at her with a question mark in his eyes.

“Yeah. I noticed you used my toothbrush.” She pulls a large slice of pepperoni pizza out of the box as soon as cardboard hits the counter. Real food finally. “I can appreciate that. Dental hygiene is
important.” Then, she fills her mouth with carbohydrate-protein nirvana.
Chapter Thirteen, Changing Dynamics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirteen, Shifting Dynamics

The world is dark when Buffy and Spike wake from their much-needed slumber. This time, Buffy doesn’t push away from him, and he spoons himself around her, relishing her body next to his. When she can’t push aside worry about Willow any longer, she climbs out of bed and dresses in fresh clothes. Checking the clock, she learns that they slept a full day away.

Spike watches her without saying a word. He’s nervous about what’s to come again.

Buffy isn’t used to him giving her nothing, so she speculates that his quiet is about lack of his own clothing. She knows she always feels better in her favorite pair of jeans and boots. “Do you have more at Giles’s?”

“More what, love?”

“Clothes.”

“What? Oh, yeah.”

She studies his glum expression. “What’s wrong?” She sits on the edge of the bed next to him, and her guess about what’s on his mind shifts to something a little more accurate. Apparently, she needs to remind him again, and her heart fills with some emotion she can’t quite label. She supposes he might need to do that for her, too, at some point. Rubbing his thigh, she reassures him in her very Buffy way because well, she dealt with Angel-broodiness for a long time. At the same time, this is Spike; he can take a little more spunk, which honestly, is a relief. “Okay. We just had an amazing night. Well, it was amazing to me, and I need you to trust me a little. It’s still me. Sitting here with you.” She runs her hand up his thigh. “Still wanting you.”

The corner of his mouth quirks up.

She surprises him by kissing him thoroughly, her tongue slipping between his lips. Her green eyes
are glittering when she pulls back.

“Minx,” he says, more buoyant now. He nabs his shoes and follows her down the stairs.

When Buffy opens the front door, she learns that the world is also very cold – in stark contrast to the other dimension’s heat and humidity. She snags her coat off the coat rack and finds a blanket for Spike because the house is sans men’s outerwear.

As she tugs the blanket around his shoulders and kisses him again, Spike muses that her gentleness with him is in complete contrast to the morning after their wedding night, and it makes him want to get lost in her warmth all over again. “Thanks, love.”

Slipping a stake into her pocket and offering Spike one, she shivers on her front porch. “Guess we should walk fast.” Good thing Sunnydale is small.

Spike follows Buffy’s lead and moves quickly. He’s not in a terrible hurry because he’s used to the cold, having lived in cemeteries and other hidey holes of late. Even the mansion had been cold. Some time he’d have to tell Buffy about some of the grand places he’d lived. Maybe take her to see some of them if he could talk her into taking a break from the Hellmouth. . . and if they had any money for travel.

As they pass a Christmas tree lot full of trees, Buffy tucks her hand in Spike’s elbow and hugs his arm, trying to stay in the moment. She’s not sure how Giles and her friends are going to react, and she doesn’t expect a snowy Christmas-time miracle like last year when all her problems were temporarily white-washed away. She doesn’t want that. She sneaks a peek at the vampire she’s with now and realizes that she appreciates how much different he is than Angel. Spike is real and vulnerable with her in a way that Angel never was. . . not fully. Angel hid so much from her, and Spike is an open book of vibrant emotions, and he’s not about white-washing things away. This simultaneously makes her feel safer and makes her want to protect his heart. She isn’t sure how she will go about doing the second part, but she is determined to try.

“You celebrate Christmas, pet?” Spike asks, eyeing the firs and pines. Buffy and her mum didn’t have one set up. He still has fond memories of Christmases as a boy.

“We do. Mom waits until closer to Christmas to set up the tree now. I used to try to talk her into getting one sooner, so we’d have the tree longer and get our pick of tree, but since we moved here. . . since my parents’ divorce, she wants to wait. Only thing I can think is that it’s harder for her.” Buffy shrugs, her arm rubbing against Spike’s. “I can see both ways. Sometimes, it makes me sad that we don’t have one sooner, and sometimes, I feel sad when we finally have one.”
“Miss having everyone together? A happy family unit?” He vows that when everything’s sorted again, he’s getting her and Joyce a Christmas tree even if he has to nick one.

“Sometimes. But I’m an adult now. Not a kid. Reunion stories are little kid fantasies. Being around my dad is hard anyway.” She knows she’s trying to sound convincing and doing a terrible job.

“Did he hurt you? Want me to bite him for you?” Spike crooks his free hand into claws and makes a “grr” face.

She laughs. He seems to be making her laugh a lot. “No, he doesn’t even deserve that.”

Spike sobers. “Doesn’t deserve to know that you care.”

“Right.”

A lone car drives past, headlights on bright. Buffy and Spike start to cross the street after it passes by.

Spike remembers how Buffy was with her Watcher when they were under the spell. “Rupert’s important to you.”

“Of course! Why else would I have wanted him to give me away at our wedding?” She smiles, a bit bemused by the memory and Giles’s horrified expression that she totally missed/ignored. “I need to talk with him.”

“About the demon piece.”

She nods, looking ahead, her expression unreadable. “Yeah.”

“Don’t be too hard on the bloke. Odds are he doesn’t know. And if he does know, he’s probably been protecting you.” Spike tends to agree with the brontosaurus demon, and he can’t believe he’s defending the Watcher. It’s really for Buffy’s sake and no one else’s.
Buffy is about to reply when a familiar voice comes out of the darkness from a side street. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t my ex-boyfriend. Emphasis on the ‘ex.’ And he’s with a new blonde bimbo.”

“Harmony.” Spike rolls his eyes because she doesn’t even realize that she just insulted herself.

“In the flesh.” Arms raised in a tah-dah pose, Harmony appears out of the shadows, her long blonde hair pulled up on the sides. She’s dressed in the latest fashion just like she in high school, and her lips are a bright pink pout. Two minions trail behind her, pulling giant rolling suitcases. “And wait a minute! You’re holding hands with the Slayer?!”

Buffy raises both eyebrows and gives Spike an explain-this-please look. Spike notices that she doesn’t let go of his arm though. In fact, Buffy holds tighter and seems to be shaking a little. Is she . . . laughing?

Harmony flicks a hank of her hair over her shoulder and sighs heavily, a little puff of condensation punctuating the sound in the cold air. Then, she surveys Spike. “What are you wearing? Sweatpants and a blanket?” She’s completely flabbergasted. Glaring at Buffy, she says accusingly, “You ruined him. He was all sexy, and you ruined him.”

Buffy lets out a little snort of amusement despite her best efforts.

“Harm. We just got back from another dimension where we fought an army of Phut demons and slew a . . .” Spike doesn’t want to explain what the Gbahali is because she might get confused, so he says, “giant alligator demon.”

“I was almost sucked dry by those monkey not-vampire things and almost died,” Buffy adds helpfully. “And then, you drank out of that well of the future and had some sort of seizure.”

Spike lifts his finger and adds, “After that brontosaurus demon mind fucked you and me.”

“Oh yeah. That was bad,” Buffy says as if she forgot that part.

Spike cocks his head at Harmony and sets his jaw. “So yeah, m’not exactly worried about my clothes.”
“And you had sex with Buffy,” Harmony notes.

Buffy and Spike stare at her.

Buffy is surprised though she considers that she really shouldn’t be given what she now knows about vampire senses.

Spike’s stare is more about wishing Harmony would shut the hell up.

Harmony dons a smug expression. They just think she’s soooo stupid. “What? It’s the only explanation for the chumminess. Plus, I can smell you. Duh. Vampire here. And I thought you couldn’t fight because you had that chip in your head.”

Spike grits his teeth. Bint’s rapidly becoming less amusing and more annoying. “Chip’s broken.”

Harmony plants her hands on her hips and punctuates each syllable with a tilt of her head. “Well, la tee da, that’s convenient.”

Spike’s almost growling at his ex. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She crosses her arms. “Well, it’s all broken now that you’re boinking the Slayer. You can help her with the killing. She couldn’t have you being a sad little fangless puppy.”

“Harmony, where are you going and what’s with the roller bags?” Buffy interrupts, wanting to end this interaction, especially now that she’s having to hold her husband back from pummeling his ex. Reluctantly dropping Spike’s arm, Buffy steps forward a little to position herself between the vampires.

Harmony’s minions, who have been uncharacteristically quiet, shift in discomfort with the Slayer’s attention on them.

“If you must know,” Harmony says snootily. “We’re leaving town. I got us a car. Well, I stole it. Those army guys are getting majorly out of hand. Now they’re going into the demon bars and just taking people. Plus, the mayor put the whole city under a curfew, and now there’s no one around at
night to eat. It’s why we’re going to L.A. More food available. Plus, better shopping.”

Now Buffy’s interested. Her tone sobers. “Have you seen any army guys tonight? What do you know about them?”

Harmony sighs. “Like I’d tell you anything.” In reality, she doesn’t know anything else, but gotta let them think she does. Fake it ‘til you make it. “I just want to get out of dodge.” She starts to stride around Buffy and Spike.

Her minions reluctantly follow and warily eye Buffy, roller bag wheels nosily grumbling over the concrete.

“Harmony,” Spike growls.

“Doesn’t work anymore, Spikey. I’m over you! Sayanora.” She gives a little wave without looking back at them.

“Sayonara,” Spike corrects.

“Whatever.” Harmony unlocks the car, and she and her two minions pile into the stolen, blacked out vehicle and drive away.

Buffy and Spike watch in companionable silence for a moment and then resume their journey to Giles’s apartment, much more alert to their surroundings. In congruence with Harmony’s report of the curfew, the streets seem deserted.

Buffy’s more worried now. The army guys are ramping up, Willow is missing, and she’s worried about Giles and Xander’s reaction to her and Spike and how that might make figuring out the other two things more difficult.

Spike senses her tension and notices the fact that her expression is more pensive. “Lots to worry about, eh, love? Harmony bother you?”

“No, it’s not that.” She sighs. “I should have staked those two minions at least.” Spike doesn’t comment. “It’s not that either though. It’s lots of other stuff. Those army guys that are doing experiments on innocent demons.” She pictures the cute Dynas demons twittering. “Willow’s off
having to do god knows what.”

“And there’s the little matter of your Watcher and the whelp’s reaction to us.”

She nods and takes his hand in hers, and they start to cut through a cemetery.

“One problem at a time. Just like in the forest,” he reassures her but not feeling very cheered himself. He doesn’t really care what Rupert and the boy think, but he damn well cares how Buffy might be impacted by their reaction.

* * *

Buffy raises her hand and knocks much more tentatively than usual. Spike stands slightly behind her. They’re not touching because no need to freak anyone out any more than they already will be. She figures Giles has been tortured by the PDA enough even though he couldn’t see it.

To her surprise, Anya opens the door only a crack – just enough to wedge her slim body into the space. Shivering in the cold, the ex-demon’s eyes shift left and right as she peers around and over Buffy and Spike’s shoulders. “Making sure you didn’t attract any army guys or demons this way.”

Buffy is confused because she and Spike obviously would have noticed if they were being followed by a pack of army guys and demons. “Huh?”

Anya shrugs, and her bored tone indicates that she could care less about her assigned task. “Xander was too scared to look himself.”

“Bit skittish after Willow’s spell?” Spike asks.

Stuffing a hand in her front pocket to warm up and rocking a little on her heels, Anya gives Spike an even look. “You could say that. What are you wearing?”

Spike notes her unspoken acknowledgment of their commonality as demon folk and almost makes a snarky comment but bites his cheek instead. No need to rock the boat just yet. “Clothes got trashed. This was all Buffy had at her house.”
“Oh. Ours did, too. I thought we should burn them, but Giles insisted on throwing them all in the washing machine.”

“Had the same thought myself when I was in the shower at Buffy’s.”

“Anya, are you going to let us in?” Buffy asks, her tone conveying impatience rather than the anxiety currently causing pins and needles on the back of her neck.

“Anya, let them in!” Giles sounds tired. “You’re letting in a draft. Be sure to lock the door behind them.”

Anya lingers a moment longer. Her eyes flick to Buffy’s left ring finger, causing Buffy’s heart to leap in her chest, but Anya’s face stays neutral. Then, she steps back, swinging the door wide.

“Anya!” Giles growls.

“Hey!” Xander’s voice finally pipes up, sounding defensive of his girlfriend.

Buffy quietly enters the warm apartment and stands awkwardly off to one side. Spike sidles in next to her and shuts and locks the door behind them. The apartment is no longer in complete disarray and is back to being cozy and warm in its usual Giles-sort-of-way. Her mom, Giles, and Xander are huddled around Giles’s dining table, which is piled with books and what look like blueprints. Anya joins the group, folding a leg under her as she sits. Xander has a pile of papers held up like a newspaper in front of his face, and he studiously ignores Buffy and Spike.

“Come, come,” Giles says, motioning to them without looking back.

Buffy glances at Spike who simply lifts an eyebrow at her. Huh. This isn’t the reaction she was expecting. At all.

After shedding her coat and setting it on the back of the sofa, she joins the group and hovers next to Giles. Her mom looks up and smiles. “Hi, darling. Sleep well?”
“Uh huh.” It’s disconcerting to see her mom working with everyone else. “How’s your head?”

“Better. Took a long nap.”

“Good.” Buffy moves aside some books that opened to various chapters. The top one says something about alternate dimensions. She tries to make sense of the blueprints everyone is pouring over but can’t make heads or tails of them. “What’re we looking at?”

Giles adjusts his glasses. “Well, uh, Buffy, we’ve switched gears from searching for a way to open a portal to find you to trying to figure out where the army base is located. Based on the intel that’s been gathered so far, we have some ideas about possible entrances to an underground facility of some sort. Since we’ve been gone, the Sunnydale mayor has instituted a nightly curfew, and the army men have begun raiding demon establishments likely to obtain fresh bodies to continue their experiments, which as you know is quite concerning given that they are indubitably in over their heads.”

Buffy hugs her elbows. “And Willow?”

At the end of the table, Anya holds up a large ancient-looking tome that she’s perusing. “Researching ways to possibly get her out of the trial period. I’m assuming D’Hoffryn has her off doing some mission for him. He usually –”

“Who?” Buffy interrupts.

“My old boss,” Anya clarifies. “Vengeance demon creator and supervisor.”

“What does he usually do?” Spike asks, appearing at Buffy’s side, a mug of blood in his hand. He’s heard of D’Hoffryn – just not by name. What he is clear on is that the ruler of Arashmaharr is not someone to fool around with.

Anya flips a page and keeps reading. “He usually doesn’t do trial or training periods. Not in the thousand years I worked for him anyway. I’m trying to find some possible way to get her out of it before I contact him.”

“You can contact him?” Buffy wonders why they haven’t contacted him, and like yesterday.
Anya gives Buffy a duh-look. “Of course. All vengeance demons know how to summon him in an emergency. He makes us memorize the spell during initiation week. We have to practice reciting it before we’re even sent out for the first time and after that, every year as part of annual training. It’s such a pretentious spell, too.”

Despite trying to be a good boy for Buffy, Spike smirks. “Vengeance demons have annual training?”

Before Anya can respond, Xander slams his sheaf of papers onto the table and scowls, still not making eye contact with anyone. “Are we going to just ignore the evil undead standing at the table? Not chained up. Acting like Buffy’s boyfriend. Acting like one of us.”

“Husband. He’s Buffy’s husband,” Anya clarifies. “We found the marriage certificate in the suit pocket, remember?”

Xander glares at Anya, and she flinches.

Buffy’s mom puts a hand on Xander’s forearm. “Xander, we talked about this. A lot’s happened in the last few days, and what matters right now is finding Willow and figuring out what’s happening with the army under Sunnydale.”

Giles’s voice is soft, “She’s right, Xander. We need to focus on the dilemma at hand; personal matters can be dealt with when the situation is less imminent.”

Buffy’s mouth almost falls open from shock at her mother’s boldness and knowledge of the whole situation. She is equally shocked that Giles agrees with her like they’re a team, on the same page.

Spike, for his part, is unfazed. Clearly, Buffy’s crew did some talking during and possibly after their time in the other dimension. Still smirking, he crosses his arms, ready to watch the fireworks.

Xander stands, his chair scooting loudly on the tile floor. “I can’t do this.” He’s shaking his head as he talks. “I can’t do this. My best friend’s in trouble. Huge, life-and-death trouble, and I can’t deal with this, too.” He makes eye contact with Buffy at last, hurt and fear plainly evident on his face. “How can you do this to us again? Wasn’t it bad enough when your last boyfriend was a vampire? At least, he had a soul. Now you’re dating – no, worse – married to a soulless bloodsucking demon who has a broken chip! How can you even trust him when he murdered people? A lot of people! How can you expect any of us to trust him after everything we’ve been through? What did he do to you in that other dimension? Brainwash you?”
Buffy’s eyes fill with tears, but before she or anyone else can respond, Anya flies up from her seat, her face scrunched in anger. She crashes her book on Giles’s table, glaring at Xander. “That’s it! Screw you, Xander Harris!” Then, she flees, rapidly stomping up Giles’s staircase.

Xander appears dumbfounded for a moment before he sets his jaw and storms a different direction toward the only other space that offers some privacy – Giles’s downstairs bathroom. The door rattles on the hinges as he whams it closed.

The remaining four are silent for a long moment.

Then, her face creased with worry, Joyce says, “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay, Mom. You didn’t have to do anything,” Buffy says quietly. “Thank you for trying.” She peers at Giles from the corner of her eye. “Thank you, too.”

Giles smiles gently at her and pulls her into a brief side hug. He knows that they need to have a talk, but for now, he wants Buffy to know that he’s on her side.

Buffy turns to Spike. “Help me out?” She tilts her head toward the stairs. “I got Anya.” She can’t handle Xander right now, but Anya. . . Buffy thinks she gets the ex-demon in a different way than before.

Spike sighs. How had he signed up for this? First Joyce, now the Watcher and. . . should he gracefully decline? “I got the whelp.”

“It’ll help if you call him Xander.”

Her green eyes are swirling with emotion for him, and Spike reaches over and wipes the vestiges of an escaped tear from her cheek. He’s struck by the fact that she hasn’t changed. She’s still with him even though they are back in Sunnydale and on her turf. Yeah, she’s worth it.

“Will do, love.”
In the next part (well the next chapter after another brief interlude), I totally channeled my inner therapist. As much as I love the character of Xander, I would find it very hard to do therapy with him. Hopefully, it does not come across as bashing, which is something I strive not to do.
Interlude, Time to Refocus

When Angel is whisked away this time, he’s in the middle of kissing Cordelia and really enjoying it. . . almost ultimate level of happiness enjoying it. But then, that damned cinnamon smell, little gust of wind, and popping noise crops up again, and he’s gone.

Cordelia falls over a little bit, Angel’s touch lingering on her skin. She sighs. She supposes it’s inevitable at this point.

She holds up her hand, not bothering to hide her irritation. “Wine! Why don’t you just send me the whole damn bottle? And just give me the paper this time. The tree tapping thing is getting old, and I don’t feel like moving.”

Said wine bottle and glass appear in quick succession. The air shimmers a third time, and a curled-up paper appears on her palm. She opens it and reads the message. “Oh. Yeah. Riley. Guess that makes sense.”

Cordelia slumps back in the cushions and the tree screen comes to life. Without removing her eyes from the glimpse into the past, she drags the whole bottle of wine into her lap, glances down, and realizes that it’s already nicely uncorked.

Now that it’s in front of her, she decides that she doesn’t need it and that she should probably be clear headed. The alcohol is making her brain fuzzy. . . unlike in her place of peace. What if she misses something important?

She hauls her butt off the sofa sectional and glares at the dress she’s wearing. Without even having to say anything out loud, her clothes shift to the cropped black pants, sleeveless top, and sneakers she was wearing before. Nothing like getting out of a hideous dress to lift a person’s spirits!

“Thanks,” she says aloud. She feels decidedly less grumpy.

Then, she starts stretching to get her blood flowing. She feels like she’s been binge watching a never-ending TV series for too long. Maybe the foray to the other dimension wasn’t as bad an idea as she originally thought it was. She does some jumping jacks and warm up exercises like she used to do
when she was a cheerleader.

When she finishes, she’s not even a little out of breath. Perk of being dead. But her mind feels less cloudy around the edges. Not sure how that fits in with the being dead part and not needing to worry about bodily functions.

Deciding that it’s not worth analyzing, she holds out her hand. “Ice water.”

The glass cool with condensation against her palm, Cordy remains standing and refocuses on the tree.

She and Angel stopped watching when Buffy went into the bathroom while Spike was showering. That was totally not something she wanted to see.

She has some catching up to do.

She doesn’t expect to see Harmony. Huh. She is even more whiny and ditzy than Cordelia remembers. Poor Harmony. Hopefully, she'll eventually find her way to Angel in L.A. in this timeline though Cordelia isn’t sure that was all that great either.
Chapter Fourteen, Demon Therapy

Chapter Notes

Just as a preface, I very, very rarely dislike a client. In general, I consider human beings as people who have good intentions and I can usually find a redeeming quality in anyone I work with. This does not mean, that on occasion, I don’t have a strong aversion to wanting to do therapy with someone. So, for this chapter, I channeled my annoyance...and hahah...a lot of Spike's reactions are my own (in Spike speak, of course). Buffy is easier to make therapist-like, and Anya is an easier client. (Sorry for the long intro note...but I couldn’t resist.)

Chapter Fourteen, Demon Therapy

Standing outside Giles’s powder room, Spike closes his eyes and inhales a deep unnecessary breath in preparation for playing therapist to a small-minded man-boy. Spike may have feelings for Buffy, but that doesn’t mean he’s completely thrilled at the thought of coddling one of her friends, especially one that has so little room in his brain for other perspectives.

Spike throws open the door to reveal the whelp. . . er, Xander sitting on the toilet lid, his head in his hands, his body rigid with emotion.

Xander raises his head and squints his puffy eyes at Spike before burying the evidence of his tears in his palms again. “Go away, Spike.”

Spike is more than half-tempted to slam the door shut, but after a few seconds of lingering there in uncomfortable silence, he silently enters the tiny room, shutting the door behind him. His hands finding the smooth porcelain, he leans back against the sink, inches from the dark-haired young man.

“Where’s Buffy?” Xander’s voice is muffled.

Spike snorts. Figures he’d want Buffy to come running after him. “She’s with Anya.”

“And you’re the sloppy seconds? Great.” Xander feels even more betrayed that his best friend went after his girlfriend. . . the girlfriend whom Buffy hardly knows. What bizarre world is he living in now?
Channeling his ability to deal with an overly emotional and distraught Dru, Spike takes a deep unnecessary breath and finds his mind centering itself. He slips into a familiar low tone of voice. “What is it that’s really bothering you, mate?”

Xander is quiet but unmoving. This is not the reaction he expected from the vampire. Then, he says with obvious pain in his tone, “Your manipulations won’t work on me.”

Spike angles his chin, trying to contain his desire to snap back. After the pause starts to become charged, he responds, “Think you have me confused with the wrong vampire.” He decides to drop the part about how the whelp isn’t worth manipulating anyway.

“Vampires are all alike. They just do things that fulfill their hedonistic desires. No matter how they hurt others in their path. No matter who they kill in the process.”

Spike goes with the first thing that comes to mind, “That’s just what you’d like to think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s kind of convenient, right? Believing that we’re monsters who have a singular agenda.”

Xander emits a short burst of air to punctuate his next thought. “It’s not convenient. It’s the truth. I’ve seen it with my own two eyes. Over and over again.”

“Kind of like how your eyes are wide open right now.”

Xander lifts his head up then. He rubs his palms, damp with tears, on his denim-covered thighs. “Fine. Eyes wide open. Still have the same point of view. Vampires are evil.”

Good god, what’s he supposed to do with this? Dru used to get stuck in one mindset sometimes when her brain wandered down a twisted path that had a dead end, and she couldn’t figure out how to turn back. Whether it was manipulation on his part or not, Spike didn’t know, but he did what he could to get her unstuck. “How do you know that vampires are evil?”
Xander crosses his arms. “That’s easy. They kill people and don’t give a shit about the person they killed. They’re true psychopaths.”

Spike counters, “They kill people to eat. Like lions hunt gazelles. They do it to survive.”

“Without his soul, Angel didn’t just kill to survive.” Xander leans forward. “He murdered Miss Calendar to hurt Buffy and Giles. . . psychologically. It was like torture. I was there. It devastated Giles – shattered his heart. Buffy felt horrible. She should have killed Angel sooner, but she had feelings for him. It made her blind to what he was.”

Spike senses the wiggle room. Now he has something to work with, something to manipulate. Bloody hell. Who cares? He refocuses on Xander. “That says more about Angelus than it does vampires. Angel, he’s always been someone who likes to mess with other people’s heads. Although other vampires do similar things, Angel made it his specialty. It’s his niche.” Spike hesitates but then decides to admit, “He did it to me enough over the years.”

Xander isn’t expecting this disclosure. “He did?”

The boy’s arms are crossed, but his face tells Spike that he’s more open. That’s some headway at least. “He did. He liked to hurt others. Anyone else was happy, he’d do whatever he could to destroy it. He got between me and Dru more than once, and Dru, broken as she was, went along with it. He hurt her, but she got to where sometimes she went along with hurting others.” Spike still remembers the first time his sire took to bed with Angelus after she made Spike. His chest aches even now at the thought.

Xander finds himself caught up in what the vampire in front of him is sharing. He’s no idiot; he knows that Spike is admitting that Dru cheated on him and from the sounds of it, more than once. “And you kept going back to her?”

Spike shrugs. “I did. Loved her. Probably always will on some level. She’s my sire. The first woman who made me feel like I was worthy.”

“And then made you feel completely unworthy,” Xander guesses, not realizing that he’s pointing out that Spike, a vampire, has feelings to be hurt. Xander can relate. It’s kind of how he felt with Cordelia. . . never ever quite worthy of Queen C’s affection. Of course, he was the one to do the cheating in that scenario. . . a fact he still feels a mixture of shame and guilt about.
“Yeah,” Spike acknowledges.

Xander is getting impatient, and his right leg starts shaking up and down. Being in such a small space with the vampire who has a broken muzzle is suddenly making him all twitchy. Plus, the toilet seat is hard under his butt. “I don’t know why you’re telling me any of this. It doesn’t change that I can’t trust you.”

Spike sighs. “I’m not after your trust.” He could give a fig about it. “I’m telling you this because you’re not getting why your girl is so upset with you.”

Xander can’t make out where this whole thing is going. “You’re trying to help me. Why?”

Spike grits his teeth and closes his eyes. Here they go ‘round again. He latches onto something he can truthfully say beyond: because Buffy asked him to. “Because she’s hurting, and I hate seeing a lady in pain. Might help if you understood why she’s out of sorts.”

“You’re right. I have no idea why Anya’s upset.” Xander raises his hands slightly off his legs to indicate his befuddlement. Women are still so puzzling to him. He sometimes wonders how he ended up dating Anya in the first place.

“Women are bloody confusing sometimes,” Spike validates.

Xander’s head bounces up and down a fraction in agreement. “Stating the obvious.”

“In this case, I have a thought.” Spike is leading the witness, er, client. Yep. Manipulation 101.

“Please enlighten me.” Xander isn’t being sarcastic.

“Go with me here. Let me know if any of it feels off. Red casts her spell, making you a demon magnet, which ends up with you lot in a demon crossroads dimension. You run into all number of demon types, some of them dangerous, some of them not so bad, some with benevolent motives. You’re dating an ex-demon with over a thousand years of experience who’s along for the ride. But you don’t even use her as a resource to get you home when you do run across dangerous situations. Instead, you hold tight to your…” Spike omits “pigheaded,” “assumptions about the nature of demons despite a lot of external evidence to the contrary all so that you can feel like your world is in order and makes sense. In reality, though, your girl just really wants you to value her and understand
what she brings to the table. Wants you to know that she can change and that she chose you despite your flaws. There she is just hoping that despite her past, her mistakes, and her flaws, you can love all the bits of her anyway even the demon parts. But by your reaction to demons, you prove all over again that you don’t or won’t accept her and love all of her because of what you need to cling to in order to feel okay about you.”

Xander’s mouth hangs open. His mind is blown. He doesn’t agree with everything the vampire just said because well, Spike’s a vampire, but the parts about Anya and how Xander’s missing something about her make him think. “I need to talk with Anya.”

Spike rolls his eyes. He can’t help himself. “That’s the spirit!” He flings open the bathroom door because honestly, a bloke has limits, and Spike has more than reached his. “Go get her.”

* * *

Anya is sobbing on the floor at the foot of Giles’s bed, her knees pushed up to her chest, her arms curved around her legs, and her face nestled in the resulting natural valley between her knees. Buffy slides to the floor beside her, her back against the bed, her legs bent in silent solidarity. She rubs Anya’s upper arm without saying a word. Buffy’s never seen Anya this upset.

With the companionship, Anya continues to cry but starts to slow down over several seconds until she finishes and little unevenly spaced hiccups take over. Then, she turns her head so that her tear-stained, blotchy cheek rests on her knee. “You don’t have to be here.” She isn’t sure she wants Buffy to be here. After all, she hasn’t cried this much in centuries, and she isn’t sure where it all came from. So, having a witness is . . . uncomfortable.

Buffy pulls her hand back into her lap. “I want to be here.”

Anya smiles, but the expression doesn’t touch her eyes. “It’s not like I expect to be accepted into the group. I mean, I don’t even know if I want to be.”

Buffy is surprised that Anya feels this way, but she’s starting to realize just how hard it is for outsiders to be welcomed in their tight knit little circle. “Well, whatever you decide, I want you to know an invitation to be in the group stands, and I can understand why you feel like you aren’t.”

“You do?”
“Xander, Willow, Giles, and I . . . we’ve been through a lot together. A lot of really painful, hard stuff, and we’ve all dealt with it differently and maybe not in the best ways sometimes. But one of the side effects of going through the hard stuff together is that we’re close, and if we hurt one another, we always come back around even if we don’t always perfectly understand each person’s decisions.”

Hallie flashes through Anya’s mind. She suddenly misses her fellow vengeance demon more than she can express. “Like a family. You love each other despite everything.”

Buffy reflects on the love in her heart and gives Anya a small smile. “Yes.”

“Xander doesn’t love me like family.”

Buffy isn’t sure of the level of Xander’s feelings for Anya. “What do you mean?”

Anya’s admission that she believes it highly likely that Xander doesn’t love her leaves her feeling vulnerable. So she gives Buffy her patented, unwavering vengeance demon stare . . . the stare that usually unsettles people and makes them want to run away from her. She supposes the lack of demon face makes it less effective. “Xander is prejudiced against demons.”

Buffy sees past Anya’s obvious halfhearted attempt to throw her off. “Xander’s only known hurt from demons.” Buffy thinks about how his first encounter with killing a vampire was his friend, Jesse. Killing someone you love scars a person. Shoving them into a hell dimension does, too.

“It’s like anytime I try to talk to him about my experiences in any depth, he either makes a joke about it or changes the subject or says something completely disparaging.” Anya exacted vengeance on other men for less than that.

“You feel discounted.” Buffy thinks about Spike and suddenly wants to hold him again.

“I don’t feel discounted. I am discounted. And being in that crossroads dimension put a giant spotlight on all of it.”

Buffy’s been wondering what went down there for her friends and mom. If she and Spike had quite the experience, she can only imagine the others did, too. Just look at how her mom and Giles are acting. She really, really needs to talk with Giles. Buffy forces herself to refocus on Anya. “How
Anya sighs, lifting her head off her knees. She ticks off a finger for each point. “First, he didn’t trust the Dynas demons. Most of them wouldn’t hurt a flea. Well, they eat their fleas, but that’s beside the point. Even though I explained all that to him, Xander didn’t even want to get in the boat. It took an act of Congress even with Giles and Joyce trying to convince him that it was just a boat on a river. Then, Joyce had the idea to leave a scrap of his shirt for you to find once we found the tree the route the section of the forest the Dynas told us led to the portals. But did Xander want to do that? Oh, no! He was afraid that some other demon would find the shirt and sniff us down. And don’t even get me started on how he reacted to the Mokèlé-mbèmbé. That demon had to totally take control of his mind to get him safely across the lake to the island.” Anya suddenly feels too emotional to keep going. Tears come up unbidden again. “Through the whole thing, he didn’t ask me once if I knew anything about interdimensional travel or portals or the demons. Giles and even Joyce did but not Xander.” She takes a deep breath and swipes at the pesky tear that streaks hotly over her cheek. “Are those examples clear enough?” The tone of the question is serious.

Buffy has a hundred questions about how they talked with the Dynas, how they knew where to go into the forest, and how they figured out the portals, but none of that is important now. The hurting ex-demon before her is. “Crystal.” Buffy can see how if she hadn’t had Spike with her, she might have reacted in some of the same ways. “And it makes total sense why you feel discounted. . . and hurt.”

Anya sniffs. Stupid snot coming out her nose. She reaches over and picks up the edge of Giles’s bedspread, dabbing her nose and transferring the viscous fluid to the cloth. “Yeah.”

Buffy almost giggles at Anya’s method of snot removal but manages to contain herself. What is it with Spike and Anya making her laugh? “I don’t have any answers for fixing it other than to talk to him. Tell him how you feel and how he impacts you. Xander may seem fixed on this, but he’s not immovable. He’s dating you, and he knows your history.” Kind of like how he saw past Cordelia’s snobbish exterior. None of them understood it at the time, but now, it makes a lot of sense. Xander has his own cover for pain. “You just have to get past the humor, the prickliness. . . and the trauma.”

Anya blinks at her. “Is that how you handled things with Spike? Because last we knew, you were disgusted by him. And now, you what? Love him?”

Thrown a little by Anya’s questions, she glances down at the ring on her finger. She feels a strong need to be back in Spike’s presence to reaffirm how he feels about her. “It is how we handled things. Being alone together. Surviving together. It changed my perspective.” She smiles at Anya. “Not sure about the love part yet.”

For over a thousand years, Anya’s job was exacting vengeance for scorned lovers. She very rarely
saw the other side of the coin, but when she did, she always marveled at the contrast. People who truly loved one another, who truly were devoted and committed to one another, there was something about them that made her stomach ache a little bit. Maybe it’s because she never had that with anyone. All she knows is that she’s experiencing the same ache now. She isn’t sure Buffy’s ready to hear that. So, in one of Anya’s rare moments of discretion, she says nothing.

Hopping to her feet, Anya straightens her shirt and cocks her head, eyes thankfully clear again. She could do without crying again for another few years at least. Maybe a decade. “Thank you, Buffy.”

Buffy is disconcerted by the shift back to awkwardly human Anya and stands as the ex-demon starts out of the room without waiting for her.

“You’re welcome,” Buffy says quietly to herself.
Chapter Fifteen, An Essential Conversation and An Arrival

Buffy is halfway down the stairs when she witnesses Xander pull Anya into a hug. As the pair meander to Giles’s sofa, Buffy wishes she could have been a fly on the wall for Spike’s conversation with Xander. She smiles a little at the thought.

When Buffy reaches the ground floor, she finds her vampire rummaging in the coat closet. Drawn to him, she slips her arms around him from behind, every fiber of her being unwinding with the touch of his body to hers. She didn’t realize how much tension she was carrying, or how desperately she needed to feel him again until he was in arms.

Spike ceases his hunt for his lived-in black t-shirt (because yes, there are differences in black t-shirts) and draws back into the Slayer’s embrace. He feels her chest hitch in a little sigh, and without extricating himself, he turns around so that her head is just under his chin. He inhales her familiar anchoring scent and pulls her even closer.

Buffy decides it’s been too long since she’s hugged someone so tightly without having to worry about breaking him or her, and she takes advantage of it. There’s nothing quite like hugging someone you care about with all your might.

“Watcha doin’?” she asks, breaking the reverie.

“Looking for a change of clothes. Got my favorite shirt buried in there somewhere.”

“Lost it?”

“No. It’s there somewhere.” What he’s lost are his cigarettes and Zippo. He could really use a smoke, and where the hell did he put his duster? First things first. “Seen the suit anywhere?”
Buffy shakes her head. “No idea where anything went, including my dress. We should probably ask Giles.” She remembers that Anya mentioned something about their marriage certificate, too. That might be important to have.

“You should probably have a chat with Rupert about...” Spike glances over at the whelp and his lady. They’re too caught up in jabbering with one another to notice. He doesn’t need the boy going off again knowing that Buffy has a demon piece.

Buffy knows exactly what he’s referencing. “I know.” She’d much rather just stand here, cuddled up in Spike’s arms.

Spike nudges her. “While you have the time.”

Spike is right. This is her window. “Fine. But before I do, what’d you say to Xander?” She tilts her chin up to gaze into his blue eyes.

He can’t resist and deposits a deep, non-magically-induced kiss on her lips. In the Watcher’s dwelling no less. He grins at her when he pulls back and witnesses the shift in her eyes from clear curiosity to the haze of surprise. “Not much that he took in. His noggin’s too thick. But enough to start him thinking.”

Buffy repositions her head on his chest. “Thank you. Everyone needs to be in the right head space if we’re going to work together to find Willow.”

Spike knows first-hand what infighting can do to handling a crisis. Dru and Angelus pop round in his mind, but he pushes the memories aside more easily than in the past. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“And sorry. Feel like I threw you to the wolves. There’s no way I could have made a dent. I was too upset.”

“Bloody well right, you threw me to the sodding wolves. Well, actually, he’s a bit more of a sniveling puppy than a wolf.”
Buffy bonks him lightly on the arm without moving out of his embrace. “Shhh. He’s right over there. He might hear you.”

Spike shrugs. “Don’t care. In any case, I didn’t strangle him, and you can always throw me to the wolves if needed. Have your back, remember?”

“Got yours, too.” Buffy is still struck breathless by this. Her fingers trail down the groove of his spine, feeling the muscles in his back. She can’t remember the last time she felt so comforted by someone’s touch. She feels peaceful and somehow more focused in his embrace; it’s such a stark contrast to how distracted he made her before. She doesn’t know what to make of the change.

“What’d you say to Anya?” He’s never realized how warm she is. Maybe the cold winter air provided a nice contrast. With her golden hair and skin, she’s his own personal little sun.

Buffy pulls back but doesn’t stop touching him. “I just mostly listened. Never saw her get so upset before. I’ve definitely never seen her cry. You were right though. I never stopped to really think about it, but she is still finding her human legs.”

Spike lets out a low laugh.

“And a lot happened to them in the other dimension just like with us.”

“Makes sense, pet. Only very different, I’m guessing.” He tilts his head at her, his eyes dark with emotion for her.

“Very.” Buffy hears her mother laughing in the kitchen, which makes her come back to the reality of the need to get moving. “I’m going to talk with Giles.” She tenderly touches his cheek. “Hope you find your shirt.”

Spike nods and kisses the tip of her nose. “Good luck. Cut him some slack.” He says this, not because he cares about her Watcher, but because he doesn’t want Buffy’s heart to be hurt. This protectiveness toward the Slayer is becoming an interesting routine. The way she’s beaming at him now makes him feel . . . happy.

“Thanks.”
As Buffy rounds the corner into the kitchen, her mom is still laughing at something Giles has apparently said or done. Buffy takes in the scene; her mom and Watcher are both wearing gloves and holding cleaning sponges. Well, her mom has one on her right hand and nothing on her left. Her left hand has settled on Giles’s forearm, and Buffy can see the merriment in her Watcher’s eyes, something she hasn’t seen since Miss Calendar.

In the past, this would have freaked Buffy out, unsettling her in the way Ted feeding them drugged cookies unsettled her and grossing her out the way knowing that Giles and her mom had magically-induced sex because grownups-that-are-her-mom do not have sex. But now, Buffy’s had her own version of magically-induced sex and knows that this can change things between two people. Plus, she’s starting to think that maybe, just maybe, the magic enhances something that’s already there.

Still, despite this, this involves her mother, and Giles is sort of like a dad figure, so Buffy’s only recourse is to cross her arms, clear her throat, and say, “Ahem” as any good daughter would do.

Joyce’s reaction is to instantly withdraw her hand and plaster a smile on her face. When she witnesses the mirth in Buffy’s eyes, Joyce’s shoulders relax, her smile transforming into one of relief. “Buffy. Giles and I were just cleaning demon blood off his counters and cabinets.”

“I can see that,” Buffy teases.

Giles glances at Joyce and then back to Buffy again. How to explain to her what she just witnessed? “Buffy, we were, ah...”

Buffy can tell that he desperately wants to fidget with his glasses, but his gloved hands are covered in green Dynas blood. “It’s actually fine with me if you want to... clean up demon blood together,” Buffy reassures him, adding, “More often.”

Giles is thrown by Buffy’s docility and seemingly good humor regarding the obvious change in his relationship with her mother. “I’m sure that your mother doesn’t want to...”

Buffy hasn’t seen a look like that in her mother’s eyes since well... ever. She shakes her head. “No. She really really does, and she should. Well, if you want her to and if she wants to. I mean, you want to, right, Mom?”
Joyce is now amused, too. “Right.”

Buffy gestures at her mom. “See? She’s all with the wanting to.”

“O-okay.” Giles peeks at Joyce and concludes that Buffy is correct. Is Joyce blushing a bit? Maybe the kiss he gave her under the pretense of offering luck before she drank out of the portal meant something to her after all? “Are Xander and Anya less... um...”

“Yes, they're talking now.” Buffy is now nervous again. Finding her mom and Watcher in the midst of a romantic moment distracted her from the seriousness of what she has to discuss with Giles, but now she has to return to it. “Giles, there’s actually something I’d like to talk with you about.”

Joyce is already peeling off her glove. “I’ll just be in...” She has no idea where to go because Xander and Anya are in the next room. “I’ll just see what Spike is up to.”

Buffy hugs her mom as she passes by. “Thanks, Mom.”

Joyce savors the touch. She has a feeling that she’ll be doing that a lot more... both the giving and receiving of hugs and the savoring. She feels guilty and torn about Rupert. She doesn’t want to hurt him with her death, but she’s also done setting aside her own needs. Life is way too short, and apparently, hers is going to be even shorter than she anticipated.

When Joyce is gone, Buffy and Giles regard one another.

As Giles peels off his own gloves, Buffy starts, “So, I guess stuff changed for you guys in the other dimension, too?”

“You could say that, Buffy,” Giles admits, studying his charge. Last he saw her, she was unceasingly kissing the vampire in his very-blind presence. Under Willow’s spell, Buffy’s personality was obscenely perky, and Spike, the snarky, shell of a vampire whose best attempt at biting was through discourse, was transformed into an ally. While engaged and seemingly in love, the pair still sniped at one another incessantly though they were quick to forgive one another with the inevitable kissing session.
The Buffy who stands before Giles now is a different person all together. She and Spike are still connected despite the spell’s dissipation, but instead of sniping, they’re collaborating. A now chipless William the Bloody is acquiescing to her wishes, is taking care of her, and Buffy is... more relaxed than she’s been since she sent Angel to hell. The insecurity that comes with being a smaller fish in a bigger college pond is lifted. Giles isn’t sure how he feels about all of this or if he trusts it. He honestly feels as if he is in one of those episodes of the Twilight Zone that Xander and Willow made him watch once against his better judgment.

Buffy frowns a little at his intent expression that’s not being followed up with words. “Giles?”

“Huh? Oh. Yes, a lot has changed.” Drinking out of the well connected to the portal to the past was also eye-opening. He still hasn’t made sense of it all yet.

Taking a deep breath, she says almost too quickly, “I have many questions, and I’m happy to compare notes later, but I had a question about something that the dinosaur demon told me.”

The corners of Giles’s lips quirk up. “Ah. Mokèlé-mbèmbé. Helpful creature aside from the tendency to paralyze those who do not take kindly to his approach.”

Buffy nods, Giles’s humor easing her anxiety. “Same thing happened to us. When we figured out who he was, he made some interesting observations about... about well, me and Spike for one. But the most confusing thing he told me was that I’m part demon.” There, she said it and so smoothly and without drama and/or hysterics, too.

“What do you mean?”

Buffy decides Giles looks genuinely startled by her revelation. “Do you know anything about that? I mean, it might make sense given the excessive physical strength and super-fast healing powers.”

Giles is taken aback by this. Perhaps his experience with Eyghon, subsequent fear of magical forces, and the need for self-protective denial goes further than he thought. “I haven’t heard that, but I agree that it makes sense.”

“Not even from the Council? In all your schooling or whatever you do to become a Watcher?”

Giles thinks back to his days in the Watcher training program. Is there some walled off memory of a
teaching that he blocked off? “I can’t think of anything about the origins of Slayers being tied to
demons. We were taught that there were mystical powers involved in the creation of the first Slayer,
but there was no link made between Slayers and demons.”

Buffy back pedals, “It really shouldn’t matter all that much because well, I’m still me, but – ”

Giles’s mind is continuing to work, and his thoughts land on a memory of something that could be
related, and he interrupts Buffy in his excitement. “There was something if I recall. It was a Slayer
emergency kit so to speak.”

“An emergency kit? How come I’m just finding out about this? ‘Cause we really could have used it
against the Mayor. Maybe we wouldn’t have had to blow up the school, and my classmates wouldn’t
have had to die or be turned into vampires. Where is it?” Buffy makes a face. “Wait. What does that
have to do with me being part demon?”

Taking off his glasses, Giles emits a huff of impatience in response to Buffy’s queries as he tries to
latch onto what he remembers from his courses about the kit. “It went missing some time in the
1970s when the Watcher at the time – Bernard Crowley – lost his Slayer. The kit was purportedly
passed down from one Watcher to the next and to be used only if the Slayer faced an evil so great
that she needed an extra boost in power. . . and it was rumored to be tied to the origin of the Slayer
line.”

Buffy strains to not react in anger. “And you’re just telling me about this now because?”

“It was lost and reputedly destroyed, so it didn’t seem relevant to share.”

She can’t let it go. “Seems like the Council should have gone hunting for it if it’s as powerful a tool
as you say it is.”

Giles taps his lip with the end of his glasses. “The Council, as you know, does not always hold the
same values we do.” He shifts the topic back to Buffy’s original query. “Are you concerned about
the origin of your powers?”

“I mean, yeah. What does it say about me if I’m part demon? What does it mean for me to go out
every night and kill vampires and demons when I’m partly one myself? The Mocha-lei-li-whatever
said Watchers would have a hard time convincing Slayers to kill if they knew about the personal link
to demon-hood, and I can kind of see where they’re coming from. This whole trip to the other
dimension... it’s made me question everything, including whether Spike is capable of doing good without his soul. And Giles, he’s more than shown me that he can choose... that he does have feelings.” Tears fill her eyes. “And more than anything, I’m worried... worried that you won’t care about me anymore if you know what I am. I know that’s silly and illogical, and you’re my Watcher, so you’re not supposed to – ”

Giles feels his own corneas misting up, and he gathers his charge into a hug. “Buffy, no matter what, don’t ever doubt that I have... that there are feelings for you.” He considers what happened with Eyghon and Angelus. “A lot of what the Council teaches... No. A lot of what I have taught you is that demons and vampires are evil, and I’m afraid that my experiences have led me to latch onto this as a reality because I have been trying to protect you... and perhaps myself from thinking beyond that. As far as Spike is concerned, I do not know if he is truly capable of choice as you say, so I will warn you to be cautious as I have not known vampires to be anything other than self-serving creatures. On the other hand, I meant what I said before about how there are two types of monster... those who want to be redeemed and those who lack humanity in their dealings with others. I have also been known to be wrong and apparently... very blind to how my own experiences impact my dealings with you, Willow, and Xander.” Even though Eyghon is dead, Giles knows that he has not dealt with the guilt tied to his past use of magic and the deaths that it inevitably caused. Not dealing with his own feelings has made him blind to just how dark Willow’s path has been turning. Now, it could be too late.

Buffy’s voice is muffled by Giles’s sweater vest. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being real with me.”

A loud knock on the front door interrupts their moment.

“I’m not expecting anyone,” Giles says, rounding the corner into the living area.

As Anya disentangles herself from Xander’s lap to answer the door as she did earlier, Giles strides to the door and opens it before the ex-demon can get to it.

Buffy moves with him, glancing at Spike, who has found and changed into a black t-shirt and jeans. She wonders if it’s his favorite one.
Riley Finn stands on the doorstep, hands shoved in the pockets of his leather bomber jacket. He looks startled to see Giles. Then, his eyes light on Buffy. “Buffy. I’m here to see you.”

Buffy frowns. “H-how did you know that I was here?”

“Can I talk with you,” Riley runs a hand through his thick brown hair, eyes flicking from one person to another, hesitating only slightly longer on Spike before meeting Buffy’s gaze again, “alone?”

“Whoever you are and whatever you need to say, you can say in front of all of us,” Giles says sternly, hand on the door, ready to slam it in the young man’s face if need be.

“It’s Riley,” Buffy explains. “He’s the T.A. for the psychology class that Willow and I are taking.”

Giles steps back, and Riley enters, dipping his head politely to the Watcher, who closes the door and stands in front of it so that Riley is surrounded.

Recognizing his new-found conundrum, Riley stutters, “I-I’m actually not just your T.A.”

“Who are you then?” Xander asks, moving protectively in front of Anya.

“He’s one of them,” Spike answers from where he’s lounging against the wall near Joyce. He can’t believe he’s just now put two-and-two together.

“Who?” Joyce asks, a bewildered look on her face.

Buffy narrows her eyes. “The army guys.”

“But he’s not dressed like an army guy.” Anya waves her hand up and down at Riley’s very nondescript, college student outfit.

“She’s right. I am an army guy . . . well, I’m part of the Initiative, which is a secret military organization run by the United States government, whose members are here to study and try to rehabilitate demons,” Riley says quietly. “And she is the Slayer, and he,” he gives the briefest of
nods toward Spike, “is Hostile 17.”
This time, whoever’s in charge deposits Angel in a tree, but not just in a tree – high in a tree. The tree branch groans with the vampire’s weight but doesn’t break. Angel sighs and mutters to himself, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Cordy’s amused voice calls up from below, “Just jump down. You’re a vampire, remember?”

“Am I still a vampire?” Angel hasn’t been craving any sort of nourishment since he died. He puts a hand to his chest. He doesn’t feel a heartbeat. He peers down at Cordelia who is looking up at him from the sectional.

She grins, her eyes sparkling. “I have come to the conclusion that being in this forest is somehow like being what we were before but different. For example, I did exercises while you were gone, and I didn’t get out of breath at all.”

“You did exercises? Why?”

She shrugs. “Because I was staring at the past too long, and I needed to wake my brain up.”

Angel thinks that her shrugging looks funny from an aerial viewpoint. “Did it help?”

“Oh huh.” She laughs. “Get your butt down here and let me fill you in on what you missed.”

“Aren’t you the bossy one.” He takes a chance and leaps, and he finds that he has similar control to what he usually had, so he lands with a thump behind the sectional, his legs bending to prevent falling.

Cordy puts her head back, her hair curling becomingly over her shoulders. “Told you you’d be fine,
Angel deposits a kiss on her soft lips.

“Mmm… Spiderman kiss,” Cordy says, eyes closed. “Romantic.”

“What’s with the superhero references?” He swings around the end of the sectional and scoops her onto his lap.

She shrieks with laughter and tucks her arms around his neck. “Because even though you make mistakes and are a pain in my ass, you’re my hero.”

“Is that sarcasm or. . . ?”

She kisses him again, letting the touch linger until they’re both caught up in only each other. Then, she whispers, “All this watching Spike and Buffy makes me think about how grateful I am that even though things ended up being royally fucked by the end of my life, I wouldn’t trade any moment that I got to be with you. I never stopped believing in you.”

Angel rests his forehead on hers and strokes her thigh. “I remember.” The memory of their final kiss before she passed away remained a bright beacon in his heart long after she was gone.

She turns around so that she’s cradled in his arms. Stroking his forearm, she asks, “So, do you want to know what’s been going on?”

Angel sighs contentedly. “Sure.”

“So Harmony left town to go to L.A. because the mayor put the city on lock down. I think he’s working with the army guys. . . well, the Initiative. And then, Buffy and Spike got to Giles’s apartment where Joyce had already talked with Giles, Xander, and Anya to tell them to be cool with Buffy and Spike, so they could focus on finding Willow and figuring out what’s going on with the Initiative. Xander, stubborn man that he is, still blew his top, and Anya got pissed at him for being obtuse. Buffy started crying, and Spike agreed to talk with Xander while she talked with Anya. Can I just say that Spike was impressive? I think he actually got through to Xander. Though Xander does have his moments and can actually be a really sweet and generous guy.” Cordelia finally takes a large breath.
“Uh, so would you rather be with Xander?”

Cordy grumps, “What kind of question is that? Xander cheated on me with Willow and not under a spell! Once a cheater, always a cheater. That doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate my first love.”

“You loved him?” Angel doesn’t ever remember talking about this with Cordy, and he knew she said it to Buffy and Spike at the portals, but he wasn’t sure if she meant it. Angel had been too busy focused on Buffy to notice Cordelia in Sunnydale. He was such a blind man.

“Of course. Why else would I have even considered continuing to go out with him?”

“Oh.”

“No need to be jealous. First loves generally don’t last.” She circles her arms around his waist and plants a kiss on his chest before gazing up at him. “It’s the ones that come after that mean the most.”

“Why’s that?”

Cordelia decides she must explain everything about love to her vampire. “Because you appreciate what you have more the second or third time around.”

Angel considers this. “That actually makes sense.”

She lays her head on his shoulder. “Of course, it makes sense! So, do you want to hear what happened next?”

“Why not?” Angel leans his head on the top of Cordelia’s.

“So then, Xander and Anya make up, and Buffy talks to Giles about her heritage, which goes well, and then, Riley shows up.” She pauses a heartbeat and lifts her head to make eye contact with Angel. “You talked to him, didn’t you?”

Angel nods. “I did.”
“I really wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that conversation.”

“I talked with the guy before.” Angel’s tone is hesitant, and then, he cocks his head as if the memory’s vague. “Well, I think we got into a fistfight.”

“You think?” Cordy knows her guy has a memory like a steel trap.

“Okay, okay, I did. But this time, we just talked. I think I freaked him out a little.”

“That’s great.” That might mean that Angel has to go back. . . again. She hugs him tighter.

“Yeah, well, you have to do what works sometimes.”

“I can’t believe Buffy dated him before.” Cordy isn’t sure how she knows this, but she does.

“I think she wanted normal.” Angel doesn’t add the “after me” part because he realizes that everything’s not about him.

“That guy is so not normal. Look at who he works for! And Buffy doesn’t need normal because she’s not normal.” Cordelia leaves out the “she’s a freak” part because that’s too high school.

“Preaching to the choir, Cordy.”

“Oh, right.” She closes her eyes, relishing his touch.

Absently stroking her lower back, Angel moves his right foot and encounters something glass. He glances down. “Um, Cordy?”

“Yeah?”

“Why is there a wine bottle full of wine by my foot?”
“Oh, that.” She waves her hand indifferently. “Thought I needed a drink and then decided I didn’t. That’s when I started exercising.”

“Ah.” And the conversation’s come full circle, Angel muses.

In response, the tree flickers to life.

Chapter End Notes

Please know that this convo is not necessarily how I feel about first loves (though I did not ultimately end up with my first love). I do think it works sometimes...that people can meet their person right off the bat. I think our characters need to believe this...
“Hostile 17?” What does that even mean?” Anya asks. If they’re talking about rehabilitating demons, it makes no sense to label them hostile. Anyone knows that immediately labeling someone doesn’t help them want to be different; it just makes them defensive. Anya’s too jumpy to ask what this Riley person means by “rehabilitation.”

Xander moves almost completely in front of his girlfriend now. Who knows what the army guys know about ex-vengeance demons? “How do you know about Buffy?”

“Being the Slayer?” Riley is nervous and can’t meet anyone’s eyes. He’s sworn to secrecy by a demon he’s only just met but is putting blind – well, sort of blind – faith in. “Let’s just say we have it on good authority that she is a demon hunter.”

“On whose authority?” Buffy demands.

Hoping she doesn’t probe much further, Riley dismisses her question. “That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you have a dangerous demon in your midst, and he belongs to us.”

“Spike? Spike’s not yours. He’s with us.” She crosses her arms and faces her T.A. with a set jaw.

Spike slings his duster from one hand to the other. “She’s right, mate. I’m not yours, especially now that the chip you jammed in my head isn’t working anymore.”

Recognition washes over Riley. “Wait. Spike? Wait. Isn’t he the guy you were. . .”
“Getting married to,” Buffy finishes for him. “Got married to.” She and Spike exchange a smile. “Am married to.”

“Ohhh…” Riley shakes his head, determined to press on because this makes no sense in his wheelhouse at all. Didn’t he just learn that Slayers are supposed to kill vampires? Instead, he addresses what he can state for certain. “Actually, you’re wrong. The chip works just fine. It’s how you were located. The signal disappeared for a little while but came back stronger than ever. We just got a little . . . well, a lot sidetracked by a . . . spell.” He can’t tell them that lots of demons somehow miraculously escaped the Initiative out of the blue a few days ago. Come to think of it, that’s two sets of escapes in not so many weeks.

“Bloody hell.” Tossing aside his new-found coat, Spike impulsively rushes forward and tries to punch Riley in the jaw. His brain is suddenly filled with excruciating, skull-crushing pain that throws his head back. A scream of agony thrusts itself out of his lungs, and he sinks to the ground.

Buffy rushes to his side, squatting near and touching his temple with gentle fingers. “H-how? He’s been fighting. . . helping me.”

Riley is calm. “Who has he been fighting?”

While Spike is regrouping, Buffy thinks. “Other demons. He was hitting them just fine. No pain.”

“That’s because the chip is designed to only cause pain if he tries to hurt another human being. Think about it like declawing a cat in the front. The chip leaves them their back claws. . .” Riley clarifies but then trails off when he sees that no one around him appears impressed. “Look. I need to take Hostil – him into custody.”

“No, you don’t,” Joyce says firmly. She is secretly horrified about the metaphor that this young man just used to describe the excruciating pain that Spike just experienced. Not that Spike should have tried to hit the man though she doesn’t blame Spike for wanting to.

Riley addresses Buffy’s mother, “I do, and I will. In less than three minutes, my men are going to kick down that door and will take him by force if necessary.”

“Why are you here before the rest of your men?” Giles asks quietly.
Riley smiles at Buffy, eyes gentle. “Because I have a message for you. From Willow. She said to tell you she’s fine.”

“Willow? Where’s Willow?” Buffy asks, trying to keep from sounding frantic as she helps Spike to his feet.

Riley is happy to share this information. “It came to the Initiative’s attention from an anonymous source that Willow is a vengeance demon. Though we didn’t know such demons existed, we had to take her into custody.”

“W-what? No!” Xander protests. “She left a note that she was ‘soul searching,’ which I assumed meant code for trying-to-figure-out-how-not-to-be-a-demon after Joyce told us what happened.”

“But she’s only a demon-in-training!” Buffy disputes, now thinking that Willow’s note was probably coerced. She remembers when Sunday and her minions forced college students to leave a note that they were leaving school when they were really being eaten, leaving behind dorm room posters that became part of a hideous death collage. “She’s not even fully...”

“Actually,” Anya pipes up, hesitantly raising her hand and avoiding looking at Riley just in case he has some sort of device that can detect ex-demons, “it’s probably a good thing that they took her into custody.”

Xander whirls to face his girlfriend, desperate for her expertise. “How so?”

Anya’s eyes are bright with knowledge and gratitude for being taken seriously. “Well, think about it. The Initiative-army-guy people probably have some sort of magical dampener. I assume that’s how they keep other magical or demon types from locating them.”

“I agree with Anya. I couldn’t locate their entrance after I escaped, remember?” Spike glances down at Buffy who smiles at him with her arm around his waist. “And if Red is there, D’Hoffryn can’t find her.”

Addressing Anya’s theory about the magical dampener, Riley says, “There’s no dampener on magic per se. It’s more like a disguise for the magic. The Initiative doesn’t want to dampen the magic so much as contain it.”
“As long as they’re not doing experiments on her!” Xander interjects.

“Look,” Buffy says. “It doesn’t help to get upset with each other. It is what it is. We have to figure out what we’re going to do. But first,” she glares at Riley, “why are you helping us?”

Riley isn’t sure what to tell her. He isn’t sure himself, and lots of what he’s doing even standing in this apartment is breaking all kinds of military rules and protocols. So, he follows his heart, the heart that was raised in small town Iowa where people are kind and good and loving toward one another. . . at least the people in his family. “I care about Willow, and I don’t like how she’s been handled.”

“‘Handled’?!” Xander steps forward, and Anya touches his arm, which stays his hand.

Riley breaks eye contact with Buffy and regards Xander. “Don’t worry. I’ve made sure no one has hurt her. There have been no experiments done on her.”

“Unlike everyone else in the joint,” Spike comments, his voice hoarse.

Riley sighs. “She’s only been interviewed by Professor Walsh. She hasn’t – ”

“Professor Walsh?” It’s Buffy turn to be shocked. She can imagine her professor in charge of a bunch of graduate students but not a covert military organization that deals with demons.

Riley explains, “She’s in charge of the whole operation, and the other part of the reason I’m here is because well, Willow and . . . someone else convinced me that maybe our organization isn’t handling things the best way in Sunnydale.”

“Great,” Xander says. “Fat lot of good your change of heart helps us.”

Giles, who has been uncharacteristically quiet, steps up behind Riley and claps a firm hand on his shoulder so that Riley flinches a little. Giles says thoughtfully, “We don’t have much time, according to our lone army man, so we need a plan. Spike, I say you go with the military when they show up.”

Buffy’s response is immediate, “What? No!”
“They’ll kill him if he stays here.” Riley really wishes they would just cooperate. Buffy still just baffles him even knowing that she’s the Slayer.

Spike finds Buffy’s hand and tucks his cool palm against her warm one. “Love, he’s right. Let me go in. Infiltrate from the inside. Check on Red.”

Buffy’s heart skips a beat at the determination in his voice that seems to be asking her to trust him. Damn it. She already trusts him; he doesn’t have to do this to prove himself to her, but she can’t say all that because they don’t have time. “How are you going to do that locked in a cell?”

Spike’s eyes take measure of Riley. “I’m assuming he’ll have my back in there like Willow.”

Riley cringes inside because he’s colluding with another vampire, but in the end, Riley acquiesces because he has to stay true to himself, and his truth outweighs how he feels about the irritating vampire before him, who is gazing at Buffy with adoration for some reason. “Fine. Also, I have this for you.” He holds out a small black device to Buffy, moving back again after she takes it as if he’s a little afraid of her.

Buffy studies the device. It has a small screen with a blinking yellow dot and the faint outlines of the rooms of Giles’s apartment. “What is it?”

“It’s a tracking device,” Riley explains. “And this here is for Hostile – Spike.” There’s a tiny button-sized round object the size of a nickel between his thumb and forefinger. He tosses it at the vampire, and Spike neatly catches it. “Keep it on you. Then, Buffy will know where you and Willow are. When he moves, the dot will blink.”

Spike slips the device in his jeans pocket. He addresses Buffy, “See, love. You’ll know right where I am.”

Buffy clutches the machine and her husband’s hand.

Riley continues, “I’ll be back here to discuss strategy as soon as I get him . . . settled.”

Before anyone else can respond, the sound of running feet pounds toward them. Riley shakes off
Giles’s hand and strides forward to grab Spike by the arm. Buffy doesn’t bother glaring at Riley because she’s focused on Spike. She squeezes his hand and breaks physical contact, green eyes finding and holding his blue ones, as her mother guides her gently away. Riley binds Spike’s hands behind his back. The vampire smirks and acts indifferent as the young man slips a black hood over his head, rendering him faceless.

Within seconds, Giles’s front door is kicked completely off its hinges, and cold winter air rolls in as a dozen men dressed in black from head to toe filter into the apartment, guns raised at Spike.

No one says a word or dares move a muscle. Joyce keeps supportive hands on Buffy whose fists are balling at her sides.

Buffy wishes more than anything that this wasn’t happening. God, what if she loses him just after they found each other. Guns are not to be messed with though, and the sheer number of them keep her from running up to Spike, ripping off the mask over his head, and kissing him for luck.

One of the men lowers his weapon and flips up his visor, nodding succinctly at Riley. He unlatches a high-tech walkie-talkie from his belt, presses a button and speaks into the receiver, “Hostile 17 is secure. I repeat, Hostile 17 is secure. Over.”

Spike is tempted to snort because he could very easily break free, but he bites his tongue.

Professor Walsh’s crackly voice returns, “Roger that. Good work. Bring him in.”

Riley gives Spike a push from behind to get him moving, and the men surround him as they guide him away.

As Riley trails behind, he addresses Giles in a business-like tone, “Sorry about your door. Had to be done this way. Hostile 17 is a dangerous creature. Had to make sure you were safe.”

Giles gives him an even stare. “Right.”

After the army guys and Spike are cleared out, Xander speaks first, worry in his voice, “So now what? We’re trusting Spike and this Riley guy to help us out? This isn’t the best plan we’ve ever come up with.”
“It’s not like we have a lot of options.” Buffy makes clear eye contact with Xander so that he knows she means her next words. “And I trust Spike. After what we went through together in that crossroads dimension, that trust is unequivocal. Not sure about Riley, but Willow seems to like him.”

“I trust Spike, too,” Joyce adds, moving next to her daughter to show her solidarity.

Although Xander really wants to say that to Buffy – and apparently Joyce – the trust is unequivocal but not to anyone else, he chooses to ignore the can of worms that is Spike. The vampire did help Xander with his Anya problem, which is a small something. Instead, he refers to Riley. “Liking the guy hardly seems like a winning endorsement.”

Anya pipes up, hinting at what she noticed earlier, “Spike cares about Buffy, so he’ll help us.”

Now, Xander protests, “Can he even care about Buffy? Being soulless and all?”

Before Buffy can protest, Anya snaps, “Of course, he can! Demons and vampires fall in love all the time. I can’t tell you how many vengeance spells I performed for them.”

“Sounds really romantic,” Xander snipes.

Glaring at Xander, Anya holds her ground. “Actually, humans called on my services more than demons by a mile.”

Struggling to set the door back into place, Giles really can’t take any more of this debate. “Squabbling is not going to help the situation, and I could really use some help with the bloody door.” Buffy hastens forward and helps Giles prop the door, effectively shutting out the cold. “Now. We need to focus and do some planning before Riley comes back.”

Buffy, Xander, and Anya cast guilty glances at one another.

Joyce speaks, “Our goal is to get Willow back, right? And help her with her vengeance demon situation? Anya, have you figured anything out in your research on D’Hoffryn?”
Buffy knows her mom has stepped things up, but this... this is just... Buffy has no words. She nonchalantly claps her mouth shut when she discovers it hanging open.

Anya nods, arms behind her back. “There’s nothing about a trial period, and I’ve never known D’Hoffryn to grant anyone a trial. He must have some other motive behind this. The only thing I can think to do is call him here. I’ve always sort of been his favorite. Maybe he’ll grant me a favor?”

“In exchange for what?” Xander asks. “I mean, demons don’t just grant favors without a catch.”

“He’s right, Anya,” Giles agrees, traversing the room to pick up one of the volumes that Anya was perusing earlier. “You would be putting your life at risk. We should do some more research.”

“Is there a way to trap him? Make him want to convert Willow back?” Joyce asks, leaning against the back of the sofa. Her head is throbbing again.

An idea pops into Xander’s mind. “What if we called him forth now and told him that Willow went to another dimension and is refusing to do his bidding?”

Anya shakes her head. “No. D’Hoffryn wouldn’t care. He’d just wait her out. He’s old... really old and patient.”

Not really listening, Buffy is still considering what her mom said. “His power is sourced in magic, right? What if we found a way to bind his power somehow? Blackmail him into changing Willow back.”

Giles’s mind flashes to Eyghon and he and his friends’ failed attempt to harness that particular demon’s powers. “Too risky. We don’t know how powerful D’Hoffryn is.”

Eyes widening, Buffy remembers what she told Willow before everything went haywire with the other dimension. “I told her to do bad vengeance. A-and she said she couldn’t do bad vengeance or he’d kill her. She also said that if he didn’t like her work at the end of the trial period, he’d let her go without penalty.”

Anya perks considerably. “That’s it!”
“What?” Xander asks, unable to keep the jitteriness out of his voice.

Anya rushes to explain. “D’Hoffryn can’t do that. It goes completely against his own code.”

“What do you mean?”

Anya huffs at the interruption. She is already impatient with herself because she should have made this connection as soon as the trial period was mentioned. She can’t believe how much she doesn’t remember about D’Hoffryn anymore, and she’s only been human for a little while. “It means that he screwed up, and if we call him here, and he’s called on it, he has to reverse it. As far as I know, he has to follow his own code, or the whole system falls apart. It’s the way his magic works. Hence, the need for employee annual training, etc.”

Xander is still confused. “Why would he do that? Go against protocol, especially with you around to call him on it?”

“He must really want her in his fold,” Giles hypothesizes. “And he probably thought we wouldn’t survive the other dimension.”

“Yes, he rarely goes to such lengths to bring someone in. Actually, he probably hasn’t been this excited since he recruited me.” Anya surprises herself by experiencing a flash of jealousy.

Xander pops the knuckles in his left hand. “So let’s get cracking. Do your spell and get him here, so we can save Willow.”

Anya frowns. “That won’t work.”

“We why not?” Buffy asks.

Anya gazes at Buffy with tolerance. The Slayer helped her out with Xander, after all. “Willow sort of has to be here in person with me to verify what he said and for me to call him on it. It’ll force him to take it seriously, and he’ll be more likely to reverse his magic.”

“She’s right,” Giles confirms.
Xander only hears one part. “More likely?”

Anya repeats, “More likely.”

“There are no guarantees,” Giles agrees.

Xander feels sick to his stomach. “Yeah.”

Buffy’s mind can’t think of any other ideas, so she asks, “There’s no other alternative plan we can make?”

Anya doesn’t say anything, her expression grim.

“Fuck,” Xander says. His eyes flick to Joyce. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Joyce is far from worried about cursing. In seemingly the blink of an eye, her life is very different, and getting upset about cursing is the farthest thing from her mind. Finding a way to rescue Willow and Spike and making more time with the people she cares about are top of the priority list. There’s also the little fact that Buffy basically gave her permission to date Rupert. The thought tinges her cheeks pink.

“We probably shouldn’t tell Riley about this plan. We don’t need the Initiative tangling with the likes of D’Hoffryn,” Giles comments.

“Agreed,” Buffy says. “Speaking of the Initiative. Weird name. Not very creative. How do we want to handle things with Riley? I mean, it seems like he’s not agreeing with the way things are being done with the Initiative, and there are innocent demons being hurt by their experiments.”

Xander closes his eyes in an effort not to say anything.

Buffy catches his reaction and continues, “Like those Dynas demons. Spike said that they experimented on the one that came here. They did something to her offspring.”
“Spike is right,” Giles verifies. “The Dynas do only come here to produce young.”

“You cut her!” Xander points out, almost accusatory.

Holding up his hands, Giles gets defensive. “It’s was only an accident. I was going for the Phut who was coming after you if I recall correctly.”

Buffy interrupts, “We should talk with Riley. See what he thinks is feasible. I don’t want to release a bunch of vicious demons willy nilly because well, I don’t want to do that clean up job, but I don’t like the idea of experimenting on life forms.”

“Even if they’re more than likely going to try to kill us?” Xander asks almost accusatory.

“Even if,” Buffy says. “If they try to kill us or anyone else, I’ll kill them.”

Xander shakes his head. “Fine. Let’s just see what Riley has to say.”

Buffy remembers her outburst to Spike about showing her own weakness to her friends and family and decides to take a risk. At the thought, unexpected tears fill her eyes. Great. She’s turning into a regular water works girl. Her right hand finds her wedding ring, and she twists it for strength. “Xander, I know you’re scared. I am, too. I don’t know what the right choice is, but I want to know all the options and have a clearer sense of what’s happening before we just decide to blow the whole place up. A-and I need all of your help to do figure things out. The priority – my priority – is rescuing the people I care about.”

Xander softens at her tears and crosses the room to give her a side hug. “Okay. I can handle that.”

Joyce joins her daughter and hugs her from the other side. “We’re here, honey. You’re not alone in this.”

Buffy blinks away the tears. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Let’s do a little more research,” suggests Giles, flipping a page that he’s been skimming. He isn’t sure it will help with the problem of the Initiative, but one never knows what one might discover.
between the pages of books.
Spike feels like he’s been herded along for hours. He doesn’t know who this Captain America wannabe thinks he is, shoving him and issuing periodic “move it” commands. All Spike knows is that the posturing interrupts his concentration. Also, thinking about the crush the git has on his wife is driving Spike to distraction. He sets his jaw; he needs to focus if he’s going to survive.

Last time Spike was dragged into this bloody situation, he was electrocuted and unconscious. Now, although the idiot effectively blinded Spike, his other senses are very much at his disposal.

So, he takes a deep breath and tries to quiet his mind, using a trick Dru taught him, a trick which he occasionally had to coax her to use when she became overwhelmed during her fragile times.

The first thing Spike notices is the cold breeze cutting through the night air and moving over his already cool skin. Even though the cloth over his head mufflest sound, it’s thin, and he takes note of the number of heartbeats and intakes of breath he can hear. Based on his count, he doesn’t think any of his captors have peeled off yet. Guess they don’t want him to escape.

The rest of the world is eerily quiet, a product of the curfew and that period of the night when everyone but insomniacs and vampires are lost to dreams. The army issued boots clump along on concrete and then crunch as they flatten the well-manicured grass of lawns and a small field or two. He can vaguely smell the scent of human sweat, and when they enter the cemetery, the faint omnipresent odor of decay and dead bodies slips past the cloth filter. From the sound of the gate squeaking, he knows that the cemetery is the one closest to the university campus.

The lawn is better and more evenly shorn on campus grounds, and now, the men begin to take their leave of him, no doubt slipping into the shadows to hide from any co-eds traversing the sidewalks or peeping out of their dorm room windows.

Soon, there are three, and they’re slowing down. Something changes in their breathing and heart
rates, which seems unusual for army men. Aren’t soldiers trained to have control over their autonomic nervous systems?

Without warning, the hood is ripped off Spike’s head, and Riley towers in front of him, his face a neutral mask. Before Spike can react, the farm boy shoves a piece of wood in his mouth. What the fuck?

“So you don’t bite off your tongue,” Riley explains as if he’s describing something obvious.

Spike vaguely thinks that the need for this makes no sense. He swears he catches a bit of an apology in the young man’s eyes before lightening courses through Spike’s entire body, just as it did months before when he woke up with a new-fangled chip in his brain. He emits a half-growl of frustration and half-howl of pain before he loses consciousness.

* * *

Spike’s brain comes back online, and the first thing he notices beyond the pain in his body is the almost inaudible hum of the invisible electric wall that hems the demons into the Initiative’s cells. His face is planted against the cold tile, which he knows without looking is white. He sighs and opens his eyes a slit, squinting against the bright fluorescent lights. Oh, the better to see you with, he thinks inanely. He recognizes the corridor he escaped down... or one exactly like it.

Pushing his palms against the smooth surface of the floor, he heaves himself up so that he’s sitting back on his heels. As the wave of dizziness passes, he takes in his stark cell, the empty hallway, and the stupid port in the ceiling where drugged blood pops out.

Great. Back to square one. So much for promises. Should have known better than to trust a sodding goodie two shoes military man.

When Spike’s world is steady enough, he stands and pushes as close as he dares against the electrical barrier, peering up and down the hall. He spies a uniformed gent to the left several cells down. If this bloke is stuck with guard duty, he must have drawn the short stick. Maybe he’d be more likely to give him something. He never wished he had Dru’s power of entralling others before, but it might’ve come in handy about now.

“Hey! Hey, you!” he calls, trying his best to sound completely obnoxious. “Yeah! I’m talking to you!”
At attention with his big black gun across his chest, the soldier ignores him, stares straight ahead, and remains unmoving. No reaction whatsoever.

What is this? The sodding Queen’s Guard? Spike tries again, “Think you have the wrong country, mate! I’m talking to you! Aren’t you supposed to be guarding us, making sure nothing happens to us, assisting us if we need... assisting?” God, that sounds so idiotic. “Well, I need assistance!” He bellows the last words, and finally, finally, the bleeding guard glances his way. Not a turn of the head, not a muscle on the body moved. But there sodding well was a flick of the eyeball. “Yeah! I saw that!”

Without any further reaction, the guard pivots and heads toward a door at the end of the hall.

Balls. “I need to find a redheaded bint by the name of Willow! Average height! Practices magic! Cast a sodding spell and made me fall in love with the Slayer... sort of... It’s complicated...”

Spike trails off as the berk disappears from sight. The door closes heavily behind him, and Spike hears some sort of latch – no doubt some form of interlocking latching system that a demon can’t kick down – slip into place.

“Damn it.” His body is still in recovery mode from being electrocuted, so he doesn’t even have the energy to punctuate his curse with a fit of temper. Instead, he slumps against the wall and slides down to the floor, his forearms resting defeated atop his knees. Supposed to be helping Buffy and all he bloody well did is get himself locked into detention with no way out.

Spike stews in silence for several seconds, not even trying to think of anything but his defeat.

Then, a soft, tentative voice floats over the airwaves, “Spike?”

Closing his eyes in a mix of relief and utter frustration, Spike leans his head back against the wall that he obviously shares with the witch. The soldier came through – sort of. “Hello, Red.”

Willow stares at the wall between her and Spike. She had been sleeping when he started shouting. Sleep was all it seemed like she did these days. Even though she’s hiding from D’Hoffryn here and is too afraid to teleport out, she feels like a prisoner, and with the being treated like a prisoner, she kind of is one. Being a prisoner made time blur together, and unlike in human prison, there was no time spent in a prison yard for fresh air. She was good as in ad seg – she remembers what it was
called from that prison documentary her dad watched on TV once. They only put the most
dangerous inmates in ad seg. She doesn’t feel dangerous. In fact, she feels the opposite of dangerous,
whatever that is. But Spike is here now, and that’s a change. . . sort of a welcome one, and she never
thought she’d think that. “W-what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.”

Spike’s voice seems to be coming from lower down, so Willow guesses that he’s sitting against the
barrier between them. Her chest hitching a little with emotion, she turns away and slides down to join
him. He’s the first friendly. . . well, familiar voice that she’s heard in days other than Riley’s, and
she’s not sure he’s such a friendly type anymore. “By getting locked up?”

Irritation flares through him. She doesn’t have any right to be funny. She’s the reason they’re in this
pickle. “Yeah, well, it wasn’t really my choice.”

So no to her attempt at light conversation. She switches gears to a serious tone. “What do you
mean?”

“Your pal, Riley, showed up. Said he had a message from you. Didn’t give me a choice about
coming here, but I didn’t put up a fight,” Spike explains.

“Why didn’t you?” Willow hugs her knees to her chest.

“Because. . .” He hesitates, undecided about what to tell her about the changes in his relationship
with the Slayer. “Because Buffy’s worried about you. Wanted me to look in on you here until they
come for the both of us.”

Willow bites her lip. God, she’s such an idiot. She’s been so consumed by herself here in this place
and with almost being a vengeance demon that she forgot that the last time she saw her best friend,
Buffy was newly married to Spike and about to jump into a portal to go after Giles and her other best
that other dimension?”

Spike glares even though the witch can’t see him. “You know your magic trick got everyone into a
hell of a lot of trouble. We could’ve all been killed.”
Tears flow down Willow’s cheeks now. She can’t help it. She should have known better than to cast a spell like the one she did. “I-I know. Did anyone...get hurt?” She couldn’t bear it if anyone was permanently scarred.

Spike sighs. He remembers how Red tried to comfort him when he discovered he couldn’t bite her. Tit for tat. He softens his tone. “No, no one’s permanently injured though everyone’s more than a bit changed.”

“Changed? Changed how?” Change could mean a lot of things, many of them of the bad.

“It was a demon crossroads dimension. Lots of demon types passing through. It wasn’t exactly a hop, skip, and a jump to get home, Red,” he admonishes. “What do you think?”

Heart thumping in her chest, Willow’s mind skips past the physical. “So, are you saying everyone was emotionally hurt?”

How the hell is Spike supposed to answer this one? He and Buffy are more than a little different with one another. He can’t think about her now without wanting to alternately make sure she’s okay and shag her until she can’t walk. Joyce is a wreck about her future but more than a little smitten with Rupert. Demon girl’s voice is stronger, and her boy, well, he’s a work in progress. All in all, no one’s too poorly, but Spike doesn’t want to tell Red that because she doesn’t deserve to know all the details. “Yeah. Yeah, you could say that.”

“Oh.” Her whisper is almost inaudible. She stares at her hands. What has she done? “Oh no.”

“Yeah. ‘Oh no,’ is right! You didn’t think about how your actions could impact the people you supposedly care about.” Bugger, does he sound like Rupert again?

Willow puts her face in her hands and sobs.

Tears get Spike every time, and he tempers his approach. “Look, I’ve made plenty of mistakes in my time. Rushed into things without considering the consequences. It’s part of who I am, but it’s not part of who you are. You’re just in pain ’cause your wolf skipped town.”

Willow quiets, but her voice breaks, “How can I come back from this?”
“From what? Making a mistake? Red, in your world, you have it made. You have friends who love you. Just waiting to forgive you.” Spike suddenly thinks that he wouldn’t be so easily forgiven if he made the same sort of mistake. Not if. When. When it comes down to it, he doesn’t think he’ll be forgiven for past transgressions either. And should he be? In the past, he didn’t give a damn. And now? He cares far more than he ever thought he would about being a part of Buffy’s world.

Willow shakes her head vehemently even though the vampire can’t see her. “No. In case you didn’t remember, I’m a vengeance demon now.”

Spike catches the tone in her voice, the hardness she’s using to disguise her vulnerability. “Don’t seem very demon-like to me.”

“W-what do you mean?” She holds her breath. God, her whole body aches so much.

Seems like he might need to jar her out of her rigid thinking with a bit of exaggeration. “Demons don’t typically sob their hearts out. They’re usually ripping others’ hearts out.”

“Well, it sounds like I pretty much did,” she says quietly.

“Take a deep breath, slower on the exhale, and then, tell me, how do you feel?”

Willow follows his command, inhaling and then slowly breathing out, paying attention to her emotions. “Different. I... I feel like something inside me is driving me to seek vengeance for those who are... misunderstood and mistreated... those who are unseen.”

Now, that little tidbit is interesting. Spike files it away for later consideration. “Makes sense given what I know about you. Want to be understood and seen.”

“Yeah.” Willow blushes. “Different than Anya. I don’t feel the need to get vengeance for scorned women.”

Spike continues, “But what I’m really driving at here is something else. What do you feel?”
Willow makes a confused face. “I don’t know what you mean. I feel like myself but different. Driven.”

“Ah ha!” Good God, he’s still being a shrink for the Scoobies again. Someone should really pay him for his time.

“Ah ha, what?” Willow asks in bewilderment.

“Like yourself. That. That is the key, Red.”

Willow feels like she’s in a class and forgot to study for the final exam. “What do you mean? The key to what?”

He sighs in aggravation. He has to spell every sodding thing out to Buffy’s pals. “Demon-human hybrids don’t lose all sense of who they are. Well, some do. It’s like anything else. Timing affects things. Factors like hunger and the need to survive obscure or dangerous situations. The personality before the change affects things. The strength of the demon affects things. But when it comes down to it, you didn’t lose yourself. And that means, you still have wiggle room. You still have a choice in how you handle things no matter how driven you might feel.”

“Like you?” Willow’s question sounds genuine.

“Of course, like me! Like every other demon-human hybrid out there. Like Buffy, for example!” Well, fuck all, he’s bloody well revealed the Slayer’s news. Brilliant move, Spike.

Huh?! “Like Buffy?”

“Buffy’s a human-demon hybrid, too. Where did you think her strength originated from?”

This is huge in Willow’s mind, and she can’t wrap her mind around it right away, so instead, she blurts, “I-I hadn’t really thought about it.”

He wants to say that’s par for the course, but he stops himself because that won’t help the witch see. “And just like every other one of us, she has a choice in how she uses her power. Buffy likes the
fight. Part of her secretly likes the violence even though at this point, she probably wouldn’t admit it because she’s too busy trying to be her definition of good. And you know what? That’s okay because that’s where she is right now. She needs time to figure it out. . . to figure out the grey. To figure out who she is.” He shuts up then because he’s said much more than he intended, and he realizes that he loves the Slayer. No. He loves Buffy Summers and not because she’s the Slayer. When he thinks about it like that, his unmoving heart aches.

“Something’s different.” Willow can’t quite put her finger on it.

“What do you mean?” Spike feels like Red might completely see through him and tries to divert.

Willow considers that Spike really sucks at diversionary tactics. “About what you’re saying. Do you. . . I mean, you care a lot about Buffy now, huh?

No use denying it. The bint’s already figured it out. “I do.”

“You love her.” The conclusion doesn’t surprise Willow. She knows he loved Drusilla. Willow saw firsthand how heartbroken he was when she cheated on him. His lame attempt to cast a love spell on his ex wasn’t exactly well thought out. Willow decides maybe she has more in common with him than she realized.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I still love. I still love Buffy and Xander and Giles. I still love Oz. I’m a demon or partly one, and I still love.” Willow knows she’s repeating herself, but she can’t help it. She loves being able to still say she loves others. There’s relief in that.

“Good on you then.”

“Therefore, you can still love even if you’re a vampire. And you love Buffy.” Willow makes another connection. “I say that because that spell enhanced what was already there.”

“How do you know that?”
Willow reflects, “I feel it now... now that I’m partly a vengeance demon. The nuance in the spell is obvious. I couldn’t feel it when I was human me. Spike, I know I have a choice in what I do, but how do I get out of this with D’Hoffryn? I don’t want to wreak vengeance on others. I want to be me again.”

Spike briefly wonders what his life would have been like if Dru hadn’t sired him, if he had said no when she offered him immortality. He’d be long dead and gone, and right about now, he’s glad he made the choice that he did. “I don’t know. Have you granted any wishes yet? Done any ‘bad vengeance’ like Buffy suggested?”

“No and no. I’ve been kinda weepy.” God, she’s sick to death of crying.

“All in keeping with the Red I know.”

“Hey!”

He amends, “Well, the one of late.”

“Better.” She pauses. “I have to figure out something though because if I get to the end of the trial and I haven’t done any vengeance, he’ll kill me.”

“That’s why soldier boy brought you here.”


“Riley.”

“Did you know he grew up on a farm in Iowa?” Willow comments.

“A soldier and a farmer, eh?” Spike adds, “I’ve run across his ‘wholesome’ type before.” Spike doesn’t add “when Dru wanted to eat a cow on a farm.”

That makes no sense to Willow, but she doesn’t question it. Spike is pretty observant. “Riley is trying
to protect me. I mean, I think he’s kept Professor Walsh from doing any experiments on me. And I’m glad. I-I mean, I’ve seen what they do to the demons that go by.” She shudders at the memory of the agonized cries. “It’s really awful. I can’t even really talk about it.”

“She better not lay a hand on you,” Spike growls protectively.

“She hasn’t, but she did come ‘talk’ with me. It was more like a weird interrogation as if she’d never met me before. . . as if I hadn’t just been sitting in her lecture a few days ago. And she told me about her proj. . .” Willow trails off. Her heart skips a beat, and she swallows her words. Speak of the devil.

“Red?”

A middle-aged woman with short blonde hair appears on the other side of Spike’s invisible fence. She’s not dressed like the soldiers or the doctors whom he’s seen here. Her stern face is unsmiling, and her hands are behind her back as she stares at him with daggers in her eyes.

Spike scrambles to his feet, where he stands awkwardly like a monkey in a cage being stared at by his captor.

She addresses him, quiet but angry and vengeful sounding. “Hostile 17 has returned from his brief sojourn into freedom, I see. Lucky for us, your chip is still functioning properly. I’m Dr. Walsh. You and I are going to have a conversation.”

Then, she smiles. The expression seems almost unnatural and is almost pasted on her face as if she has never experienced a moment of joy. It’s terrifying.

And Spike rarely feels afraid.
In keeping with her new outlook of more Zen and less wine and in the interest of calming her vampire down, Cordelia purposefully sits cross-legged on the sectional with her back straight, arms loose in her lap. Closing her eyes, she practices her deep breathing.

Inhale, hold, exhale slowly. Inhale, hold, exhale slowly. Inhale, hold, exhale slowly.

Angel’s muscles are tense after what they just watched. Now does not seem like the best time to meditate. There are too many ways this next part could go horribly wrong. He can only change so much, and it’s up to Spike, Buffy, and the others to survive it. Not having much control gives him metaphorical hives. “What are you doing?”

A line of irritation appears between her eyebrows, and she side whispers, “I’m practicing being Zen. One with the trees.”

Angel rolls his eyes. “One with the trees? Okay, I did not teach you that.”

Her lids remain stubbornly closed. “You didn’t, but it doesn’t mean it that a little deep breathing and pretend won’t help you.” She breaks her stance to whack the back of her hand on his thigh. “Get into position already.”

Snagging her hand, he kisses her palm and then draws up his long legs. Good thing this sectional has wide seats. The backs of his hands resting on his knees, he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. It’s no use. All he sees is the image of Spike with fear in his eyes. His grandchilde always did wear his emotions all over his face. “It’s not working.”

Cordy opens one eye and peers at him. “You didn’t even try.”

“All I see when I close my eyes is Spike’s face.” Despite the years of rivalry and animosity between Spike and Angel, he doesn’t want Spike to die. Well, technically, Spike is already dead in his timeline, but Angel doesn’t want him to die in the timeline he’s trying to fix.
Cordy recloses her eyes. “That Walsh lady is pretty awful.”

Angel frets, “What if she kills Spike? Will I get a reset?”

“I have no idea.” Cordelia opens both eyes and turns her whole body to face Angel, keeping her legs crossed. “If so, this would be like one of those really bad choose your own adventure books.”

“What?”

“Choose your own adventure books? You don’t know... you know what? Never mind.” This time, she picks up his hand. “If, and that’s a big if because Spike is apparently resilient, something terrible happens to Spike and/or Buffy, I will advocate for you with the PTB or whoever’s in charge to have a bit of a rewind.”

“PTB?”

Cordelia strokes his arm and smiles. “The Powers that Be. The ones I think are in charge of this shit show.”

“Trusting them is like trusting a Barnably demon not to eat your baby.”

Cordy makes a face. “A Barnably demon? Like a purple dinosaur demon?”

“What? No. They’re... you know what? Never mind.” It doesn’t matter that she doesn’t know what a Barnably demon is, but she is cute when she wrinkles her nose like that. “Thank you for being willing to advocate. And you’re right. Spike is like that Energizer Bunny. He’s not going anywhere.” Cordy raises an eyebrow at Angel, and he shrugs. “It’s a pop culture reference.”

“Let’s hope he’s like the... Energizer Bunny. What the hell is Buffy going to do? I mean, how are they going to dismantle the Initiative? What’s she going to do with all those demons?”

Angel gives her a little smug look. “Now that, I have a plan for.”
Uh oh. “What do you mean?”

“Give me a little credit. I did a little something last time when I talked with Riley. Give me the power to travel by popping in and out, and I can go more than one place.”

She smirks at him. “Well, aren’t you fancy. What’d you do?”

“You’ll see.”

“There’s enough suspense already without you holding back,” she informs him.

He grins without reply.

Cordy growls in frustration and turns back around, resuming her meditative stance. “I am one with the universe.”
Chapter Eighteen, An Unexpected Turn of Events, Part Two

Chapter Notes

An interlude and chapter today...

AUTHOR’S WARNING: Torture implied in this chapter. I originally tried to write Maggie Walsh and Spike’s scene and got about one page in and couldn’t stomach it, so only implication, no showing.

HUGE THANK YOU to Ceruleansoul for her beta help and discussion of the events coming...I was so nervous about this section of the fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen, An Unexpected Turn of Events, Part Two

Buffy and her posse are ready when Riley shows up.

The research didn’t really help them all that much, but it did keep them occupied and less likely to squabble. Xander fixed the door so that they could lock it again and shut out the cold. Anya prepared her spell for contacting D’Hoffryn, and Giles designed a binding spell that was unlikely to hold the demon but could buy them some time if need be. Buffy organized weapons for everyone while periodically checking Spike’s location; she isn’t sure seeing his dot unmoving is very reassuring, though if it hasn’t winked out it means he hasn’t been dusted. Joyce helped sort the medical supplies and provided snacks.

When the firm knock comes, Buffy peers through the peep hole, glimpsing two other heads – male and female – besides Riley’s hovering near the door. They’re all clothed in black, making their heads look even more float-y.

When Buffy opens the door, Riley isn’t smiling but isn’t unfriendly either. “May we come in?”

“Depends. How are Spike and Willow?”

Riley’s response is quick and decisive. “They’re both fine. I put Spike in the adjacent cell and left strict orders for my men to keep an eye out for them and to leave them alone.”
Buffy isn’t sure she completely trusts Riley, but she feels a small measure of alleviation in her stress at the surety of his words. “Is any one of you a vampire?” she asks brightly.

Riley’s face doesn’t even shift. He wonders how she can she possibly make jokes right now. “No.”

“Okay,” she returns, her tone now flat. “Come in.” She steps back and allows them to pass.

Peeling his glasses off, Giles rises from his seat at the desk. “Who are you?”

“This is Special Agent Natalia and Commander George. Don’t worry. They’re on our side. I can’t tell you their last names for national security reasons. George here comes from a special branch of the military that oversees these special projects. Natalia works here with me. She vouched for my report.”

Buffy wonders what other projects are out there that no one knows about.

Her young face unhardened, the Hispanic woman – Natalia – speaks up, “There are more of us on the inside that disagree with Dr. Walsh’s practices. They’re on alert and ready to assist.”

“How many are we talking?” Xander asks, his mind automatically jumping to tactical statistics despite remembering little else of his time spent as an army guy during the Halloween that his costume overtook him.

“Thirty-six,” Riley says.

Xander crosses his arms. “Out of how many?”

“Three hundred. But all of them are under George. He just has to say the word, and the plug is pulled on the project.”

“But you can’t just pull the plug,” Buffy protests. “We don’t know how many demons are captives. Or if they’re all Sunnydale residents.”

“Records indicate that there are about fifty-six demons that originated from different locations in the
US and other countries,” George adds.

“Oh wow.” This is worse than she thought. Buffy’s stomach sinks. How is she supposed to handle this? And are George, Natalia, and the others willing to let her have Willow and Spike back?

Luckily, Xander remembers one of the questions they came up with. “Why do you even need us in this situation? I mean, this is your project.”

“Good question,” George says, green eyes flashing. “Riley here has just filled us in on what a Vampire Slayer is and how they help the world. We have no desire to interfere with your business or decisions. We know the problems that inevitably come from stepping too far into worlds we have no business being in, but we would appreciate the help if things get out of hand. And they very well may as there are quite a few – we aren’t sure how many – soldiers who are loyal to Maggie.”

“Who?” Giles asks.

“Professor Walsh,” Buffy informs him.

“Oh. Thank you, Buffy.” He then addresses George. “We will gladly help with what resources we have if you return our comrades to us.”

George isn’t flustered by this. “You’re speaking of the vengeance demon and the vampire?”

“Willow and Spike,” Buffy corrects.

“What does a vengeance demon do? Your friend is reportedly not very physically strong. Your vampire is soulless, and from what I hear, he is helping you.” George appears bemused by the fact that Buffy and company work with other demon-types.

Anya opens her mouth to speak, but Xander reaches for her hand and squeezes. She shoots him a little glance, her eyes flashing with anger at being cut off, but she closes her mouth when she sees his pleading look, his eyes telling her that his reaction is about protecting her. She gives him a small smile and squeezes his hand in return.

Giles remains firm. “We just want them back. Intact. We will gladly help you with knowledge about the kinds of demons in your facility after this whole situation is resolved.” He briefly looks at Buffy.
This is the issue that divides the group. Buffy, Joyce, and Anya are on the side of being judicious with the demons while Xander remains firmly in the destroy-them-all camp. Giles himself is unsure but leaning toward throwing in with the women. He also knows that Buffy should not have all these decisions on her shoulders. She said as much in their conversation before Riley showed back up. “But we cannot be responsible for all the mistakes that have been made by the Initiative.”

George nods. “We don’t expect you to be. That’s why I’m here. Riley and his comrades will be making some changes and shifting the nature of the work. There are other ways to learn about and deal with dangerous demon types without doing inhumane experiments on them.”

“Are you going to stay in Sunnydale?” Anya asks with trepidation.

Riley shakes his head. “No, the plan is to clear out. Leave you to guard the Hellmouth and pursue missions in other places.”

Buffy is surprised. “You know about the Hellmouth?”

Natalia cocks her head. “We were all taught about it in basic training for this mission. Why?”

“I didn’t think the US government knew about hellmouths though I guess that makes sense. I didn’t know you knew about demons.”

“Well, we didn’t know about the Slayer until well, now,” Riley offers.

“Excuse me?” Joyce raises her hand halfway.

“Yes, ma’am,” George says gently.

“How are you going to decide what to do with the demons that are left over in the Initiative project?”

Riley circumvents George because he doesn’t feel like feeding Buffy a bullshit party line, not when he thinks about his concern for Willow. “The plan has always been to blow up the facility, demons and all, if things went south.”
“Wouldn’t that cause huge problems for the university and all the students?”

“No,” George doesn’t even sound remotely annoyed by the revelation Riley just made. “The facility is designed so that the explosions would be absorbed by the underground structure. The most disturbance the students would experience would feel like a minor earthquake.”

“I don’t like that plan,” Buffy says, really wishing that Willow and Spike were here now where she could see and touch them.

“We may not have much of a choice,” Riley admits, “because Professor Walsh could activate the system, too, if she feels like she’s losing control of the program.”

Natalia snorts. “She’s too narcissistic to do that to her pet project.”

“What pet project?” Buffy asks.

Before anyone can answer Buffy’s question, there’s another knock at the door. This time, the knock is made up of a burst of staccato beats... like a short musical riff.

Alarm fills Buffy’s chest, and she returns to the door, peering out. This time, instead of commandos on the doorstep, a tall green demon with red horns sways back on his heels. He’s smiling and looking around, arms behind the back of his bright mauve suit.

What the hell? Buffy decides to take a chance because the demon looks friendly enough, and she swings open the door to the cold air, making sure to keep her arm firmly on the inner side so that she can shut him out if need be. “Um, may I help you?”

The green demon smiles at her, his red lips a sharp contrast to his very white teeth. “Oh, hi there, peanut. I’ve been asked to come offer you – Buffy the Vampire Slayer – my services. My name is Lorne.” He sticks out his hand to shake hers.

“And who sent you?” Though she ignores his attempt at manners, Buffy is completely skeptical, but there’s something in the demon’s manner that keeps her from slamming the door in his face.
He withdraws his hand when it’s obvious she’s not going to shake his, but his grin widens nevertheless. “I was told that you’d ask that. Very smart of you, actually, especially since we aren’t in Caritas.”

“In what?”

“My karaoke bar in L.A. I have a strict ‘no violence’ policy no matter what brand of demon or human or other you are.” He makes a little cross with his bright green fingers to illustrate his intolerance of aggression.

“That’s lovely.” Buffy’s sarcasm creeps in because her patience is thin. “Who sent you?”

“Cordelia, of course. Er, she was a dark-haired lady. Quite beautiful in the white dress. She looked a bit like Princess Leia without those,” Lorne waves one hand beside his ear, “funny-looking buns on the side of her head.”

Buffy rolls her eyes. Future Cordelia strikes again. “Of course.”

Lorne shivers and rubs his arms. “If you’d let me in, kumquat, I’ll happily explain further.”

Buffy is amused that he references food in his nicknames, and the future Cordy was right about the portals. Plus, it’s cold, and she could use all the help she can get. “Come in.”

The very demon-looking demon steps into Giles’s apartment, eyes roving all around as he takes in the décor and menagerie of people. Buffy notices that Riley and Xander look slightly nauseous at the sight of the obvious demon in their midst.

“Cozy,” Lorne comments, regarding the décor. He looks at Giles. “A Watcher’s domain, no doubt.”

“What gave it away?” Giles asks, slightly amused.

Lorne shrugs and says thoughtfully, nodding and pointing at each piece of Giles’s world. “The
warm, earthy tones. The yellow lighting casting pools of light in the shadows. The piles of ancient
texts and books on magic and no doubt demon lore. It’s modest. Never been in a Watcher’s home,
but it’s how I imagined it to be. And it’s obviously not the soldiers’ home.”

“He owns a non-violent demon bar in L.A.,” Buffy fills the rest of the room in, “Cordelia-from-the-
future sent him.” Everyone gives her confused looks, especially the commandos. “Long story. Too
long to tell. But I trust Cordelia.” She glances at the demon. “What’d you say your name was
again?”

Lorne gives her a little nod for the intro and steps into the spotlight – well, the circle of light the lamp
is forming on the ground. “My name is Lorne, and I actually own a non-violent karaoke bar that’s
open for demons and humans alike. Let’s just say, I’m here to help, and there’s a reason for the
distinction in type of bar I own.”

“And that is?” Xander asks, his arms crossed.

Anya glares at the demon. Anyone associated with Cordelia, Xander’s ex-girlfriend, goes on her
suspicous list.

Lorne ignores the hostility. He’s used to it. He deals with it on a daily basis. . . sometimes multiple
times a day. “I listen to music. . . singing voices to be exact, and I can tell something about people. I
can tell their motivations, their hopes and dreams. And sometimes, given the right melody or coda, I
can catch a little inkling of their future.”

“And that helps how?” Anya feels unsettled around the empath demon, maybe because she’s never
met anyone like him.

“Well, sweet cakes, don’t these members of the armed forces have a need for assistance with their
demon prisoners? I can help them sort out which ones can be let go, and in turn, I’ll be helping out
your little Slayer here, too. All this can’t fall on her shoulders.” Lorne makes a conscious decision
not to point out that she’s an ex-demon; her forcefulness is a marker of her insecurity.

Buffy doesn’t know how she feels about being called “little,” but she is grateful for the assistance.
“Thank you.”

“We could use the help,” George admits.
Smiling, Lorne claps his hands together and rubs his palms. “Well, point me in their direction. I’d like to get this over with. I have a gang of Chaos demons stopping by to celebrate a birthday tomorrow night. Definitely can’t leave the bar in my assistant manager’s hands for that one.”

* * *

Willow is pacing in her cell. If her feet could carve a path in the hard surface, it would be several feet deep and well tread. To say she is anxious would be an understatement. She has no idea what’s going on with anyone else in her circle of friends, and while she was despairing before, Spike gave her hope. . . hope that was dashed when Professor Walsh came and dragged him away in chains, his vampire visage prominent, blood pouring down his cheek. And he’s been gone for hours. Willow knows this because she still has her watch – her only tie to reality in this disorienting, bleak place. It keeps her sane despite the ever-present lights and monotony. Damn it. She should have teleported them both out of here and away from the Initiative. D’Hoffryn be damned.

When she hears the familiar latch of the door down the hall, she stops, ears pricked. She is hesitant to run forward, conditioned as she is to viewing nothing but experiments gone wrong going by.

She feels the demon piece of her flare up, like a powerful engine at the ready, only she has no one to make a wish, so she can grant it. She’s been thinking about what Spike said about doing bad vengeance, but she continues to draw a blank, mostly because she can think of adverse consequences to all of what people or demons here might wish for.

She hears a pop and then the door to her prison goes off like an electric fence that went dead. Two army men toss a form into her cell. . . a familiar form. “S-spike?” She lunges at the guards. “Hey!” And just like that the electric fence is back up. The men don’t even acknowledge her and are gone. They are probably trained not to look at their captives.

In a rush of motion, Willow kneels at Spike’s side where he collapsed face down. Her eyes scan over him, taking in the trails of blood roving over his arms. Some of the red is dried dark, some still damp. His saturated clothing is torn in more than a dozen places and sticking in patches to the long, deep wounds in his flesh. His ankle is enlarged and purple, and his head is haphazardly shorn, the bleached hair gone in chunks, pale scalp peeking through. He’s not moving at all.

Willow feels tears prick her eyes, but she blinks them away because she can’t afford to be weepy Willow anymore. She places a tentative hand on an unbroken place on his back. She takes a deep breath. Inhale. Hold. Exhale more slowly. When she speaks, her voice is clear and sure as she channels her inner resolve. “Spike? Come on now. You can’t let these fuckers get you down.”
At her use of the curse word (which still sounds slightly off coming from her mouth), Spike stirs, groaning in pain. She grins. “That’s it. Let me help you.” She slips her slender arm around his waist, making sure to choose his more intact arm to tug over her shoulders. Then, she folds one leg under her for an anchor and pushes up with her other.

Spike borrows her energy, and he seems to be helping with the moving. Willow isn’t sure she could lift him without that. He emits a myriad of soft moans and hisses of pain as they make their way back to the only place to rest against – the wall. Using their weight, she scoots and turns until he can lean against the smooth surface. Willow guides him down into a sitting position. His head rolls to one side, and he opens his eyes. Usually bright and clear, one is now blood shot, and the other is swollen to the point he can’t open it.

“Thank you,” he manages, the sound a rasp in his throat.

Willow takes in the bruises on his neck, the damned fluorescent lights highlighting the contrast of his wounds against skin. His eyes are drifting shut and Willow says in a firm tone, “What happened?”

“Y-your shrink is a bloody psychopath. . . sadist. Can’t talk. Pain.” He waves vaguely with one hand.

Anger – raw and unfettered – pulses through her, and with sudden clarity, she knows what she has to do. “We have to talk, Spike. So, I need you to pay attention.”

Spike’s mind fights valiantly to hold its grip on consciousness. He somehow summons enough energy to try and sound like himself. “Do my best.”

“That’s all I ask.” She can tell that she has a short window. “I’ve been thinking while you were gone about telepor –”

Spike’s hand shoots out to grip her wrist before she can finish the word. “Careful.” Willow doesn’t twist away and leans close to his mouth. “Threw me here. Another bloody experiment. Damaged vampire with vengeance demon. See what happens.”

Willow isn’t sure what he means, but she quickly sits back and scans the room. In the far corner, a tiny camera has appeared, it’s blackness a contrast to all the blinding white. Willow doesn’t stay focused there because whoever’s watching might notice. Instead, she turns back to Spike and says, trying to sound casual, “I’m sorry. There’s nothing here to help you with the pain. Wonder why they
threw you in here.” She guesses that Professor Walsh wants the badly hurt vampire to eat her. Other than Riley being gone for the moment, Willow wonders why the shift in treatment.

Spike grunts in approval, the sound soft.

Willow then slips into position in front of Spike, her back in line with the camera. She pretends to be checking his wounds by picking up each body part and slowly examining the skin. She whispers as she works. “So, teleportation.”

“No,” he barely gets out. “D’Hoffryn will kill you.”

“But it won’t help you any either to stay here. But before, wishes. I’m glad they threw you in here. It will make it easier, especially considering how hurt you are.”

Spike’s eyes drift closed, and Willow pushes her thumb into one of the wounds. Sharp pain pushes aside the darkness. He somehow finds Red’s voice and holds on tight to the sound. “– need you to make the wishes,” is what he hears.

He squints his eyes at her through his undamaged eye and sees the determination in her green ones. “‘Bout time. R-right. Lay it on me.”

Willow’s voice lowers to a whisper as she examines a particularly bad wound in the vampire’s thigh – a wound that’s oozing a little because of the position he’s arranged in. “It’s a wish for everyone here. . . all the demons who have been hurt by these experiments. I need you to wish for all the experiments that have been done to be reversed.”

Spike chuckles. That’ll create some mayhem; he can wish that without having to drum up any vengeful feelings. “Good one.”

Willow feels a moment of pride. “Thanks. Figured it might give them a good distraction until Buffy shows up.” At the mention of Buffy’s name, Willow sees tears suddenly well in the vampire’s unmangled eye. “Wait. What’s wrong. What’d I say?”

Spike feels a twisted tangle of emotions that sweep up and override his physical pain. They’re too jumbled to make sense of in his current state. He can’t keep the sign of his sorrow from slipping over his cheek. The salty liquid spreads and burns in the gash under his cheekbone. “I-I told her,” he
manages finally.

“Told who what?” Willow asks, her mind considering different possibilities.

“Tried not to. Held out a long... time. Long as could.” He coughs then, and the pain surges, mingling with his sorrow.

“You told Professor Walsh about Buffy. About her being the Slayer?” Willow guesses, her voice kind. From his current state, she doesn’t know how he held out at all. “It’s okay,” she reassures him. “Buffy’s about to out herself anyway, right? By coming here. And Riley knows. He told me that he heard it through the demon underground.”

Spike closes his eyes to center himself because he suddenly feels dizzy. The darkness he so recently was trying to evade now provides momentary respite, so he can think. Buffy coming here as planned doesn’t changed that he betrayed her. When the chips were down, he betrayed her trust in him by revealing who she is... by telling the Walsh bint that Riley is the traitor in her midst.

Spike can still feel the pointed end of the wood pressing into his chest over his heart... how she threatened to dust him if he didn’t give up the information. Stupid git that he is, he thought in that moment of what he promised Joyce in her kitchen about being there for Buffy when she dies. That did it. He caved then. Doesn’t matter that the choice was an awful one... betray Buffy by giving into the sadist’s demands or betray Joyce by dying. In the end, he betrayed the woman he loves and that is unforgivable.

Willow watches Spike, waiting for him to speak. She hates doing it but feels the need to shock him awake again, but then, he opens his one good eye without her having to do anything. The clarity in the blue depths is striking, and she holds her breath.

“I...if you reverse things. My chip...”

“Will go poof,” she supplies without any mirth in her tone because she can tell he’s struggling.

“Right,” he says. “Then, I need you to grant one more wish for me.”

Willow’s response is immediate. “Anything.” She thinks maybe he’s going to wish for her to kill Professor Walsh, and in that moment, Willow believes this to be the best plan. She’s more than ready
to grant that particular wish given what she’s witnessed in this place, and if the person wishing for it is a vampire with a history of murdering for over a century, even better. She won’t really be responsible, right? She bites her lip. If she’s honest with herself, it’s the human piece of her that’s gunning for the vengeance in this case, and that frightens her more than she can express.

Spike uses his good hand to push himself up straighter to punctuate the gravity of what he’s asking. He has no idea what will happen if he makes this wish. Will it matter that it’s granted by a vengeance demon? Will he lose himself completely? Part of him knows deep down in his bones that he won’t lose himself, but there is that niggling bit in the back of his brain that says maybe he will. All he knows is that he can’t betray Buffy that way again. Hell, he doesn’t even know if she’ll have him anymore after what he’s done, but he’s not going to give up. If he’s learned anything through this, it’s that she’s his destiny. She may have the destiny of being the Chosen One, but his destiny is her – sodding romantic sap that he is.

Willow views him struggling, and her selfish thoughts are dashed away. She gently touches his arm. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

His voice steady, he says, “I’m going to need my soul back.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to those who dislike/hate the soul. The goal is to get Buffy and Spike in the same heaven...(see Prologue)... *goes to hide under a rock to dodge the tomatoes or bombs or other things you might want to throw at me*
“Holy Toledo, Batman!” Cordelia springs up from her seat. “Holy Toledo on so many levels!”
Hands on her hips, she glares at Angel, who for his part looks reasonably frightened.

“So, um, lost the Zen? And back on the superhero references?” To tell the truth, she’s shouting what
Angel is feeling on the inside. He just tends to hold his emotions in.

She presses her fingertips over her closed eyelids. “I don’t even know where to start. Do we have to
keep watching this? I mean, I don’t know Spike at all and oh my God. What kind of human being
does that to a person? I mean really. Tell me. What kind?” She peeks at Angel and then puts her
hands back in place. “No. Don’t tell me. I know what kind. A raging narcissistic psychopath who
shouldn’t be allowed to teach on a college campus, much less work for the army. Tell me she’s
worse than you were. She has to be worse than you were. And I may have been a narcissist in high
school, but at least, I wasn’t an angry one.”

Angel wants to apologize, but he doesn’t think she’s the person he needs to apologize to, and he sure
isn’t sure what he thinks about her comparing his centuries of killing to Maggie Walsh’s sojourn into
violence as her world is falling apart. “Somehow, Spike’s alive” is the only thing he has to offer.

“Somehow? Some. How.” Cordelia begins to pace. “And he only survived because he gave up
Buffy and that Riley dude. And now, Willow has him all set up to reverse the army’s experiments on
demons. Let’s hope to high heavens that she doesn’t reverse something that causes a complete rift in
the timeline. . . our timeline.”

Angel watches her walk back and forth and crosses his arms, trying to think. “Which has already
been changed because I’m doing this.” Hopefully whoever’s in charge is taking that into account and
seeing to the critical parts he can’t control and isn’t on a mission to fix.

“And he’s asking for his soul! Do you even know if this is an okay way for him to get a soul? I
mean, didn’t he earn it in some sort of trials before?” she continues, expanding her route to around
the sectional.

“I think if Willow does it right, he’ll be okay.”
Cordelia snorts. “If Willow does it right. That’s just great. She doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing. She’s a baby vengeance demon. Not even a full-fledged vengeance demon at that!”

“Maybe that’s a good thing? She’s not completely warped by the process yet.”

Cordelia shakes her head. “Maybe! I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin.” She pauses and does a little dance in place, her face a worried mask. “Is there a fast forward button or something so we can find out how it ends?”

“I don’t think so.” He’s surprised she hasn’t brought up the Lorne thing.

“Ughh!” Cordelia resumes her laps. “Of course, there isn’t! For some reason, we have to relive the whole thing right alongside them! And I get that I’m on this journey with you and that I volunteered and that you’re worth it. Yada yada yada. And oooo!” She abruptly stops again. “I did not go back to talk with Lorne!” She pokes a finger at him. “You did that! And which Lorne is it?”

Angel catches her elbows in his palms and gently holds her forearms against his. “Hold on, Cordy. It’s okay. It’s Lorne from the timeline then. That was the second trip I took the last time I went back. I went to see Lorne at Caritas, sang for him again. Well, before. Whatever. And I told him who I was.”

Cordelia relaxes a fraction. “But –”

“Remember that Lorne has a complete confidentiality policy. I only told him enough to get him to help. I didn’t tell him anything about his future, which I think he appreciated. I think that’s part of what got him to trust me in the first place.”

“Oh.” Angel lets go of Cordy’s elbows. “That’s good.”

“Yeah?” The corner of his mouth quirks up despite the nagging worry about Spike.

She smiles. “Yeah. And the me part?”
“I asked him to tell them that. Figured it was a good way to convince Buffy since she met you at the portals.”

“That’s really good. It worked.”

Angel’s shoulders slump a little. “Finally. Something worked.”

“I’m a little nervous to keep watching.” She slides down into the grass in front of the sectional.

“Me, too,” he confesses, joining her on the ground, which is surprisingly soft.

As they refocus on the scene unfolding before them, Cordy reaches over and lightly whacks Angel on the arm. “You thought the dress looked like a shapeless Princess Leia dress, too.”

“You don’t see Princess Leia the same way guys do,” he whispers.

Then, they get swept up in the unfolding events.
Chapter Nineteen, Wish Granted

Willow blinks. Spike’s second wish is nothing like what she expected at all. “Why?”

Spike simply stares at her, having used all his energy to say what he did. Is the witch blind? He can barely function. He doesn’t have the strength for longwinded explanations.

“You do love Buffy,” Willow concludes and notices the corner of Spike’s mouth lift ruefully. She pats his leg. “No need for apologies. I get it. Slayer. Vampire. And apparently, Buffy’s part demon, so her attraction to vampires kinda makes sense. You know, she won’t care that you gave her away. I mean, all she’s going to do is look at you, and she’ll forgive you without question. She loves you, too, right?”

Spike’s shoulder shrugs. Is he even worth loving? He still doesn’t know. And does Buffy love him? And if so, why? The rational part of him knew that whatever the psychologist said was bunk; he had been under physical and emotional duress at the hands of someone who is a master manipulator. But his heart still hurts as he recalls her dispassionate description of him as a lab rat whose sole function was to be experimented on for the betterment of mankind. Being called less than the dirt on Buffy’s shoe brought forth all his pain from being rejected... first by Cecily, then his mother, and then Angelus and Dru. Their hurtful words rose and fell all around him, as unforgiving as the swell of ocean waves in a storm; the physical torture punctuating the pain and battering his body as if he were a surfer who got whipped off his board by a massive swell. Even now when he thinks about it, the emotions pound him anew like he’s drowning in an unpredictable, choppy sea, unable to find the shore of the present.

Spike is aware of his insecurities about being accepted and loved and forgiven for past and future transgressions, but he can’t dismiss the fears that accompany them. The masochistic piece of him believes he deserves to seek vengeance on himself for betraying Buffy’s trust. Plus, he meant what he said to Buffy in the other dimension about the world being the way it is, about how human beings aren’t ready for the fact that soulless demons have feelings and can change. His mind blurred by the amount of physical agony in his body, Spike truly believes he’ll make her life easier by having a soul. He tries to turn back to focusing on what Willow is saying.
“– my best to not put a clause in there about sex and the soul,” Willow teases and then soberes when she sees how confused he looks. “Seriously. I won’t. I’m assuming you and Buffy are still. . . well, you consummated the marriage, right? So, my guess is that since you’re married. . . well, yeah. Anyway, no happiness clause.” Willow blushes. “Okay. Let’s do it. First wish, please.”

Spike shifts, trying to stay upright and trying to ground himself. He does so by searching the witch’s eyes for several seconds until he can think clearly. Then, he carefully states with no hesitation, his voice barely audible, “I wish all the experiments done by the Initiative in Sunnydale would be reversed and that the affected demons would be restored to how they were before said experiments.”

Willow feels the engine of her vengeance demon magic rev and then let loose as she hits the gas pedal. The sensation is exhilarating and powerful, and in the split second it takes for her to grant the wish, her other magical abilities ignite and mingle with the demon’s. In the width of a moment, she recognizes that she has the capacity to tinker with the wish and take it one of several different directions, including sending the demons back to the place where they were before they were captured or even sending them back in time. She chooses to keep the demons in place, so they can be a handy distraction for the Initiative soldiers. The magic pushes itself forth as she makes the decision, and she quietly says, “Wish granted.”

As the witch fulfills his wish and her face briefly shifts to a veiny-looking demonic mask, Spike feels the faintest of tingles traveling along his scalp and down his neck and spine. His wounds are all still present and accounted for. He closes his eye to the sight. Can’t a bloke catch a sodding break?

Willow works her jaw back and forth. The change to the demon mask felt strange and unnatural, and she briefly wonders what she looked like. Her human face back in place, she sits back on her heels and stares at him. “Wait. Huh?” She pauses, her hand going to her mouth. “Oh, your injuries are still. . . well, they’re still horrible. Guess torture isn’t considered an experiment. Um. Did you feel anything at all?”

Spike gives the witch a sudden shove with no question about the intent to harm. Because he’s badly hurt, she only topples backward and crashes to the floor. He’s grateful there’s no jolt of excruciating pain in his noggin. There’s no question that he would have passed out.

“Hey!” Willow scrambles up and views Spike smiling with his lone blue eye at her. “Hey.” She grins back at him. “It worked!”

“Nice job, Red,” he manages, making a concerted effort to sound like himself.
“Don’t worry. I won’t be too cocky,” she assures him. “I also have no idea if it worked elsewhere.”

As if on cue, an alarm starts to blast and red flashing lights blink on and off outside the cell. In the far distance, Spike picks up on a roar and crashing sounds. The ruckus starts to penetrate the cocoon of emotions that have been swallowing him.

Spike lifts an eyebrow at Willow, and she sighs happily. “It worked. Let the fun begin.”

Spike nudges Willow’s knee. “Other wish. Now.”

The vengeance demon piece stirs inside her. Just the sound of the word wish brings it to life. Willow doesn’t really think he needs to make this wish, but she will do what he says because he is obviously determined. That doesn’t mean that she can’t do a little something to help on her end. “Ready.”

“I wish. . .” Spike pauses. Does he really want this? His emotional upheaval is still nipping at his heels, and his brain is too tired to fathom all the possibilities. He continues haltingly, his voice stopping and starting with the effort, “I wish. . . for the return. . . of my soul.”

The last word is so low that Willow almost doesn’t hear it because something closer comes crashing down with a loud whump and bang. The magic surges forth again, and this time, her work is more fluid as she shuts out the sounds of something being smashed in a nearby corridor. With the adeptness with which she programs computers, she tinkers with the details of the magic and the wish – not much – but just enough to try to ease Spike’s transition and the weight of the soul’s homecoming. “Done.” The demon mask arrives with her word and lingers longer this time before Willow is herself again.

Willow blinks but not before witnessing the arrival of Spike’s soul – a golden yellow spark that flashes into the cell, overpowering even the manmade florescence. Her breath is taken away at the sight even though she has to shield her eyes from the brilliance of it, and she squints through parted fingers to watch where it goes and what happens next.

Spike feels his consciousness slipping from his control again, and then, a familiar feather soft touch settles onto his ankles and begins to push into his flesh and move up. He squints his good eye, determined to see if what he thinks is happening is real or merely a hallucination of what he experienced at the future portal. The bright light burns his eye, but he keeps it open, watching as his soul spirals over and around his body, climbing slowly upward toward his head and gaining speed until his mouth is forced open and his soul enters his body in a warm rush, returned home again, settling in the hollow space that the demon left when it scraped away his soul in the first place. His whole body hums with renewed energy, and although he still can’t open one eye and his injuries are
still present, his limbs, torso, head, and neck move more freely. As before after he drank from the future portal, his insides feel light and good and right.

He clears his throat. “T-thank you,” he stammers.

Willow covers his hand with hers. “You’re welcome.” He’s moving better, so her little protection tag along spell seems to be helping him manage his wounds. Hopefully, it will last long enough for them to survive and get out of this white hell hole. She decides then and there that she will never have white walls again. Anything but white. Maybe a nice soft blue or green.

The sound of electricity fizzling ripples through the air around them along with the smell of burnt wire, and the fluorescents above flicker and go out. The red emergency lights continue to wink on and off, making the world around them seem to be coming and going. The cacophony of demons roaring and guns firing comes and goes but seems to be getting closer.

Willow pushes to a standing position and then surveys Spike who is staggering to his feet as well. He nods at her, his eye a lot clearer even in the dim lighting. Taking a step, he trips a little, but Willow catches him, which is all he needs to rebalance. She slowly removes her support, and he sways but steadies.

“We should get moving,” Willow suggests. “We have to figure out a way out of here.”

“It’s different,” Spike comments. He inclines his head to indicate the corridor outside the cell. “The hall.”

“Different?”

“From when I was here. Don’t know if it’s because we’re on a different run of cells or if they modified it since I escaped.”

“Good to know.” Willow puts her hand up to make sure the barrier is gone, the demon piece of her drawn to the fight ahead. Nothing. She grins back at Spike and starts to step out of the cell.

“Look out!” Spike calls just in time for a giant demon to loom in front of the witch.
Willow startles and peers up at the massive creature shrouded in darkness, no doubt from a neighboring cell. Her heart pounds in her chest. The emergency lights flash on, and she makes eye contact with the towering beast. He grunts at her, the sound a little like a sound of affection. Then, the beast moves down the hall toward the exit.

Willow casts Spike a relieved glance, and he shrugs. Together, they follow their fellow prison escapee toward the exit.

Spike’s muscles tense with anticipation as he watches the demon use his powerful limbs to rip the door out of the wall, latch and all. Huh. So much for demon proof. The metal squeals in protest as it pulls away from its resting place, and the sounds of the chaos beyond beckon him despite his precarious physical state. He can tell by the way the little witch is quivering beside him that she’s drawn to the violence, too.

* * *

In the quiet, chilly night, Riley leads the way to the black Hummer H1 parked down the street from Giles’s apartment. The vehicle is huge, and everyone, including Joyce, piles inside. Just as Riley starts the engine, three pagers beep at once, and George, Natalya, and Riley reach for their belts. George flicks his screen on first and reads the message.

The even-keeled George sounds rattled. “It’s a 911 situation. Something’s happening back at the base. Gun it, soldier.”

Riley puts the Hummer in gear and slams the gas pedal.

As the vehicle lurches forward, jerking the passengers around, Buffy’s thoughts fly straight to Spike and Willow. She’s terrified that something’s happened to one or both of them. Spike’s dot on the tracking device has moved around some, but now, it’s still again. She tries not to think about what that means. Her feelings must be all over her face because her mom reaches over and gives her arm a gentle squeeze.

“It’s okay, Buffy. I have a feeling that they’ll be okay.” Joyce has no idea if they’re okay, but she knows her daughter needs to believe it right now.

Buffy gives her mom a tight-lipped smile. “Thanks, Mom.”
Giles, who is leaning left and right as Riley rushes through his neighborhood, intentionally uses the motion to brush his thigh against Joyce’s and addresses his Slayer. “Your mother’s right, Buffy. I’m certain that Spike’s been in tougher spots than this one, and if he’s thrown in with us, or rather you, as you say he has, I have no doubt that he is assisting Willow now.”

“He better be,” Xander mutters from behind Giles.

Anya socks him in the arm.

“Ow! Hey!”

Anya’s tone is serious and not in the least bit teasing. “You said you’d work on it.”

A heartbeat of silence and then Xander says with genuine remorse, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Buffy,” the ex-demon insists.

“Sorry, Buff,” Xander calls up toward Buffy.

“It’s okay, Xander.” Buffy can’t help but forgive him. She meant what she said to Anya about them being close because they’d been through a lot together. “Let’s just focus on what we need to do.”

“Good idea, chickadee,” Lorne says beside her, leaning forward with his hands clasped before him, a small suitcase he retrieved from his car between his legs. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m always a bundle of nerves before a performance. It helps me if I focus on a plan.”

“We’ll have to wing it; we won’t know what’s going on until we get there.” Buffy is used to this. “But Mom, you and Lorne will stay in the vehicle, or at least close to it. Promise me.” She makes sure her mom is looking her in the eye.

“I promise.” Joyce has no intention of going into the fray. She pats the backpack she filled with first aid supplies. “And I’ll be ready for if any of you get hurt.”
Lorne smiles at the Slayer’s mother. “I’ll keep you company. We’ll be okay.” He pats the pocket of his suit jacket. “Always carry a deck of cards with me. We can play a round or two of something for distraction.”

“Thank you.” Joyce returns his relaxed, reassuring expression. For some reason, even though he looks like the devil, he isn’t scary at all.

George pulls up his walkie talkie. “We’re going to get an update.” He presses a few buttons. “Anyone there? Over.”

Loud static fills the vehicle for several uncomfortable seconds. Then, “Commander. Thank god. Where are you?” A thunderous crash reverberates followed by more static. “Where are you?” The soldier’s voice is slightly more panicked with the repeat query. “We’re under attack, sir. Over.”

“Where’s Walsh?”

“Don’t know, sir. The lights are out. So is the computer system. HSTs are everywhere. Do you want us to activate the abort system?”

Buffy’s heart skips a beat, and Xander shouts, “No!”

Another hesitation. “Is that a ‘no’? Over.”

George glares back at them. “Affirmative. That’s a no. We’re on our way to assist. Over.”

“We need it, sir. Over.” There’s a loud scream in the background and then nothing.

George orders, “Head to the dorm entrance. The electricity for that entrance is sourced in the dorm, so let’s hope it still has power.”

“Right,” Riley says, abruptly changing directions and driving toward Lowell House.

Buffy’s ears perk at this tidbit. “Wait, there’s an entrance to the Initiative at your dorm?”
Riley turns his head so Buffy can only see his profile. “Yep. Behind a mirror.”

“Oh.” Buffy thinks back to the party where she’d danced the night away and flirted a little with the awkward young man that she now knows is a soldier. That seems like a hundred years ago. Her hand goes to the ring on her finger again. The familiar filigree pattern is rough but familiar under the pads of her finger and thumb, and the memory of a different man sleeping next to her fills her heart. Spike better be okay.

“It’s the perfect set up to hide in plain sight,” Riley explains, spinning the steering wheel and speeding up again.

“Bet you never thought you’d be driving up with a demon and a Slayer in your Hummer,” she jokes.

“Only the ones we captured,” Riley says quietly. “And even then, we’d take them through the South or East entrances.”

“You have a lot of entrances,” Anya observes, trying to stay in the mix lest they notice that she’s a little too quiet and start to wonder about her origins.

“We do.”

Moving the bag of weapons between his feet, Giles reaches over to take Joyce’s warm hand in his. She gives him a startled look but tucks her palm snugly against his. He tries to cover his move by saying a bit louder than necessary, “Can we go back to what Buffy brought up before the walkie talkie conversation. What is our plan besides ‘winging it’?”

Secretly pleased that her mother seems so happy with Giles’s affection, Buffy agrees, “Doesn’t the Initiative have another fail safe besides imploding?”

Natalya, who has been quiet through most of the evening, says, “We do. There’s a system to release a gas through every air duct in the facility. It’s a gas that would make everyone go to sleep without killing anyone.”

“Can we activate it without knocking ourselves out?” Buffy asks.
Natalya shakes her head. “Not if one of us activates the system. It’s located in a small hidden room off the main floor where procedures are done and runs off a generator and a backup generator when the electricity is out. There are several gas masks in there, so if we all make it there, none of us will be knocked out.”

The main floor is where experiments are done, Buffy thinks. It’s where Spike had a chip surgically placed in his brain. She shudders at the thought. “We should aim for that so that we can get everyone under control and put Lorne to work. Where’s the main floor?”

“Right outside of the elevator at Lowell,” Riley interjects, turning right.

“Um, how will you knock out the demons that don’t need to breathe?” Xander asks. He considers that the army really knows very little about their captives. “Like oh, say, the vampires.”

George twists toward the back. “Good question. There’s a chemical built in that absorbs into the skin. It has a heavy sedating effect on vampires but not other demons or humans even though they don’t need oxygen for consciousness.”

“Oh, well, good.”

Riley slams the brakes on and jerks the vehicle into park. “We’re here.” Without another word, he hops out and strides toward the dorm. The rest quickly follow behind with the exception of Lorne and Joyce who hang back.

Though the parking lot at Lowell House is full of cars and trucks and the windows are lit as an indication of active electricity, the inside of the fake fraternity house is empty and eerily silent. Buffy guesses that everyone is involved in the fight underground. Riley leads the group to a mirror in the back, and Buffy muses that she straightened her hair in that very mirror after a bathroom break at the party she attended.

Weapons at the ready, Riley, George, and Natalya line up in front of the mirror, and a red light begins to scan their head and eyes. Buffy, Anya, and Xander hang back, each bearing their own armaments.

A computerized voice that sounds like a robot version of Professor Walsh enunciates, “Retinal scan accepted.”
The mirror slides away, and the trio of Initiative members hurry into a large elevator with white tiled walls and a high ceiling.

“Big elevator,” Xander comments, gripping an ax similar to the one Giles is brandishing.

Anya huddles slightly behind Xander and Giles, still wary of the Initiative but ready to assist. Her sword is still sheathed, but her hand is ready on the hilt.

“We need it sometimes.” Riley says as they start to descend. He leans over to a small speaker in the wall and says, “We should be ready for anything if there are hostiles loose.”

“Initiative vocal code match complete. Special Agent Finn, Riley,” the robotic Walsh voice affirms.

With that, the door starts to slide open, and the sounds of a raging battle begin to fill the elevator. Buffy has two stakes and a knife, and her blood hums with energy, raring for the fight ahead. She feels a bit like she did when she jumped into the alternate dimension looking for her mom, Giles, Anya, and Xander. The world she’s about to enter is unknown and unpredictable, and she pats her pocket for reassurance that the tracking device is present. At least, she’s not completely blind. She never thought she’d appreciate the power of government technology.

She has to find Willow and Spike, and they better both still be alive – or in the case of Spike, undusty – or there will be hell to pay.
Chapter Twenty, The Walls Come Tumbling Down

Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter... Thanks to Ceruleansoul for the beta and for making me think about the way I word things! hug

Chapter Twenty, The Walls Come Tumbling Down

The battle inside the Initiative is surreal. While landing a firm roundhouse on a huge spiny demon’s jaw when he charged her, Buffy decides that it’s for more than one reason.

First, the red emergency lights are blinking on and off in a steady rhythm, making all the motion seem like it’s stopping and starting like one of those old timey movies that flickered and hesitated from one frame to the next. One second, there’s a hazy scarlet tint to the world and the next second, there’s utter blackness.

Second, at the same time the lights are going on and off in a slow predictable rate, the motion of the battle is fast-paced and chaotic. She and her friends, Riley and the other two soldiers, flung themselves into the fight without any sort of plan other than getting to the room where there’s supposedly a chemical that can stop anything in its tracks. But there are demons and soldiers in combat all around them crashing into walls, limbs being torn off, blood flying through the air, and bodies piling up. The coppery scent of blood hangs suspended all around them, a vampire’s wet dream or nightmare. She isn’t sure which.

As she ducks the demon’s swipes at her head and chest, Buffy fears for her friends who aren’t used to this sort of medieval bedlam in a fray. With the Mayor, there was a single enemy everyone could aim at. Here, she can’t tell enemy from foe. The soldiers are dressed in street clothes and army gear, but some of them could very well be vampires. She just doesn’t know. Her eyes catch glimpses of white coats dotting the battlefield, and she guesses that these are the doctors who were conducting the experiments. They’re caught up in a sudden storm of disaster that they didn’t anticipate being part of, and Buffy almost feels sorry for them... almost.

Buffy stays close to Xander, Giles, and Anya who have banded together and are engaged in their own entanglements with demons. Buffy wonders how the hell they’re going to locate Willow and Spike in this mess. Focusing on the fight to survive, she searches for a pocket of time to consult her friends.
The demon Buffy’s currently fighting is slow but persistent; no matter how many times she hits him in his rather tough flesh, she doesn’t want to kill him, but she is starting to realize that she might have to. She remembers what she and Spike discussed in the forest. Sometimes, it’s kill or be killed.

Drawing up the knife when he almost lands a blow that could have knocked her out or even broken her neck, she slides the blade into a soft spot at the base of his ribcage. He cries out in agony and drops to the ground.

She whirls as another, shorter demon charges her, and she evades his path so that he crashes into a medical operating bed.

“You guys okay?” she calls to her friends as she spins to stake a vampire who’s coming up on Giles’s back unbeknownst to him because he’s tangling with a demon of his own.

“As we can be,” Xander returns, swinging his ax at a demon who is somehow overcoming gravity to fly at his head. “Starting to be a bit with the déjà vu.” He’s tired of being a demon magnet.

Anya hacks at the demon with Xander. “Agreed.”

“We should find Willow and Spike before the –” Buffy trails off as a soldier pulls up short in front of her, strange-looking gun aimed at her face.

Giles shoves up to the man dressed in black. “Watch it.”

“Who are you?” The soldier looks vaguely familiar like Buffy might have met him at the party at Lowell.

“We came here with your Commander. Commander George. We’re helping,” Buffy insists, holding up her knife, which is saturated with demon gore.

“You’re civilians,” the soldier says incredulously.

“And you have your hands full.” Buffy throws a well-aimed stake at the vampire rushing toward the soldier, causing him to burst into dust that showers all over the man.
He lowers the gun. “Guess you’re right.” He shrugs. “It’s your life.” Then, he storms off, weapon at the ready.

“Prat,” Giles calls after the git even though the soldier can’t hear in the hubbub of battle.

“If he’s the type of ally Riley said he has, I think we may be screwed. I haven’t heard any guns going off. Weird,” Xander notes, scanning the world around them for signs of approaching attackers.

Giles dodges a stumbling demon-soldier pair, lost in wrestling with one another. “Most likely, they’re not real guns but some form of tool for disabling demons. He had a sheath knife attached to his waist.”

“Willow and Spike,” Buffy reminds them, holding up the tracking device. The red dot is steadily moving, but she isn’t sure where.

Natalia runs up at that moment. “We located the room with the fail safe.”

“Which one?” Xander asks.

She gives him a look like he’s crazy. “The one that releases the chemical. Come with me.”

“What about Willow?” Xander glances at Buffy and smiles tightly at her. “And Spike?”

“If you must look for them, go.”

“Any idea where this is?” Buffy asks, thrusting the tracking device under her nose.

Natalia studies the small screen between moments of darkness. “Yep.” She nods her head behind them. “Try that corridor. It’s sealed off, but the Slayer is extra strong, right?”

Buffy nods. “Hopefully.”
Xander faces Anya and takes her hand. “I want you to go with Natalia to stay safe. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Anya seems surprised. “O-okay. Where are you going?”

“With Buffy to find Willow.”

“I’ll go with Anya,” Giles offers. He makes pointed eye contact with Buffy and Xander. “Do be careful.”

Natalia bounces anxiously. “Let’s go.”

Buffy smiles at him. “Will do.” Then, she spins, kicks, ducks, and punches a demon charging them.

As Anya, Natalia, and Giles, Buffy and Xander hurry in the direction Natalia directed them. Xander fends off attackers, guarding Buffy’s back while she studies the handle-free sliding doors.

Great. The hardest type of entry way; one with nothing she can grip. She digs her fingers in the small crack between the doors, hoping to wedge her way in so she can pull them apart. She breaks a nail or two but is oblivious to the pain as she finally manages to force an opening. Excited, she pushes her way in further and begins to strain her muscles harder to force the stubborn, unyielding doors to move, groaning in protest.

When she gets them open wide enough for her and Xander to slip through, she shouts to him over the noise of the battle, “Xander! Got it!”

Swinging his ax in a haphazard way at his attackers, he backs toward the doors and stoops under Buffy’s taut arms to leave the main battlefield behind. Buffy rushes through after him, and the heavy doors heave their way back to their resting place.

Tracking device in hand, Buffy races ahead as fast as she can without losing Xander who is decidedly slower being human and all.
Beyond the initial chaos beyond the door to their prison run, Spike and Willow find that their journey is a quiet one. Their large demon friend got sidetracked down a pitch-black hallway to the left where they can hear raucous fighting, and with a silent exchange between them, Spike and Willow decide to continue down the current path despite the inherent pull to join the skirmish. They both know that they’re too physically weak despite the power of the wish and Spike’s semi-recovery.

“Anything look familiar?” Willow asks Spike, whom she sees is holding up quite well. She’s a little worried that she might have done something to mess him up in some way, considering her recent track record with magic. But then again, she’s different now. She really wishes he would let her teleport them, but when she brought it up a second time earlier, he’d insisted again that they keep going this way.

Spike views the worry line between the redhead’s eyebrows and misinterprets it. “Yeah. It looks familiar, but I don’t bloody know why. Don’t know if it’s where I went out before, where they led me back after I was tortured, or if it just smells familiar.”

“Well, it seems to be a main passage, so there has to be an exit somewhere.” Willow has noticed the doors seem to dot the hall at consistent intervals.

“Let’s hope.” Spike’s soul is warm and comfortable settled inside of him, which is a stark contrast to what he expected on attaining a soul. He isn’t sure what the witch did to him to make this happen, but he is a little afraid of what will happen when whatever she did inevitably falls apart, as magic is wont to do in his experience. “Red?”

Willow glances at him and then goes back to keeping alert to their surroundings. “Yeah?”

“What’d you do?” Part of him wants to be prepared.

Willow’s flinch is barely perceptible right before the red lights give way to momentary darkness. “What do you mean?”

He chooses not to stare at her. She’s already too uncomfortable. “To my soul. I don’t feel the anguish I expected. . . the guilt. And yes, I remember what it feels like, so I expected to be –“
“Mentally and emotionally devastated? Perhaps even completely obliterated?” Willow guesses.

“Well, yeah.”

Willow considers how to explain what she did. ‘The really weird thing is that even though I’m part vengeance demon, the magic piece. . . the part where I can do magic is still there. When you made the wishes, I felt two parts working. One was the demon. There’s magic there and wiggle room within the wish to turn it how I wanted, but the witch piece of me that does a different sort of magic was there, too. I know from what Buffy told me about Angel that his soul’s return was really confusing and difficult.”

Spike snorts. “Sort of.”

Willow sighs. The rivalry between Angel and Spike is something she’s picked up on before but not something she wants to dive into right now. “So, I didn’t mess with your soul or anything like that. I’m already in enough trouble without going there. I just eased the transition by building a little scaffold between the soul and the demon.”

“A what?!”

At Spike’s outburst, Willow suddenly remembers that he no longer has the chip and could hurt her very much, even if he is weakened by the torture. “D-don’t worry. It’s temporary. Over time, it will,” she pauses to choose the closest word to describe the process, “dissolve. And you will feel the effects of the soul and demon being together. I’m hoping it will give you time to adjust without being consumed by emotional pain and guilt.”

“So no funny side effects?”

Willow knows that the demon piece has enhanced her witch-y-ness, so she’s less prone to mistakes and unexpected side effects. Vengeance demons don’t seem to work the same way as vampire demons. So, despite the human side of her worrying, she reassures him, “No funny side effects. It’s a little bit like. . .” Willow tries to think of an analogy and lands on, “It’s a little like dissolvable stitches. You don’t have to go back in and take them out because they usually go away on their own without the need to have them removed.”

Spike still isn’t sure what he thinks about this use of magic. Magic’s never done well by him. “Why?”
“Why what?”

“Why’d you try to help me?”

“Because you’re one of us now, right? I mean, you care about Buffy, so that means you’re part of the Scooby gang. Fighting the good fight. I mean, you are fighting the good fight now, right? You helped Buffy in that other dimension even though you couldn’t fight anything.”

Spike almost wants to roll his eyes, but he refrains. He doesn’t know if he considers himself a white hat just yet. . . although he does enjoy being accepted and included. Much as he hates to admit it, it’s all he’s ever really wanted. “Found out I could fight demons with the chip.”

“That must have been exciting to figure out!” Willow finds herself trying to be buoyant in contrast to the situation they’re currently in.

Spike finds himself grinning at the witch. “It was right amazing to be able to hit something again.”

Then, he stops, his ears pricked at the sound of footfalls behind them. He raises a hand, and Willow runs into him because the lights blinked off again.

Willow catches a glimpse of the seriousness on his face and doesn’t protest the sudden barrier.

Spike hears nothing, smells nothing. But. . .

Doors in front of behind them open, and several soldiers dressed in black stream out, booted feet silent as mice and faces impassive and unreactive. Within seconds, Willow and Spike are surrounded with a variety of weapons trained at their head and heart areas.

Willow spies a familiar blond head bobbing between the men and women around them, and out of the corner of her eye, she sees Spike visibly cringe and shrink back. Anger swells up in her chest, and the demon piece rolls and churns, ready to lash out if only someone would make a wish.
Maggie Walsh pushes through the last of the soldiers and passes far into the bubble of Willow’s personal space. Rage sparks in her professor’s eyes.

“What did you do?”

Willow shrugs and grins. “Apparently something you’re upset about, which in my book is of the good.” Oh, this demon anger is making her fearless because she’s never talked to a teacher this way and definitely not with this many deadly weapons aimed at her.

“Fix it. Undo it. You have no idea what you’ve done. I am working on things here that you can’t even imagine... ways to help this country. Ways to save lives. Matters of national security.”

Willow doesn’t care about Professor Walsh’s bullshit but realizes something that she hadn’t before. “I can’t. Once vengeance is done, it’s done.”

“Tell me how it works,” the older woman demands.

Willow crosses her arm, her resolve face firmly in place. “No.”

“All right then.” The Professor raises her voice and orders, “Kill the vampire.”

“Wait. No.” Willow jumps in front of Spike though she knows there are soldiers behind them, too.

Spike is surprised that Red tries to protect him. Even with her recent inclusive statement about belonging, he still doesn’t believe her acceptance is real.

Professor Walsh raises her hand to stay her soldiers. Narrowing her eyes, she smiles. “So, he is important to you. Why is a vampire so important to you?”

A different but familiar voice resounds from the back, “Because he’s my husband, and he better not be dusty because then you’ll have one pissed off Slayer on your hands.”

Buffy’s voice is like music to Spike’s ears, and he slumps a little as he feels a mixture of hope and
relief and . . . love. He closes his eyes. She just announced herself, so that means, she wouldn’t give a fig about what he did. His soul rumbles a bit, and he realizes he feels guilt anyway, scaffold or no. What if she had something else that needed protecting?

“I don’t she think she realizes what that means, Buff,” another voice joins hers.

Willow grins. It’s Xander! And he’s okay! Spike said so, but she wasn’t sure before now. She wishes that he were in front of her, so she could hug him.

Buffy pushes her way through the crowd, and the soldiers part without question. She almost feels a little cocky at their subservience, but then, she realizes it likely has less to do with her role as Slayer and more to do with Riley’s role as their superior. She supposes she should be grateful that she and Xander ran into him while he was searching for Willow, but all of her gratitude is currently directed to whatever powers ensured the two beings standing in front of her were, well, standing in front of her.

Buffy’s eyes jump from Willow to Spike and back again. The redhead smiles and gives her a little wave. It’s something Willow-of-old would do, but there’s something about her aura that’s still demon-y, and something about her eyes that appears older – more serious – even in the damned blinking lights. Buffy’s eyes find Spike’s blue one next, and her heart skips a beat. The beat skippage is not in the good I’m-so-smitten way she anticipated feeling when she finally reunited with him. Oh god. She’s appalled as her eyes rove over his appearance and take inventory of his wounds. Beyond just the ripped clothing and cuts all over his body, his shoulders are sagging, he’s favoring his ankle, his hair is shorn unevenly, and his eye is swollen shut. He looks like he might fall over at any second.

Even though Professor Walsh is shooting daggers at her with her eyes, Buffy half-stumbles, half-runs forward, fully expecting to be cut down before she even reaches him. Miraculously, nothing of the kind happens, and her strong arms circle Spike’s waist. His chest is cool against her lips as she presses a gentle kiss to his bare flesh before turning her cheek. One of his arms awkwardly finds his way around her shoulders, and the knot in her stomach loosens a fraction.

Spike closes his good eye and absorbs her warmth and energy. She’s like sunshine peeking around clouds on a grey winter day. Her sweat is heady, and her heart rate accelerates as he sags against her. Somehow just by supporting him in her arms, she’s anchoring him to her. It’s a feeling he’s never experienced in the past, and unbidden tears well.

At the same time, a reunion of a different sort is happening between childhood best friends, and Xander gives Willow one of his patented bear hugs, not letting go as he softly speaks into her hair, “Willow. I’m so glad you’re alive. Don’t worry. I love you no matter what’s happened.”
Willow can’t believe how easily he’s offering forgiveness for what she’s convinced herself is unforgivable.

“Riley, what are you doing with her?” Professor Walsh’s tone is churlish and furious.

Riley feels utterly calm – much calmer than he anticipated feeling in this inevitable confrontation with his boss. His words are unequivocal. “I’m here with her because what you’re doing is not right. I’m here because this is not what we were told our mission would be. I’m here because I don’t approve of what you’re doing to my friend.”

Professor Walsh glares and before Riley can say anything else, she slaps him hard across the cheek. Riley doesn’t even flinch, only grits his teeth harder. Everyone stares at the pair.

She enunciates clearly, “You are insubordinate. You are a member of the armed forces. You do not question authority.”

“I can, and I do. What you’re doing with your unauthorized secret project is abominable –”

Maggie’s eyes blaze. “That project that you so casually call abominable is the future of the army... the future of this country, and she,” the professor points accusingly at Willow, “destroyed it. Years of work – gone in a second!” She smiles at Willow, but the smile doesn’t touch her eyes. “And that is power – power that I intend to find out how to harness.”

Xander steps between the older woman and Willow. “Over my dead body.”

Professor Walsh gestures at her soldiers. “Seize them!”

Everyone tenses at the same time, but before anyone can make a move, Buffy sees a familiar form push through the crowd. The soldiers easily part with his authority.

George’s mouth is a grim line. “I don’t think so, Maggie.”
Professor Walsh opens her mouth to protest, but the commander raises a weapon of some sort and fires. Electricity crackles through the darkness and envelops her body. With little fanfare except for what smells like singed hair, her body collapses as the current fades away.

Buffy felt Spike’s muscles tense at the sight of the electrocution, and she tugs his hip closer against hers until he relaxes.

“Is she dead?” Xander asks hopefully as he observes Riley toe the body with his boot.

“No,” George says. “She’s not dead. She will, however, be taken into custody for a variety of crimes related to her work here.” The Initiative members murmur amongst themselves, and George places a kind hand on Riley’s slumped shoulder. “Good work, soldier. We need to get back to the situation at hand.”

Riley nods. “You’re right.” He addresses the crowd. “Let’s go. We have several sectors to contain.” He affords Buffy, Spike, Xander, and Willow a glance, and for a moment, he wishes he had known them all better, wishes he had chosen a different life that he would never know for himself. He smiles at Willow. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve this.”

Willow’s heart aches a little for her sort of friend (and yes, with that smile, he moved back into nice guy territory). After a moment’s hesitation, she crosses the gulf between them and gives him a tight hug. “You did the best you could to take care of me. You are also doing something about the bad things going on here, and I appreciate it.”

The sound of a throat clearing from the darkness behind Willow makes her freeze. She pivots with fear all over her face.

“What? What is it?” Buffy asks her friend, twisting her neck around and straining to see.

Soldiers part like the Red Sea, and a tall demon glides forward, head slightly bent to avoid hitting the ceiling and robes swirling around him as he moves. His arms are tucked in his long sleeves, four horns jut out of his head, and a thin, wispy white beard is tied together below his chin.

His eyes twinkle. “There you are, Willow Rosenberg. I’ve been looking for you, but you’ve been hiding here from me. Tsk tsk tsk.” He shakes his head. “You have no need to be afraid of me. I have no doubt that you will pass the graded portion of your test with flying colors.”
“W-what if I don’t want to be graded?” Willow asks, her voice cracking.

With surprising speed, the large demon rushes forward and grabs Willow by the head. Magic and the scent of incense fill the air, swirling around the pair. Just as they start to disappear, Buffy leaps at them, tugging Spike with her.

Xander realizes what Buffy is doing and emulates his friend, darting around Riley and grasping Willow’s hand.

In a second, the three of them latch onto the tail end of the magic, and Buffy barely glimpses the surprise in the demon’s eyes. She can’t help but grin in triumph. Willow won’t be taking this trip alone.

The last thing Willow thinks is that she should have known the magical barrier disappeared when the power system failed.

Then, they all vanish in a blink, leaving the Initiative, several confused soldiers, and the current of interdimensional magic in their wake.
As the last scene fades in the tree screen, Angel sneaks a glance at Cordelia, expecting her to probably freak out about what’s just happened. He frowns. Her hands are still on the sofa cushions, not gripping them as he expected she might. Her body is relaxed, one leg casually thrown over the other.

Reasonably relieved, he sneaks a glance at her face next. Smooth forehead, a small smile, and a tiny life of one eyebrow.

“Tell me about D’Hoffryn,” Cordy says, eyebrow lifting a little more.

“You’re not upset,” Angel notes, studying her face. “Not at all?”

Cordelia cocks her head and thinks. Then, she regards him. “Nope. And yes, I realize that’s in stark contrast to how I was not too long ago. This really is a roller coaster ride, isn’t it?”

“Why aren’t you upset?” Truth be told, he’s calm on the outside, but his insides are crackling with nervous energy, and he wishes he could be with Buffy and Spike now to help them out, but he can’t be. Helpless. He feels helpless. This whole exercise for whatever reason makes him feel like he’s back at Wolfram and Hart when everything and everyone he cared about was slipping through his fingers, including the woman sitting next to him now. That was a time of his life where helping the helpless meant he was the one who needed helping. He still doesn’t like to think about that time.

“Look at it this way, they’ve made it this far, and something,” she points up at the ever-present blue sky. “or someone wants this to succeed. Buffy and Spike and all the rest of them have made it through nightmarish situations in the crossroads demon dimension and the Initiative. Somehow, they are going to get through facing some vengeance demon creator guy with weirdly strict rules for his own magic.”

“ Weirdly strict?”

To Cordelia, it seems so obvious, but she only rolls her eyes internally. “Why would someone in the vengeance line of work make up such horrible day-to-day operational procedures? The demon is basically powerless unless he or she can get another person to make a wish, which is in some cases is
probably easy but in others. . . probably not so much. Seems like it wastes time and manpower.”

Angel shakes his head. “D’Hoffryn plays by rules, but he is definitely not a demon to mess around with, and –”

Crossing her arms, Cordy interrupts, “And just because his system’s clunky doesn’t mean he’s an idiot. I get it.”

Angel nods. “Far from it.”

“Have you met him before?” Cordy runs her open palm over the sectional’s soft surface, grateful to be here and not in the company of any more demons like D’Hoffryn. Her place of peace doesn’t include assholes like him. If he were, she’d pester him into wanting to leave.

Angel nudges his hand under hers and laces their fingers together. “No, but I’ve heard stories. All the horrific things I did to people, you’d think I’d have run into him and maybe more than once.”

She bites her bottom lip thoughtfully. “You know, I’m kind of surprised there wasn’t a vengeance demon hanging out with those gypsies all those years ago.”

Angel’s caught up in the sight of her teeth making a small indentation in her lip and responds distractedly, “Maybe he thought they’d handle the vengeance thing on their own just fine.”

She’s pleased that he wants to kiss her, but now’s not the time. “No, I meant why wouldn’t they be with the gypsies to recruit someone?”

He hasn’t ever thought about it that way. Honestly, he never gave it much thought. All he knew was that he was cursed with a soul. “How do you know they weren’t?”

“Well, I wasn’t there, but . . .” She straightens up and changes the conversation’s direction by asking, “How does this vengeance thing work anyway?”

Thrown, Angel thinks she means the wishing part, and they just witnessed two wishes being granted. “What do you mean?”
“Well, the wish thing, duh. I get that, but how does D’Hoffryn benefit from the vengeance?”

“I don’t know exactly, but I think he gets pleasure or some sort of power from others’ suffering.” He considers this. “Kind of like I used to.”

“In other words, he’s a manipulative, sadistic son of a bitch,” Cordy summarizes.

Angel startles at her frank statement but catches the twinkle in Cordy’s eyes before he has time to take offense. The corner of his mouth lifts. “Right.”

“Psh. See. Buffy and Spike have this. Been there, done that.”

To his surprise, a laugh pushes past Angel’s lips. “Well, when you put it that way. . .”
As the magic dissipates, Buffy, Spike, Willow, and Xander find themselves sitting in rolling arm chairs around a long dark conference room table. The room has windows on all sides but wide blinds close off whatever is on the other side of them, so the only light comes from the golden yellow chandelier centered over the table, leaving the corners of the room dark. Demons shrouded in hooded robes surround them. D’Hoffryn sits forward in a chair at the end of the table, his arms spread wide, clawed hands resting on the table’s intricately carved surface.

Buffy flinches when she glances at Spike, who is in the chair next to her. The physical damage to his body is decidedly worse in the steady light. She inwardly admonishes herself for reacting as his one clear blue eye finds hers. He gives her the slightest of nods, and she tries to reach over to touch his cheek, but she discovers that both her arms and legs are strapped down with ties that hold even someone with her extra strength. She can’t even move the chair with her body.

Her eyes fly to Willow and Xander across from her. They both have terrified expressions on their face. Green eyes pleading for forgiveness, Willow mouths, “I’m sorry,” to Buffy.

D’Hoffryn clears his throat. “I was not expecting tag-alongs, but now that you are all here, you can be witness to your friend’s evaluation. That way, there are no questions about the results.” He shifts his focus to Buffy. “I certainly do not relish the idea of tangling with a Slayer. Over the centuries, I have very neatly tried to stay away from such situations. The Slayer’s mission does not matter to us in the grander scheme, but then, the Slayer does not usually have friends, especially powerful, angry friends, such as dear Willow here.”

Willow’s lips part to protest that she’s not angry, but after a moment of thought, she closes her mouth again. She’d had nothing but time to think while she was trapped in the Initiative. That time led her to conclude that yes, she is very angry... very angry and very sad. Oz left her, and though she feels worthless and hollow, there is rage there, too – rage she turned on herself and everyone around her but not on Oz. Never at affable, sweet, good-hearted Oz who loved her despite the fact that she was the nerdy, invisible high school girl. Even though he cheated on her... in a small, dark corner of her mind that she rarely examined, she believed she deserved that. After all, she cheated on him first with Xander. She mentally turns her back on the last thoughts.

“You are interfering with Slayer business now,” Buffy says with assuredness in her tone. “So you need to let us all go, including Willow.”
“Ah, but you see, Willow is a vengeance demon now. She’s part of my fold.”

Willow raises one hand as far as she can raise it, considering her arms is strapped to the chair. “Um, I thought I was only a vengeance demon-in-training.”

“You are. You can teleport and grant wishes but don’t have all the powers like telekinesis or extra physical strength. Those powers and others only come with the full package.”

“O-oh.”

D’Hoffryn turns his palm up to her. “I don’t know why you were hiding from me in that human facility. I will not hurt you. I want to help ease your pain by helping you cause pain on behalf of others.”

Willow winces. “But I don’t want to cause pain.”

“You already have. Look at your ‘will be done’ spell.” D’Hoffryn’s expression is dreamy.

Buffy raises her hand. “Excuse me.”

“Yes, Slayer?”

“Her ‘will be done’ spell actually had some not so angsty consequences.” The ring feels like a bright golden beacon on Buffy’s finger, and she longs to be out of this place and home, so she can take care of her husband. Above even that, she wants to touch him, to reassure herself that he’s still here with her. She wishes she were back in the cave snuggled up by the fire with him... just the two of them tucked in away from the darkness in the outside world.

“I can see that.” D’Hoffryn studies her ring finger pointedly. “You married someone you obviously have strong feelings for. The spell enhanced that, made the emotion and attachment more real sooner than they would have been.”

Spike isn’t surprised to hear this, not now. His newly restored soul rustles softly against the demon. He loves Buffy. Closing his eye, he wonders how the hell he’s going to explain what happened that
led him to wish for his soul. He reopens his eye as a flash of Maggie Walsh’s voice fills his head.

Xander perks up considerably across the table. “And Willow’s little spell helped my relationship with Anya. We’re in a better place than before. The other dimension kind of brought out some stuff that we needed to address.” He gives Spike a small smile of acknowledgment.

“I see.” D’Hoffryn sounds slightly disgruntled as he looks Xander up and down, evaluating his worthiness. “You are the boy dating Anyanka. She has made an interesting choice. You know, she was my favorite for many years. I took care of her. Did she tell you that?”

Xander feels protective of Anya’s heart in a different way than before, and he finds that there is more emotion for her than he ever dreamed possible when she asked him to prom. Was that really only at the end of last school year? “In a selfish, one-sided way, no doubt. First mistake she makes in over a thousand years, and you abandon her.”

The demon snorts. “Anyanka knows the rules. She made a mistake that only a rookie would make. Loss of your power center results in mortality. It’s written very clearly in the guidelines.”

Buffy ignores this focus on Anya as she’s more worried about Willow getting out of being a vengeance demon. “And Giles and my mom seem happy. You don’t know how long it’s been since my mom dated anyone, and last time, her date turned out to be a crazy, killer robot guy. At least Giles is past his somewhat insane period.”

“So lots of good consequences to Willow’s wish,” Xander concludes, hope all over his face.

A slow smile spreads across D’Hoffryn’s face. “Actually, there are quite a few other not so wonderful consequences.” He ticks off a finger for each point. “One, the lovely Slayer here discovered that her origins are not entirely human though humanity created the Slayer line.”

“Any demon worth his salt knows that,” Spike snarks quietly for the first time since they arrived. The words take effort, but they somehow help him stay in the moment. Dimension hopping in a precarious physical state is for the birds.

“True, but the humans in your little group didn’t know. Second, your mother found out that she is…”
“H-hey!” Spike interrupts, trying to protect Joyce and coughing to cover up D’Hoffryn’s revelation. “That’s the lady’s to know and not for you to share.”

All eyes turn to the vampire.

Buffy’s chest seizes in panic. “What? Do you know something about my mom that you didn’t tell me?”

D’Hoffryn leers. “He does.”

Buffy centers on Spike who is looking at her with similar alarm in his lone clear eye. “What did she tell you? Is something wrong?”

Emotions tangled and twisted, Spike tries to sound confident even as he tells the truth. “She did tell me something, but it’s all a hunch, an uncertainty.” God, that’s a bloody lie; he’s lying to his wife. “She drank from the future well like me.”

“And now, here is the third,” D’Hoffryn virtually cackles.

Buffy glares at the demon. “Shut up.” She focuses on Spike. “Explain.”

“She made me promise. She wants to protect you. For you to have one less thing to worry about, and I agreed.”

Buffy of the past would have snapped back with something about how he and her mother shouldn’t be making decisions for her, but now, after everything they’ve been through, she has his mind in mind, his heart with her heart. Taking a deep breath, she says quietly, “Okay. I trust you.”

D’Hoffryn frowns. Where is the pain . . . the agony at secrets kept? Ah, well. He can’t win them all, and he can sense the vampire’s reaction to her words. There’s something else to plumb but not yet. “Now. Miss Rosenberg. Time for your evaluation.”

Holding out his left hand with talons extended, D’Hoffryn rolls each finger in sequence toward his palm, and some force pulls Willow’s chair to his side. He strokes her pale cheek with his thumb and then places his large hand on top of her head, closing his eyes as little tendrils of electricity flit in and out of her strands of scarlet hair.

In seconds, D’Hoffryn heaves a contented sigh and lounges back into his chair, arms hanging limply toward the floor. With his eyes shut, he remains motionless in silence for a long time.

Willow peeks at him in terror, having felt nothing than an odd pressure on her eyelids during the procedure.

Xander can stand the wait no longer; he wants the creature to say or do anything but sit there while they’re all frightened out of their minds. Well, he’s terrified anyway, and he supposes the fear part is kind of the point to the demon. “Well?” Xander asks, proud that he doesn’t sound shaky at all.

D’Hoffryn slits his eyes as if he’s half-drunk. “Ah, Miss Rosenberg. You create such beautiful chaos when you grant wishes, and recruiting the vampire to collude with the wishes was inspired, especially as you added that delicious proviso to the second wish.”

Buffy is feeling out of the loop again, something she realizes is inevitable given that they had only about ten seconds to reunite before D’Hoffryn showed up. Still, not being in the know makes her twitchy. “What wishes?”

D’Hoffryn folds his hand on his torso with a smirk. “Why don’t you tell them, my protégé.”

Willow desperately wishes her chair was back near Xander’s. As it is, she feels like she’s been called to the front of the classroom to sing a solo like the time her nightmare came true. She feels some measure of relief that at least her voice is not a high-pitched squeak. “Spike helped me. It was my idea. I thought. . . well, after being trapped in the Initiative so long and seeing all the suffering that was happening, I felt angry and wanted to channel that anger.” No, that’s not quite accurate, Willow. “I had a lot of anger when Oz left, and instead of being angry with Oz or the situation, I turned it on myself and then on you guys. I’m still angry. And sad and hopeless that I’ll ever have anyone who loves me for me again, you know?”

D’Hoffryn waves one finger in a lazy circle. “Point, little one. We all know you’re angry and the reasons why. That’s why I recruited you. The wish.”
“I told Spike to wish for the experiments at the Initiative to be reversed.” She pauses to judge their reaction. When there’s nothing, she adds, “And well, he did. . . wish it, that is.”

Emotions bubble forth as the truth dawns on Buffy and Xander in different ways. They end up speaking at the same time and focusing on vastly different things.

Fearful, Xander exclaims, “Spike doesn’t have a chip anymore?!“ Spike glares at him, and Xander realizes how silly his fear. Look at the guy! Spike’s been slashed and beaten; he doesn’t exactly look like a Big Bad right now.

Awe colors Buffy’s words. “So, that’s why the lack of electricity and the annoying flash-y red lights and the complete and utter chaos?”

“Right and right,” D’Hoffryn says, poking a finger toward each of them. “All the demon prisoners turning on their human captors and the ensuing fight with body parts flying and everyone dying was glorious! Maggie Walsh’s life work demolished in one fell swoop. Brilliant vengeance! A+!”

“But the other wish isn’t so vengeful,” Willow mumbles.

D’Hoffryn leans forward so that his cheek is near hers. “Ah, but it is. Share, my dear.”

Willow shivers but makes eye contact with Spike who shrugs one shoulder, resignation in his expression. Her eyes shift to Xander’s and then Buffy’s where they stay. “I granted a wish for Spike.”

“What wish, Willow?” Buffy asks gently, tilting her head in curiosity and consciously trying to loosen her grip on the chair’s armrests.

“Spike wished for his soul to be returned,” Willow states, forcing herself to not look away.

“W-what?! Why?” Buffy’s eyes fill with tears because this is the last thing she ever expected.
Spike finds that the reasons are too complicated to put into a short sentence or two, so after remaining silent for more seconds that usual, he merely says, “As vengeance on myself.”

Willow helps him out but doesn’t get it exactly right. “He was tortured by Professor Walsh, and I think he felt guilty for giving you away. Plus, the first wish took away his chip, and he wanted something to replace it.”

The tears win the war with Buffy’s eyelids and tumble over her lashes. “You idiot. Oh my god. I trust you, remember? I –” She stops herself because she realizes that she almost told him that she loves him, but she wants to save that for just them. “In my world, you don’t need a replacement. Don’t you remember all the things you said to me. . . all the things you showed me about demons making choices, about demons loving and caring? You didn’t think you had a working chip in the other dimension. Why does it matter so much now?”

“It’s not just the chip” is the best he can offer in explanation because the emotion is so heavy in his chest.

“Then, what is it?”

Tears prick at Spike’s corneas. “I’ll explain later, pet. Please.”

The aching in his eyes makes her stop, stays her hand from pressing the issue. More tears push forward, and she tries to blink them away with more success this time. She can wait. As long as he’s alive, she can wait. “Okay.”

D’Hoffryn is almost gleeful. “And the little proviso that you added, Miss Rosenberg?”

Buffy can’t face her friend yet; she can’t take her eyes off her husband. The need to touch him is exquisitely painful. So, she jokes as a cover, “It’s not a happiness clause, is it?”

Willow can’t help but smile at that. “No. Not even close.”

“Good.” She waits for her friend to continue.
"I used my magic to ease the pain that comes with the soul’s return." Buffy glances back at Willow in alarm, so she hastily adds, "A scaffold. I added a scaffold so that the soul and demon come together a little bit at a time over time. He’ll still have to deal with the change but at a more comfortable, more manageable pace. And eventually, the scaffold won’t be there anymore, and he won’t even notice the difference."


Willow exhales with relief. "Exactly."

"But, his suffering will be prolonged, and with just the right amount of tweaking, that pain won’t be so manageable anymore." D’Hoffryn snaps his fingers, and everyone in the room – except the unflappable demon guards – flinches.

Buffy’s head whips back around to study Spike’s face.

He shakes his head to indicate he doesn’t feel any different, and she relaxes a fraction.

"Which I won’t do if Miss Rosenberg consents to join me here in Arashmaharr as an official member of my fold." D’Hoffryn says this like he’s trying to sell her on a new house.

"Blackmail? You’re blackmailing her? How is that fair?" Xander retorts.

Something clicks in Buffy’s mind with Xander’s questions. She sits up straighter as hope surges in her heart. "Fair!" Her volume is a little too loud, but she has everyone’s attention now, so she continues, "Anya said you have to play by your own rules."

"That’s right," Xander says, backing her up and glancing back and forth between Buffy and D’Hoffryn. "She did say that!"

Buffy confronts the demon, "And that means you have to give her the choice. There are no trial periods to become a vengeance demon and no blackmail of any sort involved. It’s a choice based on free will, which is not what you’ve done with Willow, so she has every right to decline the position."
Buffy catches the flash of annoyance in D’Hoffryn’s eyes, but it’s gone almost immediately, replaced by a smug expression. “Anyanka has been absent for a while now. With humanity comes forgetfulness. Ex-vengeance demons don’t get to remember everything about the job. About demons and other such lore, yes. Her experiences, yes. But not about the rules and the day-to-day workings of the work. There’s too much power in the knowledge. She is mistaken.”

“I don’t think so,” Xander rebuts and defends his girl. “She hasn’t been an ex-vengeance demon very long, and her memory for operational procedures is still intact.”

D’Hoffryn scoffs. “Things have changed since Anyanka was here. Procedures change.”

“And you really want Willow,” Spike points out.

“And that means you’d do anything to have her. Even bend your own rules,” Buffy adds. “But you know what? We want Willow just as much... no, more than you. And if you force her into servitude, I will be the thorn in your foot that you wish you’d never stepped on.”

“We’ll be the flies in your soup,” Xander pipes up, throwing his hat in the ring of idioms. “Or the gnats in your ointment.”

“And you’ll bloody well wish you’d have given her a choice,” Spike says quietly.

Willow smiles, grateful for the support though she isn’t sure she deserves it. “Thanks, guys.”

D’Hoffryn studies them all, one at a time.

The silence is palpable.

After carefully considering the pros and cons of making an enemy of the Slayer, D’Hoffryn heaves a large sigh of disappointment. “Fine.”

He pulls a coin out of his sleeve and presses the cool metal against Willow’s palm because she can’t reach for it, being tied down and all. “This is my talisman. You may use it to summon me at any time if you ever change your mind.” He forces her to make eye contact with him by lifting her chin up.
with his forefinger and thumb and speaks with measured slowness. “You have so much potential. They are correct. I really want you in my fold. Remember that.”

Magic crackles between them. Willow shudders as her body resumes its humanity, and she just feels ordinary again.

Then, D’Hoffryn arcs his arm through the air and transports them all back to Earth. The chairs empty of their occupants, he sighs once more. He really should have dished the vampire a little more pain for the loss of Willow.
Thank you so much to Ceruleansoul for the lovely beta on the chapter and interlude! Super huge thank you to Synefred for this wonderful song suggestion! (I totally downloaded it and have been dancing around to it any chance I get!)

Interlude, Told You So

As the past fades, Cordelia sits up straight, looks heavenward, and snaps a finger. “Pencil Full of Lead. Paolo Nutini.”

One of her favorite songs with its snappy beat fills the otherwise quiet forest air. Leaping off her seat, she does a little shimmy, rhythmic dance around the sectional, leaves crunching under her feet.

Completely relieved that D’Hoffryn didn’t pull something worse, Angel watches his love undulate. A bemused smile spreads across his face. He must remember to play this song for her again in their heavenly place. “What’s with the dancing?”

Eyes sparkling, she pauses with her hands on her hips, leans forward, and grins at him. “Told you so!”

Angel’s smile widens. “That you did.”

She sashays up to him. “Dance with me?”

He starts to protest, but then, she has him by the hand, and he joins her, doing his version of his happy dance without a care in the world about how goofy he must look or with any regard for what anyone else might think.
The four detainees appear a couple of feet off the ground, and gravity takes hold as the magic releases them. Buffy lands in a crouch in the common living space at Lowell House. Spike stumbles behind her but stays upright, favoring his ankle, and Xander and Willow sprawl to the ground in a heap.

Buffy scans the surprised faces and takes in the situation the way Giles taught her. Speaking of her Watcher, he’s perched on a stool before her, one heel balanced up on the bar between the stool legs and the other dangling low. Anya sits on a stool next to him, hands clasped around her knees, and Riley bookends her, a laptop open and balanced on his thigh. Lorne is standing in front of them with his long legs spread, head cocked to one side and one hand on his chin. A demon of unknown type stands before them with George at his spiny elbow. The demon’s mouth is hanging open as if he was in the middle of saying . . . or singing something. A whole line of demons trails behind him and out the front door. They shift uncomfortably, and Buffy catches murmurs of “Slayer.” Army men are dispersed at regular intervals, and they’re offering food and blankets to the befuddled and groggy ex-prisoners.

Lorne addresses the sudden appearance of the foursome first. “Welcome home, Sweet Pea and . . . Other Peas. Looks like you tangled with D’Hoffryn and lived to tell the tale. His dimension moves a bit slower than this one, so you missed. . . well, you missed a lot.”

Willow and Xander scramble up behind Buffy, and Anya leaps off her stool to throw her arms around Xander.

“How do you know where we were?” Buffy asks, briefly closing her eyes as her arms go around Spike’s waist at last.

“Your spunky little ex-demon filled us in when Riley found us again,” Lorne explains. He nods at the demon. “You’re clean.” Lorne pulls a couple of tickets out of a stack behind him and tucks them in the dazed demon’s hand. “Free drinks at my safe zone bar in L.A. You’re welcome anytime.”

Anya hugs Xander tighter, not even flinching at being outed. Then, she breaks free and embraces the astonished Willow. Anya holds the witch by the shoulders. “I’m glad you’re okay and . . . human. I’m here if . . . when you need to talk.”
Willow smiles at the ex-demon with new appreciation. “Thank you.”

George cups the spiny demon’s tricep. “You’re free to go. Check out procedure is in the kitchen. I’m sorry for your trouble.”

Buffy addresses Giles as simply as she can, “Willow’s human again. Where’s my mom?”

“Thank goodness.” Giles gives Buffy a gentle side hug and looks Spike up and down. “Your mother is helping with injuries. She’s unhurt. We’re... assessing the demons. Collaboratively. Between all of us, we’re doing the best we can.”

Riley runs his hand through his hair and shifts on the stool. “I’m sharing the intel we’ve gathered on each demon, Anya and Giles are sharing their experience, and Lorne is listening to them sing. His readings are scarily fitting with the information we have. Though, I have no idea how that works.”

“Can we help?” Xander asks, wedged between his best friend and girlfriend, an arm around each.

Giles smiles with affection at the young man. “Pardon my lack of decorum, but you all look like shit. I believe a brief rest is in order. Then, we could use everyone’s help.” He nods at Spike. “Yours included.” Giles takes note of the vampire’s awful wounds and ruined hair. “You may need a longer respite.”

Spike chuckles and ends up coughing to prove the Watcher’s point. Buffy strokes his back, and he relishes the touch more than he can express.

Riley is typing something on his laptop. “There are spare rooms at the end of each hallway. We reserve them for visiting soldiers. The beds are clean.” He affords the vampire the briefest of glances. “There are First Aid kits in all rooms. Standard.”

“Thank you,” Buffy says, exhaustion overtaking her again now that everyone she loves is safe. “After, you’ll catch us up? I mean about how you ended up here?”

“Of course.” Giles resumes his seat on the stool and motions the next demon forward. “I’m quite sure we’ll still be here.”
Once in the spare bedroom and well away from prying eyes, Buffy assists Spike to the edge of the neatly made bed and briefly massages his shoulder before switching on the bedside lamp and returning to the door to close and lock it. Then, she joins him on the bed where he’s avoiding her gaze.

Based on his reaction in the vengeance demon’s domain, she allows him the space but picks up his now familiar hand and holds it between both of hers. She thought about how she wanted to approach the situation in their slow walk down the hall, but she still isn’t sure where to begin, so she follows her heart.

“I want to know everything that happened because I know that there are good reasons for the choices you made even if I don’t know what they are yet.” She runs a thumb gently over his knuckles, the skin a red and purple quilt. “And I want to kill whoever did this to you because. . .” She trails off because the emotion in her throat cuts off her words.

“Look that bad, eh, love?” The corner of his mouth lifts a little as he peeks at her.

She’s sick at how awful he appears, but she doesn’t want him to know that. The humor helps. “Yes. Yes, you do.”

She glances around the sparse room and decides that the First Aid kit must be in the nightstand, which is the only other piece of furniture besides the bed. Without letting go of Spike’s hand, she scoots closer to the lamp and opens the larger bottom drawer. A large metal box with a red cross on the top sits as the sole occupant of the wooden space. Perfect.

Her fingertips skim over Spike’s fingers as she reaches for the kit and pulls it out. Setting it on the bed where she’d been sitting, she reaches for her vampire, locating the bottom edge of his tattered shirt. Leaning forward, she finds his half-broken lips and touches them gently with hers.

He returns her chaste bit of affection and steels himself for what she’s about to do. He emits a sharp hiss of pain as she pulls the ruin of his favorite black shirt over his head, the cotton ripping open the wounds that healed together with the fabric. The pain makes him see stars, and he closes his eye to the sparklies, trying to ride the wave back to her.

Buffy bites the inside of her cheek to keep from gasping. His pale torso is crisscrossed with jagged
cuts and pools of multicolored bruises. She’s almost scared to touch him. Tears threaten to come up again, but she forces them away because she doesn’t want him to have to take care of her right now.

Spike can tell by the brief flash on Buffy’s face that she hasn’t seen anything this bad before. He’s seen worse, but he knows she hasn’t, so he reaches for her. “Pet, it’s already better…”

“It was worse than this?” Buffy can’t keep the disbelief out of her voice, and it comes out harsher than she intended, so she slows down and softens. “Who?”

“The psychologist bint,” he admits and quickly adds, “But she’s all taken care of now.” He doesn’t want her to get pissed and go all vengeful, leaving him here in this room alone. He wants her to stay.

“Bitch.” Buffy swallows the white-hot anger that flashes through her body and makes a conscious decision to set the issue aside for now because he needs her. “Stupid First Aid kit isn’t going to help much. So much for army guy preparedness.” She flips open the lid and ruffles through the woefully inadequate supplies, holding up the bottle of saline and the small bandages.

Spike chuckles. “Nothing a bloody bandage can fix. It'll just take some healing time.”

Buffy slams the kit shut and sets it near the lamp. “I have a better idea.” She’s been wanting this since the last time though this isn’t the excuse she was looking for. She reaches for the button of his jeans, her hand hovering. “Mind if I?”

Spike hesitates, but not for the reason she likely fears. The shirt hurt bad enough. Jeans are worse.

Buffy totally understands. After all, she’s dealt with her own wounds and clothing more times than she can count. Just not on this scale. “Band-Aid ripping or slow and easy?”

Nerves already perking in anticipatory pain, Spike grimaces a little. “Band-Aid. But probably in the shower. Is there a bathroom around here?”

“You’re right. Not enough saline in the kit.” They have to rinse out the threads, so the wounds don’t close over them again, and there’s no way to pick each piece out. Oh god. She almost breaks down again but somehow manages to stop herself. “Okay. We passed a bathroom a couple of doors down.” Thank goodness, it’s close.
The journey back goes faster as journeys back often do. The beige (and thankfully not white) bathroom only has one tile shower with a glass door and a cushioned medical-looking bench inside, one deep sink with hand soap, and one self-flushing toilet. Everything is also spotless, which isn’t surprising considering a bunch of army types live in Lowell. Buffy muses that they at least got one thing right but wonders why they need the geriatric shower bench. She guesses maybe that when demons fight back, they deal some damage to the very human army guys.

Spike gingerly enters the shower and undoes his jeans as Buffy locks the bathroom door. Before he can summon the courage to re-open his wounds, she quickly joins him, naked as a jaybird, her loose blonde hair curling in front of her collar bones.

She slides closed the glass door and smiles shyly at him. “Hi.”

He kisses the tip of her nose, borrowing her buoyancy. “Hi, yourself.” He leans his forehead against hers. “What’re you doing, pet?”

“How’s that?” He tries to arch the eyebrow over his injured eye and fails.

“All the threads on your back.” She gingerly kisses an unbroken space on his chest. “That’s not my idea though.”

“Your idea?” Despite how much pain he’s in, his body is reacting to the warmth of her nearness in the small enclosed space, and he wants nothing more than to feel her body on his. . . so much so that he can’t think. He traces a finger over her cheek.

Buffy leans into his touch as little lightning rods of desire shoot through her. “From earlier. . . er, back in the other room. I think I need you to bite me.” She nuzzles up his palm and takes his index finger in her mouth, running her mouth over the length before teasingly biting the tip. He groans.

He leans over and nips her earlobe with his blunt front teeth.
She squirms and struggles to stay away from him long enough to explain. “No, the other way. Drink me. So you can heal faster.”

“As you wish, pet.” He caresses her breast and closes his mouth over hers.

Buffy enjoys the feeling of his lips gingerly gliding over hers and pushes her tongue into his mouth, flirting with his tongue before pulling back. “But first.”

His jeans are tight with his need for her. “You just went and made it harder.”

“Hey! Punning is my job.” Her tone is light, but she’s nervous. She knows it’s going to hurt. “Ready?”

He grits his teeth and unzips his jeans. “All right.”

She slides behind him, hooking her fingers over the back of his jeans, taking care not to scrape her fingernails over his cool flesh.

Spike emulates her movement, only from in front.

“Count of three. One, two, three,” Buffy ends her countdown by pulling hard.

Spike follows her lead but truthfully can’t do much because he’s letting out a howl of pain. When he recovers enough, he recognizes that Buffy is helping him step out of the destroyed jeans and turning up the water so that it comes raining out of the shower head. Warm water splashes over the open cuts all over his body, blood oozing from the many places of parted flesh.

After washing her hands with soap from the shower’s dispenser, Buffy forces herself to step back and stay neutrally clinical, examining each injury and maneuvering torn cloth from where it has invaded his epidermis. With each injury she clears, she presses a soft kiss to his undamaged skin near the mutilation.

Having done this numerous times on a smaller scale when he was wounded and healed over before, Spike adroitly cleans out his injuries and then closes his eyes. He lets himself be carried away by the
warmth of the water falling all around them and the heat of her fingertips and lips moving slowly down his body. This helps him ignore the pain. When she finishes, he feels her slender arms slip around his waist. Her hand slowly and lazily strokes him up and down as her hips push up against him from behind, the scent of her arousal evident. He covers the backs of her hands with his, his ring finger running over the ring on hers. He can’t believe she’s still wearing it, and suddenly, he can’t wait any longer, so he takes hold of one of her hands and turns, sliding onto the cushioned bench.

Buffy smiles at him as he pulls her forward, and she straddles him, bringing her mouth to his and kissing him with everything she has. Without words, she tries to let him know that she wants only him, that the time they spent apart was too long even though it had been such a short time. She loses herself in the cool dance of his mouth with hers and relishes his hardness against her thigh. When he trails kisses down her neck, she reaches for him, running her hand along his length again and then pressing him toward her core. She’s more than ready for his entrance.

The scar on her neck left by the previous vampire is puckered underneath his lips, and he has the strong urge to overtake the mark with one of his own. As she slides onto him, he shifts so that his teeth extend long and sharp. With only a moment’s hesitation, they pierce her neck, and he almost comes too soon as she gasps, but he manages to hold back so he can enjoy her. He draws forth her life force in a more direct way than the first time, and her blood explodes on his tongue. His demon surges forward mingled with his soul in a way that leaves him breathless. She continues to ride him faster and harder as he drinks until they are both consumed with the need and want of their joining.

Time feels nonexistent.

There is only the two of them together drowning in sensation and each other.

Her orgasm arrives before his, and he follows soon thereafter, his soul gently urging him to retract his teeth before he consumes too much blood.

As one part of his body exits hers, she collapses limp and heavy against him, her heart thundering against his chest, their bodies pulsing together. His hands move from her buttocks to the small of her back, and he is pleased when she nestles closer. The water continues to rain down on them from above, and he becomes aware of the patter of the droplets against the tile, surrounding them like a shelter away from reality.

Buffy wants to tell him how she feels about him beyond the physical, but she is reluctant to disturb the moment and worried about his health. Fighting the pull to stay in his arms forever, she opens her eyes and weakly pushes back to survey him. Spike’s wounds are looking much better already, and she sighs with glad relief.
Spike opens his eyes at her movement and realizes with happiness that he can open both eyes again to view his wife smiling at him with such joy that his chest aches. Her green eyes tell a different story than the rest of her face. “What?”

Buffy feels as if a huge weight is both simultaneously lifted but added to her shoulders. The best explanation she has is, “I’m so tired.”

Truth be told, he’s exhausted, too. Being safe and in his lover’s arms reminds his body that it needs rest. “Wore you out, eh, pet?”

“Not you. Everything,” she admits. “Sleep needed but only if you hold me again. Please?”

She doesn’t need to ask such things. He’s happy to oblige. He almost tells her that his arms are always open, but instead, he says, “Sounds like a right good plan to me.”

Buffy sags as a little tension is relieved. “Okay. Think you can make it back to the room?”

Spike runs a tongue over his incisor and wiggles his hips against hers. “Depends on what you mean by make it back, love.”

She makes a face at him. “I meant, are you physically capable of getting back to the room? And I guess I have my answer.” She pauses and then adds teasingly, “Gutter brain.”

He dives in for a kiss. “Always want you, love.”
Together again at last, the Slayer and her vampire fall asleep almost as soon as their heads hit the pillow despite being in the haven of the enemy. They sleep the dreamless sleep of exhausted travelers who have been through something traumatic and come out the other side.

When Buffy finally wakes again in the dark guest room, she finds herself spooned naked against her husband, her body fitting neatly against his. His left arm is heavy over her waist, and she cherishes the feeling, knowing that he could very well have been dust and not solidly next to her as he is now.

The thought of losing him makes her find his hand and pull it close to her heart. She loves him more than she ever thought possible in such a short time, but she doesn’t know how to convey that to him. If she thinks about it logically, their relationship and her depth of feeling make no sense. Her feelings are vital and strong nevertheless. She can’t deny them.

She knows they need to talk about a lot of things, especially the soul piece, and she doesn’t know what him having a soul means. All she knows is that Angel with and without a soul felt very different. Though, if she is honest with herself, even Angelus sometimes felt a little like Angel. He sure seemed to have feelings for her despite his words to the contrary. She has no idea what this means about Spike, and Willow’s dissolvable stitches worry her, too. At least of late, Willow has a poor track record for magic and trying to help. As Buffy thinks about this, she realizes that she wants her Spike, and the soul sans stitches better not mess with that.

Spike’s body lets him know that she’s awake before he’s even consciously aware. Her heart is a steady beat against his palm, and her breathing is faster and not as deep. Her hair tickles his nose, and he can smell the faint scent of her blood in the wound on her neck... the scar over which she let him bite her. His body responds to the very thought of drinking from her again, and he announces his presence without intending to.

Buffy feels him between her legs, and her body responds accordingly by subconsciously rubbing against him. Her heart tripping over itself, she longs to have him take her from behind, but she holds herself back. Later. And soon. Damn need for talking. Talking about this kind of thing is not her strong suit, but it has to be done. She wants to get back to the easy intimacy from the crossroads dimension. This has to get them there.

So, she valiantly chooses to ignore her body’s persistence, and says, “Hey.”
“Hello, love.” His voice is a tad hoarse from sleep. Unusual for him, he keeps checking his internal cues for signs that something is amiss with his soul. Upon inspection, the warmth is still there, steady and comforting, not bucking up against the demon piece of him. If anything, he feels a bit of peaceful co-existence and melding at the edges. A growing sense of guilt is there as well, but he’s able to manage it, set it aside like one of Dru’s unwelcome party guests – a stray vampire or demon – that he tolerates. Interesting. His thoughts are swept away when Buffy moves against him.

Buffy feels incredibly safe in his arms. She better not screw it up with words. “We should talk.” Great. Wonderful start, Buffy. Those simple three words often leads to badness – at least in her experience.

Spike freezes a little with the words. Part of him wants to pretend that she doesn’t know anything about the soul piece. And how the hell is he going to handle the bit about her mother?

Buffy notices how Spike stiffens behind her, and she rubs his forearm in reassurance until his muscles loosen again. She swallows and starts with, “Before we do, talk, that is, I want you to know something.” She takes a deep breath. “More than anything, I want you to know that I’m fallin. . .” She trails off. No, that’s not quite how she feels.

Barely perceptibly, Spike trembles in response. This helps her be brave for them both. She imagines that they’re back on the boat, swaying gently in the water, hidden away from the twin suns by the Dynas shelter. Better.

“Do you remember how you told me that you were scared, too?” She knows he remembers, but she tells him anyway. “On the river. After. . . we made love for the first time.” He remains quiet, so she continues, words flooding out seemingly out of nowhere, “Well, I’m still scared. I’m scared of how fast this is going. I’m scared of being hurt again. I’m scared of what the soul will do to you. I’m terrified of losing you. But no matter how scared I am, I know one thing is undeniably true.”

Spike finally finds his voice and softly asks, “What’s that, pet?”

Buffy suddenly feels the need to see Spike, to look into his eyes when she says what she never thought she’d say again since Angel broke her heart. She reaches up for the lamp and flicks the dim bulb on. Better than nothing. Then, she shifts around to view his face. He blinks in the sudden luminance, cerulean blue eyes both open and whole again. What she witnesses is fear that matches her own, but before she can say anything, he glances away. Her heart aches, and she traces the back of her fingers over his healing cheek and jaw, ducking her head to find his gaze again. “I love you.”
Tears well in Spike’s eyes before he can stop them. Pansy that he is. He loves her back; he already knows this. But he’s honestly speechless, which is ironic because he usually has some sort of come back for most things. How did this happen? Why does she love him? Is she sure? He doesn’t voice these questions, but he can’t stop them from running through his mind.

“Don’t leave me hanging,” she jokes when his silence goes on more than a few seconds. Her heart literally feels like it’s in her throat and could shatter at any moment. When he still doesn’t say anything, she draws away, hot tears filling her eyes, her cheeks burning from embarrassment. It isn’t the first time she slept with a guy and made assumptions about it meaning more than it did.

Buffy’s reaction jolts Spike’s brain out of his worries. He knows where her fears lie. Bugger. He didn’t mean to hurt her. “Hey, love.” He picks up her hand and kisses her palm. “I’m sorry, pet.”

She pushes further away, body jerking to the edge of the bed, wood from the edge of the nightstand pressing into her back. “No, it’s okay. You don’t need to placate –”

Before she can finish the sentence, he draws her close in his arms where an anguished sob passes through her lips. He kisses the top of her head. “I didn’t meant to hurt you. I love you, too. More than you know.” He keeps babbling like a berk to cover up his uncertainty about whether what she said is true, “It’s just that well, remember how I don’t believe I deserve all that much? You’re more than any bloke could ever ask for. You’re more than I deserve. I’ve done so many things that you don’t even want to know about. So much evil.”

Her face pressed into his chest, her voice is muffled. “And I told you that didn’t matter to me. What matters is what you do now. You can’t do anything about the past or the future. Only the now.”

“But it does matter. My past has shaped who I am now.” Even as he says this, he recognizes that every act he’s ever done has led him to now, to lying here with her – a Slayer. No, not a Slayer. He’s with Buffy who is telling him that she loves him. He runs his fingers through her now dry hair. “I wouldn’t change anything.” A soft giggle reaches his ears.

“Even the trying to kill me part?”

He chuckles. “Even the trying to kill you part. Got me in your vicinity, didn’t it? One step in the right direction.”
“I guess I tried to kill you back,” she admits.

“Not very hard though.”

She gives him a playful shove. “Hey. I did try.”

“You did.” Now, he thinks back on all those times with a different lens. Again, he muses that Dru was right. He was drawn to Buffy even then, but somewhere along the way, his desire to kill her turned to desire for her and for her happiness.

Buffy covers his cool lips with her warm ones in a brief kiss, a kiss that promises more to come. “Now, can you tell me what happened?”

Spike’s thoughts about his time in the Initiative are still all a jumble. He honestly doesn’t know where to begin, and the gentleness in her green eyes makes him want to break down again.

Buffy witnesses the emotion that’s overtaking him and makes an executive decision. She rolls back but leaves the low light on. Then, she pushes her body against his, recreating their earlier position and tugging the blanket over them both. It reminds her of how he held her in the cave where the only light was the fire creating a cocoon of warmth around them. This time, he’s the one hurting and in pain, and she doesn’t want him to misinterpret any reaction she might have. “I love you,” she whispers. “I think this will make it easier. . . maybe for both of us.”

She’s right. It does. He buries his nose in the softness of her hair and inhales her familiar scent, which grounds him. She laces her fingers with his. He feels safe now, too, so he begins, “So, that psychologist of yours.”

“Professor Walsh. And she’s so not mine.”

“Right. Was talking with Red.” He decides to start with the neutral stuff, fill her in on less emotionally jarring details.

“Riley came through?” Buffy wasn’t sure he would.
“He did. Put me in a cell next to hers. There was a guard on the hall, but then, he disappeared. Was hollering at him, but he didn’t respond. That’s how Willow knew I was there. So, we started talking. She wanted to teleport us out of there, but I convinced her otherwise. She saw a lot, being there, which I’ll let her explain to you. She mentioned that the professor had interviewed her and acted like she had never even met her.”

“Wow.” Buffy vows to have a conversation with Willow soon. She’s worried about her friend almost as much as she’s worried about Spike.

“Around about that time, the lady herself showed up.”

Buffy is firm. “Not a lady. A monster.”

“I can get on board with that, pet,” he said softly as he recalled the out of control anger in the bint’s eyes. She was almost mad but in a far different way than Dru. “Walsh had her men take me to this room, and they strapped me down. She sent them away, and then, . . .” Spike’s voice trails off, his confidence fading. Where does he even go beyond this? How can he possibly tell Buffy what happened, how some human woman got into his mind and twisted everything up?

Buffy feels him trembling again, small shudders that he’s trying to contain. She burrows closer to him and cradles his arm, rubbing her foot over his shin. “Shhh, it’s okay. You’re safe and here with me. She can’t do anything to you now.”

“Wish she was dead,” he confesses. Then, he’d know she was truly gone.

“Me, too. Dead sounds good.” And it does. Buffy’s angry with herself for not seeing through the woman sooner. “Tell me only what you can, okay?”

“Okay.” Spike studies the way the light from the lamp forms a little spotlight over that corner of the room. He is no longer there in that white room with the psychologist’s voice ringing in his ears. His mind whirls as he tries to grasp onto what he should tell Buffy. Uncertain, he picks up the first thread he can hold onto. “She knew that someone had betrayed her from the inside because she’d noticed little things that were different among her soldiers. I think. . . I think she suspected one of the people was the farmer, but . . .”

“The farmer?” Oh, wait. Willow had said something once about Riley being from Iowa. “Riley. Sorry. She suspected him. . .”
Buffy’s confusion actually helps him keep going. “Probably because of the way he was treating Red. But she wanted to be sure. Pretty sure farmer boy was her golden child before he got disillusioned.” He isn’t exactly sure how that happened truth be told. “And I’m pretty sure she sussed out something about the way he handled my return.”

“Showing up before everyone else,” Buffy concludes. “Heh. He’s not as stealthy as he likes to think.”

“Right.” Now for the hard part. The other bits seemed to settle him. . . give him some distance from the emotional pain. He takes a deep breath. “So, she tortured me.”

Spike says it so casually that Buffy’s eyes fill with tears and spill hotly over her cheeks. She’s suddenly glad he can’t see her face.

“S’okay, love. I’m here now.” He kisses the curve of her shoulder.

“Your damn vampire senses. I’m okay. I’m the one comforting you,” she insists, reluctantly pulling her hand from his to wipe her cheeks and eyes.

His hand now free, Spike plays with Buffy’s hair, the strands silky beneath his fingertips. “We’re comforting each other.”

She sniffs and laughs a little. “We are.”

The moment of humor pushes him onward. “I held on as long as I could, pet. She was good at her job. I mean, I’ve tortured people in my day and witnessed torture. She could hold her own with Angelus.”

Buffy shivers. “That’s saying a lot.” She finds his hand again and squeezes.

“She somehow knew about you, too, pet. But didn’t know your identity. At first, all she got out of me was that I knew you. I mean, she was good at picking up on nuance in facial expressions.”
“One of the things I love about you is that I can read your feelings all over your face. Please don’t lose that.” His expressive nature reassures her that he cares and lets her know when she might have done something wrong... or right. Hopefully, lots more “rights” are in her future with him. She thinks about his joy in her shower at home. She hopes that the soul won’t change that, bury it under guilt for things he can’t do anything about now.

He smiles at how insistent she is. He’s used to people using his depth of emotion against him. Somehow, he trusts that the woman in his arms won’t use him that way. “Try not to, love.”

“Good.”

Now the hard part. He closes his eyes and focuses on Buffy’s warmth against his torso. “It was a long time that she was at me. She ferreted a lot out by playing on the weaknesses she elicited earlier in the process.” Spike’s mind won’t even let him visualize what happened.

Buffy thinks that Spike sounds almost mechanical talking about this and guesses that he has to. “She preyed on your humanity. The pieces of you are that are kind and loving and good.”

Spike isn’t too sure about Buffy’s assessment of him, but the words feel right. It’s a piece of him that Angelus was always trying to snuff out, the piece of him that Dru was drawn to because she needed that connection to someone still capable of love. There’s something freeing in not having to hide that from the woman in his arms. “And when it got right down to it, I...” He can’t speak the words aloud. What will she think of him if she knows the truth? The fused pieces of demon and soul agree with his brain’s assessment.

Buffy feels him withdraw just a little, so she turns toward him. He closes his eyes to her when she does, but she doesn’t hesitate. She fidgets with the edges of his shorn hair and kisses his eyelids. “I love you, remember? You can tell me, and I won’t judge.”

After several seconds of silence during which Buffy forces herself to breathe slowly and evenly, Spike finally says, “I made promises.”

“What promises?” she prompts, stroking his cheek.

“Well, a promise. A promise to your mum.” There. He’s said it. No turning back now.
Her first instinct is to ask about the promise he made her mom, the one she was so eager to learn about in Arashmaharr. Instead, she tries hard to put herself in his shoes. “What do you think you did?”

“I don’t think. I know what I did.”

She loses her temper a bit because the vagueness is driving her batty. She really wishes he’d just say whatever it is that’s keeping him stuck so she can ease his guilt. “Then, please, illuminate me because I can’t think of anything you could have done that was so wrong under extreme torture. Did you see yourself before? You could hardly stand up. I’ve never seen anyone so...” She softens and swallows back the repeat of the sudden sadness she felt earlier at his appearance. She reminds herself that he’s better now, that her blood helped. “No matter what happened, I know that you did the best you could with dire circumstances. Thank god you’re like that bad penny... that cockroach that takes a licking and keeps on ticking no matter how bad things get.”

He laughs at her reference to their earlier conversation. God, that feels like years ago. “Hey now,” he repeats, borrowing strength again from her levity. He studies the light in her eyes and her upturned lips. She’s so beautiful when she smiles. He just can’t fathom that it’s for him, but he’ll take it.

This allows him to finally say, “Was at the end of my rope, you know? Her machinations felt endless.” He closes his eyes but reopens them when Buffy’s fingers run over his neck and down his shoulder. “Then, she pulled out the bit of wood and put it over my heart. Told me to tell her what I knew about the farmer... about you.” He’s quivering again, but Buffy remains steady. “I’d promised you that I’d try my best to have your back, and I’d promised your mum that I’d take care of you when she dies.” His words come faster now, tripping past his lips as he tries to get it all out. “And in that moment, I was right selfish, pet. I chose to betray you. To keep the promise to your mum. I-I wanted us. S-so I broke then. Told her every sodding thing.” He takes a hesitating breath. “And that... was that.” Tears slip slowly from his clear blue eyes, one trailing down his nose and the other across his cheek to his ear, but he doesn’t pull away.

She kisses his mouth and then the tear tracks on his face. “I don’t know what you promised my mom, but if it got you to make the choice you did to stick around, I’m grateful.” She nestles closer against him, her head just under his chin. “I love you.”

He wraps his arms around her and whispers, “Love you, too, pet.”

Buffy infuses her love into her next words. “I just don’t understand why you thought that you needed to punish yourself by wishing for a soul.”
Spike doesn’t know the words to answer this either, so he stumbles along. “It’s complicated. And it wasn’t intended as a punishment. . . . Well, partly it was. Red’s first wish took away the chip.”

Buffy pulls back and starts to speak but upon seeing the determination clearly evident on his face, she resumes her earlier stance and listens. His deep voice is low in her ear, a gentle echo that any other time might put her to sleep, but now, she hangs onto every word.

“And I meant what I said in the crossroads about the world we live in now. There are still a lot of black and white beliefs about good and evil and souls and no souls. . . despite the grey. I know we sorted a lot out in that other world, but there are still the people here that we have to deal with, and some of those people are people you care deeply about. If I want to have a hell’s chance of being accepted, of making things easier for us, I need my soul. I don’t want you fighting so hard with your friends when you have enough on your plate, and I certainly don’t want them constantly in my face. And I can’t erase what I’ve done. You’re right. I can only change the now, but I also have to accept my past and the ramifications of what I’ve done. I want to learn from the damage I caused; I want to be a better man. . . partly for you, but also for me. I made a choice in that alley with Dru all those years ago. I gave up my soul to have a new life. . . for me. And now, I’m making a choice to be worthy of you. . . not because I need you to be my moral compass, but because I need a moral compass in me, so that burden doesn’t fall on you.”

Buffy’s tears dampen his shirt. She doesn’t know what to say in response because she doesn’t believe he needs his soul to be a better man, but she gets what he means about the world out there. So she borrows his words, “That’s quite a speech.”

He laughs. “I meant every word.”

Buffy thinks about Willow’s scaffold again. “You have to let me be there for you if you do experience any. . . ramifications from the past. No hiding it and trying to be Mr. Tough Guy. You are not a burden to me. Ever. You might be a pain in the butt sometimes, but you’re not a burden.”

He grips her bottom so that she shrieks.

“See?” she gasps. “Pain in the butt.”

He proceeds to run his hands up her back to stroke the place near her spine that he’s learning drives her crazy. “Your pain in the butt though.”
Desire ripples through her, and she lifts her head for a kiss. “Exactly. I’d fight for you, you know. And I love you.”

He’s starting to believe her. “I know.” He deposits a brief kiss on her lips. He can’t tell her the next words enough, “I love you, too.”

She beams at him and changes the subject. “So, I’m a little afraid to ask you this. . .”

“ Anything, pet.”

Buffy gently touches the bald spots on his head, places where his bleached hair is gone. “It’ll grow back, right?”

The corner of his mouth quirks up. “Yeah, it will. Give it time. Vampire hair takes longer than human hair.”

“Good.” She corrects herself, “Good that it will grow back, not good that vampire hair grows slower.”

“Got that.” Spike knows where she’s going with this, and he’s planning on doing something about it, but he strings her along, “But?”

“It looks wonky, and it’s already half-shaved.”

“Bottom line, love.”

She can’t ask him to shave his head, so it grows back even, can she? Do wives have say over that kind of thing? What if he’s offended? He doesn’t seem offended. But what if he is? She settles on a shrug in response.

Spike views the mild desperation in her eyes and lets her off the hook, kissing her on the nose. “Was gonna shave it.”
Now she has a million questions. Well, maybe not a million. “Do vampires shave?”

Spike rolls his eyes. “Of course, they do! If our hair grows, we have to shave.”

Huh. She never saw Angel shave. Then again, they didn’t talk about everyday stuff much. “How do you do it?”

Now Spike’s sarcastic. “With a razor. . .”

She emits a little huff. “No. Without a reflection.”

He chuckles. “Practice. Years of practice, pet.”

“Can I watch?” This could potentially be very sexy.

“You can help if you want.” The way her eyes are shining, she’s eager to do so. “Guess that means we’re getting up.”

“Yes.” Buffy glances down and says rather sadly, “And putting clothes on.”
“And we’re done,” Cordelia says with a happy sigh.

Lounging back with her hands folded on her abdomen, she glances at her vampire who still looks pensive. In fact, he looks down right broody. Uh oh. “What’s wrong? They’re together earlier than before. Spike’s all soulful so that little part of his trajectory is intact. And the Initiative is. . . mostly taken care of. What more could you ask for?”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Angel holds his hands up to the forest around them. “If we were done, why is everything still here?”

“Because the PTB are done with us, and now they can forget about us?” Cordelia sits abruptly up. “Hear that? We’re still here, and I’m ready to go back to my place of peace.” She picks up Angel’s hand just in case. “And I’m bringing Angel with me!”

Angel doesn’t let go of her hand, but he does backpedal, “I don’t know, Cordy. I feel like we should make sure that everything’s okay. What if there’s something I missed?”

Cordelia pats his arm with her free hand. “I think they’ll figure it out. You can’t control everything, and the Powers are just going to have to handle it a different way. A way that doesn’t involve us.” She glares at the sky. “Hear that? He’s done his duty! He fixed his regret!” She turns back to Angel. “As much as this little place is comfy here with you, the place of peace is so much better. And do you really want to keep watching the Buffy and Spike,” she waves her hand toward their tree screen, “boinking show?”

Angel hesitates. How does he tell her that he’s worried? That he feels like there’s something he’s forgetting?

Her expression is incredulous. “You do want to keep watching the sex? I mean, we could be more doing and less watching. If you know what I mean. And I’m all for a little porn to spice things up, but even you must admit it’s kinda weird to be watching people you know and used to love humping like bunni —”
A familiar knocking resounds from a nearby tree.

Cordelia sighs in irritation. “You see?” She points at the tree and gives Angel a meaningful look. “You see what happens when you hesitate? Give an inch and they take a mile. It’s always been their way.”

Angel strides over to the tree and puts his hand into the resulting hole. Cordy hangs back, not submitting to the Powers.

Angel reads the scroll of paper. “Oh yeah. This makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” Cordelia gives in and joins Angel, peering over at the paper. “What the hell are the Gentlemen?”

“Fairy tale monsters,” Angel says as if that explains everything.

Cordelia really isn’t surprised anymore. . . not by much. “Of course, they are.”

Angel grins. “And you and I are the perfect pair to take them out.”

“Why, pray tell, are we doing that?” She crosses her arms and pouts. She hasn’t had to fight anything in a long time, and she isn’t sure she’s ready for that.

“I think this may be our last mission. It’ll give them all time to clean up things in Sunnydale and tidy up the loose ends. Maybe give them a nice Christmas.” He owes Buffy a nice Christmas.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. What do we do?”

“Well, princess,” he takes her by the hips and pulls her forward, “first, you have to put your dress back on.”

“Really? Seriously?” She leans into his arms. It’s nice there, no matter how annoyed she is with him.
“Yep. Got to look the part.”

“Okay. Fine.” She snaps her fingers, and the stupid white Princess Leia dress appears again. “You know, this outfit doesn’t come with underwear for some reason.”

Angel smirks. “There’s no underwear in space.”

She frowns. “That makes no sense whatsoever. So, what do I have to do?”

“Scream. The princess has to scream. The scream is what kills them.”

Her eyes glitter at him. “Oh, I can handle that one. Me and my big mouth. What happens when I scream?”

“I vaguely remember hearing something about their heads exploding.”

“Oh gross.” Cordy wonders if she can get some monster brains on the damn dress; then, again, the Powers can probably have it magically dry cleaned. “And you’ll do what? Stand around and look pretty?”

“I know you can handle it. And I will help track the Gentlemen down and distract them.” He kisses her gentle and long.

Then, they start to fade, the smell of cinnamon sweeping around them and mingling with the sound of wind chimes.
Buffy isn’t letting go of Spike’s hand, and he’s cherishing every moment of it as they amble down the dorm’s narrow hallway.

Minutes ago, she perched on the edge of the bathroom sink in the soldiers’ bathroom, her legs wrapped around his waist, to help him shave his head. She followed all the steps he walked her through, pausing to kiss him with each one. This led to a very heated quickie that left her breathless and them both relaxed and satisfied.

Spike loves how easily she gives herself over to him now and how easily he does with her.

Now, they’re headed back to reality, hopefully a quieter one with less torture and unexpected surprises. Spike finds himself nervous to be around any of the Initiative types again. Buffy squeezes his hand, her smile letting him know that she’s there with him.

The living area is quiet and empty, Giles’s prediction about still being at the demon sorting a misnomer. The sun is setting again, and shadows are washing over the space. Soft voices and the brighter light in the kitchen beckon the pair, and Buffy’s stomach growls loudly at her. She’s starving. She skips ahead, tugging Spike by the hand.

Spike smiles at his girl’s enthusiasm; the irony is not lost on him that he’s feeling at home in the Initiative dorm, that they christened the bathroom and more than once, or that he’s wearing military clothing though he’s donned similar duds a lifetime ago.

Willow has her back to Buffy, her thin shoulders slightly hunched and red hair darkened by the shadows because the only lights are the soft yellow ones under the cabinets. The green-skinned demon occupies the seat across from her, his large form making the chair appear small. He glances up at the Slayer and vampire enter, giving them a half-smile and wave before re-cupping his damp glass.

Willow cranes her head over her shoulder, halfway lifting her cup of tea. “Hey. Get any rest?” Her weary eyes fall on Spike. “Looking better.” She catches the mark on Buffy’s neck and understands why he appears so much less broken.

“And looking every bit the Army recruit,” Lorne points out, lifting his chin at Spike’s shaved head.

“Unintentional,” Buffy comments. “The clothes were the only thing we could find in the guest room, and the hair... well, the hair was wonky.”

“Will it grow back?” Willow asks.

“Uh huh,” Buffy answers to avoid more Spikey snark because she can tell her friend is not quite right. She slides into the seat next to Willow. “Slowly, apparently.”

Picking up on what Buffy is doing, Spike heads to the giant fridge, deciding to poke around for some sort of tasty treat. He supposes it’s too much to hope for some blood of any sort. But he does find some frozen chicken wings and a couple of large pizzas in the freezer and a variety of sauces behind the beer in the refrigerator. Grinning at his finds, he hauls them all to a nearby counter, including one of the beers.

“What’re you guys talking about?” Buffy tries to read Lorne and Willow to no avail.

“Want to tell her, pumpkin?” Lorne nudges Willow, trying to respect the witch’s privacy.

“We were just talking about what I need to do so that I don’t end up imploding or hurting anyone else,” Willow admits softly. “He listened to me squawk at him.”

“Squawk?” Buffy makes a curious, amused face at her friend.

“She tried to sing,” Lorne says, rubbing his ear at the memory of the horribly off-key notes.

“Ah. Willow can’t sing,” Buffy informs the demon.
Lorne frowns. “I think I figured that one out, peanut. But thanks for the info.”

“But you’ve heard worse, right?” Willow asks hopefully.

Lorne can’t tell her not by much, not when she’s got that vulnerable, puppy-dog look in her eyes. “Worse. Yes.” It’s not technically a lie.

Spike emits a quiet snort of amusement in the background as he studies the oven to sort out how to set the temperature. He pushes a few buttons and then turns back to the counter to prepare his feast. He’s intrigued that military men have such rations, but then again, they are undercover frat boys.

“Did you come to any conclusions?” Buffy asks, ignoring her husband except to silently appreciate his food prep.

Willow nods, circling her finger around the rim of her cup. Tears brim, and she tries hard to blink them away.

Lorne gazes with fondness at the redhead, speaking up to rescue her, “She didn’t need me to tell her anything. She already knows what to do.”

Willow swallows back her grief over what’s been done. She’s done enough wallowing. “Apologies aren’t enough, you know? Something’s really wrong if I don’t take ownership of my misuse of magic and really do something about it. I mean, most people don’t cast crazy, off-the-cuff spells when they have a break up. Well, they might, but they usually don’t have the power for them to make an impact, and if D’Hoffryn’s interest is any indication, maybe I need to take things more seriously.”

Buffy tries to give her friend a compassionate out. “Willow, you were just grieving. Oz was important to you. You guys loved each other and went through a lot together.”

Willow sniffs and adamantly shakes her head. “No. Hold on. Let me finish. It’s important to me.”

“Okay.” Buffy finds herself listening again and really trying to hear her friend.
“I was in the Initiative long enough to realize what happens when people misuse power.” Willow doesn’t want to rehash the failed experiments she saw or the demons in pain. “I saw what someone like Maggie Walsh did to Spike, for example. And I don’t want to get to that point. I don’t want to be the person who is so self-absorbed in her mission or beliefs or grief that she . . . that I do something I really regret. I mean, I regret what I did to you guys, but . . .”

“I know what you mean.” Buffy slides an arm around her friend’s shoulders and hugs her.

Willow leans briefly toward her friend. “Professor Walsh went completely off the deep end. . . scarily fast.”

Lorne shudders and takes a soothing sip of his Sea Breeze. “Really glad I don’t have to listen to her sing.” He shakes his head and rubs his temple. He’s going to have to have his assistant run the bar for the next few days. His brain is fried.

Rooting around in the cabinets and half listening, Spike shoves aside a pan that’s too small and comments, “Did you forget everything we talked about, Red?” He pulls out a proper sized pan for cooking the wings.

Buffy is pleasantly surprised to see her friend perk up at Spike’s query and wonders what exactly her friend and lover talked about in their temporary prison.

Willow offers Spike a rueful smile. “I haven’t forgotten.”

Spike pauses in his mission to line the wings up just right on the wax paper in the perfect pan and makes clear eye contact with the witch. “You haven’t lost yourself yet. Still feel like yourself, eh?”

“Uh huh. Still Willow.” She blows a strand of stray scarlet hair off her forehead out of the corner of her mouth.

Buffy catches the connection between her best friend and her husband, but she isn’t jealous. Far from it. She’s not sure she should be grateful for their time in the Initiative, but she is.

“What’d I tell you, my little carrot?” Lorne inclines his head toward the witch.
“Yeah. Yeah.” Willow blushes.

“Apparently, everyone agrees,” Buffy says bending forward on the table.

“Even more reason for me to do something now.” Willow bites her lip. “What was the name of that coven in L.A.?”

Lorne pulls his magenta-colored leather wallet out of the inside pocket of his suit and flips it open, tugging out a tight pile of small paper and business cards. “They don’t have a name. They kind of stick to themselves, but they also help out fellow witches, especially younger kin who are coming into their own. Miranda Tooke is their spokeswoman in charge of outreach. I had her sing for me before I’d consent to handing out her info when necessary.” He licks his thumb and begins flipping through the stack.

As Spike waits for the timer to indicate that the oven’s ready, he pours Buffy a glass of water. She needs to hydrate after he drank from her. Setting the liquid in front of her, she lifts her lips for a kiss.

“Thanks. How’d you know I was thirsty?” Her tongue suddenly feels very dry. He merely lifts an eyebrow at her, and her hand goes to the healing wound on her neck before she can think about it. “Oh.”

Meanwhile, Lorne lands on the slip of paper he is looking for. He slides the information across the table to Willow. “Keep it. She and a couple of her colleagues come to the bar on the regular for cocktails and karaoke. Miranda usually checks in with me, and I’ll get her number again.”

Willow accepts the paper, studying the loopy handwriting as if that can tell her what kind of person Miranda Tooke is. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, strawberry shortcake.” Then, Lorne remembers something else. He goes back a few ticks and removes a business card. He holds it out to Spike, who stops his tiding up of food wrappers to take the proffered information. “That is the number for a good psychologist of the demon variety. I highly recommend her. You’re probably going to need her to help with the transition when the,” Lorne regards Willow with amusement, “stitches dissolve.” When he catches the skepticism on the vampire’s face, Lorne adds, “She’s my personal therapist. Can’t say enough good about her. She specializes in trauma, and I’d say a vampire getting his soul back classifies as a tad traumatic what with the guilt and all. Give her a ring. She does phone sessions, so there’s no need to travel to L.A.”
Spike pushes aside his initial protest that he doesn’t need a therapist. “Right.” He holds up the card and inclines his head. “Appreciate it, mate.”

Lorne tilts his glass at Spike before tipping it back and gulping down the last of his alcoholic beverage. “I’m headed off to bed. Got a killer tension headache, and I need to call my assistant manager to find out how that Chaos demon birthday party went.” God, that’s the last thing he wants to do, but he supposes he better reach out. Gunther was really anxious about it.

“See you in morning,” Willow says, trying to infuse her words with her usual perky demeanor. “More demon sorting?”

Lorne rises and shakes his head. “It’s not as easy as the Hogwarts sorting hat. I can’t believe how many of them there are. I was not anticipating that.”

Buffy thinks it’s weird that future Cordelia didn’t tell Lorne more about how many demons there are, but then again, maybe she didn’t know all the details. Future Cordy didn’t exactly seem omniscient. “Feel better and sleep well.”

“Thanks.” The green demon gives them a little bow from the doorway. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Willow says sincerely. “And thanks, again.”

“Anytime, darling.” Then, he’s gone.

At that moment, the oven timer goes off, and Buffy’s stomach emits another loud growl. She grins at Spike as he slips the food into the oven and joins the women at the table, beer in hand.

Willow turns her lips inward at the vampire and then addresses Buffy, “He loves you, you know. And not because of my wayward, stupid, won’t-ever-do-it-again spell.”

Buffy nudges Spike’s foot under the table and takes a sip of water to hide her smile. “I know. Glad you figured that one out, too.”

“Been thinking I should probably thank you, Red. The spell brought us together.” Spike slouches
further down in the chair to touch his wife more easily.

Willow’s cheeks grow pinker again. “A happy accident. You know, this adventure has sorta led me to think about demons a whole lot differently.”

“Me, too,” Buffy says. “Especially now that I know I’m part demon.”

“Makes a whole lotta sense to me,” Willow repeats what she said to Spike when they were in cells together, “At the same time, I’m a whole lotta glad that I’m not a demon.”

“Working as a vengeance demon for D’Hoffryn is not a gig you want to sign up for,” Spike notes, running his fingers over the condensation on the brown glass of his bottle.

“He has too many rules and doesn’t seem like he’d be the most forgiving boss.” Willow sighs. “At the same time, I can see how someone who’s not in the know about everything that is supernatural might be tempted by his offer. Makes me have a new appreciation for Anya’s situation.”

“Going to that crossroads dimension makes me have a new appreciation for Anya,” Buffy admits.

“Did someone say they have a new appreciation for me, and if so, why?” Anya appears in the doorway, rubbing one eye, a sleepy Xander in tow.

They all speak at the same time.

“You worked for D’Hoffryn for over a thousand years,” Willow says, shaking her head. She has no idea how Anya did it for so long.

Buffy sits up straighter. “You have all this knowledge we could really use on the Hellmouth.”

“You’re bloody well taking the return to humankind like a champ.” Spike twists in his chair with both eyebrows lifted.

Anya grins, putting her hands on her elbows and giving herself a little hug. “What a thing to wake up
“See, honey, you’re appreciated.” Xander yawns, slipping a lazy arm over his girlfriend’s shoulders. “I don’t know how you can be so perky. I’ve slept way more hours than you, and you’re already up, Miss Wide-Eyed-and-Bushy-Tailed.”

Anya reaches with her left hand and tugs on Xander’s fingers. “My stomach asserted itself and interrupted my dreams.” She pauses. “Though they weren’t really good dreams anyway. Nightmares of waiting in a very long line with other demons.” She shivers at the memory and sniffs the air. “And something already smells good.”

Spike perks up. “It’s the wings and pizza.” He pauses then hastily tacks on, “Dibs on the wings.”

Xander plops onto the chair next to Spike. “Ooo, wings. Love me some wings.”

Buffy raises an eyebrow at Spike, and he melts a little. He pats Xander on the shoulder. “Plenty to go ‘round.”

Anya swings open the refrigerator door and pulls out a carton of lemonade. She studies the label. “Normally, I’d prefer coffee with my breakfast, but since it’s night time, and we’re having pizza, lemonade is my preferred drink of choice, especially given that the choices are beer, more beer, milk past its expiration date, and lemonade.”

“No need to explain, Anya. Bring it on over,” Xander says with kindness in his voice. In the past, his words would have had an edge of sarcasm, but now, he gets her in a different way than before.

“There’re glasses third cabinet to the right,” Spike offers.

“Great. Thanks.” Anya smiles, finds said drinkware, and fills two glasses with ice before balancing her treasure and bringing it back to the table. Xander helps her out, taking a glass and the lemonade as she settles down next to him. As he pours the sugary drink, she scoots her chair closer to him and lays her head on his shoulder. “So how was Arashmaharr?”

“For a hell dimension? Majorly weird with a side of weird. For one, it was in a conference room,” Buffy notes, wishing Spike was sitting next to her. She gazes at him longingly, and he smirks at her, which makes her want to kick him, so she does, a slight smile on her face as she pretends to study
her water.

“A conference room with closed blinds and demon guards in full Jedi hood-age hanging all around like creepy living gargoyles,” Willow adds. She catches Spike’s flinch and casts him a confused look. Spike takes a swig of beer in response.

“It was really plush for a hell dimension,” Spike says as he swallows the alcohol.

Anya shrugs. “Yeah, that’s the place D’Hoffryn takes his recruits. In reality, the whole place is much less formal and luxurious. Think cube-land, non-existent lunch breaks, purposeless meetings, water coolers, and pee on the seat in the bathroom.”

“Okay, An, that last image we could have done without,” Xander teases.

She lifts her head to smile at him. “You’re right. Sorry. Long story short, being a vengeance demon isn’t all granting wishes and enjoying satisfying vengeance.” She nestles her head back on Xander’s shoulder. “And don’t even get me started on the vengeance among the staff. Talk about back stabbing.”

“Sounds cutthroat.” Willow’s extremely relieved that her friends got her out of becoming a full-fledged vengeance demon.

“It really is,” Anya admits.

Buffy ascertains Willow’s relief when her shoulder sag. “We used what you suggested, Anya. We used his own system and rules against him, especially when he tried to blackmail Willow into taking the job.”

“That, and Buffy here threatened to be a thorn in his side if he went through with it.” Spike can’t keep the pride out of his voice.

“And I went along with quip-age,” Xander notes, lacing his fingers with his girlfriend’s.

“Xander, you were the one who reminded me about what Anya said in the first place,” Buffy says,
giving him more credit.

Anya beams at Xander, wrinkling her nose at him. “Good job.” Feeling magnanimous at her inclusion in the group, she addresses Spike, “I heard you wished for your soul back.”

Spike shifts in his chair and becomes studiously aware of the water puddling under his beer bottle. “I did.”

“But Buffy already loved you without it,” Anya proclaims, recalling that feeling in her stomach that she hadn’t told Buffy she noticed.

“The world we live in.” Spike keeps it simple. He’s still a bit of a mess inside and not because of the soul. “Sorta needed it.”

Anya sighs. Fitting in with humans makes everything harder as a demon, but at least she has being human on her side despite her centuries of wreaking havoc. “But that’s not logical. Having it just makes you more vulnerable with the guilt and everything.”

“Logic didn’t exactly come with the torture part.” Spike almost adds that said torture was at the hand of a human, but he doesn’t because he damned well knows he’s done his own fair share of torturing, mostly under the tutelage of Angelus, but Spike’s own torturing nonetheless.

“Don’t let Xander get to you. He’s coming around to demon-types.” Anya cuddles her boyfriend’s arm.

Xander shrugs. He supposes it’s true. “I would hope your decision was more complicated than just me espousing my hatred of demon-types. . . vampires in particular.”

“Was a lot more complicated.”

Buffy reads how hard this is for Spike, but she sees the now familiar determination to deal with this on his own in the set of his jaw. This keeps her in her seat even though she really wants to take him in her arms again.
Anya thinks about the gossip she used to hear in the demon rumor mill. “But I do understand your desire to fit in. I mean, from what I’ve heard of your family and all, fitting in would be difficult.”

Annoyance flashes through Spike and a form of defensiveness. “What have you heard about my family?”

Anya tries to soften her blunt tone but not very successfully. “There’s a reason the vengeance demons and D’Hoffryn explicitly told us to stay away from you.”

“And that reason is?” Spike practically growls.

“Angelus and Darla were classified as SCOs.” She lifts her head and frowns. “And yes, I realize that sounds as bad as the Initiative with their stupid names.”

“What’s SCO?” Buffy asks, trying to distract from the building tension.

Anya finds herself babbling on more than she usually might, but the recent events with Spike and Xander and the Initiative have led her to loosen her tongue. “It’s not very creative. They’re individuals we’re told to steer clear of – SCOs. Usually because doing vengeance for or against them has a high likelihood of leading to complications that D’Hoffryn wants no part of. He’s been doing this for thousands and thousands of years. He needed a system. The vengeance that was done on Angelus? That was all the gypsies. And the Slayer? Sometimes a SCO. Depends on the Slayer. If a vengeance demon chose to take on a SCO, they were on their own. They’d get no help from Arashmaharr, and they’d end up on a probationary list.”

“Am I a SCO?” Buffy wonders aloud.

“Of course you are! You’re a different kind of Slayer.”

“Not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

Spike snorts. “My sentiments exactly.”

Anya is unruffled and takes a drink of her lemonade before matter-of-factly saying, “You should be
glad. It probably helped that you tagged along with Willow and D’Hoffryn. SCOs throw him off.”

Buffy decides that SCO has a terrible ring to it and is vaguely insulting. Half-serious, half-joking, she says, “Never call me a SCO again.”

For once not taking things too literally, Anya’s eyes twinkle, and she gives a crooked salute. “Got it.”

“I’m so grateful that all three of you were there with me,” Willow interjects. “I-I don’t know what I’d have done without you. And Spike, I’m grateful that you came to the Initiative to track me down and help save my sanity but also to help me make the wishes.”

“Anytime, Red.”

Willow babbles on, “How are the dissolvable stitches holding up? What does your soul feel like?”

“Stitches seem to be holding up well.” Spike takes stock of his insides again. “There was a greater distinction between the demon and soul at first, but it’s a bit blurrier now.” He makes purposeful eye contact with his wife who smiles gently at him. He swallows. “The guilt is coming up more now.”

“Ohhh,” Willow breathes, her eyes filled with worry.

Spike’s eyes stay steady on Buffy; she grounds him still. “But it’s tolerable. And necessary. Just like you need to own your piece, I need to own mine.”

“Just don’t go all broody on us,” Xander says with a lightness in his tone. “We’ve. . .” Speaking of owning things, “I’ve had enough of that for this lifetime.”

Spike slides into an easy smirk as he directs his attention to the human on his left. He never thought he’d be feeling chummy with the bloke. “You and me both. I’m not exactly the brooding type.” Spike picks up the business card the empath demon gave him. Between Buffy and possibly this therapist he’ll have the support he needs when he does succumb to the expected angst.

“Can we join the get together?” Joyce asks with some element of tentativeness from behind her
daughter. Joyce is relieved to see Buffy alive and well at the kitchen table.

Buffy spins in her chair to see her mom’s tired face smiling in earnest at the gathered group. Giles hovers at her elbow, eyes extremely droopy and hair disheveled. Her mom must have dragged him in here. Buffy leaps out of her seat and pulls her mom into an energetic hug. “Shouldn’t you and Giles be asleep?”

Used to her daughter’s extra strength exuberance, Joyce positions her body so that the hug can have maximum comfort with minimal damage to her person. “I’m not old, Buffy.” She bobs her head back and forth as she considers the truth of her statement. “Maybe I am heading toward old, but more than anything, I’m energized by what we’ve all been through, and every time I try to close my eyes to sleep, my muscles tell me no. Is that a normal thing with these missions?”

“Uh huh,” Willow pipes up. “It’s why we stay up all night after a lot of times.”

“And I’m hungry,” Joyce says as if she just noticed the pit of hunger in her belly. “What smells good?”

“Wings and pizza,” Spike informs.

“Spike and I have dibs on the wings,” Xander quickly adds.

“Giles, are you okay?” Anya asks. “You look exhausted.”

The Watcher remains a little in the distance. “I am, in fact, exhausted, but Joyce is hungry, so I’m apparently joining you lot.”

Buffy catches a hint that Giles wants to be there with them. “Take my seat. I need to borrow my mom for a minute.”
Interlude, Hell Yeah

At the same time, Cordelia and Angel appear next to each other on the sectional.

The first thing Cordy notices is that her outfit has switched back to her clothing of choice. Thank God. She lets out a loud laugh full of joy and triumph. “Hell yeah!”

Her voice is music to Angel’s ears. In response to her exuberance, he wraps an arm around her hips and pulls her close to him. His lips find hers, and he kisses her hungrily. When he almost loses himself in her, she puts a hand on his chest and pushes back, her eyes shining at him.

“I love you,” she states so that he will know how she feels without question.

“I love you, too.” He buries his face in her neck and inhales her scent. “And you felt amazing. I want to do it again.”

She cups his cheek and stops him again. “Do you realize what just happened?”

“Yeah.” He kisses her again. “And it was worth the wait.”

Cordelia frowns. “The wait was way too long in my book.”

“True.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” she says, stroking his jaw.

He leans into her caress. “What were you going to say?”

“That we just made love, and you are still you.”
Angel throws his head back and laughs. “And I'm happy. Hallelujah!”

“So, now we have to try that again, right?” She bats her eyelashes at him. “And more than once.”

“Most definitely yes.”

The tree knocking and tree screen flickering happen simultaneously.

“Damn it!” Cordy shouts. “We killed the Gentlemen! I screamed my head off and their heads all exploded. And by the way, it was way disgusting!” And no guts got on that stupid dress. She thought that wearing whites always attracted some disaster or another, but not that dress! Nope! It better be in permanent storage now.

Angel stands to retrieve the message. “It was. I was there.” He reads the slip of paper as Cordelia starts to watch what they missed. “Huh.”

“What?” Cordy sounds irritated and tired.

“Neither of us have to do anything.”

Cordelia is considerably more alert. “What?” she repeats with a different level of hope, enthusiasm, and a slight edge of hysterical perkiness.

Angel sinks down next to her. “Looks like I was right. Whoever or whatever is in charge here is taking care of the little loose ends caused by the changes you and I made.”

“Mostly you,” Cordy insists.

“Mostly me,” Angel acknowledges.

“It’s still your regret, not mine.”
He sighs. “I got that.”

Cordy pulls his hand in her lap between both of her hands. “So how are they tying up loose ends?”

“Maggie Walsh is going to get killed. She apparently died before at the hand... hands? Of her secret project.”

“The one that everyone kept alluding to?”

Angel slips his fingers through hers. “That’s the one.”

“Oh. Well, good! She deserves it. Shall we get caught up?” Cordy scoots closer to Angel, ready to watch.

Angel relaxes back and slides his arm around Corelia’s shoulders. “Why not? At least, we’ll get to see how it goes for now.”

“And then, maybe we’ll get to leave this place.” She sighs happily at the thought.

Angel repeats her earlier words, “Hell yeah.”
Not bothering to flip on the lights, Buffy strides past her mom and sits on the sofa in the shadowy living room. She takes a deep breath, avoiding her mother’s gaze. If she’s going to confront her mother about whatever secret she made Spike keep for her, Buffy doesn’t want to be overly harsh, not with so many ears in the next room. Plus, her mom has to have a good explanation for her decision, right?

Her hands like anxious birds, Joyce perches next to her daughter. She can’t relax, not when her daughter seems so pensive. “What is it, honey?”

Buffy forces herself to pause before saying anything. “It’s about what happened to Spike.”

As soon as Buffy goes this direction, Joyce feels her stomach sink, but she chooses to let her daughter lead the way. It’s one of the only ways she could get Buffy to open up in the past, and Joyce could be wrong. “Rupert and George told me that Spike was tortured by your professor.” What was going on in schools these days? She doesn’t recall college being like. . . well, her university wasn’t on a hellmouth.

“It was awful. The worst thing I’ve ever seen,” Buffy says, her heart aching at the memory of how terrible Spike looked even in the flashing Initiative lights.

“So you let him bite you? Like you let Angel,” Joyce observes, trying to find a good balance between expressing concern and being a protective mother.

Flustered at her mother’s observation, Buffy’s hand goes to her neck. She feels strangely naked. “Yes,” she manages. “It was different this time.” For too many reasons to go into now.

“He’s your husband, and you love him.” Joyce surprises herself with this conclusion, but she’s not blind and knows far more than Buffy gives her credit for. She isn’t too sure how she feels about the biting, but she’s heard of worse kinks. She is, after all, a child of the ‘60s.

Buffy nods, and Joyce tries to pat her knee but Buffy pulls away. Confused, Joyce finds that tug of anxiety flitting through her heart again.
“Sorry,” Buffy says automatically, unsure how to express what she’s feeling. “Just I have to. . .”

“You have something important to discuss.”

Biting her lip, Buffy nods and draws her arms up to her chest. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Joyce thought she knew where Buffy was going. Joyce is starting to think she is very wrong.

“For asking Spike to make you a promise.” Buffy has no idea what the promise was - not exactly, but she is grateful for her mother’s request.

Joyce expected that Buffy knew about the promise but wasn’t anticipating gratitude. Despite this, her voice still quavers. “Why are you thanking me?”

Buffy finds strength in her mother’s uncertainty. “Because you saved his life by asking him to make the promise.”

“And you’re thanking me?”

“You made him promise to take care of me when you die. So yes. Thank you. When he was faced with death, he chose to live, and you asking him to promise to be there for me when you die was something that helped him in a moment when he lost touch with a lot of other things that make logical sense. Torture tends to do that to a person.” Buffy allows that tidbit to sink in for a minute and then inhales, trying to take in as much oxygen as possible before her next question. “Why did you make him promise that?”

Buffy’s words confirm Joyce’s suspicions that she knows. “Oh, Buffy.”

“’Cause really I don’t appreciate when my mom tries to protect me. I’m a grown up now. I’m a married woman.” She doesn’t add that she’s the Slayer and has had to do grownup things for far too long now anyway. What’s one more thing in a stack of things?
Joyce response is immediate. “I’m always going to try to protect you. You’re my baby.”

“Not when it comes to grown up stuff like you possibly dying. Why did that even come up?” At the hesitance on her mom’s face, Buffy is firmer. “I need to know. Now.”

At this point in her life, Joyce recognizes when her daughter isn’t going to move on from something. She’s got a stubborn streak, and after Joyce’s talk with Spike, she’s starting to see herself in said streak. “You remember the wells in the crossroads dimension?”

Guilt fills Buffy’s stomach. She’d been too caught up in her exhaustion and her worries about how she could integrate Spike into her world to think about who drank from what well to get them home. And then, there’d been the stress of finding Willow and the Initiative and losing Spike. Still, she should have made time to really check on her mom. “I heard you drank from one of them.”

No point in lying. “Yes. Rupert did as well.”

Buffy considers that the two older grownups – older in appearance at least – were trying to protect her friends. “That’s how you knew which to mark for us.”

Joyce acknowledges this is true with a simple nod.

“You drank from the future well. Spike mentioned it after he was tortured.” Guilt is replaced by fear, and Buffy almost wishes she could un-know this. But at the same time, it has to be faced. She just said as much. “What’d you experience?”

Joyce isn’t sure how to explain the experience. “It’s truly all a bit of a blur. More like an emotional imprint with sound.” Buffy is watching her with expectation on her face. If Joyce says these next words, Buffy won’t be able to un-hear them, and one more precious part of her daughter’s freedom will be erased. Joyce closes her eyes. It’s the only way she can do it. “I felt that I was dead.”

“So? Everyone dies in the future.” Buffy tries to lighten up her mother’s proclamation.

“No, Buffy. My death is soon.” And there’s a strange girl, who is like my blood, with you. Joyce chooses not to share that now because saying these words out loud brings a tangle of other emotions up like an impossibly knotted ball of yarn. All she knows is that the ball resides like a heavy weight in her chest. . . so heavy that she almost can’t breathe.
“Oh.” Buffy is frozen. Her expectations are confirmed, but her mother saying the truth out loud is shocking. The meaning of the words not quite sinking in, she flings her arms around her mom’s neck. “I love you.”

Joyce hugs her daughter, relishing the touch again as one feeling peels away from the rest, leaving its identification in its wake. “I love you, too.”

When Buffy pulls back, they’re both crying. Buffy sniffs and then goes into problem solving mode. “You have to get checked out by a doctor like yesterday. You’ve been having headaches. How long?”

Joyce’s laugh is hollow. “Buffy, I don’t think it works like that.”

Confused, Buffy asks, “What do you mean?”

Joyce takes her daughter’s warm hand in her own. “I mean, I think the future well shows the inevitable.”

Buffy considers that if that’s the case, she and Spike are in it for the long haul. She feels some validation and hope in that. But this is her mother, and Buffy can’t imagine losing her. “It doesn’t hurt to try.” She has a history of thwarting prophesied deaths, but she still doesn’t want to tell her mother that. “Tell me that you’ll get the headaches checked out ASAP.” She almost asks her mom to promise she’ll go to the doctor, but Buffy just got done confronting her mom about the promise she asked Spike to make.

Joyce strokes her daughter’s cheek. “I will.”

“I’m mad at you, you know.” Buffy half-teases as she wipes the tears from under her eyes with the tips of her fingers.

Joyce laughs again, sounding more like herself. “You’re allowed to be.”

Buffy’s eyebrows push inward slightly as her tone becomes more serious. “When it comes to you and your health, I want to know. I need to know. I’d be devastated if you died. If you died and I
found out that you were trying to protect me by not telling me, I’d be even more devastated. We
don’t have many people in this world, and you’re one of my only people.”

Joyce pulls Buffy into another hug, lingering with her eyes closed. “Okay. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

“I’m coming with you when... if you go to the doctor.”

Joyce lays her cheek on the top of her daughter’s head. “Okay.”

Buffy thinks of something and pulls back but not out of her mother’s embrace. “Does Giles know?”

“Which part?” Joyce fingers a strand of her daughter’s hair, sweeping it over her forehead and
tucking it behind her ear.

“All of it.” Buffy ticks things off without pause. “What you saw in the future well. What you made
Spike promise. That you might die soon.”

Joyce knows this is something she needs to do, but she’s been selfishly enjoying the moments
without sullying them with sadness. “I haven’t, but I will. After he gets through this next part with
the Initiative. I think he was pretty rattled by his own well and what he saw of his past. We haven’t
exactly had a moment to really talk since we got back.”

“I get that,” Buffy says.

A loud yelp of pain swoops forth from the kitchen.

Joyce and Buffy freeze.

“Xander.” Buffy leaps up and races into the kitchen with Joyce hot on her heels.

What she sees surprises her.
No one in the kitchen seems in the least bit upset. Everyone has a plate full of pizza and/or chicken wings. Even Riley and a couple of soldiers who must have come in from the opposite side of the dorm look unruffled and are hungrily eating.

Xander and Spike stand next to each other, looking guilty and grinning like cats who ate the canary. Xander is rubbing his very red-looking jaw.

“Are you guys fighting over the wings?” Buffy demands, immediately jumping to conclusions.

Xander and Spike glance at one another. Then, Xander speaks up, “We were all talking and realized something.”

“Something important,” Willow pipes up with her cheek full of food.

Near the doorway that Buffy and Joyce just entered, Giles rolls his eyes before picking up an extra plate of food and passing it to Joyce who gratefully accepts the nourishment and joins him in leaning against the wall.

Buffy crosses her arms. “What that’s important?”

Anya is picking tiny bits of chicken from between the chicken bones. Eating chicken wings is really an inefficient and highly messy task. She wishes they were boneless. “Well, when Spike hit Willow to test out whether the chip was still there after she granted his wish about the Initiative experiments being reversed, they forgot she was some sort of demon-y type.”


Buffy raises both eyebrows.

“To be his guinea pig,” Xander explains, catching the bag of frozen carrots that Riley tosses him. Xander presses the bag of delicious coldness to his throbbing jaw. Better already.

“He let Spike hit him,” Anya clarifies, popping her pile of gathered chicken into her mouth. The buffalo sauce is delicious and almost makes the effort worth it... almost.
“To make sure the chip was really gone. And it’s definitely gone,” Willow adds, hoping that the tension will ease again and soon. She holds up a chicken wing in peace. “Want one?”

Buffy’s stomach betrays her by growling, and she laughs. God, how had this happened? What happened that Xander, hater of vampires, is doing things to show his acceptance of Spike? This is beyond what he ever did for Angel.

Spike’s smile widens. “There’s still plenty of pizza.”

“Oh good.” Buffy scoots behind Willow and past one of the soldiers who makes room for her. Wrapping her arms around Spike’s waist, she kisses him gently on the lips. She views the pain in his eyes behind the outward exuberance and hugs him tighter. “Glad your noggin is definitely chip-free.” Anya holds a plate with a slice of pizza over her head, which Buffy takes. “Thanks, Anya.”

Anya turns in her chair, one arm swinging over the back. “Welcome. Smart of you to stick with the pizza. The wings are too much work.”

“Work which is well worth it.” Xander plops in the chair next to his girlfriend and snags a wing off her plate.

Anya peels away the bag of carrots and kisses his already bruising jaw. Referencing his wound, she compliments his offer to help Spike, “Very good of you, honey.”

Xander deposits a kiss on her mouth and takes a large bite of his wing.

Buffy digs into her pizza. She should really be sick of pizza, but she’s not. The pepperoni tastes like heaven.

Willow addresses Riley who is hovering near the refrigerator. “So, you didn’t finish going over all the demons, right?”

Riley nods. “Right.”
“We’re not even close to done,” Anya grouses, sweeping her curls off her forehead with one hand.

“So where is everyone?” Willow asks, becoming aware that the dorm is incredibly quiet for a dorm.

Buffy swallows. “Good question. ‘Cause there are no demon-types in here except for Spike and me.”

Riley figures he can trust Willow’s friends. At this point, they are all a team, albeit a temporary one. “We actually set up a wide perimeter around Lowell. George is working with the mayor of Sunnydale and the president of the university to keep things discrete. We have tents set up close to the dorm and everyone – demons and soldiers – are set up with places to sleep. So far, everyone has been cooperative.”

“Which is like a major miracle,” Anya comments. None of them in this room except for maybe Spike get how much of a feat it is.

“If we’re being honest here,” one of the other soldiers says, “a lot of us got to know our captives. Those of us on Riley’s side of things are enjoying spending time with the demons in a non-coercive capacity.”

“Some of them probably don’t take so kindly to humans though,” Anya notes.

“The vampires are surrounded by their food group,” Spike agrees.

“Lorne really seems to be helping with that,” Giles adds, setting aside his empty plate and wiping the grease off his hands. “He had the Furies drive out to temporarily put up the same non-violence spell he used on his demon bar in L.A.”

“Temporarily?” Buffy asks.

“Until all the demons are sorted and on their way,” Anya clarifies.

“So we can all relax a bit,” Riley adds. “Some of us are even learning about kitten poker. The demons in our tent are getting it set up now.”
Chicken wing halfway to his mouth, Spike perks up but tries to sound casual and not too eager. “Kitten poker?”

“Um, you do know that involves demons using actual fluffy baby kittens as currency and then eating them, right?” Anya asks Riley.

Riley’s eyes widen. “What? I thought it was some other kind of kitten. . . like maybe on the cards or something.” His cheeks redden. “How did they even get kittens. . . er, the fluffy baby kind past the perimeter?”

Straightening his shoulders, Spike sets aside his food and licks the remaining buffalo sauce off his fingers. “I better help you lads out.”

Buffy gives him a look. She thinks maybe she doesn’t want to know much about this kitten poker thing. “Really?”

Spike shrugs and grins. “I won’t eat any fluffy kittens if you’re worried about that.”

Wait. Did Spike play kitten poker to eat the kittens before? Is that what he’s telling her?

She sticks her tongue out at him, trying to hide her anxiety about him going with the soldiers. “Hmph. I wasn’t worried about that.”

Spike catches the feeling in her eyes and kisses her on the forehead. “I’ll be fine. Right, Farmer?”

At everyone’s confused expression, Willow side notes, “He means Riley.”

Still a little thrown by the kitten thing, Riley reacts, “What?”

Spike sighs. He’s already expecting to be annoyed when he tries to explain the game to the soldiers, but part of him is really looking forward to the being annoyed part. It’ll be a nice reaffirmation that he’s himself. He doesn’t bother to hide his edge of irritation. “Reassure my wife that I’m going to be okay when I go with you.”
“What? Oh.” Riley addresses Buffy, feeling awkward again like he did standing with her in front of the bridal shop. “He’ll be fine.”

Buffy crosses her arms. “That’s not how it went down the last time.”

Anya butts in, rising from her seat. “I’m going with him.” She touches Buffy’s forearm. “So you don’t have to worry about him coming to bodily harm.”

Buffy isn’t completely sure how that will work, but she accepts Anya’s offer. “Thank you.”

As Spike, Anya, Riley, and the other soldiers head out, Xander starts to follow. As he makes it halfway to the door, Giles clears his throat.

“If you could hold on a moment, Xander,” Giles says with quiet urgency.

Xander almost makes a joke about not wanting to miss out on pussy poker, but he sees Giles’s face and remembers that Joyce is in the room. “All right.”

Giles takes a seat next to Willow who smiles at him. He returns the smile as he tugs off his glasses. As he cleans the glass with the handkerchief from his pocket, Buffy and Xander join the table across from them, and Joyce almost imperceptibly takes the chair at the end.

Willow braves the silence first. “Glasses polishing usually means something important is up.”

Giles ignores her observation because he’s trying to center his thoughts and decide where to begin. He launches in after a moment’s hesitation. “As you all know by now, I drank from the well of the past in the other dimension.”

Willow shakes her head and looks between Xander and Buffy. “This, I don’t know about. I mean, Spike hinted at something, but this is a loose end I don’t know anything about.”

Giles really doesn’t want to go into a long explanation, so he holds up a finger when Xander opens his mouth. “Later. What I really need to say is. . . I’m sorry.” Giles closes his eyes.
Xander starts to speak again, but Willow shakes her head at him. He literally sits on his hands.

Giles continues, “I’ve already spoken briefly with Buffy about this.” Xander and Willow stare at Buffy who shrugs. Eyes still closed, Giles says, “It seems that Willow’s spell to render me actually blind coupled with what I re-experienced from my past has led me to realize how my past experiences have led to actual blind spots regarding my teachings and the struggles that you all have regarding demons. Yes, apocalypses and evil are very real and very dangerous to mankind. Yes, Buffy, you should slay those that are out to cause bodily harm to others, but there is a grey to the matter that isn’t readily apparent from what the Council asserts. You already know that I was involved in dark magic and with a very malicious demon – a demon that killed people that I cared about. I must admit that this changed me. It led me back to the Council and to train to be a Watcher, and I espoused their teachings as Gospel, swinging the other way. And as you’ve shown me over and over again, Buffy, this rigidity is not the key to survival. . . for you or for mankind.”

“Giles,” Buffy says, “you’re too hard on yourself.”

Giles opens his eyes and stares at her pointedly. “No. I’m not being hard on myself. I’m facing reality, and if we are going to function as a team. . . as a family, we have to be honest with ourselves. I have to be honest with you as your elder.” He turns to Willow. “My experiences with black magic have made me blind to your struggles. I have willfully turned my cheek when you practiced beyond what you should be doing. It’s made me blind to the strength and depth of your power and how much you need a teacher. Someone who is not me.”

Willow touches his arm. “Lorne gave me the name of a coven in L.A. He encouraged me to reach out for guidance. Giles, I’m going to be okay. I needed to come to it on my own. And I did. The hard way. And thankfully, no one died. . . though there was a lot of hurt involved. I’m sorry, too.”

“I want to vet them,” Giles offers, sliding his glasses back in place and adjusting them. “I want to make sure they are legitimate and have your best interest at heart. There is also a coven I trust in England. I will contact someone there, have them flown out to meet with you and the coven Lorne suggested.”

Willow nods. “Okay. I want that, too. I-I want to learn to manage my feelings and my use of magic.”

“Good. I’m proud of you.”

She smiles. This feels better than the cookies she told Buffy and Spike she planned to bake.
“Thanks.”

Giles addresses Xander next, “You need to address your anger about Spike and Angel.”

Xander is taken aback by Giles’s directness. “W-what?”

Though his next words sound harsh, Giles’s eyes are kind. “I know why I don’t care for Angel and his progeny and demons in general, but I’m not sure you do. I don’t know what it is that’s causing you to have such outbursts as the one you had in my apartment, but I do know that it’s not healthy for you and not healthy for the group.”

“Giles –”

“Your outburst is indicative of something deeper that you need to address because if you don’t, it will fester and continue to grow, and it will interfere with our ability to function together. I’m not asking for a quick fix, but as someone I hope you see as a father figure, I’m asking you to do something about it. Therapy for one.”

Xander doesn’t know what to say. He’s almost angry and hurt, but as his eyes fill with tears, he recognizes what he feels is something different. Relief spreads in his chest. This is something he’s been needing to hear from someone who cares about him. As a tear escapes over his cheek, he nods. “Okay.”

Buffy leans over and hugs her friend.

Giles glances at Joyce who is watching him with something akin to awe on her face. She reaches for his hand, and he accepts the affection, drawing strength from it. Then, he addresses his Slayer. “Buffy. You and I are going to change the way things are done. I’ve known that you’re a different kind of Slayer. Well, I’m a different kind of Watcher, and you and I . . . well, you and I are going to change the way things go, regarding this job. . . this calling as it were. We are going to shake things up.”

Buffy grins. “That, I can totally get behind.”

“Starting with finishing things up here at the Initiative.”
Buffy leads the way out the front door of the almost vacated Lowell House and comes to a complete stand still in front of Willow who bumps into her with a little grunt.

“Buffy,” Willow protests.

Without responding because she’s too shocked, Buffy takes a few steps to the side so that Xander, Willow, Giles, and her mom can join her. The yellow-white campus lights illuminate a sea of large dark tents, hulking shadows like an alien circus came to town in the middle of the night and took up residence on campus.

Buffy muses that the Initiative has been unearthed and is now on display for all the Sunnydale college students to witness, only they’d have no idea what they were looking at.

“Whoa,” Xander says, his mouth hanging open in awe. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many demons in one place. I mean, if I had my X-ray vision goggles on.”

Willow giggles, and Buffy’s reminded of days gone by when it was just the three of them, patrolling Sunnydale cemeteries without a care in the world other than staking the latest vamps. Now, Buffy’s married to the vampire she least expected she’d ever love, Xander is dating an ex-demon, and Willow is sans Oz and newly human again after a stint as a sort-of-vengeance demon.

“Buffy, can you believe that they organized this so fast?” Joyce asks, appearing at her daughter’s elbow with Rupert’s hand firmly in hers.

And how could Buffy forget that her mother is almost a Scoobie and dating her Watcher? “Actually, no. How? And it looks like it takes up most of the campus. How did they explain this?”

“You know the nature of adults in this city, Buffy.” Giles doesn’t bother to hide his fatigue.

“Denial. Denial. Denial,” Xander jokes. “Same as me apparently.”
“Xander’s right about the denial part.” Willow leans her head on his shoulder.

“As for the speed of their actions, the army seems to be very efficient when they set their mind on a goal,” Giles adds.

“At least they have the right goal this time,” Buffy says, knowing that she isn’t sure she trusts the soldiers.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Willow hugs her arms to her ribcage and shivers in the non-existent breeze, goosebumps rising up over her arms anyway.

“Do we even know what the right thing is?” Buffy asks, catching Willow’s fear and linking arms with her friend.

“No,” Xander and Willow say at the same time.

A smile plays with the corners of Buffy’s lips. “Well, us being on the same page makes me feel better at least.”

“Sometimes, acknowledging that you don’t know the answer leads you to the right choice,” Joyce comments.

All heads turn her way.

She shrugs. “It makes you more aware.”

Buffy regards her mom in the low light. “Spike was right about you.”

Joyce blushes even though no one can see it. She remembers what the vampire said to her in the kitchen at home. . . something about being brave. “What do you mean?”
“He said you’d be the one to notice things. That you’d be the one to survive in the other dimension because you were new to the world of the supernatural. He said you’d have your eyes wide open.”

Giles slips his arm around Joyce’s waist. “For once, I wholeheartedly agree with the vampire.”

Speaking of Spike makes Buffy want to be with him before something bad happens. Trust is definitely shaky. She gestures at the tents. “We should find Spike and Anya.” She looks over her shoulder at Giles. “And you still have to fill us in on what happened in the Initiative. Later.”

No one replies with words. Instead, Willow starts off first, leading the way down the sidewalk toward the first tent. Xander trails after her. Buffy glances her mom and Giles and smiles before following her friends.

Joyce and Giles bring up the rear.

Joyce tucks her hand against Rupert’s arm. “They’re growing up.”

He smiles. “And so are we.”

Joyce returns the expression. “We never stop growing, do we?”

* * *

In all the years of his short life and much longer unlife, Spike never in his wildest dreams imagined that he’d be huddled around a makeshift table with a Slayer that he loves in his lap. Said Slayer loves him back and is intently focused on trying to make sense out of kitten poker while absentmindedly stroking the sleeping white short-haired kitten curled up on one of her thighs. To top that off, they’re surrounded by demons and members of the United States army. They are also caught up more in the game than fighting one another; there is little to no lust for blood or the fight in the air, not even for the kittens who are straying from the tables and baskets to perch on demons’ giant horns or soldiers’ shoulders.

The absurdity of his observations makes Spike laugh, the action a soft rumble in his chest that is so low that only Buffy detects the sound and movement. She glances at him with a question in her bright green eyes. He responds by kissing her warm cheek and checking as the turn passes to him. He does, after all, only have a pair of fours, and he’s notoriously bad at bluffing.
The demon to Spike’s right raises the bet by one kitten on his turn, and Willow stares at her cards and then the pile of tumbling kittens that others have bet. She only has two kittens left. Frowning and indecisive, she turns her cards upside down and shoves them toward the discard pile. “Fold. I’m down too many kittens.”

With a most serious expression on his face, Riley pushes his lips to one side, holding his breath. Several seconds pass, and then, he lets all the air out in one rush and throws his hand on the table. “Nope. Too rich for me.”

A short mottled reddish demon named Lloyd squints his narrow eyes at Spike, focused less on the Slayer than on trying to read the vampire and the demon next to him. Making an executive decision based on the data he takes in, Lloyd croaks, “Raise you three kittens.”

“You realize that’s all in, right, Lloyd?” Willow observes. Even though she’s new to poker, she’s catching on.

“Um. Yeah. Oops,” Lloyd says without sarcasm. “All in.”

Anya is up next, and she frowns at her cards for a long time. She has a straight, but what if Lloyd has something worth more? Xander pokes her from behind. He’s been assisting since he lost his set of kittens almost right away. Anya wrinkles her nose at the nudge. “Fine.” She tries to sound disgruntled. “All in. I have three kittens, too.”

Xander tries to herd Anya’s two mewling grey tabbies and a quieter black kitten to the center of the table. He gives up after a valiant effort, deciding there is something concretely true about that saying about herding cats.

Buffy puts her hand to her mouth and pseudo-whispers at Spike, “I think you should fold.”

Spike groans. Between him and his girl, kitten poker is doomed to failure. He slaps his cards on the table. “Fold.” He studies her face as she gently scratches her kitten’s head. He reaches over and adds his own little gesture of affection to the baby cat’s big soft ears. “You want to keep him, don’t you?”

Buffy blinks. She’s never had a pet. . . not since the ill-fated goldfish she won at the county fair when she was five. “He looks a little like you. You know, with the white hair. Only his is natural.” She reaches up and runs her hand over the evenly shorn stubble on the top of his head. She loves the
tingles the short hairs elicit against her palm and can’t wait to learn how it feels on other parts of her body.

He leans with affection into her touch. “Ha ha, pet.”

Anya’s squeal of delight almost brings Buffy and Spike’s attention back to the table, which is probably a good thing considering the company that they’re keeping. Anya does a little dance in her seat, bouncing up and down and waving her arms back and forth to the happy beat of a silent song. “Yes!”

As Xander tries to pick up Anya’s winnings and winces as he gets stuck by tiny claws, Riley’s cell phone rings. He nearly jumps out of his skin even though he’s been waiting for this call. He quickly leaves the table.

Buffy glances at Spike, and with a silent communication, she gently eases off his lap, nudging the sleeping kitten into his possession. “Don’t bet him.” Spike rolls his eyes so that she grins. Then, she follows Riley.

“Anya, I could use some help,” Xander complains. “You have a lot of kittens.”

“Isn’t it amazing?” she chirps.

“Did you think about what you’re going to do with all of them?” he asks as she starts to help.

Lloyd gathers up the cards and starts to reshuffle them.

Willow watches Buffy go, and after only a few seconds, decides to join her friend. She leans over to Lloyd. “Watch my kitties?” Lloyd nods with an easy-going manner that reminds Willow of the giant demon who helped her and Spike escape their prison. She wonders what happened to the towering demon. “Thanks.”

* * *

Phone to his ear, Riley is pacing outside the tent, flattening the dew heavy grass with his boots.
Arms crossed, Buffy finds a space to stand close and watches her faux-TA pace. Donning a much more relaxed and concerned expression, Willow joins her friend.

Riley acknowledges them with a brief nod and runs his hand through his hair. He doesn’t say much except for an occasional “I see” and “Uh huh” and “Got it.” Finally, after several minutes, he hangs up the phone.

Buffy glances at Willow and raises her eyebrows, signaling for her to take the lead.

Willow accepts the ball. “What happened?”

Riley wavers, uncertain whether he should be sharing this information with civilians. Then, he decides screw it because both the women before him have been impacted by what he just learned. “It’s a call from the transport crew transferring Maggie Walsh.” He says his professor’s name with hardly a note of emotion in his voice.

Her muscles tightening, Buffy asks much less gently than Willow, “What happened?” “Did she escape?” Willow is afraid even though she’s surrounded by military men and demons and has a best friend who is a Slayer.

Holding out his phone as if he can’t believe what he just heard, Riley can’t hide the emotion any longer and shakes his head. “No.”

“Did she hurt someone else?” Buffy asks, softening a bit at the indecipherable feelings on Riley’s face.

“No.”

“What then?” Willow puts a hand on his outstretched arm, and he trembles.

“She’s dead.” The words come out flat and disconnected. Riley fleetingly wonders if he’s in shock.
“Good,” Buffy snaps and immediately regrets it. She shouldn’t wish another person dead, but she’s also very glad the woman is dead and that there’s no chance she could pop back up again.

“How?” Willow asks, patting Riley’s arm. She decides that it’s pretty amazing the power her professor wielded over Riley. . . and Spike. The woman had abused her power in horrific ways, and Willow feels her stomach clench because she almost went down that path herself.

Riley shakes his head. “It’s weird. I just talked with my men who were in the truck. They said that they were on a deserted highway. Flat countryside all around them. No storms. Clear sky. This gust of wind just came out of nowhere and hit the side of the vehicle. Knocked them off the road. They’re in a large heavy vehicle. It spun, and they crashed into the only tree for miles around. And that’s not the really weird part.”

“What’s the really weird part?” Willow’s voice is soft.

Riley blinks. “I can’t believe I’m even saying this out loud. The really weird part is that the tree crashed onto the vehicle, and this branch somehow smashed through the bullet proof glass and. . .”

“And?” Willow urges.

“It gutted her. No one else even has a scratch or even whiplash. . . well, as far as they can tell so far. The vehicle’s even drivable.” Tears fill his eyes, and he asks himself why the hell he’d have tears for a woman who betrayed him and the country so badly, but there they are.

“Wow.” Willow tries to think. “That’s. . . can wood penetrate bullet proof glass?”

Buffy thinks Professor Walsh’s fate is strangely poetic. “Should we call in Mulder and Scully to investigate?”

Riley laughs despite the knot of confusing emotions in his stomach. He wonders if this is how it feels to actually be gutted. He feels a sudden urgency to get to work again. “I need to check in with George, and we need to start sorting again.” The sooner they get done with this part of the job, the sooner he can move away from here and find healing in a new mission. He manages a smile for Buffy and Willow. “We could use your help.”

Buffy gestures at the tents. “It’s going to take a while, huh?”
Riley stuffs his hands in his pockets and shrugs, looking more like the very young T.A. Willow and Buffy used to believe he was. “Yeah. And it’s more complicated than you’d think.”

“What is?” Willow asks.

Riley stares out over at the sea of tents. “Deciding the fate of these demons. Trying to figure out whether to set them free or send them home or incarcerate them or execute them. Even though this is a special sort of mission for the army, we weren’t exactly trained to be judge and jury. It was easier when the mission was grab ‘em and bag ‘em.”

Buffy gets this more than she has time to explain. Slaying was easier when things were black and white in her head. Spike flashes through her mind. She wouldn’t go back though. “Tell me about it.” She pauses, remembering something that almost eluded her. She smirks and says deadpan, “You know, you guys really sucked at your jobs.”

Willow tries to keep a straight face. Humor is needed. “Agreed. Like sucked beyond words.”

Buffy gestures at Willow. “You were supposed to be teaching us psychology. Psychology 101. Heck. I was even quoting what I was learning to Spike. And you guys... you didn’t follow any of it. Punishment doesn’t lead to effective change.” She shakes her head at him.

“And there was a whole lot of punishing going on,” Willow finishes, raising both eyebrows at him.

Mouth hanging open a little, Riley is completely flummoxed by their verbal attack. Then, after what feels like a little too long, he laughs again. This time, the sound is more congruent with what he’s feeling. “I think I can get on board with that sentiment. Let’s hope we’re doing better now.”

* * *

As the sun starts its daily march across the sky, Buffy and Spike find themselves once again in the hallway at Lowell House. The quiet noises of her friends and the soldiers setting up shop in the living room fill the background behind them. The only member of their little demon vetting team that’s missing is Lorne, so Slayer and vampire are searching for which room he might occupy. Well, Spike’s using his hearing to search, and Buffy’s tagging along.
Buffy is holding fast to Spike’s hand, and he begins to reminisce about being under the witch’s spell and loving the Slayer. Nothing about his feelings then held a candle to how he feels about her now, and he tries to mark the thought in his mind to tell her later. A faint snore chases the thought away, and Spike strides forward, listening more carefully and tugging Buffy along with him.

“What?” Buffy asks, confused at the increased pace.

He pauses, pulling her up to him and kissing her on the lips. She moans a little and leans into the bit of affection. He strokes a curl off her forehead. “The snore came from this direction, pet.”

“My own personal bloodhound,” Buffy teases, thinking of him tracking Xander’s scent through the forest. “Like Copper.”

“Copper?”

“The Fox and the Hound. A Disney movie about a fox and a hound who are unlikely childhood friends because they’re supposed to be enemies. You haven’t seen it?”

Spike gives her a what-do-you-think look. “Does that mean you’re the fox?”

“Of course! The girl version.” She considers showing him the movie. The last place she saw the VHS tape was in the hall closet at home.

“They’re called vixens, pet. Definitely fits you.” He winks. “Hmm. Never been called a bloodhound before.” He cocks his head. “Though that could be fitting.”

“It’s got ‘blood’ in it,” Buffy explains. “And you’re a vampire. Of course, it fits!”

“Brilliant deduction, pet. I was thinking about the hound part though.”

She whacks him lightly on the arm. “Let’s go, my hunter. Where’s the green guy?”

Spike focuses his hearing again. Another snore – a little louder one – reaches his ears, and he charges
ahead several more doors before pausing in front of two. “One of these.”

Buffy regards the doors thoughtfully. “Door Number One or Door Number Two?” She taps her index finger on her lower lip. “Which has a demon behind it?”

“My bet’s on the left one. He’s not a regular snorer, so it’s hard to tell.”

“Maybe he has sleep apnea? And are we betting kittens again? ‘Cause you promised you wouldn’t bet my kitten. . . or eat him.”

Spike puts both hands up, palms to his wife. “Kitten is safe and sound. Willow’s looking after him. I thought about Anya but figured she might bet him.”

Buffy makes an assumption with her next words. “Lost all her kittens?”

Spike grins. “Yeah. Beginner’s luck. She wasn’t as good at gambling as she thought she’d be after that one hand.”

“Ah. Makes sense.” Buffy shifts the topic back to their current mission. “I thought you could hear things like heartbeats.” She points between their chests.

Spike shakes his head and crosses his arms with a thoughtful expression. “Heartbeat undetectable. Maybe it’s something to do with the building?”

“Maybe the army guys had the whole thing soundproofed? ‘Cause Stephenson is definitely with the loud. So not fun after a late night of slaying when all a girl wants to do is lay her head on the pillow and get three hours of sleep before 8 AM class.”

“Sounds perfect for when I come to visit after you’re back in classes.”

Buffy can’t imagine sleeping a night without her husband. “No visiting.”

Spike doesn’t even feel hurt. Huh. He trusts that she loves him. The melding between his demon and
soul feels warmer. “But I thought we had it all planned. You stay in the dorm, and I come visit and disturb all your classmates.”

Buffy pouts. “No. I mean, I want to be with you. All the time. Well, maybe not all the time. I might need some space sometimes. But we’re married. I want you with me while we’re sleeping.”

“Open to a little day sleeping, too?”

“I already have to nap with the slaying, so yes, please.”

They grin at each other, and then, Spike cups her chin and kisses her gently, infusing the gesture with the tiniest bit of urgency to torment her. This backfires on him when she responds in kind and then pulls quickly away.

“If we’re married, do we get to move into married people dorms? I heard some universities have them. Do they even have married people dorms here?”

Spike opens his mouth to reply when Door Number Two swings inward, and a groggy looking Lorne blinks at them from the darkness of the room behind him. His pajamas are a rich dark purple and appear almost silky in the hallway light.

“I know nothing about dorms, having never been in one until today.” Lorne’s yawn is huge, and it’s contagious because Buffy and Spike yawn, too. Lorne continues speaking at the tail end of his yawn. “So I don’t know if there are married people dorms. I would, however, like to invite you into the dorm room I’m temporarily residing in. Or napping in, as it were.” Lorne hurries back inside to tie on the matching robe he packed for his trip to Sunnydale and flicks on the lamp.

Buffy and Spike exchange a glance and then follow the green-skinned demon into his domain where he is arranging two meager looking chairs next to the bed.

Lorne sinks back onto the comfortable mattress and gestures for the chairs. “Sit. Sit.” When Buffy and Spike are both tentatively seated, Lorne studies each of them, really staring for a few seconds too long.

Spike squirms first, ready to bolt out the door. “What do you want with us?”
Satisfied, Lorne arranges his hands neatly in his lap. “I wanted to see the two of you together. I mean, after all, this whole trip is about. . .” He can’t go this direction. He promised the other vampire, his supposed future friend and colleague. “Your little vixen here knows that I run a karaoke bar in L.A. You may have heard of it. Caritas ring a bell?”

“Never been much for singing in bars, so no. And L.A. is flush with demon bars.” Spike offers as way of explanation.

Lorne’s voice takes on a note of pride. “It’s more than just a bar for singing demons. It’s a safe haven for demons and humans alike. Anyone can come for a drink or two, maybe some appetizers, without worrying about risking life and limb. And if they want a little reading, I can give them one if they sing for me. People ask all kinds of questions. And the results are strictly confidential, of course.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Buffy asks, shifting in the chair. This is far less uncomfortable than being trapped by D’Hoffryn, but she doesn’t know Lorne either, not really.

Lorne smiles at her. “Neither of you need to sing for me. But I want you to know that I pick up on vibes, and I’m impressed. . . by both of you. What Slayer reaches beyond what she’s taught to do something entirely different with her calling? What vampire chooses to align with a Slayer for good and not for some nefarious motive? Heck, what vampire asks for his soul? You both took quite a chance on one another despite your differences. I believe that your union is a sign of the times ahead for this dimension, and that brings me so much hope.” Lorne sighs a happy sigh. “And the other important thing I have to tell you is that you and your colleagues must never mention to present day Cordelia. . . or any of her associates that you’ve met me.”

“Why not?” Buffy asks, more intrigued by the last point than the speech about specialness. She’s heard that one before.

Lorne shrugs. “Future Cordelia made me promise to ask you to make that promise.”

Buffy gives him side eye. “And that’s not suspicious.”

Spike reaches for his wife’s hand, which she gladly gives over to him. She’s glowing despite the lack of makeup and styled hair. In fact, she’s the most beautiful creature he’s ever seen. “Actually, pet, it makes a lot of sense. If she’s from the future, maybe there’s something greater that we’re not supposed to mess with.”

Buffy considers this. “You’re right.” She makes firm eye contact with Lorne who is watching her
expectantly. “I can make that promise. I’ll . . .” She glances at Spike, “We’ll tell the others.”

“Thank you, Buffy.” Lorne slaps his hands on his thighs and rises from the bed. “Now, back to work. If you’ll pardon me.”

Spike is already halfway to the door, and Buffy follows, still tightly holding his hand. “Thank you for all your help.”

“It’s turning out to be a bigger project than I anticipated. Let’s hope my head survives all the singing. Someone really needs to set up arts programs in demon schools. But that’s an issue for another day.”

Buffy grins. “We’re here to help. Give you breaks as needed. All the decisions shouldn’t fall on you.”

“Thanks, sugar bear. I will be taking you up on it, and trust me, I don’t want this all on my lap. Your friends have been helping and so have George and Riley. I’ll join you kids in a minute. Need a moment to warm up.”

As Spike pulls the door closed behind them, Buffy mouths, “Warm up?”

Spike waves a dismissive hand at the demon’s room. “I’m sure there’s some sort of empathic exercises.”

“Like meditation?” Buffy speculates.

“Maybe,” Spike says distractedly looking down the hall toward the bustle of soldiers and the others setting up for the day’s work. Seeing no one except for the farmer who stares at him for a few seconds and then goes about his business, Spike smirks, grabs Buffy’s hand and pulls her into the vacant room next to Lorne’s.

“What – ?” Spike slams the door shut and pushes her gently against the wall, his fingers sliding through hers as he holds her arms up.

Spike’s mouth hovering near her own, Buffy’s heart hammers double time.
“We need our own warm up,” he whispers in the almost total darkness. The early morning light sneaks from behind the window blinds to give him just enough luminance to see her silhouette.

She grins even though he can’t view her expression. “Of course, we do. Lucky for sound proof army walls, so we don’t disturb the meditating next door.” She pushes her hips into his, feeling how much he wants her. She shivers with desire. “Do you believe what he said?” She barely gets her question out before she gasps at the trail of soft, cool kisses he’s tracing down her neck.

“What about?” he murmurs as he noses his way to her chest only to find that clothing is in the way of her flesh. He lets go of her hands to begin undoing the buttons on her shirt.

“That we’re a sign of the times ahead?” Buffy runs her hands again over the short hair on his head and down the back of his neck to his strong shoulders, tingles rocketing through her body to her core.

Spike’s fingers manage to release three of the buttons before he growls impatiently and tugs at the bottom of the blouse, sweeping it over her head as she lifts her arms for him. “Dunno. Don’t bloody care. All I know is. . .” He pauses to pick her up by the hips.

Buffy kicks her legs up around his waist and slowly rubs herself against him. “You okay?”

Groaning, he presses against her, borrowing the wall for balance, and kisses her lips. There’s the matter of his lingering physical injuries and the acquisition of the soul taking up residence inside, but none of that is important because right now, he is with her. “More than.” He carries her to the bed, laying her down with reverence.

Spike sheds the army issued clothing as Buffy tugs off the rest of her clothes. Then, he joins her on the comforting surface, his skin covering hers so that she emits a small sound of contentment.

He whispers against her skin, “All I know is that my heart belongs to you.”

She traces her fingertips over his back, down his spine, and then bucks her hips to meet his. “And mine belongs to you.”
Standing with her legs apart in her dark living room, Buffy stares up, squinting her eyes a little. “It still looks crooked. A little to the left. I think.”

“Make your mind up, Slayer! This is the eighth adjustment. My arm’s getting tired.” Spike sounds disgruntled, but he’s secretly enjoying doing this with her. He barely nudges his target to the left.

Too focused on her task to tease him about his poor arm, Buffy takes two, then three, steps backward. Tilting her head one way and then the next, she decides that it’s good enough. “I think it’s straight!”

“’Bout time!” Spike bounces down off the short stool and stands next to Buffy, surveying their work.

In Buffy’s mind, the Christmas tree is perfect with its dazzling rainbow-colored lights, all her and her mom’s old Christmas ornaments and a few new ones that she and Spike spent the afternoon painting, shimmery silver tinsel that their kitten has been batting at, and the shiny gold star on top. She even loves the fact that a few of the branches are sparse and that they had to turn the side with the hole toward the wall. The tree’s a little worn but still loveable. Imperfect but still beautiful.

Buffy wraps her arms around Spike’s waist, her thumb hooking in his jeans loop. “Thank you for helping me, and thank you for the tree. I almost forgot it was Christmas.” She leans her head up for a kiss.

Spike gladly acquiesces and gently kisses her. He didn’t forget. Buffy and everyone had been so caught up in wrapping things up with the army and demons in the last few weeks that Christmas Eve caught up with them. Spike reminded Joyce, and together, they’d gone shopping and picked out two trees – one for the house on Revello and one for Rupert’s apartment. Spike insisted on paying for Buffy’s with the little money he received from selling old items to the local pawn shop. “Happy Christmas, pet.”

“When’s the last time you had a Christmas tree?” She pauses, considering something. “Did you ever have a Christmas tree?”
“Of course, we did. It’s what made me think of it. Candles and candies and a star on ours. The tree was always magical. Smelled delicious like this one.”

“And the last time you had one?” Buffy catches the hesitation in his expression and leans her head on his chest. “It’s okay to talk about your past. It’s not erased because you’re with me.”

“Same for you, love.” Much as he hates the idea of talking with her about Angel, Spike would rather she tell him than hide anything. “Back in the early days before we parted ways with Darla and Angelus, Dru always wanted a tree. It didn’t matter where we were or if an evergreen was even readily available, she always wanted something with candles and a present or two. It was rather innocent really. ‘Course, she usually wanted to do something –”

‘Nefarious?’ Buffy asks.

“Yeah, pet, nefarious.” Spike releases her finger from his jeans and takes her by the hand, guiding her closer to the tree. He sits down with his back to the fir, and Buffy emulates him as he eases under the lowest branches.

As Buffy’s head joins Spike’s under the tree, she discovers their white kitten curled up next to the water stand. Her heart melted. “Henry’s asleep under the tree. So cute.”

Spike twists his head to view the kitten’s tiny nose near his forehead. “Rare for that one.”

“I thought maybe he never slept,” she whispers, settling her head against the soft velvet of the scarlet-colored tree skirt. “He’s got so much energy, especially at night.”

“Cats are nocturnal, love.” Spike finds Buffy’s green eyes with his blue ones, and she smiles.

“I think I knew that, but I never knew it, knew it until now.” She muses that she never knew a lot of things until recently. “How come he always pounces on my head in the middle of the night?”

Spike loves that lately, they’ve taken to sleeping in Buffy’s bed while Joyce spends her evenings with Rupert. “The boy likes you. It’s why he pounces on you. That, and you always feed him, so he’s getting you up, so you don’t forget to fill his bowl.”
“I guess that makes some semblance of sense.” Buffy scoots her head closer to Spike’s and gazes up between the branches. The lights surround them with a gentle, colorful glow that makes her sigh. Contentment spreads like a warm blanket through her chest. “This is magical.”

Spike finds her hand and tips his head so that it touches hers. “Truly. What was your last Christmas like?”

To Buffy, last Christmas feels like a lifetime ago. “Well, for one, it snowed. Unlike the torrential downpour we have going on out there now.”

Spike focuses on the sound of steady rain pattering on the windows. “Odd for Sunnydale. The snow. And the rain, for that matter.”

“Well, the snow didn’t last long. Stuck for maybe an hour and then it melted.” Should she tell him about Angel? When Spike runs a thumb over hers, she decides to be honest. “Angel tried to kill himself because some ancient evil force was messing with him. He was waiting for the sun.”

Spike considers how this must have impacted Buffy. “Wanker. Always thinking of himself.”

“Well, it wasn’t quite like that. It was . . . he wasn’t doing well after he came back from hell. The soul and what he’d done – the evil force – it called itself the First Evil – played on those things. Angel wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Oh.” Spike feels his soul stir with the demon. The mingling of soul and demon was deeper now as was the guilt, but therapy was going well. The ACT techniques or whatever the therapist called them were helping. Spike surprises himself when he realizes he can say, “I think I can understand that.”

Buffy snuggles closer to him. “I know you can. If it helps, I yelled at him.”

Spike smirks despite his new-found appreciation for his grandsire’s soul dilemma. “Good.”

“There might have been some tears, too. We walked through the town while it snowed all around us.”
Spike shifts at this, jealousy blooming in his chest—jealousy that is infused with over a century of past mind games at the hands of his grandsire. “Romantic, eh?” He means to sound casual, but his query comes out with a little more emotion than he intended.

Her response is quick, “Not even. We walked, and I was still half in tears, and then, I went home and finished decorating the Christmas tree with Faith.” Almost suicide and her screaming at Angel to live didn’t hold a candle to the more balanced give-and-take she has with Spike. Spike doesn’t make her feel half-broken. Plus, the unencumbered sex isn’t bad either. “I much prefer being sheltered from the cold driving rain and lying under a Christmas tree with you. No drama or suicide threats. I don’t feel exhausted; I feel loved for me. That is romantic.” She kisses his shoulder and returns her gaze to the colorful lights above them. She lets them blur together in her happiness.

With a sharp intake of breath, she remembers something. Spike and Henry both startle, but luckily, the tree goes undisturbed, and Henry merely stretches, pushing his little tail and butt in the air.

Buffy catches the confusion on Spike’s face. “The romantic thing reminds me. . .” She trails off as she scrambles out from under the lower limbs. “Hold on. Wait there,” she commands. She runs to the stairs and scampers up them before Spike can protest. In her bedroom seconds later, she opens her dresser drawer and roots around in the back. Her fingers close around a small box wrapped in her best wrapping paper and tied up with a red and green bow. Her prize clutched in her hand, she races back down to her husband who is waiting for her with Henry cuddled up to his chest.

“You know, he really has an awfully loud purr for a kitten,” she observes, hiding the present behind her back.

“He’s announcing his satisfaction. Nothing wrong with that.” Spike scratches behind the kitten’s ears. Spike sits up on the sofa where’s he’s lounged. Henry doesn’t even protest, tumbles off Spike, and pounces on a stray string sticking out of one of the cushions. “Watcha got there, pet?”

Purposefully allowing herself to be distracted by the kitten because she’s nervous, Buffy’s heart jumps, and she turns back to her husband. “I know we said no presents because neither of us has any money.”

Spike is nervous but elated that she obviously bucked the rule, and the corner of his mouth lifts. “But?”

She shifts from one foot to the other. “But you got a tree, so technically. . .” She rolls her eyes to one side on the last word before her trail off.
“That’s not a present, pet.”

“It is to me,” she insists. “Anyway. Here!” She holds up the tiny box in her palm. “Merry Christmas. . . Eve.”

The last person who gave him a present that he counted as a present was his mum. He takes the tiny parcel with reverence; he doesn’t want to mess up the neat bow or thick paper that’s precisely creased at the corners and taped closed underneath instead of on top.

Antsy for him to open his present now that she’s given it to him, she encourages him with a mixture of eagerness and an attempt at placidity, “Open it.” She plunks down next to him and draws leg up so that her shin aligns with his thigh. When he still stares at the tiny package without moving, she reaches for the ribbon.

Spike moves the present away from her. “Hey. I was getting to it.”

“Sorry.” She intentionally places her errant hand on her knee and tries not to drum her fingers. What if he doesn’t like what’s inside?

“Before I do,” he kisses her forehead and continues, “thank you.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

He tries to erase the worry from her eyes by saying, “You picked it, so I’m sure it’s perfect.”

“You sound so sure.” Now she’s impatient. He’s stalling. “Open it!” Henry weaves his way around Buffy’s hip and over her legs, which gives her something to do to alleviate her anxiety.

Without another word, Spike pulls the ribbon loose and passes the unraveled strand to Buffy who waves it in front of Henry’s nose so that he paws at it. Her eyes remain fastened on Spike. He neatly undoes the wrapping paper as if he’s done it before and discovers a small black leather box with a hinge. With his thumb, he nudges open the box.
What’s inside almost makes his heart start beating again.

The ring glints golden in the lights from the Christmas tree. The design is simple but solid as he pulls it free.

This time, Buffy doesn’t take his silence as something other than it is and explains the gift. “You needed one, too, so that if we’re apart and you look down or feel it on your finger, you’ll know that I’m there with you.” She watches his eyes mist over, so she continues, touching his hand. “And if you get really confused or feel lost, I put a little something on the inside, too.”

Spike blinks the tears away. “What?”

Buffy gently dumps Henry to the floor. The kitten darts away, lost in play, as Buffy turns on the lamp beside Spike. She settles back down next to him. “Look.”

Spike tilts the inside of the band up to the light and reads what’s engraved there in an elegant cursive script: “Love, Buffy.”

“I don’t know if it will fit. I used the size on the ring you gave me at first.” When Spike gives her a confused look, she adds, “The one from the night we got engaged. The skull ring. It was way too big for my finger, remember?”

“I remember.” Spike had no idea she kept the other ring. He slips the band on his left ring finger. The precious metal feels cool even against his skin. It feels right.

“It fits,” Buffy says uncertainly.

Spike hears the hint of her fear and pulls her onto his lap. He kisses her instead of talking, his lips dancing with tenderness over hers and his fingers twining in her hair. After several seconds, he abruptly moves back and caresses her cheek. “I love you.” Her eyes are a bit glazed with desire, which he wants to crow about. She wants him. She is his to love. He can’t believe it.

She blinks and smiles. “I love you, too.” She feels his hand with hers, their rings touching. She can’t believe that he, of all people, is hers. “Do you like your present?”
“Love it. But how?”

Buffy turns sideways in his lap, so she can feel his body against hers. Laying her head against his, she explains, “If you’re asking how I afforded it, Mom had some jewelry that was passed down in my family from various relatives I’ve never met. When I was sixteen, she gave me some of the pieces. She helped me, and we had them melted down and custom made into the ring for you. She has a friend in the art world who is married to a jeweler, who thought our story was really romantic. Well, what he heard of it. That’s how we got it so fast.”

“Thought you forgot it was Christmas.” He sounds amused.

She shrugs. “I did. I was having it made for you anyway, and then, this Christmas thing came up, and I thought, ‘Huh. This would make a perfect gift for my husband.’ And I wanted to give it to you before –”

The doorbell rings as if on cue.

Buffy plants one more kiss on Spike’s lips and untangles herself from him to answer the door. Cold air and the heavy scent of rain pushes over the threshold as she opens the door. “Merry Christmas Eve!”

Joyce smiles at her daughter, her nose slightly red from being outside. As she enters the house, she tugs off her scarf and coat and hangs them on the coat rack. Breathless from the cold, Giles follows her, carrying a stack of gifts.

Joyce pulls her daughter into a hug. “Merry Christmas, Buffy.”

“You didn’t have to ring the doorbell.” Buffy’s voice is slightly muffled from the center of her mom’s embrace.

“I insisted she ring it,” Giles says as he arranges the presents under the tree. “Didn’t want to come in with my eyes closed.”

Buffy teases, “Ha ha. The over the top PDA was a spell, remember?”
“How could I forget?”

Giles rises to find Spike standing next to him. They regard each other with indecision for a moment, and then, Giles holds out his right hand. Spike hesitates only a second or two and then grasps the Watcher’s hand.

Giles speaks first, “Help me get the groceries out of the car?”

“You cooking?” Spike asks Joyce as he follows Rupert toward the front door.

“Buffy’s helping,” Joyce notes, giving the vampire a brief hug.

Spike affords his wife a glance. “She did a right good job at Thanksgiving.”

Joyce beams. “I taught her myself. Did she make the pie?”

“She did.” He hadn’t tasted it though. He’d been a bit tied up. What a difference a month could make.

Buffy deposits a quick kiss on his lips, knowing what he’s thinking. “We’ll make it again.”

As the men exit the house, Joyce bends to pick up Henry who is trying to escape into the dark night, his little white head poking around the open door. “You don’t want to go out there. It’s wet and cold.” Stroking the kitten, she observes, “You gave him the ring.”

Buffy runs a finger up Henry’s nose, and he starts to purr. “I did. Thank you again for helping make it happen.”

“You’re welcome, honey. Glad to help. Rings are important when you’re married.”

“Did you talk with Giles?” Buffy asks, trying to sound casual.
Joyce nods. “Yes. He took it as well as could be expected. He didn’t get angry at least. He wants me to see a doctor right away.”

“That’s ‘cause he cares about you, and I agree with him – about the doctor thing.” Buffy says firmly. Then, she softens. “You two seem cozy with the groceries and presents and the driving together...and the spending the night.”

“Well, I wanted to give the two of you your space...”

Buffy steps back and crosses her arms, teasing, “Don’t tell me it wasn’t easy to do given how you feel about him – him meaning Giles.”

Joyce blushes. “I knew who you meant.”

Buffy opens her mouth to say something else, but the thought escapes her when Willow appears in the doorway with a huge smile on her face. Xander and Anya crowd in behind her. Xander and Willow are bearing packages, and Anya is clutching a poinsettia. None of them have places to go on Christmas, so Buffy invited them all over to spend the night. Anya and Xander will take the guest room, and Willow graciously agreed to sleep on the couch.

“Merry Christmas!” Willow practically shouts. She is freshly back from Los Angeles after meeting with the coven there for the second time and the first time by herself, and she has a crush on someone in the local Wiccan group but isn’t sure where that will go yet.

Buffy realizes that it’s been a long time since she’s seen Willow’s cheeks and eyes glow with happiness. “Merry Christmas. Let me take that.” Buffy balances the gifts in her arms and then tucks them next to the ones that Giles and her mother brought.

Willow slings her overnight bag next to the sofa, which she greets with, “Hello, my bed for the evening.”

Anya hands Joyce the red and green plant, which is slightly damp from its brief sojourn in the rain. “Here. I wouldn’t recommend eating it, but the poison potential is apparently greatly exaggerated.”

Henry is already nosing around the leaves, so Joyce holds the two living beings far apart. “Thank you, Anya.”
Buffy rescues Henry from her mom. “C’mon, kitty.”

Eager to hold the kitten, Willow nabs him on her way to the kitchen and nuzzles her nose to his. “Let’s go find you a treat!”

“Merry Christmas, Buffy.” Xander ducks down to give his friend a hug around his presents and small overnight bag.

Spike and Giles reappear with several bags of groceries and damp clothes and hair. They head toward the kitchen, having already said their greetings to the newly arrived trio. Buffy and Joyce follow. Xander shuts and locks the front door and places a gentle hand on the small of Anya’s back as they trail behind the others.

The small kitchen is bustling.

Buffy hangs back and watches everyone as she enters. Her heart is warm and full. Everyone is together, and she loves the happy energy in the room.

Joyce helps Giles put away his bags of groceries. Spike and Xander are putting the other supplies in cabinets and the refrigerator. Willow is spoiling Henry with a piece of turkey she found, and Anya waters the poinsettia and then tries to find a place to put it that satisfies her desire to keep the plant away from potentially hungry plant-eating beings.

Spike tucks the last of the contents of his bag into the cabinet and catches Buffy hanging back alone. Closing the cupboard, he joins his wife in leaning against the counter by the sink.

He considers what might be going on for her. “You’re going to have many more of these, pet.”

She pushes her hand into the crook of his elbow. “What makes you say that? In my line of work, you have to cherish every moment. . . every holiday because it could be the last one.”

He amends his initial statement, “If I have anything to say about it, you’re going to have many more of these moments with the people you care about.”
She leans against him. “And if I have anything to say about it, you'll be included in said moments.”
She hugs his arm close. “Always.”
This is it...the last chapter. I'm so sad! But I'm also happy...I love this little fic.

And thank you so much to all of you who read it and liked chapters and/or left reviews. I truly appreciate all the love you gave the story! It was fun to write...and a challenge.

(And I never ever thought I'd write a re-write of the season four Initiative arc...always thought it would be too hard. Ah well, that went out the window...) *g*

Thanks to Ceruleansoul for betaing a good chunk of the middle of this fic! And a huge thanks to eyesthatsslay for encouraging me to keep writing it in the first place (and for the beautiful banner)!

Postlude, A Death and a Thank You

Time passes, the sun shines continuously on, and leaves fall in gentle arcs from the tree branches above.

The sectional remains, its cushions never fading or sagging, the fabric never thinning. An open but untouched bottle of wine remains propped against one leg of the random bit of furniture. The tree screen is perpetually silent and inoperative.

More time passes, and the forest remains the same.

No one comes or goes for decades.

Then, without any fanfare – not the smell of cinnamon or the tinkle of wind chimes or the popping of air – Angel and Cordelia appear on the sectional, both dressed in black. Cordelia blinks in confusion, and Angel leaps to his feet, scanning his surroundings.

“No!” Cordelia complains as soon as she recognizes where they are. She had been doing...something very relaxing with her vampire. (Was he really a vampire anymore?) Now, suddenly they are thrust here. Unfair.
“I have no idea why we’re back. I mean, I think we’re back. It looks the same. There’s the sofa thing.” He gestures at the furniture. “And the trees.”

“And the wine bottle.” Cordy holds up the bottle of wine she never drank. It is full but uncorked. Did that mean the wine had gone bad? She takes an impulsive swig. Mmm. Still fresh.


Before she swallows, she passes the bottle to her partner. The liquid slides down her throat, and she says, “So good. Maybe this place is in a time bubble of some kind?”

Angel throws some of the alcohol back and swishes it around in his mouth. “Nice.”

She cocks her head. “We’re back because you forgot something. Right? I mean, that’s the only possible explanation.”

“What? Why is this all on me?”

“Because this whole thing was about you righting wrongs or regrets or whatever.” She glares at the sky. “This better be the last time!” she growls.

Angel sighs. She’s not wrong. He obviously screwed something up, and now, they’re both paying for it. “I’m sorry.”

Taking in his forlorn expression, she points a finger at him. “Don’t go all broody on me. Let’s figure this out.”

Cordy and Angel search their small space for any clues. They check the sometimes hollow tree. They squint to see if the tree screen might appear. They root around between seat cushions, and Angel even lifts the whole damn thing. In the process, they drink half the bottle of wine, passing the alcohol back and forth the more frustrated they become.

They find nothing, nada, zilch.
After exchanging a brief glance, they both meander to the front of the sectional and sag down in defeat. Just as their behinds hit the plush cushions, the mingled scents of leather and vanilla fill the air, and two more figures clad all in ebony fall from midair and hit a tumbling roll to stop in front of Angel and Cordelia.

Both figures jump into a crouched fighting stance, arms raised, legs spread wide.

“Angel?” Buffy says with a frown as she recognizes her ex-boyfriend. “What are you doing here?” She pulls up into a more relaxed position as she takes in what’s happening. “And Cordelia. Hi.”

Cordelia’s mouth is hanging open, but she manages a little wave. “Hi.”

“Of bloody course!” the other figure shouts, waving a pale hand at Angel.

“What are you talking about?” Buffy asks her husband who is apparently very disgruntled.

Spike’s hand becomes more insistent. “Of course, my afterlife would include Angelus.”

“Afterlife?” Buffy casts Spike a confused look. Then, she realizes something. “Oh, yeah. I died.” She winces as she thinks of how sick she’d been. At the least the drugs kept most of the pain at bay. Suddenly, she stares at her hands, her gold wedding ring glinting in the sunlight, and then her bare arms. She feels her hair and runs her fingers though the silky strands, which are long and blond and curling in waves over her shoulders. “Hey! I’m young again!”

Spike drinks her in. No matter how much she worried, he didn’t mind that she had wrinkles and a short bob with silver running through it. He only cared that she was in pain and sick and wished he could take it away. He loved her as she was – always had. He can’t resist touching her, stroking her cheek. As he bent to kiss her, the sound of someone clearing her throat catches his attention.

Cordelia watches the two blondes with raised eyebrows and crossed arms. “I’ve had more than my fill of the Buffy and Spike love fest. Even though it’s been a while.”

Spike gives Angel a gander. Angel shrugs.
Buffy is bewildered, trying to grasp the scope of what’s happening. She addresses Spike, making sure her eyes meet his clear blue ones. “Wait. Why are you dead? I mean, dead dead.” Then, she puts both hands up toward Cordy and Angel. “And what do you mean you’ve had enough of the ‘Buffy and Spike love fest’?”

Laying a hand on Cordy’s arm before she can speak, Angel says, “They don’t know.”

Cordelia relaxes at his touch. She’s gotten used to that, but it still thrills her. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Obviously, Angel’s interfered. Again,” Spike says, not hiding his grumpiness, but he doesn’t turn away. He watches his grandsire, trying to suss out what’s happening.

No one says anything for a moment. A large red leaf falls from above and lands in the middle of the standoff.

Angel figures he might as well own it. “Spike’s right. I did intervene.”

Spike narrows his eyes but doesn’t scoff, doesn’t act on his impulse to shout, “I knew it!”

Angel nods at the other vampire. “When I was dusted, I ended up here in this forest, and Cordelia was here to greet me. She said I had to review my life as part of the process of moving on to the... our place of peace. But my review was a little different.”

“How different?” Buffy asks, her voice less heated than it had been in the past when it came to her ex.

Cordelia chimes in to help Angel, “He means that whoever’s in charge makes everyone review their life – their happy times, their regrets. Only Angel’s was different because he was required to go back and fix his biggest regret.”

“And what was that biggest regret?” Spike feels insecure suddenly, but he isn’t sure why. It’s not a feeling he’s felt in a long time.
Angel regards him evenly. “Actually. It had to do with you.”

“Me? What about me?”

“And Buffy.” Angel smiles a bit sadly at the petite blonde.

Spike recalls when Angel found out about his marriage to Buffy. That had been a long time ago, but the memory is clear. “Great. Just great. What’d you regret? Not keeping us apart? ‘Cause you sodding well tried your best.”

Angel frowns. He doesn’t have the same memories as Angel from the other timeline, probably because he didn’t go back and live in his old body.

“He doesn’t know that part,” Cordelia explains, not hiding her impatience. “Just listen, okay? It’ll go much faster if you listen.” She addresses Buffy, “Is he always like this?”

Buffy shakes her head. “Only around his family.”

“You’re my family,” Spike insists, taking her hand.

She kisses him on the cheek. “Okay. Listen.”

Spike bites his tongue. Literally.

Buffy urges Angel on. “So, you reviewed your regrets, and your biggest one had something to do with me and Spike.”

Angel smiles at her. “Yes. I regretted that I did my best to keep you two apart when I knew deep down that you loved each other. And then, when my biggest regret was identified, I was required to go back in time to fix it.”

“I don’t remember anything like that,” Buffy says with surprise in her voice.
“That’s because I had a choice in how I did it. I had to pick a place to intervene, and well, I didn’t think either of you would take it very well if I just showed up and tried to encourage you to be together. So, I did it behind the scenes.”

“How very stalker-y of you,” Buffy notes, but her tone is more amused than upset. “When and where did you go back?”

Angel is holding both hands together nervously, and Cordelia pries one of his hands free to hold in hers. He continues, “When Willow cast that spell. The one when she told you to marry Spike. I, um, arranged for you to actually get married. The judge. The marriage license. The phone call. In my actual timeline, you never got married.”

“That was you?” Spike’s memory of his time under the spell is a bit blurry, and if he thinks about not being married to Buffy, he feels a little panicky in his chest. He feels reassured when Buffy hugs his arm.

Angel sighs. “Yeah. That was me. Only, it had some unforeseen side effects because in the initial timeline, Buffy, you and Spike helped out Xander and Anya with his demon problem, and Joyce never went over to Giles’s apartment. The portal to the crossroads dimension never opened, and Willow never became a temporary vengeance demon.”

As if her mind isn’t blown already, Buffy is completely thrown by this new information. “Oh my god. Do you know what happened in that other dimension. . . to all of us? Do you know what Willow went through?”

Spike recalls the quiet moments with Buffy, how they had to help each other out to make it through. “Do you remember what we said to D’Hoffryn in Arashmaharr about all the good that came from Willow’s wish?”

“That was a long time ago, but you’re right. And I do remember.” Buffy studies Spike’s face and considers this. “The side effects weren’t all bad.”

“Angel went back when we saw that there were problems with his initial changes. Several times,” Cordelia defends her vampire. “He fixed things. He talked with Riley about the Initiative and helping hide Willow.”
“That was you?” Buffy blinks at Angel.

Angel nods. “Yeah. And I talked him out of trying to date you.”

Buffy’s eyes widen. “What? Wait. I dated Riley in your timeline?” She can’t fathom dating the ungainliness that was Riley Finn.

“Uh huh,” Cordelia inserts. “You sure did.”

“You dated the farmer?” Spike teases. “Um. I so cannot see that. He wouldn’t be good for you. Too –”

“Awkward. Riley was totally awkward.” Buffy leans her head on Spike’s shoulder. She smiles at Angel. “Thank you for saving me from that.”

Angel can’t help but grin. “You’re welcome. I sent Lorne to help you, too. That was a little more challenging because he became. . . well, he helped me and Cordy. . .”

“He was our friend,” Cordelia clarifies for him. “So, when Angel went back, he had to do some convincing without interfering with our timeline.”

“Wait a second,” Buffy says, the memories pouring out of storage. “That was you? I thought it was future Cordelia – er, you. You, right?”

Cordelia beams. “Yep, I helped you out at the wells, but the Lorne thing was all Angel. And that’s pretty much all we did. Except we also killed off the Gentlemen before they could get to Sunnydale. The screaming part was way too much fun.”

Spike makes a face. “Screaming?”

“The Gentlemen steal voices and cut out people’s hearts and only the princess’s voice can kill them,” Cordy adds.
“Ah,” Buffy says. The Gentlemen sound strange and horrible. “That’s good because we had a lot of clean-up to do with the Initiative.”

“You did,” Angel agrees. “I wanted you to have a good Christmas after... well, after what I did the previous year. And that was the last of what we did.”

Buffy’s chest feels warm with the memory of how happy she and Spike had been... how happy her friends and mom had been, too. “We had a wonderful Christmas.”

Spike steps forward then, crossing the invisible divide between the couples. He held his hand out to Angel. When Angel doesn’t immediately accept the gesture of good will, Spike says, “Thank you.” The words carry more meaning than Spike can express because tears are blurring his eyes.

Viewing the tears in his grandchilde’s eyes, Angel clasps Spike’s hand and pulls him in for a hug. “You’re welcome. I’m proud of you. What you did to be worthy of Buffy... to take care of her. She has a good man, and you made... make her very happy.”

Spike draws back. “I love her.”

“I know,” Angel acknowledges.

Buffy slips her arm around Spike’s waist. “Thank you, Angel.” She inclines her head toward her high school nemesis. “Thank you, too.”

“You’re welcome.” Cordy emulates Buffy’s movement with her own big guy. “Just so you know, we looked away during the sex.”

Buffy’s eyes grow rounder than before. “What? You were watching?” Catching Spike’s smirk out of the corner of her eyes, Buffy whacks him playfully. “You would like that.”

Cordelia nods. “I think whoever’s in charge wanted us to know what was happening, so Angel could fix it if need be.”

“He definitely didn’t need to fix anything there,” Buffy teases. “And as long as you looked away...”
“We had our own situation to sort out,” Cordy assures Buffy.

“And did you? Sort it?” Spike asks, oddly wanting Angel to be happy, too.

“We did,” Angel admits.

“Good on you.” Spike’s words aren’t sarcastic.

“So you’re here now to tell us this and help us review our lives?” Buffy asks, her mind coming back full circle.

Cordy answers. “Yes. Though I don’t believe you have go back and fix anything.”

“We don’t? How do you know?”

Cordelia taps a finger to her head. “Stupid connection to whatever or whoever’s in charge. They send me information here... sometimes. It’s all very inconsistent and unclear on the why and the when.”

“And then what?” Spike is concerned about what happens after. Will he go wherever Buffy goes?

“You both come with us to the place of peace,” Cordelia says. “You earned it, William.”

Spike is awestruck. He never expected that. He frowns. What about all the killing and murderous rampages?

Cordelia anticipates his next question. “Nope. Not a mathematical equation.”

“Wait.” Buffy knows she’s being repeat-o-girl. She makes eye contact with the love of her life. “How did you die? You promised you wouldn’t dust yourself.”
Spike shakes his head. “I didn’t. I promise, pet.”

“Then, how are you here?” Buffy turns back to Angel and Cordy. “How is he here?”

Cordelia searches her head for more info. “Guess whoever’s out there wanted you to be together in heaven and took you -”

Buffy experiences a rush of anger. “Without his permission! That’s like taking his free will away!”

Spike takes her by the chin and makes sure she knows the veracity of his next words. “Buffy, love, I’d rather be here with you than out there without you.”

Angel remembers something. “When I died, in the other timeline, you weren’t together. Not in life and not in the same afterlife.”

“Oh. What is the purpose of all this?” Buffy asks. “I mean, why does whoever’s in charge even care?”

Cordy rolls her eyes. “I gave up trying to figure that out a long time ago.”

Spike kisses Buffy’s forehead. “Whatever the reason, I’ll take it to be with you. I love you, pet.”

“Me, too.” She hugs him tight. “I love you.”

For the next several minutes, Buffy and Spike experience a rush of memories, many of which are remembrances of their life together. When they finish, they smile at one another. They had a good...no, an amazing life together.

Buffy takes Spike’s hand in hers and squeezes.

Then, with as little fanfare as they arrived, the four of them enter their heaven together.
The end.

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