Liebestod

by Iamblichus

Summary

They really should have known the First Evil wasn't done with them after Sunnydale... Enter: Time-travel, mysterious prophesies, and lots of poetry. Spuffy. BtVS Post-Season 7; Angel AU Season 5. All's well that ends well.

Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Author's Note: I started this story a decade ago (seriously, 2009). That just seemed like something that should be shared. Any similarity to things that have subsequently happened in the comic-book verse is therefore entirely coincidental. Fair warning: if you hate Victorian fiction, skip the prologue. Or at least know it's an experiment in style—the rest of the chapters are written without channeling George Eliot.
TWICE or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp’d be.
Still when, to where thou wert, I came,
Some lovely glorious nothing did I see.
But since my soul, whose child love is,
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
More subtle than the parent is
Love must not be, but take a body too;
And therefore what thou wert, and who,
I bid Love ask, and now
That it assume thy body, I allow,
And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.

—John Donne, “Air and Angels”

Extraordinary natures are bound to find themselves, rather too often indeed, encumbered by layers of mediocrity. How many ears, straining after the ephemeral sounds of eternity, will lose that graceful melody in the dull hum of machinery or the simpering chatter of dinner guests? Lucky are they who catch even a fleeting glimpse, the barest arrested note—enraptured, they carry this secret treasure in their hearts until the day cold soil wrests it from them. Lifetime after lifetime, always grasping after a secret symphony, they spill their ink to capture something that inevitably melts into nothing but air.

But what of those who cheat their earthy mistress? That mute inglorious Milton, who sells his soul for a glimpse of Eden. Having beheld its divine effulgence, will he turn his art to death? Or, having caught the spark, will he shelter it within the cave of his unbeating heart in expectation of the day when love’s sweet breath might fan it into a raging flame?

William Pratt had all his life been acutely aware of his painful mediocrity. He was a gentleman as far as anyone was concerned, and a respectable one at that, having finished with highest honors his education at Oxford and being presently the manager of his father’s considerable estate. If not strictly
of the old order, the Pratts were well enough connected to command a proper sort of approval in most social circles. And it is a commonly acknowledged truth that the life of such a gentleman must be easy and luxurious and, above all, remarkably dull.

He read indiscriminately. The great Bard was his chief adviser and Lord Byron his most intimate confidant. His boyhood had been spent in rapturous wonder, all streaming banners floating in the wind and glinting steel that resounded clear as it met its mark against shimmering armor. There was glory to be won and honor to be upheld. Later, there were maidens to be defended in the name of love so pure it made the heart sing out. Later still, there were silent meditations on beauty and grace found in the slope of a rolling knoll or the curve of a snow-white brow.

Young William gave his days to the dutiful recitation of paradigms and his nights to quenching the ardent thirst of his imagination. He devoured comedy, tragedy, and history alike. He raged against nature’s fury on the pale cliffs of Dover even as he sat in contemplation under the dark sycamore above Tintern Abbey. The romantic ideals of his early manhood proved a forgiving lens; he lived each day in the tremulous hope that these most earnest longings of his heart might find their gratification, if not through the advent of some wondrous adventure, then perhaps in the clear countenance of some beautiful creature upon whom he would bestow his fervent worship.

Yet the years passed, and the world’s heavy monotony weighed upon him. Perhaps, had he been granted a harsher lot in life, he might have found satisfaction in the urgency of daily labor. But, being such as he was, the ease of his existence grated at his restless mind with dull-edged instruments. It began to occur to him that the splendid ecstasies of spirit he had so long dreamt of may not have been meant for him, after all. For there was nothing extraordinary about this world and, by logical extension, there was certainly nothing extraordinary about him. The quotidian bustle of business and polite society that surrounded him only served to reinforce this gnawing suspicion: he was abhorrently unexceptional.

William wrote. Painstakingly applying pen to paper, he struggled to capture that elusive splendor that somehow loomed ever beyond the grasp of his rude faculties. In the quiet cavern of his study, his mind strained after the subtle vibrations of a luminescent harmony he so intensely longed to perceive. Even as his labors yielded failure after failure, the impenetrable depths of his heart housed a hope that the faded thread of his destiny might yet hold some hidden luster.

Then, one morning, William awoke with the most curious sensation that he was forgetting something extremely important. He woke, just as was his typical habit, no more than a quarter of an hour after the day’s first light. But as he did so, he was embarrassed to find himself in a rather scandalous state of dishabille—whatever had happened to his bedclothes? Having battled his way through an uncharacteristically rumpled set of sheets and bedcoverings, he finally rose to discover his regular clothes discarded on the hearthrug next to the long-extinguished fire. The garments were damp, but he had no memory as to how they might have attained such a state. He did not feel as though he’d been drinking—though, come to think of it, his muscles did ache ever so slightly. Finally giving up memories of the previous night as a lost cause, he set about preparing for the day. His fingers slipped inattentively as he buttoned his jacket, his mind occupied with things rather more abstract than the intricacies of coat fastenings.

He walked through the house quietly, as if in a daze—the cook was making an awful lot of noise with what he only imagined must have been the tea kettle down in the servants’ quarters and Hutchins, his mother’s lady’s maid, was flitting about, witlessly rearranging vases and dusting off trinkets. This wasn’t her job, strictly speaking, but she had been charged with a fair share of the housekeeping duties since they’d dismissed a couple of their other maids. Mrs Pratt therefore made a daily practice of reminding her that the downstairs rooms must be kept especially tidy for the benefit of any unexpected visitors. One never knew who might choose to drop in on a whim, after all.
William held the secret opinion that unexpected visitors posed no alarming threat—hardly anyone came to visit them anymore, unexpected or otherwise—but one had to keep up appearances.

He graced Hutchins with one final glance over his shoulder, as she almost succeeded in toppling one of his mother’s favorite porcelain figurines with a particularly enthusiastic flutter of her feather duster, and opened the door to the garden.

Having settled on his customary bench just beside the rosebush, which was now in the full glory of wilting, William took out his journal and opened it to a blank page. He’d felt himself simply brimming with words upon waking, but now they seemed to have all evanesced into cloudy strains of half-formed syllables, as words were wont to do. He struggled to recall what it was that had called forth his sudden rush of inspiration—perhaps it had been a dream—yes, it seemed that he remembered having a dream, insomuch as one ever remembered such things.

There had been a lady—William chuckled inwardly—of course, there was always a lady. Indeed, his fool mind seemed capable of dreaming of nothing but this strain of sentimental absurdity. And ladies were all manners of spectacular, of course, but a man was obliged to be practical. He knew perfectly well that his mother wanted him to marry—truth be spoken, he was not at all averse to the prospect himself—but William’s idea of connubial bliss seemed to differ quite drastically from the numerous examples he observed being paraded quite shamelessly at the most fashionable social gatherings.

In his entire circle of acquaintances, there was but one lady whom he considered to be above the meanness of the rest. There was something extraordinary about young Miss Cecily Underwood—something that separated her considerable charms from the petty imitations of the rest. Though one could observe her for hours and not know it, William perceived that there was something unique and mysterious about her.

But, all that was of no matter. He dared not presume to approach her, choosing instead to admire her radiant beauty from a distance, and then, he had his mother to think of. Anne Pratt had all her life taken care of him, and he would be deserving of the worst kind of damnation if he did not repay that kindness by taking care of her through these last few remaining years. And she was a remarkable woman, his mother. She’d doted on him like no other and it was only in her eyes that he ever felt himself to resemble that which he had always longed so earnestly to be: someone exceptional.

Expelling a heavy sigh, William propped the journal up on his knee and mindfully lowered the tip of his pen to the smooth surface of the page. The words, like stubborn children, refused to form a tidy queue so as to properly be set to paper. There was something he was missing—a thing he appeared to have lost somewhere along the outer reaches of his half-waking mind—but try as he might, he could neither capture nor fully relinquish the odd sensation. He simply had no choice at this moment but to write.

He strained himself, but the words still declined to appear of their own accord, so, assiduously, he began to scribble: *My soul is wrapped in harsh repose…*

***

The remainder day had passed by rather uneventfully, which was hardly out of the ordinary. William had left the garden no more than an hour later to see to some business, offering his mother a warm good morning on his way through the parlor and out of the house. He’d not be returning home for dinner that night, he told her, as there was a gathering of sorts held by the Dawsons. It was hardly his preferred mode of entertainment, but he knew it would give her some small measure of satisfaction to imagine him socializing with his peers; and besides, Cecily would likely be there.

William arrived at the Dawson residence rather late—the clerks never could be trusted to put all
matters into good order without his oversight—he exited the cab, casting a cursory glance over the street before heading for the entrance. These parties were often rowdy affairs, continuing well into the long hours of the night. This night, especially, had been advertised as an event of particular magnificence. It was the fall equinox and, with Mrs Dawson having recently gotten herself embroiled in a number of fashionable esoteric societies, anyone who was anyone had been invited to celebrate the ancient festival of Mabon with proper pagan decadence.

The Dawsons resided in an appropriately posh part of town and, though the hour was getting on, the street was still littered with people; couples, mostly, likely on their way home from theater, and young ladies with their escorts heading to this party or that could be seen along the main promenade. There was only one figure that seemed out of place—an odd-looking boy was watching him intently from an alley across the way—William instinctively placed his hand over his pocket, but the child didn’t appear to be interested in his money. He’d been eyeing William in the strangest way but, having apparently become privy to the fact that he’d been detected, the boy slid back into the shadows.

William shook his head, attempting to rid himself of the uneasy feeling that this peculiar figure’s appearance had stirred within him, then turned to enter the grand residence. Once inside, he made his customary rounds—one was bound by decorum to a certain measure of small talk, after all—and, having littered the room with a proper smattering of how-do-you-do’s and lovely-evening-isn’t-it’s, he settled into a quiet corner, where he pulled out his journal once more.

There had been a sort of irksome itch around his mind all the day through, like the words were trying to scratch their way out from the recesses of his brain. The poem, however, wasn’t shaping up nearly as well as he might have liked. William was not sure how long he had spent ruminating in that corner surely it was well past midnight now. But the verse stubbornly refused to yield.

He reached for a fitting word. “Luminous... oh, no, no, no. Irradiant’s better,” he mumbled to himself, absentmindedly.

A footman went gliding by, stopping to approach him with a tray. “Care for an hors d’oeuvre, sir?” he droned.

Hors d’oeuvres were decidedly the last thing on William’s mind at the given moment. “Oh, quickly!” he found himself muttering, rather despite his better judgment. “I’m the very spirit of vexation. What’s another word for ‘gleaming’?” The man gave him blank look bespeaking an impressive combination of silent mockery and polite incomprehension. William continued, undaunted, striving to clarify. “It’s a perfectly perfect word, as many words go, but the bother is nothing rhymes, you see.”

The footman donned a patronizing smile before moving off into the crowd and William silently reprimanded himself. One knew one’s standing to be falling to shambles when even the servants failed to take one seriously. But that hardly seemed to matter because in the next moment his eyes traveled well past the insolent footman’s retreating back to settle on the fine figure of a young woman who had just entered the room.

“Cecily—” William breathed quietly, and suddenly all was right in the world once more. She was a glorious vision of perfection, Miss Cecily Underwood, with her luminous eyes, her dainty smiles, and her soft curls.

A funny sort of flutter palpitated through his chest—surely, this was what he’d been waiting for—it all seemed to come so effortlessly now. He returned to his poem with sudden fervor, jotting several lines without so much as ever seeing the words themselves, then rose, the open book still clasped in his hands, all but forgotten.
Cecily had joined Richard, the youngest Dawson son, who stood in a small circle of acquaintances, apparently engaged in lively conversation. No one could fault the Dawsons on much of anything; they were an old family and very well connected. Very comme il faut. Their sons always attended the best colleges and their daughters always married into the most well-to-do families.

Richard Dawson had been at Oxford with William. They hadn’t been friends, exactly, but Dawson had always been civil enough, at least when it suited him to be thus. For his part, William was rather sure that their relationship was one of convenience—Dawson was not unknown to come to him for advice on all sorts of matters that he was either too slothful, or, as William often suspected, simply too dull-witted to work through himself—and, all this besides, he had apparently discovered quite early in their acquaintance that William made for a spectacular punching-bag when the mood was proper. William tolerated the above, largely because he had neither the patience nor the force of character to overturn the dynamic, and partially because having the likes of Richard Dawson on one’s side, whatever the circumstances, was hardly something one scoffed at.

William approached the group cautiously, hovering in the background as he caught the line of their conversation. “I merely point out that it's something of a mystery and the police should keep an open mind,” Abigail Vincy pronounced dramatically, looking quite pleased with herself on account of having made such an obviously astute assertion.

“Ah, William!” exclaimed Dawson in greeting, having perceived William’s form over Miss Vincy’s shoulder. “Favor us with your opinion. What do you make of this rash of disappearances sweeping through our town? Animals or thieves?”

William made his way around Miss Vincy to join the circle and found himself directly across from Cecily’s uncertain countenance. His shirt collar felt suddenly all too tight.

“I prefer not to think of such dark, ugly business at all,” he commented lightly. “That's what the police are for.” He hazarded a tentative glance over at Cecily, noting, to his vexation, the disapproving tilt of her delicate eyebrows. “I prefer placing my energies into creating things of beauty,” he hastened to add, giving her a meaningful look as he raised the open pages of his journal demonstratively.

Dawson, unlike Cecily, appeared rather amused by this turn of conversation. “I see,” he said snappily, stepping forward to snatch the top page out of William’s hands. “Well, don't withhold, William.”

“Rescue us from a dreary topic,” Abigail Vincy contributed haughtily.

“Careful,” William exclaimed, reaching for the page. The withering look Dawson shot him, however, ruled out any likely chance he’d had of retrieving his composition without an unnecessary scene. It was a look he’d come to recognize over the years, and one that said, quite plainly, that Richard Dawson’s present desires were not to be interfered with. He tried again, more softly this time, still reaching for the sheet. “The inks are still wet. Please, it's not finished.”

But Dawson had detected weakness; he was not to be deterred, now. “Don't be shy,” he assured William ironically, turning his eyes to the page. “My heart expands, ’tis grown a bulge in it, inspired by your beauty, effulgent… Effulgent?” He turned to William questioningly, as if genuinely disappointed to the brink of offense by his poor use of poetic lexicon.

If asked to objectively evaluate his own work, William might have judged that “effulgent” was hardly the more criminal member of that particular rhyme, but his mind was no longer on the poem.
Cecily had dropped her gaze in embarrassment as soon as Dawson had begun to read, and presently, rather than joining the rest of the group in an outburst of uproarious laughter, she had turned and walked off, her head hung low in shame.

William’s heart might have stopped. He shot Dawson an angry glance before snatching his poem out of the man’s fingers and turning to follow Cecily.

“And that's actually one of his better compositions,” he heard Daniel Hornby, who had until now stood silently at Abigail Vincy’s side, occasionally shooting appreciative glances at the neckline of her dress, exclaim through another burst of laughter. He glared scathingly at the back of Hornby’s head, but, as could have been expected, to little effect.

“Have you heard?” Miss Vincy positively squealed in amused excitement. “They call him William the Bloody because of his bloody awful poetry!”

William could hear Dawson’s voice responding, even as he had made his way almost to the other side of the parlor. “It suits him. I’d rather have a railroad spike through my head than listen to that awful stuff!”

Rather despite himself, William briefly hypothesized that it might not be altogether terrible, should a railroad spike somehow come to find itself in close proximity to Richard Dawson’s head. But, before he could follow that unsavory train of thought any further, his eyes fell upon poor Cecily, who was perched gracefully on the sofa, away from the bustle of the party and gazing through the window as if wishing she were somewhere else entirely.

“Cecily?” he called to her gently.

She turned towards him, eyes widening as her mouth formed a quiet “Oh!” of surprise. “Leave me alone,” she said bitterly, fanning herself in an agitated fashion as she turned away once more.

“Oh,” he chuckled nervously and lowered himself to sit across from her, waving a dismissive hand at that particular spot in the crowd from which he could still detect the emanation of Dawson’s mocking laughter. “They're vulgarians. They're not like you and I.”

Cecily lowered her fan abruptly, eyes glinting in a way he was not at all accustomed to. She seemed wholly unfamiliar to him, somehow—as though some strange new mask had fallen into place—or, perhaps, it was more as though some old mask had suddenly slipped away.

“You and I?” she asked, her tone unexpectedly confident, almost lofty. “I'm going to ask you a very personal question and I demand an honest answer. Do you understand?

William nodded eagerly. It appeared that whatever it was he had thought he’d detected in Cecily’s tone was gone now—she seemed soft and delicate as ever, her face an open scape of wide eyes and charmingly pretty blushes—and it occurred to him that perhaps something good might come to emerge out of this horrid debacle after all.

“Your poetry, it's—they're—not written about me, are they?” she asked anxiously.

“They're about how I feel,” said William. It was an honest answer, after all, and he did not wish to shock her by being overly bold, but Cecily did not appear to be satisfied.

“Yes, but are they about me?” she insisted.
He hadn’t planned on declaring himself to her tonight, and certainly not in a manner such as this, but it seemed, now, that there would be no helping it. William took a quick breath and prayed for courage.

“Every syllable,” he uttered resolutely.

“Oh, God!” exclaimed Cecily, her hand coming up to cover her face.

William had to admit that this was not entirely the reaction he’d been hoping for, but perhaps it was to be expected. All in all, it must be quite unsettling for a young lady to be approached in so abrupt a manner.

“Oh, I know,” he replied soothingly, even as her expression seemed to become more tortured with every word. “It’s sudden and—please, if they’re no good, they’re only words but—the feeling behind them—I love you, Cecily.”

He gazed at her hopefully, willing her to understand the depth of his feelings—if only she knew, she couldn’t possibly—

“Please stop!” Cecily exclaimed, turning away from him.

William’s heart was breaking, as he’d never imagined was possible, and he could think of nothing but that he must try to make her understand, for if only she could condescend to understand, she would see past his many defects into the great and profound depths of his affection. “I—I know I’m a bad poet,” he stammered, “but I’m a good man and all I ask is that—that you try to see me—”

“I do see you,” she interrupted, turning to face him once more. “That’s the problem. You're nothing to me, William.” She rose then, towering over him as she pinned him with those hatefully beautiful eyes, and uttered the one phrase that would remain etched into his mind like a fiery brand to the very end of his existence. “You’re beneath me.”

And so, with a swish of her skirts, she had gone, leaving him staring after her with the acute feeling that the world was crumbling down around him into a spectacular myriad of crystalline fragments, each of them as sharp and painful as the last. Thus, his gaze aloof and unfixed as his vision dissolved into an indistinguishable array of form and color—it was perhaps, the tears that were responsible for this particular phenomenon, and yet, his eyes felt excruciatingly dry—William also rose and made his way through the crowd out into the cool night air.

***

He was vaguely aware of the surprising fact that his feet were moving—how odd that was, since he seemed to be exerting no conscious effort to such an end—and he was transported down the street, past the lights and the horses and the people, still milling around, blissfully unaware as they were of the reality that the world had just come to an abrupt end. William staggered down the street, his shaking fingers mauling the hateful leaf of paper that had brought down his entire world. Another figure loomed before him, this one considerably larger and more solid, and he reeled at the impact, the shredded fragments of his life tumbling to the ground.

“Watch where you're going!” cried William to the offending man, kneeling to gather the torn pages.

The stranger passed him by without taking any note, his female companions sidestepping William as their swaying skirts brushed his shoulders, their carefree laughter ringing through the street. William pushed himself off the ground and headed for an alley across the way, in hopes that perhaps he might
find some quiet there, away from the late-night bustle of the city.

He sank down onto some neatly stacked bales of hay—most likely they had been deposited there in wait of being taken into the stables of the considerably large residence alongside which he’d found himself—and continued to ineffectually tear the mangled papers still clutched in his hands. He fixed his eyes on the tattered remains—across the topmost scrap he could just barely make out what must have once read as “effulgent,” written out in his neat slanting script—William clenched his jaw to prevent more tears from falling. He was a man, after all, and a downright fool to have allowed himself such a disgraceful display of emotion.

“And I wonder,” a languid voice sounded from just a few feet away. “What possible catastrophe came crashing down from heaven and brought this dashing stranger to tears?”

William turned his head in the direction of the voice and came face to face with the second arresting vision of his night. A beautiful woman with lush dark curls stood serenely before him—he halfheartedly noted that her features had something of Cecily’s in them—her dark liquid eyes gazed at him enchantingly.

But he’d had quite enough of that for the evening. “Nothing,” replied William curtly. “I wish to be alone.”

“Oh, I see you,” she continued, unabashed. “A man surrounded by fools who cannot see his strength, his vision, his glory.” William followed her graceful movements, quite despite himself, unable to untangle his attention from amongst her enthralling words. “That and burning baby fish swimming all around your head,” she finished, her body beginning to sway to some bizarre rhythm as she approached him.

Those final words effectively succeeded in pulling William from his trance. “That's quite close enough,” he cautioned, rising to back away anxiously. There was indeed something out of the ordinary about this lady, and at the moment he was not at all confident that he liked it. “I’ve heard tales of London pickpockets. You'll not be getting my purse, I tell you,” he informed her defiantly.

She curtsied gracefully, the light falling across her finely sculpted features, illuminating those dark eyes—William noted, with trepidation, that, rather aside from the resemblance they bore to Cecily’s, something of the demon appeared to dance in their depths—if Cecily had so often struck him as an angel then, surely, this finely adorned lady must have been a devil.

“Don't need a purse,” she smiled beguilingly, approaching to touch her gloved hand to his heart. “Your wealth lies here… and here,” she reached up to stroke her fingers along his brow, before sliding her hand down his body in a manner that William vaguely realized would not be considered at all appropriate, even as his eyes fluttered closed. “In the spirit and… imagination,” she continued in her low tone, drawing him in. Long, thin fingers curled into the wool of his trousers. “You walk in worlds the others can't begin to imagine.”

“Oh, yes!” William suddenly found himself gasping, then abruptly came to his senses. “I mean, no. I mean—mother's expecting me.”

The woman seemed not to hear him. Her eyes were riveted to his neck as she pulled at his shirt collar. “I see what you want,” she intoned. “Something glowing and glistening. Something… effulgent.”

Her eyes returned to his, that odd devilish gleam more apparent than ever, but that hardly seemed to matter anymore. “Effulgent,” echoed William quietly.
“Do you want it?” she asked.

William realized, just then, that it was quite probable he had never wanted anything so badly in his entire life. This dark temptress was holding out an apple and he desired nothing more than to take a hungry bite and feel the juices pooling on his lips. She was his Eve, his siren, his muse, and he was nothing but a starving man—who was he to refuse?

“Oh, yes!” he gasped, reaching for her. “God, yes.”

She dropped her gaze to his hand momentarily, and when she raised it once more, her face seemed to have changed—or perhaps it was just his vision playing tricks—the demon’s shadow had sharpened her features, making them more terribly beautiful than he could have imagined possible.

It seemed like an aeon might have passed while her sweet lips descended on his neck, then he felt a sharp pain and cried out, surprise overwhelming propriety, as the moment threatened to shatter. The pain didn’t last long, however, and a glorious sensation overtook him—this was, maybe, what eternity felt like—he found himself slipping away into the abyss, his mind reeling and full of visions of pale maidens with red lips and brandished steel that smoked with bloody execution.

He was just ready to slide into blissful darkness when he saw her. A lady—not the dark beauty who had stolen his life—but a heavenly apparition. She was oddly attired in overlarge men’s clothing that reminded him, suddenly, of the boy he had seen what felt like ages ago now. But this figure was decidedly female, her golden hair cascading down her shoulders in disarrayed strands, just barely concealing a bloom of fresh blood that decorated her brow. She might have been a true angel in disguise, sent to carry him away from the barren wasteland of his existence. Her clear eyes widened as she gazed at him; they were exquisite eyes that carried something of his mother’s warmth, and they were shining with reflected sorrow and something that seemed so very much like love. Probably, she could see directly into his soul with some unearthly vision—and so, just then, something within him reached out to her, longing to ascend to her eternal sphere, which was surely filled with beauty and light and all else that made the world worthwhile.

It was becoming difficult to breathe now. How odd, he thought, as his head rolled back onto the cold stone. Somewhere above him, he caught sight of a faint green shimmer. There was a roaring somewhere deep in his skull—and the rest was silence.

The next evening, William awoke with the most curious sensation. He was intensely hungry.
Part I: The Widening Gyre

The window of the school bus had been doing a weird vibrating thing against her temple. It made her head feel like there were thousands of tiny little mallets inside her skull, just malleting away—or whatever it is that mallets do.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

That was the only thing she really remembered of the trip to the “second front” in LA following the town’s collapse. The second front that they hadn’t needed after all. Once the initial adrenaline rush had worn off, she’d been left feeling at once overwhelmingly full and devastatingly empty. She wouldn’t let herself to think about what she’d left behind in the crater. The world was all shiny and bright—almost painfully so—and she had sunk into herself, slouching against the ragged vinyl seat.

Giles had been typically helpful in pointing out that there was evil afoot yet, what with that pesky Hellmouth in Cleveland and all. But since when was evil anything other than afoot? It had been a long time since she’d been foolish enough to permit herself the luxury of imagining a normal life, whatever normal even meant when you had the strength of a small elephant and a convenient sixth sense for things that go bump in the night. Still, for a second there, as she stared at the giant hole that had replaced Sunnydale, Buffy had wondered if maybe the time had come for shoe shopping to take priority over stabbing slimy things with pointy objects. And once the shoes got boring—well, maybe even college.

Angel had fussed over them with the attitude of large bat-like mother hen. Buffy, for her part, was pretty sure that his sudden instinct to nurture had more to do with feeling useless in the face of a recently averted apocalypse than anything else. When she’d told him about Spike and the amulet, he’d gone oddly silent. She could have sworn she caught the barest flicker of some odd emotion—something almost akin to defeat—pass across his hooded eyes, but she had blinked and it had been gone, replaced by a cool acceptance. She’d shown no desire to discuss the matter any further and he hadn’t pressed her. Words seemed inappropriate between them now. Hollow.

That night she had cried. Lying curled up on her hotel bed, she’d stroked the blistered skin of her palm, retracing with feather-light touches the flames that had licked her flesh. Later, she recognized the selfishness of her thoughts during those hours. Anger and regret were bitter bedfellows.

She’d seen his soul in all its stinging effulgence—he’d been glorious, then—so excruciatingly brilliant that she thought he must have been made of the stuff of angels. Ironic, really, but there he was, all air and ether and blinding light. She’d known it all in that single moment—every feeling she’d spent years denying, every longing she’d squelched, every realization she’d tucked away for a more convenient time—and it was too late. The goddamn heavens had opened up and illuminated every last dusty corner of her emotional stupor. Seventy-six bloody trombones.

But it seemed he hadn’t heard a single one of them.

Spike.

What a stupid damn name.

In her tired mind, she had systematically catalogued those last few months. Sorted through every word, every glance, with the most assiduous care. When had she broken him?

She’d felt that he had come back a different man. That the soul had made him more contemplative,
more reserved, almost defeated. Gone were the lewd comments and the suggestive smirks that made her weak in the knees. Even at the end—oh God, that night—he’d never laid a finger on her unless she touched him first. When he looked at her, his gaze had been resigned, his smiles touched with melancholy.

Still, when she’d watched him sleep in her arms, she had believed everything could be made right. When they could finally just get some time—apocalypse customarily averted, and order restored—they’d sort it out. She’d meant her big cookie speech, she really had. That’s what made the prospect of being with him so liberating. It didn’t have to be all fated, and star-crossed, and forever—it was the possibility of an open future that she’d craved. She’d tried to tell him, to show him, but now she realized that it had been the last straw. He’d put too much on the line then, revealed himself too fully, only to have her ask him if it had to mean anything. By the time she’d realized it did, he’d been closed to her, his eyes detached even as she poured out the contents of her heart in three little words.

So, he left.

It seemed that the story of her life could be encapsulated in that one truncated sentence. She was a shrink’s wet dream. This was different, of course. Allowing for world-saveage and all. But she wondered if something could have been changed, wondered if he hadn’t chosen a heroic end over something that was just too little too late.

When the tears had run out and her body felt like a crinkly shell, she tucked her thoughts away—far, far away into the recesses of her brain where they could live out their days in good company with so many other experiences she hoped never to revisit. She’d been proud of Spike. He deserved to be remembered as a hero—a Champion—not as just another of her emotional failures.

The following weeks had brought a flurry of rebuilding and reorganization. Faith had volunteered herself to watch over the Cleveland Hellmouth, claiming that her talents lay in beating the crap out of things rather than bureaucratically arranging for said beating. Robin Wood had trailed after her, which gave Buffy no small sense of relief. He was one less complication.

She and Xander—though less enthused by the prospect than Willow, who was itching to reconnect with the coven—had nevertheless decided to accompany Giles back to Bath. Xander’s life had been in Sunnydale and, with the town at the bottom of a crater that was looking to give the Grand Canyon a run for its money, he hadn’t had much to cling to aside from the friends that seven long years had made closer than family.

Buffy’s situation had been much of the same. Staying in LA hadn’t felt appealing, especially given that evil lawyer seemed to be the look of the season, and then she had Dawn to think of. Her sister deserved, if not a so-called normal life, then at least a proper education and a place to call home for more than a month.

The sixth seat on the plane to merry old England went to Andrew, who, little as they all liked to admit it, had become one of their own over the previous year. And they took care of their own.

So, the months stretched on.

Piecing together the remains of the defunct Watcher’s Council had been laborious and, for the most part, outside the field of Buffy’s interests. As the others went about contacting field Watchers and making plans for the construction of a new headquarters in Bath to replace the smoldering wreck left behind in London, she’d been content to sit back and let the activity wash over her.

Willow had begun working with the coven to locate new Slayers. It turned out that the ability to feel them awakening she’d experienced directly following her spell had not been a passing sensation.
And, complicated implications aside, everyone had been grateful for the convenience. Dawn had taken to assisting several Watchers in restoring the Council’s library and even Xander had seemed to find satisfaction in turning the large building they had been lucky enough to occupy into a viable center for training and research.

Buffy watched.

The ranks of the Council had been significantly thinned by the destruction of its headquarters, but Giles had found the network of communication as effective as could have been expected. He’d been able to successfully recall a large portion of the Watchers who had been on field assignment at the time of the explosion. Having taken on the position of leadership essentially by default, he had thus begun to make some long-overdue changes in the institution’s structure and modes of operation.

Buffy’s opinion of Giles hadn’t passed through the previous months unscathed, but she had seen enough of Quentin Travers’ methodology to recognize improvement when it bit her on the ass. Or gave her a warm bed and shiny pieces of plastic linked to brimming bank accounts.

It wasn’t that Buffy was unhappy. She knew unhappy like the back of her hand—remembered the stone-cold numbness that had followed her resurrection in all of its muffled glory—and this wasn’t it. They had marked the anniversary of the battle by avoiding all mention of it. Xander got devastatingly drunk. Buffy had been tempted to join him but settled for a good cry—late at night, when she was sure she was alone.

New Slayers were arriving every day, and it had been determined that she would eventually be able to occupy herself with their training. As long as she lay off the speech-making, Buffy decided that this was something she could manage without turning into a big puddle of crazy.

In the meantime, she pitched in where she could, which mostly entailed helping Xander carry heavy objects. It wasn’t the most stimulating job, but it kept her occupied. Which, she decided, was good. Definitely good. Especially since it helped her ignore that nagging sensation that had, as of late, taken up residence in the back of her mind. Like there was something she had forgotten to do. Something important.

And then the dreams started.

***

Buffy stretched as she reluctantly made her way down the stairs into a large room that was slowly shaping itself into something resembling a dining hall. Her head ached and her muscles protested every movement. She made a silent promise to get back into that training routine one of these days.

The hall was littered with people, only a few of whom she could have addressed by name if pressed. It seemed like every day someone new appeared on their doorstep. A defunct Watcher returning to the fold, a newly activated Slayer bursting at the seams with eager questions and teenage angst, a vampire groupie looking for a secretarial position.

Buffy knew she should be enjoying the downtime while it lasted, but something inside her still moaned and groaned when she rolled out of bed in the morning for another day of what felt like sitting in a field and waiting for the Second Coming. It all felt too quiet to be good, in a way. Having spotted Willow and Dawn picking at the remnants of their breakfasts in the corner, she plopped herself down into an empty chair on the other side of their small table.

“Hey, it’s not-so-early-morning Buffy!” Dawn made an admirably valiant attempt at cheerfulness. “Lots of slayage last night? I didn’t even hear you come back.”
“Well, not so much with the slayage, and more with the walking around aimlessly, but I suppose you just can’t have action-packed adventures every night in this town,” Buffy replied, staring vacantly at her sister’s pile of assorted breakfast items. It was true. Hence, sad. No wonder she felt decrepit.

Willow looked up from her eggs. “Giles said to tell you that he wants to talk to you once you’re up and about,” she offered. “He sounded kinda serious. Maybe there’s an apocalypse…”

“Nah, can’t be, we can’t be due for another one of those for at least a few more months,” Buffy said with a touch of wistfulness. “Still, might be important. I guess I’d better find him.”

She wasn’t surprised that the others didn’t share her nostalgia for impending doom. She was trying, really, she was. But something felt off. She felt… itchy. Like she’d put on one of those woolen sweaters that were just prickly enough to be uncomfortable without actually demanding to be taken off immediately. Except the sweater was in her head. Around her brain. And she didn’t think that taking it off was really an option. God, please let there be monsters, some small voice in the back of her mind whined desperately as she pushed her chair away from the table.

“Wait! Buffy! Don’t you want any—”, but Buffy was off, moving quickly across the room in the direction of Giles’ study. “—breakfast?” Dawn finished weakly, gazing after her.

Buffy realized only too late that perhaps she should have humored Dawn and Willow with some conversation and a few bites of food. Her friends had spent enough time worrying about her willingness to keep breathing. It wouldn’t do to go back to that now. Especially when Buffy had no problems with air consumption these days. Air was peachy. Like life. There was probably even a bit of keen involved in there somewhere.

But there was no going back now, she reasoned. They’d probably made up their minds, for better or worse, and she’d just have to deal with it when the time arrived. Maybe there would be another intervention. Except this time she’d be fully prepared to attest to her perfect mental health. No catatonia, no death wishes, and certainly no socially inappropriate sex with her sworn enemy. So what if she was more excited by the prospect of a nice apocalypse than by the new season of The Apprentice?

She found Giles at his desk, pouring over some dusty volume. As she entered, he shifted his gaze away from the indecipherable text that covered the page and followed her movements with unfocused eyes.

“Ah, Buffy. I suspect Willow told you I wanted to see you?” He finally blinked, adjusting his spectacles, then continued before she had a chance to reply. “Are you feeling quite alright? You’re looking a bit peaky—”

“Thanks, Giles, you know just how to charm a girl,” Buffy smirked at him. Just great. She was probably starting to make up for the lack of undead activity by looking the part herself. “I just haven’t been sleeping well. No big.”

His eyes continued to follow her as he shifted in his chair. “Well, in any case, I wanted to speak with you because—well, because I’ve been going over the information we have on the events leading up to our final battle in Sunnydale—”

“What for? I thought we were done there—fancy spell, lots of Slayers, town go boom—there’s not much more to discuss.”

“Yes, well, perhaps. But there are some matters on which I’m not entirely satisfied. This amulet that Spike wore, for instance, we still don’t quite know what caused it to react the way that it did. In fact,
we know almost nothing about it at all,” Giles proceeded, frowning slightly. “When I spoke to Angel during our stay in Los Angeles, he indicated that he had obtained it from an agent of Wolfram and Hart, but we know nothing of its actual origins, where it draws its power, or much of anything else, for that matter.”

“Angel said something about scrubbing bubbles—” Buffy offered halfheartedly before sucking in an impatient breath. “I’m sorry, Giles, I guess I just don’t really see the point. The amulet is gone. It served its purpose, the Hellmouth is closed, done deal.”

He shifted in his chair again, as though trying to get comfortable. “Yes, you may be right. Still, I can’t help but think that there was more to that amulet than we’re aware of. Given the sheer force of power it appeared to wield, I do believe it may warrant further inquiry.”

“Yeah, well, seeing as how it’s at the bottom of a big ol’ hole, I’d say we missed the boat on that one.”

“Indeed. Be that as it may,” he shot her a careful look before continuing tentatively. “I don’t think there’s cause for concern quite yet—but, well, I bring this up largely because I’ve been in contact with members of the coven and they’ve been perceiving a rather significant disturbance for quite some time now. They tell me it’s too early to pinpoint anything, but it seems that we may not be out of the woods quite yet.”

“Score one for Willow,” Buffy mumbled. “So, we’re thinking it has something to do with the Hellmouth going all kaplooey?”

“In a manner of speaking—” he hesitated. “Buffy, er, I know this is a difficult topic for you and I’ve done my best to respect your reluctance to revisit the events of the final battle, but, if there’s anything you may have neglected to tell me about what happened down there—anything about the amulet —”

Buffy shrugged uncomfortably. “There’s not much to tell. Like I said, Will’s spell kicked in and we were making with the fighting, and then Spike went all glowy and became one with the sun—or something—I’m not really sure of the mechanics. In any case, he pretty much blasted everything to smithereens,” she intently picked at the seam of her jeans, “Something about his soul stinging…”

Giles looked thoughtful. “Yes, yes… of course…” he muttered indistinctly.

Restless, Buffy took the Watcher’s distant gaze as an opportunity to shift her footing in a bid for the door.

“Are we done here?” she asked with a forced politeness.

Giles’ eyes snapped back to her and he gave her a rueful smile, “Yes, I suppose we are. And do try to get some rest tonight Buffy—I don’t want you concerning yourself with this. Not yet.”

He rose and followed her to the door, looking after her with a touch of regret. He was past attempting to convince himself that his relationship with his Slayer—though she was hardly that anymore—would right itself. Buffy had forgiven him out of necessity. It was somewhat less than prudent to hold grudges when the world was threatening to end. But now that things had settled back into a steady rhythm, it remained to be seen exactly what they were to each other.

He shut the door gently and returned to his chair. Running his hands through his thinning hair, he tried to concentrate.

Bloody hell, but he was tired.
There was a soft knock and he saw a curtain of red hair fall into the rays of the late morning sun as Willow poked her head through the doorway.

“No go?”

“Not in the strictest sense of the word. I’m afraid it may be just as I feared.”

Willow made her way into the room and planted herself firmly in front of Giles’ desk.

“Enough with the cryptic, something’s wrong, isn’t it? Really wrong? I’ve felt it. Come on Giles, I’m a big witch now.”

“Yes, that you are,” Giles replied as he observed her critically. Perhaps it was time to share his conjectures with another—heaven knew they had been stewing in his own brain long enough. “To be quite frank, I don’t know what I was expecting from Buffy. I’ve been holding on to a fool’s hope that she might be able to offer a bit more insight into the destruction of the Hellmouth —” he paused, pinning Willow with a sharp glance over the rims of his glasses. “Keep in mind, now, this is only a theory, and an incomplete one at that, but how exactly, would you say, did we stop the First?”

Willow looked momentarily perplexed. “You mean besides activating the Slayers and closing the Hellmouth? Lost here.”

“That’s just it—there’s no question that your spell performed marvelously, but I doubt we would have achieved much more than an unusually large bloodbath had it not been for—”

“Spike.”

“Precisely,” Giles continued, pacing to the other end of the study as his tone gained urgency. “Think, Willow. We believed the First was responding to an imbalance in the mystical forces surrounding the Slayer—the Beljoxa’s Eye told us as much—but when have we met the First before? Who was it after? And why?”

“Angel…” she began tentatively, then her eyes lit up in realization. “Angel with his shiny newly re-implanted soul. Well, I guess the First and Buffy share a type. Who would have thought?”

“Yes—err—not I, certainly,” shrugged Giles. “But, such details aside, it seems we had failed to consider something that I imagine the First must have known all along—a vampire with a soul. That was the key.”

“But then why let Spike live, why not just dust him?”

“I think—I believe he may have been too important. Buffy’s involved in this somehow, I just can’t seem to put my finger on it. There has to be a reason why the First chose to use Angel and then Spike in its attempts to kill her—appearing to them, driving them mad—there’s just too much overlap for this to be mere coincidence,” Giles stopped his nervous circumambulation of the room to gaze thoughtfully through the window.

“Well, there’s the whole—you know—well, they were both kind of her—”

“Yes, yes, quite right.” Somehow, he still didn’t particularly wish to hear that thought fully articulated. “Regardless, there’s this business with the amulet. Perhaps the First simply did not anticipate its power. Which brings me to the issue at hand. Given Buffy’s account, I’m fairly certain that Spike could have successfully descended into the cave quite alone and attained the same result without involving any of the Slayers. Which means—”
The wheels in Willow’s head were turning now. She’d had doubts about performing the spell from the moment the proposition had fallen from Buffy’s lips. Still, the power coursing through her as she invoked the magic of the Slayer had felt so… right. But she knew she was only delaying the inevitable. The only other time she had felt power that even came close to what she’d channeled that day was when—well—it was best not to go there.

“No.”

“Which means,” Giles continued more forcefully, “the spell wasn’t necessary. We toyed with forces we had no right to invoke and our actions will have consequences.”

“But we changed the world for the better.” Even as the words left her mouth, she knew that they were little more than empty platitudes. “Giles! Just think of all the good we can do—”

“I wish it were that simple, I really do. But you’ve felt the disturbance in the subtle forces yourself, you know this kind of magic doesn’t come without a price. If Buffy’s resurrection was enough to create an imbalance significant enough to allow the First to manifest with such power, imagine what activating hundreds of Slayers simultaneously could do.”

“So now what?”

“I’m really not sure, unfortunately. Maybe if we understood more about what happened—perhaps if we were able to locate some reference to the amulet—” he trailed off pensively, knowing he was grasping at impossibilities.

Willow walked over to stand by Giles as he continued to gaze through the dusty glass. He was right, she of all people knew that the universe always exacted payment for its favors. Even as the cars rolled by peacefully along the street outside, she could feel the energies shifting and percolating. Everything was connected and, right now, everything was waiting for the proverbial other shoe to finally drop.

***

“Buffy!” Dawn jogged to catch up with her sister as Buffy passed the entrance of the dining hall and headed for the stairs. “You really should eat something, you know. Never slay on an empty stomach.”

Buffy reluctantly slowed down as Dawn finally managed to fall into step beside her. “I know, Dawnie,” she answered in a tone that, she hoped, bespoke great emotional stability. “I will. I’m just not feeling all that bright-eyed and bushy-tailed lately. It’ll pass.”

“Do you… want to talk about it?”

Buffy frowned. Apparently her impression of a sane person needed some work. “About what?” she asked innocently, preparing herself for the inevitable.

“Well… it’s just… everyone’s been noticing, you know, you’ve been all no-fun Buffy for a couple of weeks now—”

“I’m fine, Dawn, really. I just think this whole thing is finally starting to hit me. What with the Englishness and lack of demony hijinx and all. Like culture shock except with a major case of existential questioning on the side.”

Dawn chewed on her lip. “You mean because of all the new Slayers popping up every other day? You know you’re still important here, right?”
“I am—I do—but you’ve got to admit, when you’re used to having an active Hellmouth making with the devouring from beneath you on a daily basis, it kind of spoils the peaceful country life.”

“Point taken.”

Buffy gave Dawn a reassuring smile. She knew her sister was homesick—they all were—even if no one else happened to be missing the daily threat on their lives, they did miss the idea of Sunnydale. It wouldn’t be difficult for them to believe that she was just suffering from a typical California girl’s case of nostalgia. And, after all, that’s probably all it really was, anyway. Buffy immediately brightened. “I’ll deal,” she said, “And hey, Giles says there might be another apocalypse coming, so there’ll be end-of-the-world fun all around soon enough.”

The joke didn’t land. “Wait, what?” Dawn squeaked, stopping in her tracks.

“Kidding, Dawnie. He said there wasn’t anything to worry about. Something about a disturbance in the Force. I think he’s just being Giles. You know how he gets when there’s research to be done.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing else?” Dawn prodded tentatively.

Buffy held on to her smile and tried to mean it. “Nothing some gratuitous shopping won’t cure. Speaking of, do you think you can crawl out from under your pile of demon card catalogs long enough to do some recon at Shires Yard with me today? There’s gotta be some sort of rule against spending this much time mall-less.”

“Well, I guess some reckless spending may be in order,” Dawn acquiesced with a sly grin, and Buffy knew that she’d just won this round.

“Nothing like strappy sandals to lift the existential gloom. What about Willow?”

“She seemed like she was heading off to do something witchy when I saw her this morning. Plus, I think Kennedy’s been feeling ignored. Willow said she promised that her first magic-free day would be Kennedy-time.”

Buffy made a halfhearted grimace. Even surviving through an apocalypse together did not seem to have generated any healthy camaraderie between her and Kennedy. The girl was as annoyingly headstrong as ever and becoming a full Slayer had not tempered her ego. “To each her own, I guess,” she said. “But I think inviting Kennedy might cancel out the desired therapeutic effect.”

Dawn gave an amused snort. “You two might have to do the friendly thing eventually, you know. That or you could just go straight to the bloody evisceration…”

Though bloody evisceration did sound like just what the doctor had ordered, Buffy shook her head resignedly as she gave her sister a playful tap and made a turn for the staircase.

“Downstairs. Half an hour. Be there,” she called over her shoulder.

She was going to have a good day, damnit. Shoes and silky dresses and possibly a mochaccino. Demons and apocalypses were overrated, anyway.

***

Many hours later, Buffy crawled under the smooth cotton sheets and nestled deeply into her pillow. She was feeling decidedly better. Having been fed, watered, and outfitted with a pair of unnecessarily expensive boots, she had decided to forgo her nightly stroll through the city’s streets in favor of a hot bath. Not like she was bound to get any more action in a deserted alleyway than in her
own bed. Which was sad on so many levels—


She vaguely thought that perhaps she should have been less dismissive of Giles that morning. The man was clearly walking on eggshells around her—and what did that mean, anyway? Were they whole eggshells? If they were, how could you even try to walk on them without ending up with a whole bunch of runny egg? And if they weren’t, what did it matter? She guessed that, maybe, if the eggshells were pointy and he were barefoot—

No, she reprimanded herself. Brain off. Sleep now.

Buffy inhaled deeply, catching a faint whiff of flowery detergent. Over a year later and it still didn’t smell like her bed. Relaxing into the softness of the mattress, she willed herself to sink into the comforting embrace of blank unconsciousness. It turned out that sleep was not as elusive as it seemed. Gradually, her breathing evened out and she shifted under the sheets, her arm flailing out to reach for something just beyond the veil of reality. The cool midsummer breeze ruffled the curtains, sheer folds undulating silently as phantom tendrils of air and lace tickled her face with their shadowy cast.

He came to her, then. It was different every night. The whisper of ghostly fingers running up her thigh, soft words caressing her ear, a swift movement behind her, signaling an attack she countered instinctively.

Tonight, he hid. She wandered dark, cavernous hallways in search of the presence she felt like a certainty engraved into her flesh right down to the bone. Once, she thought she caught a glimmer of candlelight illuminating pale skin, but as she turned the corner she found only more shadows. Still, she was sure he was there. She felt him with as much certainty as her own heartbeat. Suddenly, a familiar tatter of curtain loomed before her. And then, he was there. She felt a hard expanse of muscle pressing into her back, barring her retreat.

A raspy whisper filtered into her ear. “Ah, she walks in beauty, like the night— she cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, forever wilt thou love, and she be fair—”

Buffy shivered.

“I couldn’t find you,” she said. Something felt odd—she made to turn towards him, but her limbs refused to obey. So she stood, her gaze riveted to the gossamer cloth before her, even as she felt every inch of his body molding itself to hers. She was certain that, were he to step back, she would tumble helplessly into some unknown abyss. “Why won’t you let me see you?”

“‘Tis not yet near day—” his muttered words brushed against her skin. “If it be now, ‘tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all—”

The tiny mallets inside her head were back. With their rhythmic thump, thump, thump.

She was used to the riddlespeak by now. At first, it had reminded her of the way he’d been in the high school basement all those months ago—eyes wild, muttering seemingly random strings of non sequiturs—but, rather quickly, she came to realize that she’d been wrong. There was no madness in him now and the mysterious words flowed off his tongue like languid streams of honey. It was all far from random, if only she cared to listen, and, every once in a while, something he said would resonate deep in the hollows of her memory. Like she’d heard the words before but couldn’t quite remember when or where. Sometimes she wondered what hidden recesses of her mind yielded his borrowed speech.
But tonight seemed different—something was new—and her palms prickled with an expectant anticipation.

“Something is coming?” she asked carefully. “I thought I was done here.”

His silence unnerved her. It felt like hours before anything else happened to reassure her that he hadn’t, in fact, left her standing there alone in the dark, leaning against something that only felt like him.

“But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison house,” he finally whispered into her hair, his hand rising up to trace a feather-light trail along the curve of her shoulder. “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul.”

Buffy shivered again. “Spike—I don’t understand—what is this place? Are we here for a reason? Is something bad going to happen?”

He offered no other words, his fingers still softly making their way down the length of her arm. She was becoming agitated. They didn’t always speak but, when they did, it was remarkably easy for her to find a place in her mind where his enigmatic speech made sense. Not tonight. It was all strange—the cave, his distance, the ominous feeling his words stirred inside her—nothing was connecting. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Talking had never been their thing anyway, not even here. He might speak, but their bodies would communicate for them—flesh impacting flesh—now in tactfully aimed kicks and punches, now in the pressure of lips and the delicious friction of their joining. Tonight though, his body was silent. It loomed behind her like a wall of stone and she found herself taking on its heavy stillness, unable to move save for the rapid rise and fall of her chest and the hammering rhythm of her heart resonating up through her skull.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Spike, why are we here?” she tried again. “Does this have something to do with you? I thought we were done with this—there’s nothing left to—”

He quieted her with a soft hiss of exhaled breath. “Give me thy hand, and hush a while,” the low vibration of his whisper tickled her ear just as his fingers entwined with hers.

Warmth enveloped her hand and she felt a sudden need to look down and check for the flames she felt certain would be there.

“Thou hast felt what ’tis to die and live again before thy fated hour. That thou hadst power to do so is thy own safety. Thou hast dated on thy doom,” he continued, the velvety timbre of his voice growing strangely ragged. “And what of me? A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce, a fierce dispute betwixt damnation and impassioned clay—”

“Spike—” The heat was suffusing her. The cold presence behind her had turned into a raging furnace.

But he wasn’t listening. “—What am I that I should be so saved from death?” he pleaded, his lips still moving against her ear, now quivering with intensity. “Thou whose spell can raise the dead, bid the prophet’s form appear!”

She felt his urgency. The sudden splintering of his control compounded with her own growing agitation. Too fast—everything was happening too fast—all at once, it seemed that her life was predicated on the meaning of his words. There was something she was missing, something she had
neglected to do.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She felt his scorching lips on the base of her neck, his kiss etching indecipherable truths into her flesh. Buffy closed her eyes, savoring the intimacy of his touch. And then, just as suddenly as it had come, the solid presence behind her was gone.

Her eyes snapped open to see a figure silhouetted through the translucent curtain before her. She knew, at that moment, exactly where she was as she recognized the white hair and flowing robes of the Guardian.

Buffy remained still, her back still tingling from the loss of contact, as she observed the old woman slowly raise her hand and reach to draw back the cloth that separated them.

There was something off, something different about this woman—Buffy vaguely thought that perhaps she looked smaller than she had that night in Sunnydale—and then, the Guardian stepped forward, illuminated by the soft light of the surrounding lanterns. Buffy’s eyes widened as a silent gasp formed in the back of her throat. She had found herself face to face with her best friend.

Willow smiled gently as she tilted her head, causing the flowing white hair that framed her face to sway as it cascaded down her shoulders. “I wasn’t done with that, you know.”

Buffy followed Willow’s gaze down to her own hands, somehow unsurprised to find herself firmly clutching the scythe. “I thought this was mine.”

“We forged it in secrecy for one like you,” Willow recited, “but you’re not the only one that fits the description anymore, are you?” A twinkle of laughter crept into her strangely old eyes.

“So what, you’re here to tell me that I’ve got to be a good little Slayer and share my toys?”

“Well, no, not exactly. Anyway, it’s not time for that yet.” She took the scythe from Buffy, turning it over in her hands. “The Guardian must finish what was begun, the many must once again be made one —” a youthful giggle bubbled up, belying the air of ancient wisdom, “— hey, that kinda rhymed!” Then, a moment later, she was somber again. “The end is coming, Buffy. Everything is in motion now,” she said, handing the weapon to Buffy before turning back to the tattered curtain. “The locks are rattling on the doors and the Key is poised to turn. The earth will tremble and it will begin.”

“What will begin?” Buffy asked, half-shocked to find herself suddenly moving to follow her friend through the translucent cloth.

The area behind the curtain was not as Buffy had remembered it. The décor wasn’t particularly different as far as underground tombs went, but the new space appeared to be some sort of cavernous passageway rather than the small room she’d been expecting.

Willow walked silently along the rocky path, her shimmering hair catching glints of soft light from a torch she had produced as if out of nowhere. Around her, there were only rough stone walls. Buffy trailed after her as if entranced, the question still hanging from her lips. This place was definitely giving her the wiggins. The air was heavy with ancient mystery, just as it had been in the Guardian’s temple, but here it was laced with a sense of dark foreboding. Buffy had the oddest feeling that she was trespassing on something that had never been meant to be seen. Something primal rested here. Something old and not at all friendly.

Just then, Willow came to an abrupt stop as the ground in front of their feet suddenly disappeared from view. Turning, she stepped backwards unto an ancient bridge that stretched across the open
space and motioned Buffy to approach. Buffy found herself on the brink of a great precipice. The wild palpitations of her heart pummeled her ribcage as she shifted her gaze down to the darkness below, not knowing what to expect but finding just what she’d expected all the same.

A great hole loomed at her feet, its depths shrouded in inky blackness. If someone had told her it reached to the other side of the world, she would have believed it without question. Her first thought was of the Hellmouth. There were others, after all, perhaps ones that even Giles was not aware of. Not that she was particularly interested—she hadn’t even stopped by to admire the scenery at Cleveland. She was so done with Hellmouths. As her eyes swept along the visible expanse of rocky wall, she squinted at the dark protrusions that lined the circumference of the pit as far down as she could make out.

With a silent gasp, she realized that they were coffins. Great stone sarcophagi.

Buffy had the distinct feeling she did not want to know what lay inside. Suddenly, her earlier question seemed irrelevant. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her weapon as she glanced up at Willow.

“From beneath you, it devours.”

Buffy shivered. “How do I stop it?”

Now a melancholy smile flitted across the witch’s lips. “Alone, you are powerless. You will need another,” she said, extending her hand to Buffy.

On her open palm rested the amulet.

Buffy froze. “No. This isn’t right. We already did this—” The corners of her eyes prickled uncomfortably. Another. She wasn’t ready to face the implications of that word.

“The amulet was meant to be worn by a Champion,” Willow echoed, cutting off her protest.

“Well, it’s too bad we’re just fresh out of those, isn’t it?” Buffy countered. That wasn’t entirely true and she knew it, but no way was she going there. Not after what had happened.

Willow’s smile returned, this time aggravatingly playful. She extended the amulet in offering and Buffy felt her free hand move, as if of its own accord, to receive it.

Before she had a chance to fully register what was happening, the hateful trinket had slipped from Willow’s fingers onto her palm and Buffy’s world exploded.

Her vision was flooded with blinding brilliance, as if someone had set off a white-hot blast right inside her eyelids. But there was no pain. She was floating. Her heart felt ready to burst in the best possible way, overwhelmed with the blissful ecstasy of sensations she could only clumsily begin to characterize as unadulterated love and peace.

She was back in heaven. Except, this time, she was astounded to realize that she was not alone. There was something—someone—there with her, she was sure of it.

There was pleasure. Indescribable bliss. And knowledge.

She grasped for understanding.

There was an odd familiarity here that went beyond the vague imprint of paradise left by her resurrection. She’d felt this before, somewhere else, at another time —
And then it was gone.

Buffy gasped as her eyes shot open to the murky darkness of her bedroom.
Buffy opened the creaky door that led to the library and peered inside. The place was really starting to come together and she suspected that Giles’ love affair with musty old books was happily flourishing thanks to his newfound council resources. It was a large room, not quite as big as the old high school library that Giles been so fond of, but close.

Willow was right where Buffy had expected she’d be, curled up in one of the slightly threadbare armchairs—books, it seemed, had taken precedence over fancy upholstery—lining the periphery of the central arrangement of tables. A large tome rested open on her lap but her eyes seemed oddly unfocused, as though she was engrossed in something that lay far beyond the yellowed pages of the volume.

“Will?” Buffy called softly.

Willow jumped slightly, her body momentarily overtaken by a rolling tremor, then craned her neck to glance toward the sound of her name. Their eyes met and she offered Buffy a tired smile.

“You look rested.” Rested was clearly a relative term here.

“Shopping’s a great natural remedy, complete with a low incidence of side-effects aside from, you know, poverty,” Buffy said, coming to lean against the large table opposite Willow’s seat. “You, on the other hand, look like you could have used some retail therapy.”

“I’ll be okay. Not that this book isn’t fascinating, but even my brain gets a bit fuzzy around the edges after staring at it for a few days straight.”

“Weren’t you supposed to be spending some alone time with Kennedy?” Buffy asked, confusion crinkling her brow. “I didn’t think there was any need for serious research mode.”

“There isn’t,” Willow said quickly. “But, you know me. Big fan of the books.”

Buffy shot her a doubtful look. Not that Willow’s bookworminess was ever in question, but she got the funny feeling that her friend was being evasive. And failing badly.

Willow shifted uncomfortably, as if reading the accusation implicit in Buffy’s gaze, and added quietly. “Plus, Kennedy and I haven’t been big with the togetherness lately, if you know what I mean.”

Buffy didn’t, which, she suspected, was her own fault. For all the uninvolved watching she’d been indulging in lately, she seemed to have overlooked the fact that her friend wasn’t exactly head over heels as far as her girlfriend was concerned. Then again, Buffy wasn’t really head over heels as far as Kennedy was concerned either, but she’d tried her best to dismiss that detail on account of the fact that she wasn’t the one sharing a bed with the girl.

“I thought you guys were happy,” she replied lamely.

“We were—or maybe we are—I’m not really sure. It’s just kind of weird, you know?” Willow dropped her head against the back of the chair to stare contemplatively at the high ceiling. “Things made so much more sense when I thought we might get killed by bumpy uber-vamps tomorrow… that doesn’t really sound very good, does it?”

Buffy sighed. Gripping the edge of the table, she hoisted herself up to sit atop the polished wood and
stared at her feet as they dangled inches above the demure rug.

“I think that’s just the way it is,” she answered thoughtfully. “Things always seem a lot easier when you think the world might end tomorrow. I think a lot of us made some decisions we might not have otherwise.”

Willow let out an amused snort. “Like Faith and Principal Wood—well, I guess he’s definitely not a principal anymore—Robin, or whatever we’re calling him these days.”

That wasn’t really what Buffy had had in mind, though it might have been true enough. Surprisingly, there was some part of her that was genuinely glad Faith and Wood had found each other. She had an odd feeling they might actually be screwed up enough in the right ways to fit.

“I don’t know,” she answered after a short pause. “I sort of hope they’ll make it work. Not that Faith is the crowned queen of functional relationships, but it would be nice to see something good come out of that whole mess.”

Willow, however, had already drifted back into her own thoughts. “I guess I never really thought about what it’d be like when things settled down and there wasn’t the threat of scary death keeping us together,” she continued, half to herself. “And now she’s a Slayer, which is great for her, really —” she broke off suddenly, shutting her book, and twisted in her chair to face Buffy. “Do you think that matters?”

“Huh?” Buffy scrunched her forehead.

“The Slayer thing,” Willow clarified, leaning forward a bit as she dropped her sock-covered feet to the floor. “Do you think it might be making things different between us?”

Now there was a loaded question. How many times had they harped on her tendency to isolate herself? What did it say that she didn’t need a full two hands to count her relationships, romantic or otherwise? Somehow the issue always seemed to surface and the real truth of the matter was beyond her pop-psychology analytic abilities. But Willow was waiting for an answer.

“I don’t know, Will. I don’t exactly have the best history with relationships as far as the slaying side of it all is concerned,” Buffy said carefully. “But if you really want to know, I don’t think that’s it. Sure, Kennedy on a Slayer power trip isn’t at the top of my list of stuff I love about the world. But aside from the fancy new superpowers, she’s not really any different.

“Then why does everything suddenly feel so wrong?”

Buffy sighed. “Honestly? Maybe you need to ask yourself if it was ever right to begin with.”

They fell into a heavy silence, each lost in her own bevy of troublesome thoughts, until Buffy shook herself and ran a hand through her hair as if to brush the offending memories from her mind.

“I’m sorry, Will, but I did have something I wanted to talk to you about.

“Sure, what is it?” Willow replied eagerly, clearly glad to change the subject.

“Well, I had this really weird dream last night—like, a major case of the Slayer tinglies—and I was hoping that maybe you’d be able to get something out of it, because I’m coming up with a fat lot of nothing.”

The decision to come to Willow had formed in her mind as soon as Buffy got out of bed that morning. She’d spent the few remaining hours of the night dozing uneasily, the implications of her
dream whirling around in her head. One thing was certain, it all felt too important to keep to herself.

“Shouldn’t Giles be here for this? I know you guys aren’t best pals lately, but he is still head Watcher guy. He’s probably way more useful as far as Slayer stuff is concerned,” Willow offered tentatively.

“You’re probably right,” Buffy admitted. “But I don’t even know if it’s anything all that urgent. Plus, I think maybe you could help. You were kind of in it.”

She wasn’t sure if that was really the reason she had chosen to go to her friend over her former Watcher. Certainly, Willow’s presence in her dream made her seem like a more natural confidant, but there was also something very personal about what she was about to share.

It wasn’t just Spike. She hadn’t told anyone she’d been dreaming of him, and she intended to keep it that way. Those visions were all she had left of him and they were hers. She had already decided to omit the detail of his initial presence, regardless of how odd this particular encounter had been. It wasn’t relevant—it couldn’t have been—and she saw no reason to dissect the matter further.

Still, there was something about the dream she couldn’t quite pinpoint. An atmosphere that felt very private, almost sacred. And, somehow, she couldn’t see herself trying to explain it all to Giles quite yet.

Willow must have seen the plea in her eyes because her expression quickly changed to sympathetic acceptance. “Alright, if you say so, but I’m officially voting in favor of telling Giles,” she declared, settling back into her chair with mock stern disapproval.

***

Twenty minutes later, they were on their way to Giles’ study.

“Will, I still don’t see why we have to do this right now,” Buffy grumbled.

Willow had been uncharacteristically silent as Buffy recounted her dream, her expression growing more solemn with every word. As soon as Buffy had finished, she’d sat up, hauled her friend from her perched position on the table and dragged her toward the exit with surprising force.

“We’re telling Giles. Now,” were her only words.

In all truth, Buffy knew it was the right thing to do. Willow’s response to her account only served to confirm the uneasy fear that had already been growing in her mind. But that didn’t mean she had to enjoy this. She pouted, allowing herself to be tugged along the final few feet to the door, which Willow opened hastily, forgoing the customary knock.

Giles was firmly ensconced in his usual seat behind the large oaken desk. He looked up at the unexpected interruption, his easy expression darkening as he absorbed the look on Willow’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

Willow didn’t waste any time. “Buffy had a Slayer dream, Giles. I think you should hear this.”

There was no going back now. Buffy slowly settled down directly across from her Watcher, giving him a hesitant glance.

“I think it’s bad.” Somewhere behind her, Willow emitted an anxious but satisfied sigh. “It wasn’t anything I saw, really,” Buffy continued, slightly annoyed at being forced to admit that her friend’s worries had not been unfounded. “It was more the way the whole thing felt. I think you were right
about what you said yesterday—I think there’s something coming.”

Giles sat back in his chair, wordlessly inviting her to go on. A bit uneasily, Buffy set about recounting her dream for the second time that morning, observing the older man’s reactions with acute expectation.

His expression remained dark, his jaw set and his brow etched with pensive concern. A few times she thought she saw his facial muscles twitch in an effort to suppress some undesired emotion. As she arrived at the end, repeating dream-Willow’s words upon revealing the amulet, Giles’ eyes grew impossibly wide behind the glimmering rims of his spectacles. He remained silent, allowing Buffy to finish her account, but his posture was rigid, his body radiating barely-contained tension.

“This is most troublesome,” he said finally, after a long moment of silence. Buffy had a feeling that this was likely the understatement of the century, but she waited for him to continue.

He said nothing more, however. Instead, he rose from his desk and briskly made his way to a nearby bookshelf to pluck a well-worn volume from the stacks. Returning to his seat, he began ruffling through the dusty pages, seemingly no longer aware that he was not alone in the room.

Buffy did her best to sit patiently, listening to the soft rustle of old paper and Giles’ occasional noncommittal mumbles. His behavior was doing nothing to alleviate her anxiety and she was ready to make what was likely to be a rather ungracious comment when he suddenly gave a satisfied quack and slid the old tome across the desk.

The pages were covered in something that suspiciously resembled chicken-scratch.

“What is this, Giles?” Buffy asked, her brow furrowed.

“The occult academic’s equivalent of a knockoff,” Giles replied with a solemn smile. “It’s a replica of the Oldest Scrolls—quite good actually, despite what appearances would suggest.”

“And this is useful how?” Buffy pressed.

Giles huffed at her impatience. “It deals with the most ancient of magics and demons, in large part with the Old Ones and what little is left of their history and rituals,” he explained in an even tone that belied his own obvious agitation. “I acquired it in the course of our battle against Glory, hoping that it would be of use, but she turned out to be a rather different beast altogether—” Ignoring Buffy’s irritable fidgeting, Giles once again rose from his seat and paced across the length of the room, as if hoping that the movement of his body would somehow spur the words he knew must now be uttered. “I think the end might truly be near,” he finally said quietly.

It was Willow’s turn to break the heavy silence. “Does this have anything to do with what we talked about?”

Disregarding both her question and the confused “Huh?” that followed on Buffy’s end, Giles stopped by the bookshelf to run a light finger over the aged spines. So much knowledge and power, and yet here they were, likely facing yet another end of days with little to aid them in the battle ahead.

“I believe, Buffy, that your dream very much concerns the subject matter of these scrolls. From what you’ve described, it seems that you’ve been shown the Deeper Well, a sort of mystical prison for the aspects of dead demons. You’ve seen vestiges of the Old Ones before—Mayor Wilkins being the most notable example—but, as you know, their presence has been largely wiped from the earth. It is said that before the final exodus took place and dominion of the world was passed to men, the Old
Ones warred and died—in so much as such creatures can die—and their bodies were interred in the Deeper Well, their essences bound by the mystical forces within it.”

“So you think this well is about to spring a leak?” Buffy asked slowly. She remembered what she’d felt in that cave. Raw power. Ancient and deadly and not particularly well-disposed. “Does this have anything to do with the First? What Willow—dream-Willow, I mean—said. From beneath you it devours. Those were the dreams I was having before the First showed up. So, the ‘it’ that’s doing the devouring—we all kind of figured it was the Hellmouth, but what if that was only the first act?”

Giles had resumed his pacing, now and then stopping to finger an odd knickknack resting on one of the many shelves that lined the walls of the large room. “It’s possible. I expect the First suffered a heavy blow when we collapsed the Sunnydale Hellmouth, but it would be foolish to assume that we’ve beaten it back for good.” He knew he was consciously hedging Willow’s question. In all likelihood, the two issues were indeed linked. It would be just their luck that in averting one crisis they had spurred an even greater one. “The First, of course, precedes the Old Ones, though that is not to say that they are unrelated. Indeed, the Old Ones are perhaps the purest incarnations of the First Evil’s presence that the earth has ever known,” he went on. “It is not, however, the First’s role in this that presently concerns me.”

“Giles—” Willow tried again.

“Yes, Willow, I’ve not forgotten your question,” he interrupted. Approaching Buffy, who’d turned to watch his progress across the room, he placed a surprisingly steady hand on her shoulder. “Buffy, Willow and I have discussed the possibility that the activation spell we performed may be having some unfortunate consequences—”

“If this is going to be another lecture about rash decisions, I’d say you should save yourself the trouble,” she bristled instinctively.

Giles withdrew his hand to run it heavily across his brow. It was hard to believe that their relationship had truly degenerated to this. “No, Buffy, I’m not here to reprimand you. Far from it. We all made this decision together and I agree that it seemed like the best option at the time. But in light of what happened with Spike and the amulet—”

Buffy had an odd sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She wasn’t going to let herself think about this. She wasn’t going to second-guess her decision. She wasn’t going to—“Giles,” she interrupted again, “What you said yesterday about us still needing the amulet—my dream—what do you think it all means?”

“It’s hard to say,” he replied, “I’d say the amulet certainly fulfilled its task at the Hellmouth, but the fact that it was revealed to you now does seem to imply that it has a purpose to serve yet.”

“But it was destroyed,” she said weakly, “or, at least, it might as well have been.”

“Indeed. I must admit, I’m at as much of a loss as you.

“Do you think—” she probed carefully, “—do you think that maybe it wasn’t supposed to happen that way? Angel wanted to wear the amulet, but I wouldn’t let him, I thought—”

She broke off, unsure of how to continue, but it was too late now. What if it was her fault? The decision to pass the role of Champion to Spike had seemed only logical. This was his fight, not Angel’s. But now, doubt was worming its way into her mind. What if she’s chosen incorrectly?

“Do you mean to say that the amulet may have been meant for Angel alone?” Giles picked up
gently. “Don’t blame yourself, Buffy. Even if Angel’s role in this was somehow preordained, I don’t know that the outcome would have been any different. Given what happened, I don’t think the Champion was ever meant to emerge alive.”

Buffy knew he was probably right. As much as her trust in him had been tested over the previous year, Giles usually was. Still, was it really any better that she’s chosen to sacrifice Spike rather than Angel? And what if Giles was wrong after all and her stubborn determination to give Spike the opportunity to prove himself had resulted in his unnecessary death? She couldn’t shake the thought that if she’d only allowed Angel follow through with his original intention, the amulet’s effects might have been different. Spike’s bruised pride was a small price to pay for his life.

She massaged her temples. You’d think by now she’d have learned to be careful what she wished for. Dull as the preceding months had been, she wasn’t mentally or emotionally equipped to deal with another apocalypse.

Giles was still talking, which probably meant she should be listening, but his words seemed to be gliding right along the surface of her consciousness, like little ripples that failed to leave any lasting impression. Something about locks and keys. God, why did Hell have to have so many mouths and doors and whatnots that were just itching to be opened? And then something jarred her out of her reverie. “—Dawn cannot be overlooked,” Giles intoned, “We must—”

“What?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” Buffy repeated, suddenly very much aware that both Giles and Willow were looking at her quizzically.

“Many things, actually,” Giles finally replied, his tone resigned. “Not the least important among which is the fact that we cannot discount that Dawn may presently be in some danger. As I was just explaining, the Scrolls make explicit reference to mystical restraints that prevent the essences of the Old Ones from escaping. The Deeper Well was chosen as their prison for a reason—much like a Hellmouth, it is a center of mystical convergence—however, its nature is quite the opposite. That is, rather than weakening the barriers between dimensions, it holds them in place. Think of it as the mystical equivalent of a giant lock. But, as you might guess, every lock has a—”

“Key,” Buffy finished, gravely. Why was she not surprised?

***

Dawn watched quietly as Xander finished pounding a nail into some beam that was probably extremely crucial to the structure of their new training room. Hell if she knew. Sometimes it was just fun to watch Xander hammer things.

She’d gotten over having any sort of real crush on him a few years ago, but that didn’t mean she didn’t still appreciate a good ogling session when the opportunity arose. Today, however, was not the day for such frivolous activity. Dawn was on a mission.

Buffy had stumbled into her room just minutes ago, going on about some new impeding crisis and how they needed to hold an emergency Scooby meeting. Frankly, Dawn was surprised that she was so readily included in said meeting. Perhaps learning all those demon languages and acquiring a badass set of library skills was finally paying off. Or perhaps the world was ending and they figured she was finally old enough to know before the sky actually started falling. Either way, it was a welcome change.
For now, Dawn’s only real job was to retrieve Xander, which she was entirely committed to accomplishing. As soon as he finished hammering.

“Hey, Xander,” she called, having finally caught an interlude in the deafening banging.

Xander instinctively turned his head in the direction of her voice, let out a frustrated sigh, and then swiveled to face her, hammer hanging loosely at his side. “I’ve really gotta start enforcing this whole ‘right-flank approach only’ rule I’ve been laying out,” he muttered before throwing her a good-natured grin. “Hey, Dawnster, what’s up?”

“Buffy wants everyone in Giles’ office. Apparently the world is ending again.”

He shot her a mock skeptical look before demonstratively consulting his non-existent watch. “Yup, ‘bout time, I guess. So, when’s this party going down?”

“Nowish, I think,” Dawn replied, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“And here I was, thinking I’d get to spend my day nailing large pieces of wood together,” he said as he deposited the hammer onto a nearby bench and stripped off his tool belt. “Alright, let’s go show that apocalypse what us meddling kids can do.”

They made their way to the upstairs office in companionable silence and Dawn stopped in front of the closed door, listening to the muffled voices emanating from within.

“I guess they started without us,” she said casually before giving the heavy wood a light tap. No surprise there.

The muffled female voice, which Dawn guessed must have belonged to Willow broke off, and Giles’ heavier tone sounded a split second later. “Yes?”

“It’s us,” Dawn called, jumping in surprise when the door immediately swung open to reveal the grim face of her sister. This couldn’t be good.

Buffy ushered them in, shutting the door promptly behind them, and returned to what must have been her previous post, leaning against a bookshelf a few feet from the entrance.

“Hey, look, the old gang’s back together,” Xander commented with less cheer than might have been anticipated, running his eyes over Willow and Giles, who appeared to constitute the remainder of the gang. “No Kennedy?” he asked the witch, eyes surprisingly full of understanding.

“Nah,” she replied, giving him a reassuring smile, “this is more of a general heads up for the old guard. We’re not really at the point where there’s anything to be slain—or researched, for that matter.”

“So, what’s the big emergency,” Dawn interjected, doing her best to keep her nervous curiosity out of her voice.

Behind her, Buffy took a breath as if she were about to speak, but remained strangely silent. Instead, Giles, his hands folded neatly on the desk in front of him, began in a low tone, “It appears the ordeal we thought we’d put behind us in Sunnydale may not be as resolved as we might have hoped.”

“The First is back?” Xander inquired apprehensively.
“Not as such, no,” Giles answered, his hands still clasped in what Dawn now realized must have been a symptom of physical tension rather than an expression of decorum. “But we believe that the events of the previous year may be having some lingering repercussions—”

With that, he launched into a detailed exposition which, Dawn felt, for all its logical structure and incisive conclusions, meant that they didn’t really know much of anything at all. As far as she could tell, something was wonky with the world, as per usual, Buffy had a weird Slayer dream, also as per usual, and now they thought there was some kind of big evil ready to spring out of the ground and pick up with the devouring right where the Hellmouth had left off. Oh yeah, and apparently she was in danger. There was something new.

“—and I still say we just don’t have enough to go on,” Willow was insisting, “I mean, fine, we know something—and lemme repeat, not a whole lot of something—about these old demon guys that took up hibernation in the Deeper Well, but that’s mostly history book stuff. We don’t even know how they might get let out, or—”

“Am I still the Key?” Dawn broke in, suddenly surprised to find all four faces immediately turned towards her. She swallowed the boulder-sized lump in her throat and continued in a more subdued tone. “I mean, I thought maybe all my Keyness kind of got used up during the whole thing with Glory.”

Giles gave her a disconcertingly sympathetic look. “I apologize that we’ve not discussed this previously, Dawn. I must admit, I never really expected it to become relevant,” he said. “The fact of the matter is, the Key is not a creation of Glory’s, but only a tool she had hoped to employ to her own ends. The true nature of the Key is rather more generic. It is, indeed, just that—a key—and though it is a powerful tool, to be sure, it has been in existence for longer than history can attest to. I had no reason to believe it might come into play again in the course of our lifetimes.”

“But it can?” Dawn questioned him. “Come into play, that is. You’re saying I can still be used to—to, you know—open stuff? Dangerous stuff?” She was becoming agitated. She’d done her best to get over the whole not-a-real-person hang-up, but going back to seeing herself as a ticking time bomb of energy that might just bring about the end of the world was not something she found particularly appealing. “Is my life really worth this much risk?” she asked soberly.

“Dawn!—” Buffy exclaimed from behind her, but Giles silenced her with a firm shake of his head. “I understand your concern, Dawn,” he said carefully. “But, for better or worse, this has nothing to do with your life. As I understand it, the monks who—errr—created you, simply gave the Key human form. The Key itself is far more than that. I have no doubt that it will survive your death, regardless of when that might come.

“Alright,” Buffy broke in, clearly wanting to change the subject to something other than whether her sister should live or die. “So, now what? The way I see it, these Deeper Well guys haven’t been waiting around to have cupcakes and ice cream—I got some majorly bad mojo from that whole thing—what do we do to keep them, you know, on the deader side of things?”

“Well,” Giles replied uncomfortably, “like Willow so keenly pointed out, not much, I’m afraid. Even with our resources, we seem to be flying blind on this particular matter. Materials on the Old Ones, though more plentiful than on the First, are scanty at best, and without any further insight on what exactly it is that we’re trying to prevent from happening, I regret to say that our only course of action at this point is to simply wait.”

“Giles,” Willow began tentatively. “Maybe it’s time to give Wesley a call. I mean, I’m not loving the whole evil law firm scene any more than you are, but the resources they have—”
“Are worth nothing next to the potential danger of aligning ourselves with the likes of Wolfram and Hart,” Giles finished tersely. “I appreciate what you are saying, Willow, but I would consider such a course of action only as a last resort.”

“But you’ve said yourself,” she argued. “We’ve exhausted our own libraries—there’s nothing else on the Old Ones, no histories, no prophesies, no protective spells—”

Dawn had been observing this exchange with acute interest. There was something that kept naggling at the corners of her mind, something she’s seen or read, but couldn’t quite place. The Old Ones weren’t something she’d come across very often during her cataloguing of the council’s remaining materials, which made sense given what Giles and Willow had said about the sucky availability of information, but there was something—something small—and then, it clicked.

“Oh!”

“Oh?” Willow echoed, her rant interrupted. “What, oh?”

“Oh!” Dawn repeated victoriously, nearly bouncing with excitement. “I think I might have something. Well, I’m not entirely sure, and it’s kind of questionable as far as reliability goes, but we beggars can’t be choosers, right?”

“Dawn, what are you referring to?” Giles asked skeptically, sitting up in his chair.

“Hang on,” she squeaked as she turned on her heel and headed for the door. “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back, I just need to get something from the library office—and, did I mention—Oh!”

With that, she was gone, leaving the others to stare at the closing door in dismayed confusion. Being useful was awesome.
Part I: The Widening Gyre

Not five minutes later, Dawn had returned toting a rather unimpressive scrap of aged paper, covered in what looked like at least twenty distinctly different sorts of writing.

“I found this,” she declared, still trying to catch her breath, “while I was sorting through the stuff that got salvaged from the old headquarters—you know, the stuff that was kept in the basement with all the useless paperwork—and, well, I haven’t actually been able to translate most of this, plus I think it’s missing a pretty big chunk of the page on the left here, but this part on top is in pretty basic Latin.”

She laid the torn page in front of Giles and he leaned in to inspect it.

“For the Slayer who seeks knowledge of the rise of the Old Ones, a means to invoke guidance,” he translated slowly. “You say this came from the Council’s collections?”

“Well, yeah, more like the Council’s junk drawer, I guess. They obviously didn’t think it was very important,” she shrugged, “I found it with a bunch of hokey-looking manuscripts and thought it was kind of cool, plus it mentioned the Slayer, so I kept it. I knew I’d seen the Old Ones somewhere before, I just didn’t have any clue what the term was referring to at the time so it didn’t connect right away.”

“What does it say Giles?” Willow chimed in, peering over to catch a glimpse of the writing. “Does it actually give an invocation?”

“Yes, I believe that it does, and a rather intricate one.”

“Okay, then,” Buffy stepped forward. “Let’s try it. I’m not liking the idea of sitting around and just waiting for something uber-bad to go down. What’s the worst that can happen? I have to deliver another smackdown to the Shadow Men?”

She eyed the room in expectation.

“Ummm, I’d hate to poop the party.” Xander spoke up, breaking the silence he’d been holding since Giles had first launched into his explanation. “But do we remember what happened the last time we pressed the ‘help’ button on a Slayer thingamabob? You may have gotten to take a field trip but all we ended up with was a big hunk of demon.”

Buffy bit her lip. “I still say it’s worth a go. Giles? Will?”

“I agree,” Willow nodded. “I can show this to the coven and maybe we can at least make sure that this thing won’t make the world explode or suck you into some hell dimension or anything.”

“Alright, then,” Buffy stepped forward. “Let’s try it. I’m not liking the idea of sitting around and just waiting for something uber-bad to go down. What’s the worst that can happen? I have to deliver another smackdown to the Shadow Men?”

She eyed the room in expectation.

“Ummm, I’d hate to poop the party.” Xander spoke up, breaking the silence he’d been holding since Giles had first launched into his explanation. “But do we remember what happened the last time we pressed the ‘help’ button on a Slayer thingamabob? You may have gotten to take a field trip but all we ended up with was a big hunk of demon.”

Buffy bit her lip. “I still say it’s worth a go. Giles? Will?”

“I’m afraid I may have to agree with Xander. There’s really no way to determine the ultimate safety of the spell,” said Giles, giving his lenses a thorough rubdown. “But, as matters stand, we do seem to be rather short on options at the moment. I suppose if we examine the invocation carefully and perform the magic in a controlled environment, I dare say this might be our best course of action.”

“I agree.” Willow nodded. “I can show this to the coven and maybe we can at least make sure that this thing won’t make the world explode or suck you into some hell dimension or anything.”

“Well, by all means, then,” Xander added, appeased. “Any day the universe doesn’t collapse in on itself is a good day in my book. If you could make sure the building survives too, that would be just super.”

“We’ll check it, Xand.” Willow reassured him, a smile beginning to play on her lips, “I promise. And
we’ll stay away from the windows this time.”

They continued to banter cheerfully, spirits raised by the promise of something new to work on after the months of quotidian drudgery. Buffy, for her part, returned to her passive sentinel at the bookshelf, leaning against the heavy wood, seemingly lost in her thoughts.

***

Buffy looked around the old-fashioned room, wondering what weird part of her subconscious mind had produced this place. It reminded her of something out of the Pride and Prejudice BBC special, in that aged British kind of way. Dark wallpaper, gilded picture frames, and rich polished wood. The sort of place she imagined Quentin Travers might have lived in before he’d gotten himself all blown up.

Before she had any further opportunity to ponder the aesthetics of English interior design, she felt his long fingers on the small of her back. She knew him instinctively.

“No more cave?” Buffy asked playfully as she turned to lace her arms around Spike’s neck. Whatever this place was, it felt a billion times more normal than their last rendezvous spot and, for that, she was monumentally grateful.

His demeanor, on the other hand, seemed to have carried through.

“There’s some ill planet reigns,” he answered pensively, his eyes distant. “I must be patient till the heavens look with an aspect more favorable.”

“What? Before we go back to the cave?” she teased, trying to meet his gaze. She was tired of the gloom and doom, especially after the day’s developments. Tonight, she’d make him play along.

“That’s okay, I’ll take an old British guy’s bedroom over that place any day. Or night, as the case may be. Maybe you should start showing up in all those daydreams I have when Giles is delivering his informational sessions about the new order of Council business—”

“I had a dream, which was not all a dream,” he interrupted her, eyeing her intently, now, but refusing to shed the seriousness that lined his features. “I saw pale kings and princes too, pale warriors, death-pale were they all, and graves have yawned and yielded up their dead, fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds—”

It was her turn to interrupt. “This isn’t what I came here for, Spike,” she protested. This was a ridiculous statement, really, because she’d made no conscious choice to be there at all. It was always he who came to her. It was always she who wouldn’t dream of refusing whatever he had to offer. But not tonight—tonight she needed him her way. “There’s enough apocalyptic goodness going on in the real world right now,” she coaxed. “Let’s not talk about my day job.”

He glared at her stubbornly, as if inwardly frustrated at her refusal to listen to something so clearly important. “I have seen a medicine that's able to breathe life into a stone,” he insisted, his tone soft, yet urgent. “All the infections that the sun sucks up feed a flame within, which so torments me that it both pains my heart, and yet contents me—so shall thou feed on death, that feeds on men.”

“Damn it, Spike!” Buffy snapped as she snatched her arms away and turned to walk to the other end of the room. Her entire vocabulary couldn’t express how done she was with this shit. “There isn’t going to be any more feeding on death, or death being my gift, or whatever other majorly weird metaphor the crazy voices in my head—one of which, by the way,” she jabbed an accusing finger in his direction, “I never asked you to become—come up with. The fact of the matter is, you had to be all stupid and heroic and get yourself killed and now all I have is this. Why? Why the hell would you
do that to me?”

She looked down, a bit surprised at her own words and instantly apologetic. It wasn’t like it mattered — after all, he was just a figment, albeit a very articulate figment, of her imagination — still, she liked to think of him as really existing in this place in her head and fighting was the last way she wanted to spend her precious time with him.

But, before her mouth could open to retract the outburst, she found herself nose to nose with him, angry eyes pinning her where she stood.

“Think you I bear the shears of destiny?” his raspy whisper prickled along her spine. “Have I commandment on the pulse of life?”

Buffy took a deep breath. Never mind, then. Fuck apologizing. “I’m not asking about destiny,” she ground out. His lack of making sense was becoming more frustrating with every second. She hadn’t signed on for nightly psychotherapy with Shakespeare. These dreams were supposed to be her guilty pleasures, little pockets out of time where she could lose herself in him. “I’ve had enough destiny to last me the rest of my suddenly much longer life expectancy. All I want is a nice little bit of escapism, but does Buffy get what she wants? Ever? No! That would just be ridiculous, wouldn’t it? I think I’ve pretty much given up on the idea of having a functional relationship outside of my own head for the time being, but this? Can’t you just—”

Her tirade was cut short by the crushing pressure of his lips on hers. She struggled halfheartedly, her hands, having landed on his upper arms, doing as much to push him away as to draw him closer. The kiss was bruising. His teeth scraped her lips as his tongue demanded entry into her mouth and she surrendered with a sigh. In the end, her desire had never been in question. Not here. Totally ignoring the large four-poster bed, he’d managed to maneuver them over an old-fashioned couch, breaking away from her only to adjust his position as he pressed her into the firm upholstery.

Buffy gasped for breath, no longer able to identify whether she was sad, happy, angry, aroused, or all of the above. “Spike—”

“For God’s sake, hold your tongue and let me love,” he growled as his mouth descended to claim hers in another devouring kiss.

Something in those words shot through her like an electric current. She gave up all pretense of dissatisfaction and settled for wrapping her legs around his waist as an adequate alternative to whatever she’d been planning to say. It was perfection, this rhythmic movement of his body against hers. He slid to the floor, bowing before her as his hands pressed her thighs. Whatever games her mind had wanted to play, it didn’t matter now. There were no more flames, no more death, and definitely no more destiny — just the dream, which, in the end, was really all a dream. Still, she’d take what she could get, here in the forgiving darkness, until the sun took it all away once more. A single tear crept out of the corner of her eye. Tonight, his kisses felt like the beginning of the end.

***

Unfortunately, when Buffy cautiously opened her eyes, sunrise was still several hours away. She tossed and turned, intent on slipping back into blissful unconsciousness, but sleep refused to return. Finally, she kicked off the covers, fished the previous day’s clothes from the floor, and headed for the door, axe in hand. The cemetery was silent and empty, which really shouldn’t have been a surprise. She’d known before she ever set her course for the small church graveyard that her chances of finding something to slay would be slim to none.

On the whole, Bath’s demon population left much to be desired. What little demonic activity had
flourished, appeared to have virtually disappeared since the Council had set up shop in the neighborhood. It seemed that Bath was simply not enough of an evil hotspot to warrant taking on an army of Slayers, which was, of course, quite fortunate for the wellbeing of the general populace, but rather unhelpful to a Slayer on the hunt. Either way, any evil demon still trying to make his fortune in this town was unlikely to be found in the cemetery. It wasn’t really the prospect of a good fight that had brought Buffy there. No, the real truth was that this was the only place in the entire damn country where she felt at home. Because all cemeteries were the same in a way.

As she walked slowly through the moss-covered gravestones, she allowed herself to imagine that the small gate on the other side would lead her onto Garden Street. She would take the first left and then the second right and walk straight down Revello Drive.

Her mother would be making hot chocolate in the kitchen as faint strains of the latest Backstreet Boys hit filtered down the stairs from Dawn’s room. Perhaps she’d find a fresh pile of cigarette butts littering the grass of the front lawn. And maybe, just maybe, she’d find him by the sink, nagging her mom for marshmallows or fervently debating the fate of Timmy or some other such irrelevant nonsense.

And there it was again. She was spending entirely too much time thinking about Spike.

Buffy deposited her axe onto the ground before slumping against a particularly overgrown gravestone. The weapon was mostly for show anyway—a formality to keep up the appearance of patrolling. The August heat was oppressive, even at night. She sighed, plucking mindlessly at the yellowing grass. The dry flakes got under her finger nails. Across from her, a haughty looking angel stood perched atop a crumbling mausoleum, its robes flowing in a motionless wind and its wings spread obnoxiously wide. The thing seemed to be mocking her with the very reality of its existence.

There was her world in a nutshell—angels and demons—like that book Willow had given her a few weeks back, sheepishly suggesting that maybe it was time she caught up on the bestseller list. Buffy secretly determined to wait for the movie. The problem was that waiting seemed to have taken on the status of a full-time job, as far as she was concerned. She was always waiting. Waiting for her real life to begin. Waiting for her own personal Godot. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

It wasn’t like her, to be stuck in this state of flux. Of course, Spike’s nightly cameos weren’t really helping with the moving on but, if she were honest with herself, she knew that this weird feeling of inbetweenness had started before the dreams. Maybe it was the whole business of telling him that she loved him only to have him throw it back in her face. It all felt so unfinished.

Sometimes she imagined what it might be like if she got another chance. If she ran into him on one of her nightly patrols like it was the most commonplace thing in the world. What would she do? Kick his ass and screw him into next Tuesday both seemed like viable options. Not necessarily in that order. There were other times when she wondered if maybe he’d been right. Could she really have loved him at that moment? The before and after were irrelevant, but right then—as she stood seconds away from losing him forever—she wondered if maybe she’d held back. If he’d read something in her face that had made him doubt. Or, perhaps, if the love she’d had to give just wasn’t enough.

She’d thought she loved Riley, after all—

The angel was glowing. It took her a few seconds to realize that it was, in fact, simply framed by the rays of the rising sun and not a vision of some otherworldly messenger come to smite her for her abysmal lack of emotional depth. A heavenly herald in the guise of her latest victim.

Fuck what he’d thought. She’d meant it. Despite her better judgment, she’d thrown caution to whatever passed for wind down in the Hellmouth and meant every word. All three of them. For that handful of seconds, she’d allowed herself to love him and it had been her undoing.
Go figure.

It was never enough. No matter how much of her own blood she spilled, no matter how many helicopters she chased, it was never enough. Points to her for waiting until the very last millisecond, of course, but she’d expected more from him. And now, there was nothing left to expect. Nothing but the maw of the latest apocalypse opening up to swallow them all whole. Again. All because, apparently, she’d fucked up.

Buffy leaned her head against the cold stone behind her. The birds were chirping merrily, blissfully unaware that the world was anything but perfectly bright. Maybe next time she could come back as a bird. Tweet, tweet, so sweet. Observing the golden tendrils of sunlight as they crept around the winged figure before her, she made up her mind. It was time to leave the past in the past—Spike wasn’t coming back—there was no hell dimension this time, no higher power with a master plan to pull him back into her world. Just dust.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the cool morning air. She’d waited too long already—evil didn’t just politely stand by while you mourned and buried your dead—maybe she wasn’t the only one who’d been called on to stop the world from ending anymore, but she was still the best woman for the job.

Picking up her axe, Buffy pushed herself off the grass, silently thanking Mr Archibald Grimes for his good company if not his excellent lumbar support. Slowly, methodically, she took step after step towards the iron gate, knowing that every movement carried her further and further from the memories that had somehow invaded this small patch of earth from half a world away. She’d not be returning to the graveyard.

Stopping just short of the rusted bars that framed the exit, she shot the glowing angel one final glance over her shoulder. It stood there, just as before, absorbed in some exultant vision, unaware and indifferent.

As goodbyes went, it would have to do.

***

Willow closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the soft upholstery. What she really wanted was a nice warm blanket but, unfortunately, the library contained no such accouterments. Her room upstairs did, but it also contained Kennedy, which made the prospect of going up there much less appealing.

She’d spent the remainder of the previous day with the coven, poring over Dawn’s scrap of paper. They’d gotten as far as ascertaining that the incantation scribbled across the top was a rather unusual method of creating a conduit of some sort. The problem was, a conduit was traditionally expected to—well—conduct, which generally entailed a “to” and a “from.” This particular conduit, however, seemed to be missing at least one of the aforementioned crucial components. There was no to or from, there was only a here, and this made Willow justifiably nervous. Opening up a big empty hole in the fabric of space and time hardly seemed like a safe and responsible thing to do, and she was all about the safe and responsible these days.

To top it all off, she’d returned to find Kennedy sitting on the bed, glaring at her with accusing eyes. Much to Willow’s lack of surprise, her girlfriend failed to see the scintillating interest in a big magical door to nowhere. At least not the kind of interest that would require one to stay out past any reasonable hour and then come home with a big pile of books to spend the night with. So they’d argued, and then they’d apologized. But, despite their apparent reconciliation, Willow still ended up walking out the door, musty books in hand, and heading down to spend the night in her trusty
The thing that stung the most was that tiny little voice in the back of her mind that wouldn’t let her forget that Tara would have been right there with her. So, here she sat—toes prickling from insufficient circulation and eyes drooping shut from way too many hours of staring at the same roughly scribbled bit of magical mumbo jumbo.

Vaguely, she noticed that the first rays of morning sun were beginning to stealthily peek through the heavy curtains. Myriads of tiny particles of dust floated before her tired eyes, each little speck suddenly given its own special luminescence by the warm glow of the sunrise. It was still strange to her—this new vision of the world—the humming of life in every miniscule fragment of reality. Life and death. She’d wrapped her fingers around both. Felt the sticky glide of blood and the hollow crunch of bone. Heard the dry rattle of a dying breath. Had been the cause of all of the above.

And now—now she felt the life. Root systems and energy circles aside, she’d gotten a front row seat to the it’s-all-connected feature presentation when she’d cast that awakening spell. There weren’t words to describe what she’d felt then. The magnitude of it all. The trouble was, none of that had done much to convince her that she deserved to be given access to such power. Quite on the contrary, she felt more sure than ever that Willow and great responsibility were not very mixy things. Especially not when great power was involved. No, the universe was best left to its own devices. Little bits of matter swirling in patterns she really had no business trying to chart. Just dust—ebbing and flowing—

“You know,” Xander’s cheerfully sarcastic tone broke through her existential musings. “Some would argue that once the amount of bloodshot overtakes the overall amount of eye, it’s time to ease up on the research, but I commend your masochistic persistence.”

Willow lifted her head in a vain attempt to focus her bleary eyes on his smiling face. “And you, Xander,” she answered with mock severity. “What happened to the time-honored tradition of sleeping ’til noon you’ve been trying to revive? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were an adult with a real job again.”

“Touché,” he smirked, strolling over to plop himself down into the chair just next to her. “I guess this whole thing got me thinking—I mean, we were supposed to be done with that particular funfest, you know? Counted our losses and moved on to bigger and more apocalypsey things? Which, I’ll grant you, is kind of the case, but it seems like what happened in Sunnydale should have stayed in Sunnydale, not come back to wag its big evil finger at us.”

“You miss her don’t you?”

“What tipped you off?”

Willow sighed, slowly rolling her tired neck against the cushion. “We’ve all done our share of loss-counting in that place, you know that.”

He shot her an apologetic glance before returning his gaze to the patterned rug. “I know, Will. We’re a regular card-carrying club.”

“Who’s president?”

Xander emitted a hollow chuckle. “Do we vote or is there some kind of quantifiable method to this? It’d have to be Buffy, wouldn’t it?”

She didn’t answer right away. Only in Sunnydale were dead friends and family a thing to be counted
up and plugged into a neat little bar graph. Not that she’d be making any bar graphs. On to something less morbid, then—except, oh yeah, they were having a conversation. “I wonder about her sometimes,” Willow said finally, resigning herself to following Xander’s train of thought.

“The Buffster?”

She eyed him cautiously. “She seemed to handle it pretty well, didn’t she? The whole thing with Spike?”

Xander shifted uncomfortably. He made a noise that seemed to start out as an awkward clearing of the throat before mutating into a sort of resigned grunt. “Time was, I’d have argued that there’s no reason she should have batted an eyelash, but we both know that’s not really true, is it? And don’t look at me like that,” he mumbled, shooting her a sidelong glance. “I’m not a complete idiot. I get it. Especially after last year—I get it.”

“Do you?” Willow asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Not that I’m about to start stitching commemorative throw pillows for the Spike fan club, mind you, but the guy did die to save the world. I figure I can cut him a little slack. Plus, I’ve had quite a bit of practice in learning to understand how it might be possible to love someone who’s done things I’d prefer not to imagine—no, not you, Will,” he added, noticing her guilty expression. “Although, again, kudos on the brief stint at being unbelievably scary.”

“Right,” she said contritely. “But still, Buffy—she’s—”

“Right here and ready for portal opening action,” a new voice chimed in, causing Willow to jump a bit, as Buffy poked her head through the library door. “How goes the research?” she asked with uncanny enthusiasm.

“It, ummm, well,” Willow began, taking a moment to shift a heavy book off her lap as she attempted to compose herself before turning to face Buffy. “There’s definitely a portal to be opened, we just don’t know where to.”

“Uh-huh,” Buffy replied in the same oddly bright tone, practically bouncing on her heels. “So, is it safe?”

“Not in the traditional sense of the word.”

“Can we do it anyway?”

Willow studied her friend thoughtfully. How much of their conversation had she heard? And, perhaps more importantly, why was she suddenly acting like she’d had one Red Bull too many? “Well,” she finally said, “I might have come up with a way to contain whatever we open, so I think, maybe, yeah—but Buffy, are you—ummm—ok?”

Buffy flipped her tousled hair and then looked down to appraise her slightly rumpled and clearly day-old clothes. “Yeah,” she responded sheepishly, “I just couldn’t sleep so I figured I’d go slay something—or pretend to slay something—or, well, I don’t know what it is that I really do on patrol these days… but, the point is, I decided it’s time be proactive. Enough with the building and the cataloguing and the waiting. If something evil’s coming, I want to know what it is, then I want find it, and then I want to kill it. The deader, the better. Just like old times”

Willow nodded silently, still eyeing Buffy with a slightly wary expression. Fortunately, Xander picked up the conversational slack.
“Ok, then,” he said patiently. “Point taken. But unless you’ve got some sort of dangerous spell quota that you’re looking to meet by sunrise, I say we wait until a few more people have, you know, woken up?”

That elicited another wry grin from Buffy, who’d taken to anxiously pleating the disheveled strands of her hair.

“I’m sorry, guys,” she said. “I know it seems like I’m unleashing the crazy right now—I didn’t mean to freak you out—it’s just, you know, everything’s been so different lately that I guess I’m just excited to get back to something I know how to deal with.”

Willow softened. Of course, the past few months had been hard on all of them. She, too, was pretty worked up about the possibility of putting an end to the mystical compression spring that seemed to be taking on more tension with each passing day.

“No worries,” she smiled at Buffy. “You’re right. It'll be good to figure out what’s going on. Or at least score some points for effort. Here’s the deal, though—the spell—it’s kind of weird. As in not like anything I’ve ever seen before. We can open a portal, but there’s no way of even finding out what kind of portal it is, forget about where it leads to.”

“So, what are you saying?” Buffy frowned at her, confused.

“I’m saying, you’re welcome to walk through the thing, but I can’t do much to guarantee that you won’t end up in ancient Greece, or getting eaten by a dinosaur, or in that world without the shrimp.”

“Ah, excellent,” Buffy sighed, taking a few directionless steps towards the center of the room. “Top three vacation destinations, here I come.”

“Also,” Willow continued carefully, “I’m not entirely sure of how we’d go about trying to get you back. This isn’t Slayer Kit shadow-puppet theater—we have no idea where this thing came from, or who wrote it, or why we even have it, really.”

Buffy shifted from foot to foot a few times, apparently trying to make up her mind about something, then turned towards Willow and Xander, her expression resolute.

“I want to do it, Will.”

“Okay, but, Buffy,” Willow said, doing her best to continue appearing supportive. “What I’m saying is, maybe we should wait—just until we figure out a way to make this all a bit safer?”

“She’s right, Buff,” Xander added, fixing Buffy with a steady gaze. “This isn’t exactly an emergency. At least, not by our usual standards. I’d say we have at least a couple more months before we pass uncomfortably urgent and head into impending doom. You could be risking your life here, not to mention whatever other badness that thing might spew back out once you’re through it.”

“But you said something about being able to contain it, right, Will?” Buffy argued insistently. “What if you did that and then tried to keep it open until I could at least check out what’s on the other side? I know what’s at stake here—I’m not crazy or suicidal—honest, I’m not. I just don’t want to wait any longer. Call it a feeling. A very reliable Slayerly feeling. Let’s at least try to open the thing—see if you can maintain it?”

Willow looked into her friend’s pleading eyes. She could put a barrier around the conduit—she’d gotten good at those—secure it so that nothing could get out unless it asked real nice. It couldn’t hurt to try. Not as long as they played it safe.
“Alright,” she acquiesced finally, ignoring Xander’s disgruntled snort. “But only once we clear it with Giles.”

There was no way she was going into this one based solely on her own questionable judgment and Buffy’s feeling. Giles tended to be reliably levelheaded about this stuff. If Buffy managed to convince him that this was the right decision, she’d go along, even if that was beginning to seem like less of a fool-proof method than it had once been.

***

Giles proved to require just as much convincing as Willow had expected. It took a few good hours of circuitous arguments, some frustrated outbursts from Buffy, and even a couple of reluctant assurances from Willow herself before they’d determined that it might be worthwhile to attempt a trial run of the spell.

By the following morning, they’d gathered the coven and a few of the more experienced Slayers, just on the too-likely chance that something went wrong, either magically or demon-wise. Kennedy sat glowering in a corner, seemingly ready to pummel Andrew, who was babbling something about having charted a safe course through the Delta quadrant.

“Are you confident you’ll be able to contain the conduit?” asked Giles, crouching down next to Willow.

A large circle of silvery sand occupied the majority of the spare room they’d chosen as their staging area. Willow sat cross-legged, poised in the center, and surrounded by an impressive assortment of candles, fragrant herbs, and gleaming crystals.

“Sure, confident, that’s me,” she answered nervously, fingering a large piece of quartz. “Don’t worry, Giles, Miss Harkness and the others will be able to handle anything I let slip.”

The other witches stood guard along the outer perimeter of the circle, their faces solemn. Miss Harkness, an older woman with silky graying curls and a small but stately build, looked particularly grave. When Giles rose and retreated to the outside of the circle, she shot him a stern look that communicated quite clearly the fact that she questioned his judgment on the whole matter. Giles noted this and cleared his throat self-consciously, suddenly becoming very interested in a loose button on his jacket.

Finally, Buffy stepped forward, breaking away from Dawn, who was looking nearly as grim as Miss Harkness. “Alright, let’s do this,” she said decisively. “Remember Will, all we need to do is open the thing and keep it stable for a little while. Just a test run. No big deal.”

Willow nodded. “I’m ready,” she said, taking a deep breath. Having scanned the worn scrap of paper one last time, she closed her eyes and began to chant in a low and steady tone.

Everyone looked on anxiously. Willow was swaying slightly now, her lips forming the strange words as if of their own accord. Back and forth, and to and fro—it was almost hypnotic, the way she was moving—Buffy, standing just barely at the edge of the circle, looked literally spellbound.

It seemed that the chanting and swaying continued forever. The Slayers were beginning to shift uneasily in their positions, as if almost wishing for something tangible to appear. Miss Harkness was watching Willow intently, something odd glinting in her eyes. Suddenly, the air within the circle began to crackle and percolate. Streams of energy pulsed through the space, catching Willow’s hair, making it flow as though it were being carried by a particularly lively ocean breeze. A spark appeared, hovering in mid-air just a few inches off the ground in front of Willow, and her arms
stretched out to bear it upwards. It rose and rose, guided by her extended fingers, leaving a brilliant trail in its wake, like a shining cut running through the very fabric of reality. And then—there were no other words for it—the air simply opened, revealing a shining emptiness.

Willow appeared to be in a deep trance, almost oblivious to what it was that she had just done, but everyone else gazed at the portal with acute interest. Waiting. Nothing appeared to be happening, however. Giles expelled a stifled breath and moved to consult Miss Harkness. It seemed that Willow had settled into a sort of holding pattern, but she looked to be in no way inclined to close the conduit. Just then, Buffy stepped forward across the edge of the circle. Her eyes were glassy—not vacant, exactly, but remote—she seemed to be walking through a waking dream.

“Buffy—” Dawn called nervously.

“Buffy, I’m not sure that’s entirely safe,” Giles cautioned, his voice unsure. “I would say it’s best that we stay outside of the contained area for the time being.”

But Buffy paid no attention. In fact, she seemed not to have heard them at all. Instead, she continued to drift forward, her feet moving lightly and gracefully along the wooden floor. Giles reached out to clasp her shoulder, but pulled his hand back with a gasp as the crinkling energy wrapped itself around his fingers. Miss Harkness took a hold of his forearm, lowering his injured hand to his side.

“I was afraid of this,” she said heavily. “You have to let her go, Rupert. There’s nothing we can do—she’s been called—it’s out of our hands, now.”

Giles looked down at her, bewildered, before quickly returning his gaze to Buffy, who seemed to have stopped no more than a few inches away from the blazing luminescence of the conduit. For a moment, they all thought she might turn back, but then, a ripple ran through her body and she stepped into the light.

A few of the Slayers gasped and Xander let out a strangled cry. No one moved. Time seemed to have stopped as every person in the room stared silently into the shining abyss.

And then, with a bright flash and a shocking crack, the portal vanished. It took a few seconds for everyone’s eyes to adjust to the lack of bright light.

“Buffy!” Dawn cried out.

Buffy was standing where the portal had been only moments before. They all continued to stare, not quite comprehending what had just happened. Somewhere behind Buffy, Willow emitted an odd sort of sigh.

A few more seconds passed as no one dared to move. It was beginning to register that Buffy looked a bit off. Her clothing looked slightly the worse for wear and her hair fell down her shoulders just differently enough to warrant notice. She was gripping a stack of rumpled-looking paper and a small cut marred her temple—but far more striking than all these things was the look on her face. Her eyes were mournful but restless, her jaw set in determination.

She was the first to speak.

“Giles,” she said, her voice small but firm. “Get me some plane tickets. We’re going back to Sunnydale.”

With that, she shook herself, thrust the stack of paper into Giles’ flailing arms, and briskly walked out of the room, paying no heed to the turning heads and dumbfounded stares she left in her wake.
Giles blinked, wrenching himself out of his stupefied silence just in time to call after her, “But Buffy, why on earth?”

Her answer came as a single word—almost no more than a gasp that trailed behind her retreating form.

“Spike.”
5 minutes earlier…

Willow nodded. “I’m ready,” she said and took a deep breath. Having scanned the worn scrap of paper one last time, she closed her eyes and began to chant in a low and steady tone.

Buffy gazed at her friend attentively. Willow was swaying slightly now, her lips forming the strange words as if of their own accord. Back and forth, and to and fro—it was almost hypnotic, the way she was moving—Buffy stood, transfixed. She vaguely acknowledged the presence of others in the room—the Slayers’ nervous shifting, the light scraping of Giles’ nail against that same coat button, the witches’ quicker-than-normal breathing—but, suddenly, it seemed very important that she keep her eyes entirely on Willow.

The air within the circle was pulsating—alive with crackling currents of energy—but Buffy’s attention was riveted to the small spark that had blinked into sudden existence just inches above the floor. She watched Willow motion the tiny rivulet of light upwards until it had sliced a neat little incision through the rippling air. It was then that she felt it. A brilliant fissure had appeared, expanding upwards and outwards, and Buffy knew—was more sure than she’d ever been of anything in her entire life—that whatever she was looking for lay on the other side of that glistening veil.

Buffy moved forward without really meaning to do anything of the sort. Somewhere, very very far away, she thought she heard Dawn calling her name, then someone mumbled something indistinctly—Giles, maybe?—but she didn’t have time for them right now. She was almost there, only a couple more steps and she’d be able to touch the beautiful shimmering light—Buffy stopped. Why was she doing this? It seemed kind of dangerous, actually. How did she know the conduit wouldn’t just burn her to an extra-crunchy crisp? She tried to consider her situation objectively—what was it that Giles had been wanting to…?—but then the surety returned. She wasn’t hypnotized, she wasn’t under a spell, she simply knew that this was the right thing to do.

Buffy took a decisive step forward and her vision was suffused with blinding radiance. She felt a tug somewhere at the base of her spine, as though she was being drawn downwards—or maybe inwards, she couldn’t quite tell. She struggled to keep her eyes open against the light. Then, gradually, her vision adjusted.

For a second, she thought she had walked into her dream. She was in an old-fashioned parlor with rich, antique looking décor—except, it was definitely not Spike standing in front of her this time. A circle of women surrounded her. A couple looked to be no older than she, while others seemed closer in age to her mother, and a few others still looked old enough to be her grandmothers. All of them were seated, kneeling on the ground on the outskirts of a shimmering circle that looked suspiciously like the one she had just walked into. No one said anything—the women stared, and she, not knowing what else to do, stared back.

“Good heavens,” an uncertain voice sounded behind her. “My dear—were you not quite ready?”

Buffy whirled around to find herself face to face with a stout elderly woman who appeared to have just risen from the same seat where Willow should have been. The woman was eyeing her with a somewhat confused expression.

“I’m sorry,” Buffy stammered. “What?”
“I should say,” the woman responded slowly. “We were under the impression that the summoning spell would function only if performed simultaneously by both parties—were you called away unexpectedly?”

Buffy blinked. “Summoning spell?”

The woman inclined her head critically. “The summoning spell, dear, we were told that the Chosen One would be summoned from the proper point in time, when she chooses to take up her role in what is to come. Do you mean to tell me that you undertook no such action?”

“What I mean to tell you is that I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Buffy warily. “All we did was open a conduit thingy—I’m pretty sure no one told me anything about my role.”

“Ah,” the woman brightened. “Then you formed the link. You are then, indeed, the Slayer?”

“Well, yeah, I guess you could put it that way.”

“And you are the keeper of the Key?” the woman pressed.

“The key?” Buffy squinted in confusion, but then it clicked. “Oh! The Key! She’s—I mean, it’s—yeah.”

There were some quiet murmurs from behind—she could have sworn she heard someone mutter, “American”—but Buffy locked eyes with the woman in front of her. It was time to figure out what the hell was going on here.

“So, now that we’ve established who I am,” she said firmly. “Let’s talk about you guys. Who exactly are you?”

The woman’s expression softened. “Forgive me,” she said with a small smile. “I’ve been terribly rude. No doubt you were pulled away quite unexpectedly and, it seems, without much understanding of where you were being summoned to. We were not warned that you would be so unaware—the Great Mother, despite her considerable wisdom, you understand, does occasionally omit such minor details—sometimes, I find myself under the impression that she hands us these riddles just for the sheer amusement. We are—well—we’re a coven.”

Buffy looked at the circle of women appraisingly. “So, you guys are witches?”

“Indeed, we are.”

“And this Great Mother of yours, she, what?—just decided that it might be fun to fly me in for the weekend?”

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, you see,” the older woman conceded. “I must admit, even I was not made aware of all the intricacies of the matter. But—you must be from a future time, as I understand?”

For a second, Buffy was sure she must have misheard. “Sorry… huh? What future time?”

“The spell that brought you here was meant to span the dimensions of not only space, but also time, to bring to us the Slayer whose duty it is to serve as the keeper of the Key. I dare say that, were it simply a matter of hopping a boat to have a nice cuppa with the girl, we would not have been contracted to perform such a spell. Also,” she finished, laughter creeping into her voice, “unless my sources are very much mistaken, I am quite certain that the current Slayer is Indian.”
Buffy swallowed hard, then took another look around. The women did appear to be dressed rather oddly, now that she thought of it—definitely old-fashioned—she tried hard to place the clothing. They were a long way from flappers, but their simply cut dresses didn’t scream Renaissance Faire, either. This was a good start, Buffy decided, because she definitely didn’t feel like playing California Slayer in King Arthur’s Court. “So,” she asked nervously, “what year is it, exactly?”

“It is 1880, child—may I ask from which time you have arrived to us?”

“It’s… ummm… I’m from 2004,” Buffy muttered breathlessly. She supposed it could have been worse. Victorian England seemed like it would be marginally better than the Paleozoic Era.

The old witch must have sensed Buffy’s distress because, in the next moment, she reached over to place a steady hand on her shoulder. “Come, my dear. Limited though my knowledge may be, I have much to explain to you, and I dare say we’ll get this all sorted yet. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Buffy. Buffy Summers.”

A beat. “Buffy—is that short for anything?” she said hopefully.

“No.” Buffy gave her an offended look.

“Of course not,” the woman offered apologetically. “My good heavens, we do appear to be starting off on a rather sour note, do we not? I am Dorothea.” With that, she turned to the other women who, having risen to their feet, were now congregating just behind her. “Thank you, ladies,” she said ceremoniously. “I do believe we have fulfilled our task here.”

Without another word, they bowed their heads to her in turn and quietly filed out of the room. Buffy stared at their retreating backs disbelievingly.

“They’re just going to leave?” she asked.

“Being what we are, we have learned not to meddle beyond the required degree,” Dorothea replied calmly. “They were asked here to assist me with an incantation, nothing more and nothing less, and now their involvement is finished.” She walked towards the door, motioning Buffy to follow.

“Come, now, I’ll have Gretchen make us up a nice pot of tea and we shall see if we can’t shed a bit more light on this whole ordeal. Oh, and, yes, we’ll need to locate a proper dress for you, of course—you’ll have to tell me how you happened to appear here in your underclothes—”

***

A short while later, Buffy was seated by the fireplace across from Dorothea, a bit less comfortable than she might have liked to be, but otherwise unscathed by her first hour as an inhabitant of the nineteenth century.

She had decided to forgo any attempt at explaining that her jeans and tank were actually her regular outfit and not, as Dorothea had apparently assumed, her underwear. Instead, she had obediently submitted to being fitted into a prim woolen gown by Gretchen, whom she supposed to be the maid, figuring that, if she really was in Victorian England, it might behoove her not to be mistaken for a hooker on her first day.

Aside from the boning running through the bodice, it really wasn’t that bad, Buffy mused as she sipped gingerly from her tea cup. It was even vaguely more comfortable than that Halloween dress she’d worn back in the day in her attempts to impress Angel. Gretchen had informed her that the new cuirass bodices were really a God-send and Buffy nodded along, being grateful that no one had tried to put her into a full-on corset.
“So,” Dorothea began, having placed her own cup back onto its saucer. “I suspect you must be quite beside yourself by now, wondering why you’ve been brought here. I’m afraid I must disappoint you, however,” she continued with a smile. “Our coven was charged with facilitating your arrival, but we are not the ones who require your services.”

“And I’m assuming this Great Mother of yours was the one doing the charging?” said Buffy. “Did she also happen to give you a rundown of the expected services? Or are you guys just really into compartmentalizing your intel?”

“You’ve got spirit,” said Dorothea fondly. “I like it. And, as I understand it, the objective of your mission is quite clear: you must protect the Key. It’s in the particulars that I am afraid my knowledge finds its limits, quite simply because they are outside the sphere of my involvement. You see, for as long as history can attest to it, the guardianship of the Key has been entrusted to a single monastic order—”

“Yeah, I’ve met the guys,” Buffy interrupted, “or one of them, anyway—we had a nice chat before he succumbed to a slight case of being dead—but why are you working with the monks? I thought your kind didn’t normally mix with theirs, what with, you know, the witchcraft and the burning at the stake?”

Dorothea continued to smile indulgently. “They’re a rather unorthodox order, and I’m certain you’ll find that they have a good bit of their own magic, though I suppose they never would call it witchcraft. They keep to themselves mostly, but we all have our duties to uphold, when the time comes. By taking guardianship of the Key, the Order or Dagon has effectively alienated itself from all others in its tradition. Suffice it to say that they make their alliances where they can find them.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” said Buffy, reclining in her chair. “But what does any of this have to do with me? These monks need some help with their Key maintenance, fine, I get it, but you guys have your own Slayer. I’m sure there’s a boat coming in from India every once in a while.”

“Ah, but you see,” said Dorothea. “The spell was meant to call forth not any Slayer, but the one Slayer whose duty it is to guard the Key so that she might guide it to its ultimate purpose. I understand you have some special relationship to the Key, do you not?”

Buffy thought for a moment. She supposed “special relationship” might just sum it up, case being that the Key in question was effectively her sister. “I guess so, yeah,” she replied uncertainly. In my time, the Key is—”

“That’s quite alright,” Dorothea interrupted. “I have no need of the details—they are beyond the scope of my understanding, I dare say. It is enough that we both accept that, for better or worse, it is you and only you that can protect the Key at this time.” Then, her expression darkened. “There is danger brewing,” she said somberly. “I’ve felt it and, though I am not certain what it means, it came as no surprise when the Great Mother called upon me and my coven to perform this duty. Something is out of place—something is not as it should be.”

A light shiver crept up Buffy’s spine. You’d have thought that one advantage of traveling over a hundred years into the past would be that the impending apocalypse would be just slightly less impending. Apparently this wasn’t the case. Go figure. Why was it that, everywhere she went, something was always on the verge of being terribly wrong?

“Got it,” she said bleakly. “Big bad danger on the horizon. So now what? If I’m gonna be protecting the Key, it might help to know where the monks are keeping it—and, incidentally, if these Dagon guys are so magical, why didn’t they just bring me here themselves?”
“They very well could have, I am sure,” said Dorothea. “But, they do tend to be a rather isolationist bunch. It seems the Great Mother had decided you would be better served by someone who is, how shall we say, more involved in the normal trappings of the world? And I do believe it would not be too arrogant on my part to conjecture that I might make a better host for a young woman such as yourself than a cohort of mystical hermits,” she added, her old eyes sparkling with amusement. “We are all players here, you see, and we play dutifully only those parts that have been granted to us. But not to worry, I shall arrange for you to meet with one of the Order—be kind to him, if you please—he is my brother.”

Buffy stared at her in confusion. “Your brother? Brother, like the priest is your father, or brother, like you actually played in the same sandbox when you were five?”

Dorothea emitted a chuckle. “My brother, in the most quotidian sense of the term. As you can imagine, we come from quite an interesting family.”

“Alright,” said Buffy, abandoning the remnants of her tea to toy with the pleats of her dress. “I’ll meet with this brother of yours. By the way—this might seem like a dumb question—I’m pretty sure we must still be in England, but this is definitely not the house I was in before… are we still in Bath?”

Dorothea had risen to stoke the fire, but now she returned her gaze to Buffy. “You had been in England prior to your appearance here? How curious—I had assumed we must have snatched you from America.” She returned the gilded poker to its proper resting place and made her way towards the staircase, looking very much like she expected Buffy to follow. “No, child,” she said lightly, “we are in London.”
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

Buffy slept surprisingly soundly that night. She’d gone to bed, still struggling to wrap her mind
around the reality that she’d somehow found herself in a time that was over a century before her own
birth. But the tumult subsided quickly and she felt herself drifting off into an untroubled sleep. She
woke up wondering whether Dorothea hadn’t put something a bit stronger than chamomile into that
tea the previous night, but finally decided that she should simply be grateful for the uninterrupted
rest.

It turned out, however, that the amenities of a nineteenth-century household would take some getting
used to. The tooth powder was coarse and not at all on par with the sweet mintiness preferred by four
out of five dentists, toilets were apparently still in very rudimentary stages of development, and the
idea of a hot shower was decidedly outlandish. By the time Buffy had shrugged off Gretchen’s
kindhearted attempts to help with her morning routine, made her way downstairs for some food—
whether it was breakfast or lunch, at this point, was anyone’s guess—and finally set out in search of
Dorothea, it was much later than she might have liked.

“Ah, good day, my dear,” Dorothea greeted her hastily when Buffy entered the parlor. “Do forgive
me for not joining you earlier—I’m afraid—well, you see, I have just received word that Isaac has
gone missing.”

“I’m sorry,” said Buffy, slightly confused. “Isaac is—”

“My brother, dear,” replied Dorothea quickly, flitting nervously around the room as she gathered
some things that Buffy had long ago learned to recognize as the components of a basic locator spell.
“The very same one with whom we were to meet today. I had sent word late last night that we were
ready to consult with him regarding the matter at hand, but the messenger arrived this morning,
reporting that the order has not been able to locate him for two nights now.”

“And you’re only just finding out about this?” Buffy asked in surprise. “Boy, you really meant it
when you said that you guys like to keep your information compartmentalized, didn’t you?”

Dorothea shook her head distractedly. “As I said, they keep to themselves. Oh, but I told him not to
go gallivanting around at night—one never does know what sort of trouble one might meet with on
these streets—and still, all that despite, it seems he left on some odd bit of business the day before
last, just a hair before sunset. Foolish man.”

Buffy cringed. She could think of any number of things that a guy with valuable information and no
self-defense skills could have run into, wandering the streets on his own after dark, and none of them
were very pleasant.

“You said I was here to protect the Key,” she asked Dorothea tentatively. “What exactly am I here to
protect it from?”

Dorothea had settled in front of a small card table, upon which she had unfolded a large, ornately
hand-drawn map of what Buffy assumed must be London. “That’s a fine question, child,” she said
gravely, “and I thoroughly wish that it was within my powers to furnish you with the answer. I am
not entirely certain that even the Great Mother knows exactly what it is that we face, I can only
imagine that she has sensed—and, I should say, perhaps with greater clarity—the same coming
danger as I have done. As I indicated last night, something is out of place—there is a serious
disruption in the continuum of time, and such things never bode well.”
“Wait a second,” said Buffy. “A disruption in time? Wouldn’t that have been caused by—well—me?”

“No,” Dorothea replied firmly. “Indeed, I’d hazard to say it is the very reason you have been brought here. Time is far too dangerous to be trifled with on a whim, and we would not have done so if it hadn’t been deemed absolutely necessary.”

Buffy decided that it was in her best interest to take this opportunity and pose the question she’d been mulling over ever since she’d discovered where—or, more precisely, when—she’d ended up. “So, speaking of trifling with time,” she began carefully. “How exactly is this going to work? I don’t want to accidentally kill, say, Winston Churchill’s father—or, wait, is he already born?—anyway, I’m guessing I don’t really want to kill anyone. How am I supposed to make sure that I don’t mess up the future while I’m here?”

Dorothea frowned thoughtfully. “You’re entirely right, my dear. Of course, the most prudent course of action would be to limit your involvement to matters which are crucial to your mission—you are here to remedy an existing problem, after all, not exacerbate it—and I am told that any minor effects of your interactions with the general population will be, err, accounted for, but I would conjecture that you might want to refrain from killing anyone, as you’ve stated yourself.”

“Uh-huh,” Buffy nodded. “Don’t talk to, touch, or eviscerate anyone if I can help it. Got it. And what do you mean, my interactions will be accounted for?”

“That is not my place to determine,” said Dorothea, staring intently at the map as she ground some herbs over its surface. “My duty was simply to bring you here and to facilitate your contact with the Order of Dagon—I’m just a cog in the machine, if you will—everything else, such as it is, falls to others.”

With that, she closed her eyes and muttered a few indistinguishable words. Buffy saw a tiny glimmer of light appear in the air and circle the map for just a few moments before it settled itself over an area just left of what must have been the Thames.

“Here,” Dorothea breathed. “He is here.”

“Your brother?”

“Indeed. Leave it to that bunch not to attempt even a simple locator charm. They can channel energies strong enough to tear this reality asunder, but ask them to find a man and they wouldn’t manage it if he were standing right behind them.”

Buffy stared at the witch, not knowing quite what to say. Dorothea, on the other hand, seemed to be paying her no attention, busyng herself instead with cleaning up the remnants of her spellwork as she continued to mutter something under her breath. Having finished, she cast an anxious glance in Buffy’s direction. “Dear, I hate to ask, but it seems that a bit of rescuing might be in order—would you be so kind?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Buffy answered with a shrug. “The day really hasn’t started until I’ve gone off to save someone from certain doom—not that your brother is facing any sort of doom,” she added quickly.

Dorothea gave her a thankful nod. “I had better explain the way to you, then. I shall call a coach, of course—there’s no reason we cannot be civilized—but I would prefer that you knew how to return, should anything unexpected arise.”
Buffy had never been good with maps, but she watched patiently as Dorothea pointed out their location and then explained to her all the best routes to take should she need to navigate between the two points on foot. It didn’t seem like it would be terribly far—five miles maybe—but Buffy genuinely hoped that they would be able to find another means of transportation to take them home besides their own two pairs of feet. Provided that Isaac still had feet by the time she got to him.

It looked as though her first day was about to get a lot more interesting.

***

Even if Buffy hadn’t gotten up so late, it appeared that she simply wasn’t destined to leave Dorothea’s house before dusk. Everything seemed to take so much longer when there weren’t cars and cell phones involved. By the time the coach had finally arrived, the sun’s last rays were just barely peeking over the tops of the neighboring buildings.

Buffy sat back against the seat and prayed that the two small knives with which Dorothea had outfitted her would prove to be enough against whatever she was about to face.

Upon discovering that Isaac was missing, her mind had immediately jumped back to Glory. But that couldn’t be right. Glory was Ben, and Ben couldn’t have been over thirty—for better or worse, Glory should be happily exerting a reign of terror over some unfortunate hell dimension for another century or so—still, Buffy found it difficult to let that initial pang of icy fear fall away.

But maybe there was nothing sinister about this whole thing at all, she mused. Perhaps Dorothea was just being overly paranoid and Isaac had simply decided to get some much needed R&R at the local pub. Buffy knew it was a stretch—from what she could surmise of the monks of the Order of Dagon, they didn’t seem like the type to overdo it on a pitcher of ale—but finding Isaac passed out under a bar was a much more appealing prospect than finding bits and pieces of him scattered around some deserted alley.

Just then, the coach came to an abrupt stop. Buffy peered out of the window. Even with her limited knowledge, it was pretty obvious that this was not one of London’s nicer areas. They seemed to be just about a block from the river, which, Buffy took note, did not smell good in the slightest. She had a feeling that she’d just found out exactly where the city’s sewage went.

The driver had hopped off his bench and was presently opening the door for her. She took his proffered hand and lowered herself to the ground with as much grace as she could manage in her gown.

“You quite sure this here’s where you’re lookin’ to go, Miss?” the dumpy man asked her uncertainly.

She shot him a nervous smile. “Looks like it.”

“Well, alright, then,” he replied, looking rather anxious to leave, with or without her. “The lady said I was to wait here for you, long as you needed. Do me a kindness and hurry, won’t you?”

“But don’t worry,” said Buffy, “I’m looking to get out of here just as quickly as you are. If I’m not out in fifteen minutes go without me. I mean it.”

The man nodded his head briskly, looking jumpier by the second, and Buffy turned towards the dilapidated house in front of her. How Dorothea had communicated to the driver that this was definitely the place was beyond her—each of the buildings on the street seemed to be just as run down as its neighbor and none bore any distinguishable marking.

She approached the entrance with measured steps and slowly reached for the door—suddenly, she
froze—footsteps were echoing on the other side and she could just barely discern the high-pitched sound of two women laughing. Buffy pressed her ear to the wood, straining to make out the words.

"—must be losing his touch," a tinkling voice carried through. "I never imagined torture could drag on this way—to think, it was actually getting boring—I really don’t see why we couldn’t have just eaten the poor bastard, but then I imagine that would lack the proper art—"

She sounded human. Must be vampires, then, Buffy concluded. How unoriginal. She was about to move away from the door before the sound of the second woman’s voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Impatient grandmother," it echoed eerily, "has no care for pretty pictures. Such lovely colors he had playing on his skin… lines going this way and that… he had the whole world drawn out on his belly…"

Buffy’s head spun. Drusilla. It had to be. But what were the chances? Maybe she was just imagining things—still, there were at least two vampires approaching, one of whom was potentially an unpredictable basket case—with no real weapons and a clueless civilian just a few feet away, this was not a risk she was willing to take. Buffy ran back to the coach and motioned frantically to the driver.

"Go! Go now—I’ll be fine!"

He eyed her warily. "Miss, I can’t say as it’s overly wise to—"

"No, you have to listen to me," she hissed. "You go now or I can promise you that this place will be the last thing you’ll ever see. I mean it. Go!"

It seemed that the man needed no further convincing—whether this was because he’d actually chosen to take her advice, or simply because he’d decided she was completely insane, Buffy would never know—but, shooting her one last alarmed glance, he turned in his seat and tugged on the reins. Buffy didn’t waste any more time. Turning back to the house, she crept around the side, hoping that the shadow would conceal her from view, just as a sharp snap of the reins and a quick rapping of hooves behind her signaled the departure of her comfortable ride out of this place.

She held her breath and waited. Any moment now, maybe-Drusilla and her companion would be exiting the house. Buffy racked her brain—now that she thought of it, the other woman’s voice had sounded a bit familiar as well, but she couldn’t quite place it—given the time period, Darla, maybe? This brought up still other possibilities, none of which Buffy really wanted to consider at the moment. They’d been talking about a third and, to the best of her knowledge, the only common factor between Darla and Drusilla could be—

"Angelus can take as long as he chooses with his pretty pictures," the first female voice rang out as the door burst open. One cursory glance was enough to confirm Buffy’s suspicions. Darla had just stepped out of the dark hallway, followed closely by no other than Drusilla herself. "And I won’t have you sniveling on about it," she said curtly. "You were perfectly welcome to stay and watch—no need to trail after me."

"Didn’t want to stay any longer," stated Drusilla glumly. "The holy man’s little spark has got Daddy’s head all turned around. And the fireflies were nipping at my eyeballs."

Darla let out an exasperated sigh and swung the door shut. A second later, the leisurely clicking of two sets of heels informed Buffy that the women had set a course down to the opposite end of the street. She exhaled a long-overdue breath as she slumped against the wall at her side.
Damn it. Of course, it was just her luck that she’d happen to run into the only three people in this century she definitely did not need to see.

Then her heart literally stopped.

Shit. Three. Please let it only be three. Because if there was a fourth—

No, no, no. She definitely did not need to deal with this right now. She focused hard, trying to remember—it was 1880—that meant it was a hundred and twenty-four years ago. What was it that Giles had said? Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Why is it that she could remember exactly how many birthmarks he had on his back, but not how old he was? Had she ever even known?

Buffy swallowed another deep breath. It was enough that she had to go up there and face Angelus, but if she walked through that door and saw—no, it wasn’t even worth thinking about it. She just had to do what needed to be done, and that was that. It wasn’t even as though she had to stake any of them. She couldn’t, what with the timeline needing to stay intact and all. She’d get in, figure out a way to grab Isaac, and get out. Simple.

She was certain, now, that she’d come to the right place. It remained to be seen exactly what Angelus would want with a monk, but she knew as soon as she’d passed through the heavy wooden door that Dorothea’s charm had not been mistaken. Softly, she padded through the small, litter-strewn room and crept up the dark staircase. A flickering light shone through the open door at the top of the landing and Buffy could hear soft whimpers emanating from within.

There was a heavy clang and then footsteps echoing across the wooden floor.

“You know, this is starting to become a bit tiresome, which, my friend, is a true compliment to your stamina,” a male voice drawled.

Buffy didn’t need to guess as to the source. The accent was strange—Irish, she supposed—but the tone was all too familiar.

She crouched down and peered around the corner of the doorjamb. Angelus stood only a few feet away, silhouetted against the light of a small fireplace. His hair was longer than she’d ever seen it, the clothes expectedly old-fashioned, but everything else was more or less the same. Not that she’d expected him to look any different—he was a vampire, after all.

Her eyes traveled further to land on the figure of another man, this one slumped against a chair and looking as though the ropes that wound around his midsection were the only things keeping him from sliding all the way down to the dusty floor. She imagined this to be Isaac.

Frantically, Buffy scanned the remainder of the room but, to her great relief, found it to be empty. Angelus was alone with the old monk. Her gaze returned to Isaac, this time taking a few moments to assess his injuries, which appeared to be numerous. Angelus must have been growing frustrated because he’d made a marvelous mess of the man’s exposed torso. Buffy’s eyes zoned in on a particularly nasty wound that still looked to be oozing quite liberally from its seared edges—an iron poker lay abandoned at Angelus’ feet—she thought it must have been the source of the loud clang she’d heard only moments ago.

Isaac was drawing labored breaths as his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Buffy really didn’t see him lasting much longer. It was time to come up with an exit strategy.

“You must realize, however,” continued Angelus leisurely, looking down at his prisoner, “that this will occupy only as much time as it must, no more and no less. On a regular day, I assure you, I
would have had no problem with more, but you—I’ve grown weary of your obstinacy—so, I shall lay the matter before you one last time.”

Isaac’s head drooped and he seemed to give little indication of attentiveness, but Angelus was apparently undeterred by this lack of enthusiasm.

“Now,” he growled, shoving a crumpled scrap of paper at Isaac’s face. “This, as the kind chap whom I ate explained, speaks of a Key. A Key that I’m meant to use in order to bring a glorious end to this world of ours. But, as you might imagine, I’m finding it rather difficult to perform my duty without the proper instrument. Once more, then, where is my Key?”

The monk expelled a wet cough and then, with what appeared to be great effort, lifted his chin to gaze into Angelus’ furious eyes. “And I shall tell you one last time, vampire;” he choked out through a mouthful of bloody saliva, “that the Key is not yours to wield.”

Angelus roared, sending the scrap flying to the floor, then whirled around to stalk towards the door. It seemed that he’d only meant to retrieve the poker, but as he kneeled down to pick it up, something else caught his attention. His nostrils flared violently and Buffy realized, with a sinking feeling, that she’d been discovered.

The vampire rose slowly, having abandoned the piece of metal, and stalked towards the door. The time to act was now, while she still had the element of surprise. Whatever Angelus was expecting, she doubted it was a Slayer.

Buffy closed her eyes and waited, her attention fixated on the approaching footsteps. Four feet. Three. Her leg whipped around the frame, catching Angelus across the shins. He went down with a resounding thud. This was her chance. Buffy grabbed for her knife and sprinted towards Isaac, hoping only that she’d be able to free him before the vampire had a chance to get to his feet.

She had just begun slicing through the first set of ropes when something grabbed her ankle and pulled. Hard. She twisted around to see Angelus crawling towards her, a licentious sneer stretching his lips.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” he purred. “That’s quite the kick you’ve got on you. Let’s see what else those legs of yours are good for.”

Buffy commanded herself to remain still and settled for shooting him a disgusted glare. “Been there, done that, got a good friend with a bunch of dead goldfish to prove it. I suggest you take your eyes off my throat and start worrying about your own.”

“And why would I do a thing like that?” he intoned, beginning a leisurely progression up her still supine body.

Buffy’s reply came in the form of a knee to his windpipe as she gracefully slid her legs from beneath his crumpling mass and returned to her previous activity.

“Get your hands off of my monk,” Angelus croaked as she cut through the last of Isaac’s bindings.

Buffy paid him no attention, focusing instead on the injured man. She wasn’t in a position to do any serious damage to her opponent, so her best bet was to keep him incapacitated long enough for them to make their escape. That and it only now occurred to her that she was very much not dressed for a fight. Mini-skirts were one thing, a full-on gown with a petticoat was entirely another.

“Can you walk?” Buffy asked Isaac urgently.
A second later she was forced to conclude that the answer to her question was “no,” since it wasn’t entirely obvious that the monk even acknowledged her presence. Panic setting in, she turned around to see Angelus rising to his feet. How the hell was she supposed to carry a man who was nearly twice her size while fending off a vampire whom she was not allowed to stake?

Her eyes swept the room before landing on a door leading to what looked to be a small chamber opposite her intended exit. There was even a nice bunch of shelving that might slow him down enough if impacted from the right angle. Now, if only she could get Angelus in there, perhaps she’d be able to trap him. She knew the door wouldn’t hold for long, but all she needed was enough time to make it out of the house… and then what? Where would they go? Sunrise was still hours away and, although Isaac’s feet where thankfully still attached, he didn’t appear to be much inclined to use them.

First things first, then. The need for transportation was quickly becoming overshadowed by Angelus’ fist careening towards her face. It had been a sloppy swing and Buffy caught his hand easily, squeezing until she heard his knuckles crack. She was running out of quick fixes—he wouldn’t underestimate her again.

“What in the bloody hell are you?” Angelus ground out, tearing his injured fist from her grip.

Buffy didn’t wait for another swing. Lunging forward, she sent the vampire reeling with a forceful upper cut to his solar plexus. “The Slayer,” she stated with artificial perk. “Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“That’s not possible,” Angelus scowled as he recovered and began to circle her with renewed purpose. “There’s no Slayer ‘round these parts. I would know if it were otherwise.”

“Well, I guess you must have missed the newsletter,” Buffy countered, mirroring his movements. Just another couple of feet to the left, and—“You’re welcome not to believe me, of course,” she continued casually, “I can still kick your ass just as hard, even if you happen to think I’m Britney Spears.”

A brief look of consternation crossed Angelus’ features—maybe it was the anachronistic pop culture references, or maybe he just wasn’t used to his opponents chatting him up—but the momentary distraction gave Buffy just the chance she was looking for. She moved forward suddenly, looking to land another punch, but it didn’t connect. Angelus blocked her assault, responding in turn, and she was forced to parry his blows, all the meanwhile moving further and further out of line with the open door she had so deliberately maneuvered him towards.

This wasn’t going nearly as smoothly as she would have liked, and it really didn’t help that, under any other circumstances, she would have already reached for a stake. As matters stood, her only offence was a good defense and good defenses didn’t tend to win many battles where speed was of the essence.

Buffy threw a high kick—oh God, was that a seam tearing?—and Angelus ducked, slamming her in the abdomen hard enough to render her momentarily breathless. She recovered quickly, launching her own attack, but it was obvious that she was only buying time. Right. It was time to remaneuver.

Angelus came at her with another powerful swing, which Buffy blocked before whirling around in hopes of recapturing their earlier position in line with the door. Just one good kick—

It appeared, however, she’d let her gaze linger on the door for too long. Angelus easily blocked her latest attack, caught her forearms, and deftly pinned them behind her back, making her wince at the unwelcome shoulder rotation as he pulled her flush against him.
“Rather disappointing, for a Slayer,” he hissed. “Still, I can’t say as I’d mind getting a taste of you, be you a Chosen One or no.”

Buffy’s body tensed against his. She knew they were both still feeling each other out. He was certainly not the same vampire she’d fought in her own time. Not yet, anyway, which made his moves and reactions frustratingly unpredictable.

She felt rather than saw his fangs descend as the sharp points pricked her neck. She’d been right in this, at least. The bastard still liked to play with his food. He was dragging it out on purpose, waiting to see what she would do. He’d be expecting her to resist eventually, of course, so she had to plan her next move carefully. Her one advantage rested in the fact that, even a hundred years in the past, she still knew him better than he knew her. She knew how to throw him off. Knew how to push his buttons.

“Darla not giving it up as well as she used to, huh?” Buffy murmured, sliding her mouth towards his ear. Quite deliberately, she forced her more perceptible muscles to relax. “Maybe your loony plan to destroy the world’s got her bored.”

With a twinge of satisfaction, she felt Angelus freeze against her. Then, his grip on her arms tightened and he pulled her even closer. Ugh. She highly doubted that was a roll of quarters in his pocket.

“Have you been tracking us, then?” he breathed menacingly. But she knew she’d achieved her purpose—this was not what he’d expected from her—it was only a matter of time before he let an opportunity slip.

“I have my sources,” she spoke softly. His fangs were still dangerously close to her jugular and she forced herself to swallow her resistance as she angled her head to fit better against his.

He was definitely curious now. His grip hadn’t loosened but she could sense that he was trying to anticipate her next move. This wasn’t her usual style but she felt like she’d run out of options. Her lips were just a breath away from his neck—if she could move her head just ever so slightly—

Buffy opened her mouth and bit down hard enough to draw blood. It worked. Angelus roared in anger and tore her away, struggling to keep his hold.

“Daft whore!” he sputtered. “What the—”

But Buffy had taken the advantage. She broke his hold on her with the double whammy of a powerful head butt and a sharp knee to the groin. Angelus staggered back, doubling over in pain, and her next kick sent him flying through the intended door and directly into the rickety shelving covering the wall. Goal.

Buffy dove for the door, slamming it shut, then sprinted over to drag Isaac to the floor and propped the chair against the knob.

It wouldn’t hold for long. The chair was heavy and the angle was good, but she was dealing with a healthy vampire. As soon as his pained wheezing subsided, Angelus wouldn’t waste much time getting himself out.

Something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. The scrap of paper the vampire had hurled away in anger was lying on the floor only a few feet away. Buffy wasn’t sure why she took the time to pick it up, especially when time was in such short supply, but she snatched up the crumpled leaf and stuffed it into her bodice—now she knew why the women in all those period films
kept doing that, because for all its complexity, her dress was severely lacking in pockets—and prayed that she wasn’t wrong. Maybe she’d just wasted a ton of precious seconds, but Angelus seemed to know about the Key and this piece of paper seemed to be the reason why.

Then, without another backward glance, she hauled Isaac onto his feet and draped his arm over her shoulder. He wasn’t a small man and, in his condition, he was pretty much all dead weight. It was thanks to pure adrenaline that she got him down the stairs and out of the house. Once outside, Buffy had no other choice than to begin moving as quickly as possible in the direction from which the coach had brought her. Maybe if they moved fast enough—

But, after only a few dozen feet, she was already gasping for breath as she strained under his cumbersome weight. The fight had tired her out more than she’d thought. At the rate they were going, they wouldn’t get very far at all before Angelus caught up with them. Buffy found herself dangerously close to pure panic.

Just then, she heard a burst of raucous laughter emanating from around the corner up ahead and, seconds later, a group of five men rounded the building at the end of the block—sailors, most likely, considering the neighborhood they were in—one of them was swaying slightly as he whipped off his hat and waved it in the air in imitation of some gesture with which Buffy was not entirely familiar.

“An’ then—would you believe it—they jus’ kept on—” the young man’s good-humored exclamation trailed off as his eyes fell on Buffy and her burden.

She knew a lifeline when she saw it.

“Please,” she called. “You have to help! This man is very hurt!”

They rushed forward immediately, surrounding her. “Come now, miss,” the same man who’d been shouting only moments before said in a much quieter and suddenly anxious tone. “Give ‘im here.”

Before she knew it, Isaac’s weight was being lifted off her shoulders by two of the other men and she found herself being guided to the side by the first.

“Please, you have to hurry,” she said to him quickly. “We have to go right now. The people that did this to him—they’ll be following.”

He nodded receptively, casting a glance in the direction of his companions.

“We can take him back to the pub,” one of them suggested in a low tone. The others grunted their approval, and, without any further discussion, they all set off.

Buffy trailed behind, accompanied by the man she’d spoken to. He seemed to be the youngest of the bunch and not at all bad-looking, as far as she could tell in the dark. They walked fairly quickly, but she noticed him shooting her concerned glances over his shoulder, which made her rather unnecessarily self-conscious.

“This chap any relation of yourn, miss?” he finally asked.

Buffy wasn’t really sure how to answer. Obviously, she’d never seen the monk before in her life, but she also figured being related to him might make getting them both back to Dorothea’s house a bit easier. “He’s my uncle,” she responded after a beat.

“I see,” the man said, not looking entirely convinced. “And how’d you happen to come across him lookin’ like this? A man of God, too, from the look of ‘im—say, you’re not hurt yourself, are you, miss?”
“No, no, I’m fine,” Buffy said quickly. “He… umm… he was trying to help some people, I think. Not a very friendly crowd. He’d been missing for a couple of days now and I thought I might find him there.”

“So you went alone?” he asked incredulously. “Why not call the police?”

Right. Because that would have made more sense. “They—uhhh—they wouldn’t have been able to help,” Buffy answered. That part, at least, was true. “Look, I just need to get him back to his sister’s—my aunt’s—house. That’s all. Could you please help me do that?” she looked up at him imploringly.

The man nodded briskly. “Sure thing. We’ll send for a coach right as we get to the pub. Reckon we ought to get the fellow patched up a bit while we’re at it.” He eyed her warily. “Jus’ tell me, miss. You ain’t involved in anything unlawful, are you? We’ll help you all the same, mind, wouldn’t do to leave a man bleedin’ in the streets like that. I’d jus’ like to know what I’m gettin’ myself into, is all.”

She gave him a sincere smile. He reminded her a bit of Riley, with the hair falling in his face like that… God, was this the night of boyfriends past? With a shudder, she resolved that she really hoped it wasn’t. When the hell was the Boxer Rebellion anyway?

Irrelevant. She so was not going there.

“No, nothing illegal, I promise,” she answered instead. “I really appreciate you guys helping us. Seriously.”

“Think nothin’ of it,” the young man waved his hand in response. “An’ here we are. Let’s get inside now.”

Buffy trailed after them into the pub. A fair bit of commotion followed but, eventually, someone was sent off to hire a coach and Isaac had been taken into the back room to get some his more conspicuous wounds bandaged. The barman’s wife had sat Buffy down with a cup of tea after she’d declined all of the establishment’s heartier offerings and they’d made a bit of small talk before the woman left to tend to some business.

Buffy was dozing off by the time her new friend approached her at the bar. The relief had washed over her like a warm current. She could hardly believe that she was actually sitting with a hot cup in her hands, rather than lying in a deserted alley somewhere, but she wasn’t about to question her luck.

The young man’s tentative hand on her shoulder pulled her back to the surface of her mind. “Coach’s all ready for you, miss,” he said gently as she shook herself awake.

“Thanks,” she turned around, smiling weakly. “Thanks for everything. Tell your friends I said thanks too. I wish I had something to give you, but—”

“Come now, miss,” he shook his head at her dismissively, “no need for that. I’ll take you to your ride. Your uncle’s already waitin’.”

He motioned her to follow and they made their way out of the pub to the coach parked just outside.

“Now, you jus’ tell the driver exactly where you need to go and he’ll take care of the rest,” he said, helping her into the cabin.

“Thanks again.” Buffy gave his hand a friendly squeeze.

“You’re most welcome,” he smiled back kindly, getting ready to shut the door. “Oh, miss,” he called
as she began to lean back against the seat. “I never did get your name.”

“Buffy Summers,” she replied simply. There didn’t seem to be any harm in telling him. She owed him that much, after everything.

His smile widened. “Sam Finnegan,” he nodded. “You have yourself a safe trip now, Miss Buffy Summers.”

With that, he gently closed the door and they were off.

Buffy never did see Sam Finnegan again. The odd coincidence of his surname struck her hours later, as she was lying in her bed in Dorothea’s guest room, and she smiled into her pillow. Then, sleep claimed her.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

Isaac had been nearly unresponsive the previous night when the driver had helped Buffy carry him into the house. Gretchen and Dorothea’s dismayed faces met them at the doorway. The following morning hadn’t brought much of a change, but Buffy noted that his breathing was steady and his heartbeat uninterrupted. It appeared that he might make a full recovery, after all, though when exactly this would come to pass remained to be seen.

Shortly after dawn, there came a knock on the door and they were greeted with the stern countenance of an elderly man whom Buffy mentally identified as another monk of the order. Dorothea seemed to know the man, because she promptly stepped aside to welcome him into the house.

“Do come in Miklos,” she said solemnly. “I was wondering when you might appear.”

Miklos stepped through the door gingerly, shooting Buffy an appraising gaze over Dorothea’s shoulder. “Yes, I came as quickly as I could,” he said. His speech carried the shadow of some accent Buffy couldn’t quite identify, her best guess being something East European. “Your message might have suffered to be a bit more specific.”

Gretchen had scuttled out of the room, prompted by a discreet gesture from Dorothea, and the older woman stepped aside to leave Buffy fully exposed.

“All in due time, I assure you,” she said curtly. “This is Miss Buffy Summers. She is responsible for Isaac bring returned to us with all integral faculties intact.”

Miklos’ dark eyes narrowed. “Then she is—”

“Yes.”

Buffy didn’t particularly enjoy being discussed in terms she had no way of understanding. It seemed, however, that Dorothea’s abrupt affirmation had succeeded in settling Miklos’ mind, because he gave her a gruff nod before turning to the witch once more.

“Shall we talk, then?”

“Yes, I suppose we shall,” Dorothea answered. “Follow me, please. I see no reason why we must have this discussion on the doorstep, keen to escape as you may be. Gretchen will fetch some tea and a bit of breakfast.”

She said nothing more, instead turning to walk determinedly down the long hallway in the direction of the parlor. Miklos eyed Buffy uncertainly for a few moments, but when she showed no inclination to be the first to move, he sighed and set out to follow Dorothea, his shoulders slumping tiredly.

Buffy trailed cautiously behind. The monk had done nothing to earn her mistrust but, then again, he’d done nothing to recommend himself as a definite ally either. She felt it might be better to reserve judgment until she got the guy’s whole story, one way or the other.

When all three had settled themselves into some sort of seat, Miklos spoke again. “I presume, from the calmness of your disposition, that Isaac is in no mortal danger?”

Dorothea folded her hands neatly before replying in a measured tone. “I believe we’ve ruled out mortality for the time being, but I do not pretend that his condition is superficial,” she said. “You may
see him, of course, but as he is currently resting, I thought that we might do well to see to some more pressing business.”

“Indeed,” said Miklos. “I trust that Miss Summers has been made privy to the situation, such as it is?”

But, privy or not, Buffy had had enough. The guy was starting to get to her, with his calculating looks and his apparent ignorance of the fact that she was endowed with a functioning organ of speech. “You know,” she cut in, before Dorothea had a chance to reply. “Miss Summers happens to be sitting right here and, seeing as how she didn’t just catch the last DeLorean from the future to play hired muscle, she’d really like some of those answers she’s been promised.”

Miklos’ initially astonished look quickly shifted into one of satisfied amusement. “Forgive me,” he replied with a new sort of awareness. “I should have assumed that you might be quite interested in the circumstances of your presence here. You are aware of our predicament, yes?”

Not allowing herself to be thrown off by the sudden change in his attitude, Buffy gazed at him carefully. “I’ve heard you’ve got a Key that needs guarding,” she said finally.

“Indeed,” the man nodded. “As I assume you are aware of the nature of the Key, I expect that you will also know that our order has taken on the task of its protection in this realm. You have been brought here because it seems that, just as we reach a rather critical moment, an apparent threat has arisen. Of course, there have always been those who would try to take hold of the Key—”

“Angelus,” Buffy concluded.

Miklos gave her a confused look, then continued. “Our chief opposition over the centuries has come in the form of the Knights of Byzantium. They do not approve our belief that the Key may be used on the side of good, thinking it simply too dangerous to persist. We have been monitoring their movements, of course, but I must admit I am unaware of the individual to whom you are referring.”

“I know about the Knights,” Buffy answered dismissively. “Big on the clangy armor and the will of God, but Angelus is a different story. Vampire. Majorly evil. Not so big on God. And, from the sound of it, he seemed to think that playing Picasso with Isaac’s body parts was a good way to get himself a nice Key.”

The monk blanched visibly. “Then he is the one responsible for our brother’s abduction?” His hand came up to run across the shadow of a beard that had begun to assert its presence on his wrinkled cheeks. “This cannot be a coincidence. It must have some relation to the disturbance in the subtle forces—”

“A vampire, Miklos?” Dorothea shook her head disbelievingly. “Come now, isn’t it much more likely that such a creature is simply after a bit of mayhem?”

“No,” Buffy cut in. “Not Angelus. And he was definitely after some big time world destruction.”

She reached inside her bodice, extracting the crumpled scrap of paper she had carefully stowed away there once more upon dressing. “Here, I took this from him. He seemed to think it said something about him being destined to use the Key to end the world.”

Miklos reached for the sheet, but Dorothea snatched it up before he had the chance. “You told me nothing of this last night,” she said to Buffy sternly.

“Last night, I was a bit more concerned with your brother’s insides not falling out,” Buffy returned with cool logic, and the witch’s expression softened.

“I apologize,” she said inclining her head in acknowledgment. “I meant no disrespect, nor to
diminish the value of your aid. However, it does seem to me that this is a matter that requires immediate attention. Here you are, Miklos,” she thrust the scrap in the monk’s direction. “See what you can make of this. I must say, I can generally tell my Greek from my Etruscan, but I can’t seem to read more than a few words of this.”

Miklos took the paper and squinted at its surface in consternation. “I’m afraid I’m forced to agree with you. This goes well beyond the scope of my abilities. There must be at least a dozen languages represented here…well, this bit here’s Latin, but then Phoenician, Sanskrit, Assyrian, Bantu, and—good Lord, is that Linear B?—I’m not entirely sure that all of these are even human. This would require some serious analysis,” he concluded finally. “We have the resources, I imagine, but you know well enough that Isaac is our best linguist, and the only one with any classical training. Without him, we are rather at a loss.”

“So, we wait for Isaac to wake up,” Buffy interjected. “I’d say we have enough to go on for now. If nothing else, I know Angelus, and to him temporal disturbances and a nice spot of torture are all in a good day’s work if there’s an apocalypse to be had. Until we find out otherwise, I think it’s safe to assume he’s our guy.”

Dorothea nodded, casting her gaze in the monk’s direction. “You are prepared to take on this duty, then?” Miklos inquired solemnly.

“Duty’s what I do best,” Buffy replied. “Now, where’s the Key? If we’re going to keep Angelus from it, we’re gonna need to make sure security’s as tight as it can be.”

“It is not quite so simple, I’m afraid,” said Miklos. “You see, the Key is not a static object that one can simply hold on to at one’s will. It flows through dimensions, appearing and disappearing as is required of it.”

Buffy raised her eyebrows in confusion before shooting a glance over at Dorothea, whose face she found to be unhelpfully blank. “Okay,” she said to Miklos. “So what does that mean, exactly?”

“It means,” the monk continued, “that the Key is not currently within the boundaries of our world. It was last used to close the gates between worlds centuries ago, when the last pure demon was slain, and it has remained absent since that time.”

“So, wait a second,” Buffy began uncertainly, “you’re telling me you guys don’t even have the Key? What the hell have you been doing all this time? I thought your gig was to guard it?”

Somewhere to her side, Dorothea shifted in an agitated fashion, but Buffy kept her eyes fixed on Miklos, who was presently giving her an extremely scandalized look.

“Our sworn duty,” he said with no small amount of forced patience, “is to safeguard the presence of the Key within this world in preparation for the moment when its power might be required by the forces of light. In this respect, whether or not the Key is physically present in our dimension is largely irrelevant.” This was met with a dissatisfied grunt from Buffy, but Miklos continued undeterred. “It falls on us to ensure that, at the slated time of its arrival, it is properly mediated and anchored, no more, no less. Until then, preparations must be made, records must be kept, and the line must be preserved. We are monks, my dear, our existence is hardly one of rousing action.”

Buffy thought that a more proactive approach might have been in order—all this sitting around and waiting for the Key to just appear seemed a bit hokey to her—but she decided she didn’t really have options that went beyond taking everything for what it was. If nothing else, at least Angelus wouldn’t be getting his hands on the Key any time soon, what with it being in a different dimension and all. Which gave her time to regroup and hopefully come up with something resembling a plan.
“Alright. Fine,” she said after a few moments of silence. “So we don’t actually have the Key, but neither does Angelus. That’s not a bad start. I assume you know when the Key is supposed to be—umm—arriving?”

“The Key will enter our world as the moon passes its meridian on the fall equinox, in the year of our Lord 1880,” Miklos recited, as if quoting something that had been imprinted onto his memory by years of rote memorization. “Or, more bluntly put, in about two weeks,” he added, noting Buffy’s confused expression. “It should manifest at the location known today as 28 Dean Street, which just happens to be our headquarters.

“Well that’s awfully precise,” she said with an edge of light sarcasm that she usually reserved for some of Giles’ more bookish statements. “And convenient. Did you guys get to, like, pick the place?”

“We did not, but we have had centuries to plan, after all,” said Miklos calmly. “I dare say, we managed to find an opportunity to determine the date and location of the most important event in the current history of our order—even to secure said location—all between bouts of doing nothing, as you so aptly classified our activities.”

Buffy was about to apologize for having apparently offended the man—far be it from her to insult someone else’s sacred calling when hers was mostly limited to stabbing things indiscriminately—but then she noted the thin smile that had formed on Miklos’ dry lips. Maybe the monk had a sense of humor after all.

“Fine, then, I’ll take your word for it. We’ll hash out the details of how to deal with this whole Key thing later, since I guess you’d better go take a look at Isaac and see if he’s made any progress towards joining the world of the awake,” she said, rising from her seat. “Although—one last thing— I’m guessing the Key won’t just pop out of thin air, so do you guys have, like, a ritual or something planned that I should maybe know about? Just so I have a general idea of what’s going to be involved here, in case Angelus decides to crash—”

Miklos had made to rise, then paused, before finally hoisting himself the rest of the way out of his straight-backed chair. “Yes, Miss Summers, there is a ritual of sorts, as there usually is with these things, but the mechanics of it all are always rather complex and contingent. You see, one does not summon the Key intentionally. Its progress is governed by cosmic laws more intricate than we can fathom, yet it requires a catalyst—” he sighed laboriously, seemingly focused on choosing his next words with care. “Our prophetic records indicate that on this occasion, a sacrifice will bring the Key into our world. A sacrifice of a soul willingly given in the name of love. We have many men who are willing to lay down their lives for this cause should it be required, but I am afraid that it may prove to be beyond our control. This kind of magic is complex precisely because it relies on something of an unknown variable. We will be ready to receive and mediate the key, but the rest is up to—well, it.”

With that, he turned and walked away in the direction of the stairs, barely taking note of Gretchen who’d finally entered the room with a tray full of biscuits and hot tea.

It took Buffy a moment to process what it was, in fact, that he’d said as she blinked mutely. “Wait,” she called after him, “what is that supposed to mean?”

***

Buffy walked along the street in carefully planned steps. She felt it was important that she give the general impression of grace and ease, tempered with the self-conscious caution of a proper woman.
walking the streets on her own after dark. Not one in need of aid, but also refraining from the sort of frivolous disregard that might give people the wrong idea.

She’d already received quite a few odd looks from passers-by—she’d read enough Dickens to know how unusual it must be for someone like her to be seen unaccompanied at any time of the day—but Dorothea had seemed to indicate that, while she might raise a few eyebrows, no one would haul her off to the nearest beadle for questioning. “You hardly look like a harlot,” she’d assured Buffy, “and there’s the whole lot of them that have been causing such a stir of late with their New Woman business, that you might easily pass for one of their number out for a bit of rebellious strolling.”

Buffy had taken Dorothea on her word and left just after dusk, dressed in her prim woolen gown and wrapped in a dark shawl. She hoped she looked presentable enough to be taken seriously and nondescript enough to pass mostly unnoticed.

The other cause for her current caution was the primary reason for her outing. Having been unsuccessful in extracting any further information from Miklos—it seemed the best that the monk could do was to assure her that they would take her to see the Great Mother the day after next—and grown tired of sitting around and waiting for Isaac to wake up, she’d opted for a bit of recon patrolling. The difficulty with patrolling, however, rested in the fact that she wasn’t actually allowed to slay anything.

Once she’d seen a long-haired man in a dark coat that she felt certain must have been Angelus. But, no sooner had she side-stepped around the corner of the neighboring building than the man had turned around to reveal a gaunt bearded face that definitely did not resemble anything even vaguely angelic. So, she walked, half hoping to stumble upon the vampire and his posse of the blonde and the crazy so that she might glean a bit more as to the nature of his plans, half praying that she’d be saved the inevitable futility of that encounter. She wasn’t dumb enough to get into another fight with Angelus—at least, not with the stipulation of also making sure that he’d walk away undead and relatively unscathed.

A coach rolled by and she caught the faint strain of women laughing, their tones light and carefree. It had been a long time since she’d laughed like that, she thought. No, in her corner of the universe, cares abounded. It didn’t help that she’d somehow found herself in a world over a century away from her own, not only no closer to the answers she’d sought when she walked through that portal, but apparently with a brand new set of potentially apocalyptic issues on her hands. Though, she supposed, the two weren’t necessarily unconnected. Giles had been concerned about Dawn, or specifically her Keyness, and the Key was just the thing at stake here.

It was a stretch, but maybe whatever temporal funkiness was floating around Angelus and his sudden desire to end the world was somehow connected to what was going on back in her time. Granted, Angelus being bent on an apocalypse wasn’t anything to write home about. But, if his involvement in this whole Key extravaganza was part of the regular time line, she was pretty sure there would have been some record of it in one of Giles’ musty old books. Or the world would have been sucked into hell before she even existed to worry about it.

On the other hand, if Angelus—or, Angel, more like—was the true Champion and had some super special role to play in the coming apocalypse, in which, no surprise, the Key was also slated to make a flashy cameo appearance… damn it. It was all making her head hurt. She was only supposed to be here for information. That’s it. This was arguably worse than being nearly assaulted by a cloud of evil smog while three old guys banged their sticks. At least then she’d been given some kind of knowledge. Not overly encouraging knowledge, but still.

There had to be someone in this century who knew what the hell was going on, Buffy resolved as
she crossed the street, sidestepping an opportunely placed pile of horse manure. She really needed to get this Key thing taken care of, find the alleged guidance about the Old Ones that she’d been promised, and get her ass back to the future before this place gave her tuberculosis or cholera or something.

However, before she could further evaluate her chances of dying from something that they’d stopped vaccinating against before she’d been born, Buffy spotted a familiar figure skulking in the shadow of a brightly lit house only about a hundred yards ahead. She’d wandered onto what seemed to be a rather lively bit of street. Nicely kept coaches were routinely stopping by the large doors of a nearby residence and depositing small groups of exquisitely dressed passengers before rolling away once more. Most likely she was witnessing what passed for a good party in these parts.

Buffy cautiously made her way towards the entrance to get a closer look. A group of people had paused by the side of the door, apparently waiting for the last of their party to make her way out of the car. She took care not to get close enough to catch any unwanted attention and their bodies provided her with just enough cover to get a good look at her lurking target. She’s been right. Angelus stood leaning against the side of the building, a bit further along the stone wall, silently observing the arrival of the guests. The woman inside the carriage seemed to be taking her time, for which Buffy was monumentally grateful. From the lady’s dissatisfied exclamations, it seemed that her bustle had become misarranged.

Just as Buffy was evaluating her next course of action, another coach pulled up behind the one containing the unfortunate victim of what was clearly a major wardrobe malfunction. A single figure gracefully stepped out of the cabin, aided by the firm hand of her driver. Buffy paid little attention to this new arrival, however. Much more interesting than the woman herself, whom Buffy had peripherally identified as simply being dark haired and conventionally shapely, was Angelus’ reaction to her. He was eyeing the lady with a leisurely attentiveness as she daintily paraded across the sidewalk and though the door, which had been held open in wait of her.

As soon as she’d passed out of sight, Angelus slowly moved from his post at the wall towards the entrance. He stopped to utter a few words to the doorman, who initially appeared not at all inclined to grant the vampire admission. Buffy moved a bit closer, intent to keep her eye on Angelus. Over his shoulder the saw the man’s eyes widen before he pulled the door open with jerky movements, mumbling something indistinct as Angelus swept inside.

She really had a bad feeling about this. Most likely, Angelus had simply taken a fancy to having the recently arrived lady as a light snack. This, of course, didn’t really make Buffy feel much better, but it probably fell under the long list of things she was powerless to stop without wrecking the timeline. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something more sinister might be at play here. There’d been something in the vampire’s dark eyes—a sort of maniacal determination—that made her profoundly nervous.

She waffled momentarily, shifting from foot to foot. Crashing a party hadn’t been on her agenda for the night and it hardly seemed like it could lead to anything but extreme badness, but she was fully aware that walking away was pretty much out of the question at this point. With a deep breath, Buffy made up her mind. Gracefully, she sidled up with the small group of guests who, having been joined by their last member, were finally making their way toward the entrance. She was worried that the doorman might stop her, but he seemed far too shaken to notice much of anything, and the woman with the inordinately large bustle was creating such a distraction by repeatedly patting the back of her dress that Buffy slipped through without attracting so much as a stray glance. She barely had time to consider what a terrible idea this truly was before she spotted the back of Angelus’ head disappearing amidst the crowd. Ignoring the whining strains of the chamber orchestra, she stamped down her better judgment and stepped into the large hall.
Needless to say, she stuck out like a badly mutilated thumb. Her neat day dress clashed badly with the evening gowns worn by the other women, and she was all too aware of the scandalized looks she was presently receiving from the surrounding groups of finely outfitted guests. Probably, she looked like the help. Buffy made her way around the outer edges of the room, trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible in hopes that she might find Angelus and ascertain precisely what he was up to before getting thrown out on her ass. A servant carrying a tray of hors d’oeuvres moved swiftly past her, pausing just long enough to shoot her a distinctly patronizing look before moving on. But Buffy was not to be deterred. Her eyes swept over the room, searching for Angelus’ dark form. She took a few tentative steps towards the center of the hall, moving past a particularly large circle of men and women engrossed in lively conversation. And then, her eyes landed on her quarry.

Crap. He was heading right for her.

Buffy whipped around —

And suddenly found herself smack against a wall of brown tweed.

Double crap.

The gentleman she had tackled was already apologizing profusely, as though it was his fault she’d just decided to bulldoze her way directly through his chest. She summoned up her best imitation of ladylike Victorian manners and lifted her gaze to her unfortunate victim.

Her eyes locked with a sea of piercing blue. The half-formed apology froze in her throat.

There were high cheekbones set in sharp relief against a frame of sandy hair. A slightly weak chin. Full lips and a well-defined jaw line. The floor seemed to have dropped out from under her as she stared, the stalled breath burning her throat.

It couldn’t be.

Except—

It totally was.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

As much as she’d dreaded it over the past couple of days, she’d hardly expected to find herself face to face with him now. Not here. And especially not like this. But perhaps she was just imagining things. Not that she’d had prior experience, but time travel was bound to do all sorts of funky stuff to your brain.

Like make you see dead vampires parading around as Victorian bourgeoisie.

Okay. Step one, open mouth. Step two, produce words. Whoever this guy actually was, that particular question was quickly becoming irrelevant in light of the fact that he was currently looking at her like she was completely insane.

“I’m really sorry—I had no idea there was anyone behind me—” Buffy stammered ungracefully.

That seemed to do the trick, however. His questioning gaze was quickly replaced by an apologetic smile.

“Please, think nothing of it.” The accent was different—lighter, more refined—but there was no mistaking the voice. “I had no intention of shocking you so. And now we’re both rather flustered—would you like something to drink? To sit, perhaps?”

“Oh—no—I’m fine. Thank you,” Buffy answered in the calmest tone she could muster. Her head felt like it had become an entity wholly apart from her body. A hot prickling ran along the back of her skull and she felt like passing out was not entirely out of the question.

She scrambled to gather her thoughts out of the searing stupor that seemed to have overcome her brain. God, it felt like someone had jammed a hot poker through her spinal column. Poker. Metal. Spike. She forced herself to focus—time to go—there was something majorly bizarre going on here and if this man was really Spike, which was beginning to seem likelier by the second, then Buffy was fairly certain that becoming best friends with him was not at the top of the list of ways to preserve the timeline.

“I don’t believe I have the pleasure of your acquaintance, Miss—”

Triple crap.


“Ah! Anne is my mother’s name—how lovely!” He seemed genuinely pleased and Buffy silently congratulated herself on her quick, if unoriginal, nomenclature. “William Pratt, pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise. But I—”

“You must be American, yes?” William Pratt didn’t seem quite ready to abandon the conversation. He readjusted his spectacles—holy shit, spectacles!—and gazed at her with an eager expectancy. “Would you be visiting here, then? Some family, or acquaintances perhaps?”

“Something along those lines,” said Buffy, giving him a forced smile. At least he hadn’t assumed she was the new governess or something. “I’m sorry William, but I should really go —”

“Say no more!” He exclaimed. “I do believe I’ve delayed you with my chattering—you must have
been in quite the rush. Are you leaving already?”

“No—yes!” She was back to the stammering. “There’s—there’s someone I really need to find…”

“Well, perhaps I can be of some aid to you, then. To make up for my clumsiness. Who is this person you seek?”

“I don’t think you’d know him.”

“Are you quite certain?” he insisted hopefully.

Buffy shifted uncomfortably. Her brain zigzagged around the connections. William—William the Bloody—it matched up, but the epithet hardly seemed applicable to the man standing before her.

He was thinner, which was surprising, really, since she’d found it hard to believe that Spike could get much thinner. Even through the—and, oh God, was that actually a six-piece suit?—it was obvious that William’s body lacked the layers of sculpted sinew that had lent Spike’s compact frame its deadly force. His face was softer, less hollow, its lines more forgiving. The scar was gone, or rather not yet there. But it was his eyes that made the biggest difference. The same eyes that had, at first sight, startled her with their familiarity seemed, upon second glance, to belong to an entirely different man. They were open and trusting—a bit melancholy perhaps, but innocent—these were not the eyes of a killer, nor were they the eyes of a sinner repenting.

All the meanwhile, William continued to observe her with uncertain anticipation. Her silence seemed to have unnerved him. A fretful hand came up to adjust his tie as he awaited her response.

_Baby, I’ve always been bad, my ass._

“Yes. Thank you, William. It’s been nice talking to you—” She plastered on her kindest expression, willfully ignoring the wide array of thoughts, questions, and uncertainties that were currently doing laps around her brain. Part of her really had no desire to leave—not when she’d just found… what?—which, in fact, made said leaving all the more imperative.

William acknowledged her decision with a slight nod. “You as well, Miss Giles. I do hope I shall see you again,” he said, a bit of disappointment creeping into his tone. But it was the tentative smile that accompanied this polite farewell that almost stopped her heart. If any doubt had remained as to the identity of this William Pratt, it had just been shattered by a tilt of the head and a gentle quirk of the lips.

She had to get out of there. _Now._

For lack of a more tactful exit, Buffy simply turned on her heel and rigidly headed for the other end of the room. When had it gotten so hot? She forced herself to keep walking and, more importantly, breathing. Damn gown.

How the hell had she ended up at a party with Spike? No. Not Spike. Definitely not Spike. The man she had just left befuddled, staring after her, was very much alive and breathing. She wondered when it would happen. How would this man die? Spike never had told her the real story and Giles’ books hadn’t been terribly specific on the details of his life prior to his debut as William the Bloody, slayer of Slayers.

In any case, no amount of prior knowledge could have been enough to prepare her for the sudden reality of him standing in front of her. She faintly realized that she’d never even given Spike’s human self all that much thought. What little he’d told her had led her to picture him as some pre-modern punk—a criminal, most likely—who’d scraped a living on the streets before his inability to keep his
pants buttoned landed him on the business end of Drusilla’s fangs. His lack of a perceptible character shift, post-soul, had only confirmed her assumptions. He was quieter, sure, and a bit more serious maybe, but there were other moments when she forgot the difference.

Of course, she’d long since gotten past the whole dual personality thing. If she were honest with herself, she could admit that Angel was closer in kind to Angelus than to the gallant knight of her starry-eyed teenage conceptions. Willow, too, had proven that a soul wasn’t enough to stop her from wreaking more bloody havoc than her bizarro-word vampire counterpart had ever dreamt of. Still, accepting that Spike’s character was the product of a natural evolution, rather than some soulless vampiric template, didn’t go a long way towards making the idea of his origins in that soft-spoken man any more palatable.

Buffy shook off the troublesome thoughts. Odd as the encounter had been, she couldn’t afford to let it become an issue. She wasn’t here for Spike—no, William—she wasn’t here for William, whoever this William even was. In fact, if events were coalescing in the proper way, it seemed that the above distinction might get a lot blurrier in the very near future, what with Drusilla trailing after Angelus like a rabid puppy —

Angelus.

She scanned the room, silently reprimanding herself for getting so distracted. Granted, she didn’t know if she was technically allowed to prevent him from eating any of the party-goers and she doubted that he was going to find the Key in one of the champagne glasses. Still, keeping an eye on him had been the entire purpose of her little outing.

She finally spotted the vampire in a distant corner of the room, chatting up a vaguely familiar buxom brunette. Buffy sighed. It would really have helped if someone would just explain this whole time-travel thing to her. She didn’t want to inadvertently bring about World War III by preventing a random girl from being eaten, but standing by and doing nothing just felt wrong. Plus, she’d probably already messed something up by clocking this much face-time with Angelus and now Spike. Although, she hadn’t begun fading into nothingness, so that was probably a good sign.

Satisfied with having located her target, she allowed her eyes to drift around the room once again before they settled inevitably on William, who had retreated to a distant corner on the opposite end of the hall and now stood leaning against some innocuous piece of furniture. The expression on his face was oddly troubled, his eyes glued to—Angelus. Buffy blinked. Unless her appraisal of him had been very much mistaken—no, it just didn’t make any sense—what business could this human William have with Angelus?

And then she understood. William watched intently as the curly-haired woman tossed her head and giggled coquettishly at her looming conversation partner. The hard set of his jaw told Buffy she wasn’t the only one banking on this woman’s ladylike sensibilities to prevent her from sneaking off into a dark corner with a stranger. As if on cue, the brunette gave her coiffed curls a satisfied pat and reached for Angelus, evidently ready to continue their tête-à-tête someplace more private. With dainty movements, she snaked her bare arm around his elbow and turned to lead him towards a dimly lit archway. Her lips curled in what looked oddly like a sly smirk as she appraised the room before her, her head angling upwards as she mouthed indecipherable words to the tall vampire. There was something familiar about this woman—but there couldn’t be. She was just some long-dead—possibly as of this very night, if that proper Victorian prudery didn’t surface soon—member of the minor aristocracy, reasonably pretty but otherwise unremarkable.

Though William certainly seemed to disagree, Buffy thought begrudgingly.

Still, Spike’s questionable taste in women aside, there was definitely something uncanny about the
particular woman now weaving her way through the crowd as she continued to chatter away in the
direction of Angelus’ unreadable face. She moved with a comfort unbefitting a well-born lady who
was about to sneak away with a man she barely knew. Buffy wondered if she did this often. So
much for everyone being good and repressed in this century.

Just then, the woman reached up to fondle something around her neck. A long silver chain swept
down the curve of her breasts, weighed heavily by an amulet that rested just below her bosom. The
curls framing her face bounced as she laughed and tossed her head with annoyingly artificial flair.

And for the second time that night, Buffy stood frozen with the shock of sudden recognition.

What the hell was this? A convention?

How was it that everyone she knew—at least everyone who had been alive for over a century, and
she wasn’t even going into how messed up that sounded—was suddenly congregating at a house
party in late-Victorian London.

Because that was definitely Halfrek.

Who else did she know that was alive right now? Anya? Mayor Wilkins? She was pretty sure the
latter was on the other side of the globe starting a town but, the way this night was going, she
wouldn’t have been at all surprised to suddenly find the former chatting up some socialites on the
virtues of laissez-faire economics.

Okay, new question: what the hell kind of business could Halfrek have with Angelus? That couldn’t
possibly be good. Buffy highly doubted that the vampire was just in the market for some good ol’
vengeance—not as if that particular thought was really any more comforting.

And, apparently, she hadn’t been the only one who noticed Halfrek’s departure. Buffy watched in
horror as William detached himself from the spindle-legged table he had been resting against and
warily trailed after the couple.

Quadruple crap with even more crap on top.

Whatever Halfrek and Angelus were up to, she had no interest in William joining the party.
Especially not when she had a feeling that the highlight of said party might be her beating the not-so-
living daylights out of all attending members. With a frustrated sigh, Buffy carefully made her way
toward the corner around which the three persons of interest had just disappeared. Another round of
outraged looks accompanied her as she jostled through the many small circles of guests littering the
hall. She silently cursed herself for having wandered so far into the center of the room.

Ducking into the archway, Buffy found herself in an unlit hallway. Perhaps this was an unused part
of the house? Or else a way into the servants’ quarters? In any case, it seemed just secluded enough
to be ripe for trouble. Buffy quickened her step, careful to minimize the click of her heels on the bare
floor. Finally, and not a moment too soon, she rounded another corner to see an anxious William stop
and start a few times before gingerly heading for the room into which she presumed the other two
had already ensconced themselves.

Screw it. Timeline be damned, she couldn’t let this very human man confront an apocalypse-happy
vampire and an active vengeance demon. Plus, this didn’t seem like his night—the company was all
wrong. Darting further into the dim hallway, she reached for his arm.

Her grip didn’t connect right away, which was just as well because she immediately thought better of
her action, realizing that eliciting a loud yelp was not in either of their best interests.
“William!” she hissed instead. Her hushed whisper was enough to bring a stop to the soft tapping of hurried footfalls resonating from just a few feet ahead.

“Who’s there?” an uncertain voice replied.

“Shhh. William, you can’t be back here. Let’s go back to the party!”

“I’m afraid I disagree. I believe there is a lady here who is in urgent need of assistance.”

At least he was talking more quietly now, his voice involuntarily mimicking the soft hiss of her tone. Buffy took a steadying breath before continuing insistently. “No, she doesn’t need your help, trust me. Go back. I’ll take care of it.”

“Miss, I don’t know who you are, but I do believe it is you who should not be here.”

Well, with his back turned, at least he hadn’t recognized her. “Look, I don’t have time to do this,” she reached out, following her earlier impulse to grab a hold of his arm, and pulled. “Please just go.”

“Please unhand me!” William scolded her with an equal level of annoyance.

He struggled lightly against her hold, turning to head further towards the crack in the door ahead. Buffy’s grip tightened on the soft woolen fabric covering his arm. She really needed to get him out of here so she could find out what Angelus and Halfrek were up to. Maybe she was being overly paranoid, but she had the feeling there was more going on here than a demonic nookie session. If she focused, she could hear soft tones emanating somewhere from within the dimly lit room. It seemed that the mostly-shut door was enough to muffle the commotion she and William were causing, but this also meant that she was no closer to being able to hear what the two were actually saying.

William, in the meantime, appeared to have had just about enough. Tired of ineffectually pulling against her vise-like hold, he turned to her with a huff of exasperation. But, just as he opened his mouth for what was promising to be an extremely loud reprimand, the voices on the other end of the door grew louder and Buffy heard two sets of footsteps as a shadow loomed against the sliver of light along the door jamb.

“Angelus, you should know that’s really none of my concern,” Halfrek simpered haughtily.

William seemed to have noticed this as well, because he abandoned his intended exclamation to listen to the pair.

“Well, I just thought that you might have an interest in the matter. Never knew a vengeance demon to pass on such a good bit of destruction. You should know as well as anyone what’s at stake here,” Angelus’ Irish-tinged baritone rumbled in return.

She had to do something. *Like, right now.*

Running was out of the question. Even if she managed to drag William along without his protests blowing her cover, they had nowhere to go but into the light where Angelus would surely recognize her before she had a chance to disappear. A confrontation would be bad, but a public confrontation would be much worse.

No, they’d have to take cover and hope for the best. Without another thought, Buffy swiftly pulled William towards her and into the shallow alcove surrounding a nearby window. Taken by surprise, his body teetered off balance as she thrust him against the narrow corner. The recess of the wall might nominally conceal them and, if it came to it, she could protect him from any initial attack. William’s surprised grunt of protest was silenced by her hand on his mouth as she pressed herself...
against him.

“Yes, yes,” Buffy heard Halfrek answer, her voice now clearly audible as the nearby door swung open. “But we justice demons are creatures of the human realm. What interest have we in the destruction of that which sustains us?”

“My mistake then, I’ll let you return to your—work.”

Buffy knew that even if dim light of the hallway managed to hide them from Angelus’ eyes, his nose was unlikely to be similarly deceived. Her only hope was that they might seem inconspicuous enough, and he perhaps too distracted, to warrant his direct attention. Excepting their slightly unorthodox positioning, they could easily have been just another couple indulging their forbidden passions.

Fortunately, William seemed to be obliging—at least for the time being. Buffy guessed that being caught in a closed off part of someone else’s house, with a strange woman, spying on a different woman in whom he apparently had some interest was not his idea of a fun night. Or maybe it was. Unaware as he was of any impending danger, perhaps this seemed something like an unexpected adventure. His body had relaxed against hers somewhat. The surprise had drowned out his initial irritation. Now he seemed to be waiting with interest for whatever might come next.

“Quite right,” Halfrek’s voice rang out, “since you don’t seem to be rising to the occasion of play…”

They were only a few yards away now. Buffy’s mind raced. At the worst possible moment, it was suddenly dawning on her that she now stood pressed flush against the all-too-familiar proportions of William’s frame. His face was inches away from hers and she realized that she’d just fallen face-first across a very important psychological boundary.

She didn’t know if it was just the dreadful suspense of the situation that was making her brain run haywire in all sorts of inappropriate directions. All of a sudden, the gross physical awareness of him was battling for dominance against her instinctual sense of the approaching enemy, forcing its way into the periphery of her consciousness like an insistent glimmer of curiosity. She had experienced the rapid rise and fall of his chest before—marveled, despite herself, at the gasps of unnecessary breath coursing through the lifeless body thrumming against hers—but this was new. Now, his breath was hot on her face and his heart thundered in tempo with her own in a resounding thump, thump, thump.

Still—no—she had to focus. Halfrek seemed to be going on about the innumerable merits of walking amongst the throng of humanity, as she had just put it, while Angelus had fallen into silence. Buffy hoped despite all odds that the vengeance demon’s babbling was holding at least some of his attention. No more than a yard or two away now, and yet their movement continued uninterrupted. Not the slightest sign of a hitch to indicate their awareness of an unwelcome presence. But it would come—she was sure of it.

Clip clop. Clip clop—shoes resounded against the tiled floor. Buffy could hear the soft swish of Halfrek’s gown. Feel the slight vibrations in the air as two bodies passed through it, moving ever closer.

Was she actually trembling or was it just her skin prickling from the inside? No time to contemplate. She held her breath as the other pair passed through the darkness behind them, and William mimicked her arrested silence. Waiting. Listening to the rhythmic knock of footsteps and Halfrek’s airy laugh resonating against the walls of the hallway.

And then, just like that, it was over. The movement had been behind them, and then it had gone, the
voices becoming more distant as the tapping of two sets of heels drifted around the corner and down
the narrow passage. Somehow, unbelievably, inexplicably, they’d been left alone.

Warm relief rushed through Buffy’s body. The breath returned to her lungs and she gasped quietly,
sensation spreading through her extremities as if for the first time. Against her, William’s form
remained taught, though unresisting. The fuzzy exhilaration of being suddenly safe had
spontaneously mingled with the visceral euphoria of finding herself sinking into the solidity of him.

Without really meaning to, she leaned closer. His scent assailed her. Somewhere in her subconscious,
she had half-expected cigarettes and leather, but instead she found musky gentleman’s cologne,
warm wool, and a metallic tinge of ink. And then, further down, beneath all that, lurked something
that was strictly his. Something that made her stomach clench and every nerve in her body sing out,
Spike!

The tinkling sound of what must have been Halfrek’s laughter still filtered into her ear, but it didn’t
matter now because that was all miles and miles away. In the faint glow of the adjacent window, her
eyes lingered on the smooth outline of William’s cheek. This was utterly bizarre, if she let herself
think about it for half a second. Here she was with a total stranger—but Buffy didn’t think.

He was Spike. Tweedy, bespectacled, and alive, but it was him. In the dark, it was easy to forget the
differences. Even the apparent contradiction of his hot breath could be overlooked in favor of how
his body felt pressing against hers. Was it her imagination or was he leaning into her now ever so
slightly? She wished she could know what he was thinking. Wondered if he felt the same electrifying
current flowing between them or if it was all just in her head.

But a subtle acknowledgment of what, exactly, was going on was beginning to dawn on her. Of
course not, she admonished herself, he doesn’t know you. She looked up at him nervously, but his
eyes were shrouded in the shadow of the windowpane. Oh God—what was she doing?

Faintly aware of her own shallow breathing, she was suddenly grateful for the multiple layers of
clothing that separated her from the man she was currently doing her best not to climb like a ladder.
Hi, I’m a sex-crazed hussy. Ask me how!

She shifted slightly, her hips unintentionally rolling against his through the thick fabric of her dress
and petticoat. His truncated gasp sent shivers rolling down her spine.

This man is not Spike. This man is not Spike.

Except there wasn’t a single cell in her body that seemed to believe or care. Suddenly she was
painfully aware of the soft warmth of his lips against the palm of her hand. The gentle tickle of air on
her knuckles. Mesmerized, she ran her fingers across his mouth before trailing the suddenly shaky
hand down his chest to rest over the pounding center of his heart.

He hadn’t moved. Hadn’t spoken. And some foolish part of her looped around the irrational notion
that perhaps he knew her after all. That somehow, in some absurd way, he wanted this as much as
she did.

It was the hissed exhale he let out when her palm splayed out across his ribs that did her in. Timeline
be damned, Buffy closed her eyes against the murky darkness and pressed her lips against his,
praying to whoever was listening that she might savor this one beautiful moment before his inevitable
indignation shattered the illusion.

William’s hands shot up to roughly grip her biceps and he stood unmoving against her. The next
second seemed like an eternity as she waited in trepidation for him to push her away.
A beat.

And then, his mouth softened against hers in tentative acceptance.

Buffy panicked. Utterly and incomprehensibly. Torn between the logical impulse to pull away and run and the incongruous need to prolong this sliver of contact for as long as possible, she found herself dropping frenzied butterfly kisses, now here, now there. Through the agitated humming of her own mind, she felt William hesitate against her briefly before finally locking his mouth onto her fluttering lips.

It wasn’t hesitant, exactly, but controlled, in more ways than one. She knew he was trying to soothe her agitated movements, but it seemed that he too was walking a thin line between wild alarm and forced composure. It was a fumbling bit of contact, but there was something unqualifiedly raw and familiar in the caress of his mouth—it was only the warmth that threw her. If not for that, she could have been kissing him. She nipped at his bottom lip, leaving behind a moist trail as she traced its full curve. Their tongues met in a tentative stroke. He tasted of warm spice and smoky tea leaves and just a breath of cognac. His fingers, still loosely grasping her biceps, fluttered lightly before cautiously traveling down to her waist as if to pull her closer.

This was a really, really bad idea. If asked what exactly had driven her to initiate the kiss, Buffy doubted she could have produced a coherent answer. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that her brain was currently on its way to becoming jumbled emotional mush. The only thing that still seemed to matter in this moment was the intoxicating presence of Spike-lips. Supple and yielding lips of Spike. Except, no, not Spike. William. Whom she technically did not know, and who definitely did not know her.

It suddenly came to her that her Spike would have found this assault on his human self marvelously hilarious. Of course, her Spike was currently a pile of dust on the bottom of a very large crater and the human man in front of her had no idea that he was acting as an impromptu stand-in for her dead lover. She really had to stop this. Aside from whatever temporal havoc she was on her merry way to wreaking, this man did not deserve to end up on the receiving end of her horny neuroses. Now, if she could just manage to convince her lips that it was time to cease and desist, everything would be jim-dandy.

Fortunately, William had apparently chosen that exact moment to save her the trouble by making the decision for her. With something like a lingering reluctance, he broke the kiss, inclining his head to gaze at her. The new angle cast just enough silvery moonlight across his face for her to discern his expression.

Maybe it was only the shadows playing cruel tricks on her, but for a beautiful moment she thought she saw that familiar look of awe settle across his features. She didn’t have time to reevaluate, however, because a second later whatever expression might or might not have been there was decidedly replaced by one of tight-lipped consternation. She felt the hands that had settled on her waist lightly drawing her body away from his.

“Miss Giles—” Shit. “—it’s not that, err, that is to say—there may be different cultural—” His hoarse whisper echoed in the now empty alleyway. As though waking from a dream, his expression had slowly shifted from something rapt, to one of confusion, before settling into a look of mild concern. “You are feeling quite alright? A lady such as yourself—”

She slid her hands from his neck, resting them on his forearms where they framed the distance between their bodies.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” she wavered, trying desperately to figure out whether she
was indeed feeling quite alright. And, even more importantly, what exactly she was going to tell him. 
Explaining that he had nearly walked in on a vampire and a vengeance demon—she imagined that 
even if he somehow knew Halfrek, surely he couldn’t know who she really was—well, that didn’t 
seem like the most solid plan. She settled for ambiguity. “I only thought that you shouldn’t, uhh, you 
shouldn’t interrupt.”

He looked a bit sheepish now. “Yes, yes, you’re probably quite right. I only thought that perhaps 
Miss Underwood hadn’t really considered—well, clearly my services were not needed. What was it 
they had been discussing? Such terribly queer talk—” William paused, looked down, grasped her 
elbows somewhat gingerly, and then withdrew his own arms from hers. “But it seems that, after all, it 
was I who have ended up putting a lady’s honor in jeopardy. I’m terribly sorry.”

He was now backing away from her with an air of apprehension. But Buffy was glad that, at the 
very least, he wasn’t posing any uncomfortable questions about the precise nature of a vengeance 
demon, or a justice demon, or whatever the most politically correct appellation actually happened to 
be. With any luck, he would just carry on the time-honored tradition of selective memory adhered to 
by so many of her acquaintances. She figured that, either way, she’d done enough damage for the 
night. It was time to make her exit.

“No, it’s my fault. I don’t know what came over me—champagne maybe,” she lied, hoping that her 
tone sounded lighter than it felt. Under the circumstances, playing the tipsy American coquette was 
probably her best bet. “I should really head home before I get myself into too much more trouble.”

He cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, yes. I imagine it is getting quite late. Perhaps I 
should follow your example. Mother must be worried—” he murmured, focusing rather intently on 
some invisible object just to the right of her head and generally doing his best to avoid her gaze.

“Why don’t, uhhhh, why don’t I go ahead of you? It’ll look more proper if we don’t suddenly 
reappear together.” She offered him a strained grin. If anyone was going to be the first to follow 
Angelus out of here, it should be her.

“Yes, I suppose that is prudent.” William shuffled again, as though there was something more he 
wanted to say, but finally seemed to decide against it. “Good night, Miss Giles.” He bowed his head.

“Good night,” Buffy replied, feeling just as out of sorts as he had sounded.

She slid past him awkwardly and headed briskly down the hall, newly aware of how loudly her 
footsteps echoed against the narrow walls. She’d probably lost Angelus for the night, but at least she 
could reasonably convince herself that he wasn’t up to anything terribly diabolical just yet. Ducking 
back into the brightly-lit reception area, she scanned the crowd. It had thinned a bit in the short time 
she’d been gone. It really must have been getting late. Sure enough, Angelus was nowhere to be 
seen.

“Well, well—” She had walked less than fifty feet when Angelus’ mocking tone rang out from 
behind her. “Where’s your paramour? I suppose you’ve scared the lad away. What was all that 
about, I wonder?”

“I could ask you the same,” Buffy answered coldly. She was immediately furious with herself for 
being caught off guard, but was determined not to show it. Of course, he had noticed them. But she
should have remembered, Angelus wasn’t one to attract undue attention. A public confrontation was never really in question. Even Halfrek was probably more company then he preferred, if he was set on settling the score with Buffy. And how typical of him, to lurk in the shadows, waiting. Watching her.

“I’m merely curious as to what a lady such as yourself is doing with a twit like him.”

“Judging by the company you keep, you probably shouldn’t be talking,” Buffy snapped.

He moved faster than she’d expected. Before she could blink, she found herself pressed against the side of the building, his hand squeezing her windpipe hard enough to snap the neck of anyone who wasn’t lucky enough to be a Slayer.

“This isn’t my usual style, but you might just be worth it,” he ground out. “You’d do well to remember your manners when speaking to—”

“Unhand her immediately, you ruffian!” an unsteady voice rang out from somewhere to the left of her peripheral vision.

There was no mistaking the source. Buffy cringed, shifting her focus away from the strategically placed kick she’d been seconds away from executing, and waited to see where this new development would lead. She was already pretty sure it wouldn’t be anywhere good.

“Ah, the gallant knight returns!” Angelus exclaimed, darting a quick glance in William’s general direction. “And here I’d thought your lady love had bruised your delicate… sensibilities.”

William huffed indignantly, obviously unsure of what to do next. “Release the lady and be on your way. I’ll have you know the police frequent these streets quite regularly,” he tried again, not surprisingly, to little effect.

This elicited a gruff snort from Angelus as he tightened his grip around Buffy’s neck, causing her to sputter for air.

“Quite the specimen of manhood, isn’t he?” The vampire smirked coarsely. “I might almost be frightened—you do seem to have put a bit of vigor into his limp—”

Unfortunately, the world would never discover exactly what part of William’s person Angelus had been referring to because, at that moment, he was rudely interrupted by a series of three events taking place in very close succession.

William, justifiably incensed, rushed at the large vampire with what must have been an uncharacteristically guttural roar. The distraction gave Buffy the opening she’d needed and, a split second later, her leg broke free to curl around Angelus’ calf as she knocked him off balance and administered a hard jab to his gut. Reeling from the impact, Angelus stumbled backwards to land ungracefully on top of a surprised William just in time to reveal the twin figures of Darla and Drusilla as they rounded the corner of a nearby building.

The two women lunged at Buffy, who recovered just quickly enough to avoid being overtaken by the unexpected attack. She really wasn’t getting any better at fighting in this gown. Luckily, though, her opponents seemed to share her predicament. She doubted their prey regularly put up much of a fight and their choice of fashion over practicality was clearly hindering them in the face of this new challenge.

Avoiding the swipes of Drusilla’s deadly nails, Buffy managed to hike up her skirts far enough to land a well-aimed blow to Darla’s midsection, sending the vampire flying into the street. Meanwhile,
Angelus had gotten up, leaving William scrambling to get off the ground, and approached slowly.

Buffy searched for a weapon. Stakes wouldn’t do her much good the moment, since she was fairly sure that killing any one of the three vampires wouldn’t go very far towards ensuring temporal integrity. Something else, then. Something heavy. She just needed to incapacitate them enough to get herself and William out of there.

Shit. William. Buffy whirled around to see that he had picked himself up off the pavement and was now backing away from an extremely displeased Darla who had landed only a few feet away from him.

“Miss, I have no quarrel with you,” he mumbled apprehensively. “I haven’t anything of value— please—”

She couldn’t let this happen. She knew the poor man would have to meet his death at the hands of a vampire sooner or later, but this wasn’t right by any account. Not now. Not this vampire. She’d have to protect him. Sidestepping Angelus just as he was about to pounce, she placed herself firmly between Darla and William.

“Back off,” she growled, falling into a defensive stance. “I’m pretty sure you’re not his type.”

Darla, clearly not quite aware of who she was dealing with, shot Buffy an amused look as she began to circle, but Buffy’s attention fell back to Angelus, who’d pushed Drusilla out of the way to stalk towards the three of them.

“Just what is it about the boy?” he spat. “I guess he must have his uses after all. We’ll have to look into that once I snap your neck.”

As if they’d planned it, Darla chose that exact moment to charge at Buffy, while Angelus lunged past her to seize William by the throat, dangling him a good foot above the ground. William choked, gasping for breath as his legs flailed wildly.

Buffy’s heart was threatening to leap out of her chest. She had to get to him. As she frantically parried Darla’s blows, she watched Drusilla approach the pair out of the corner of her eye.

“Burning… burning…” sang Drusilla madly. “He’s all on fire. But the light… it won’t go out… he’s got it, this one. He’s got it and he won’t let it go. Fire and shadow… burning… burning… the doors are shut tight but he knows how to turn the key—”

Angelus watched her intently as she danced around them, swaying to some imperceptible beat. Her last words seemed to send a jolt through his body.

“The key? The Key, Dru? What do you see?” He dropped William unceremoniously and, pinning his arms behind him, hauled him upright to face Drusilla.

“She’s got the light… but the stars are screaming… such mad commotion up in the heavens!” She drifted toward William, still undulating to music only she seemed to hear. “He doesn’t see it… the fire… it’s burning… burning —”

William gazed at her, enthralled. His jaw hung loose as his eyes followed her rhythmic movements.

“I want to see—” he whispered, his jaw hanging slackly.

Suddenly, something within Drusilla seemed to snap, like a mechanical cog clicking out of place. Shrieking wildly, she swiped at his chest. William cried out, struggling against Angelus’ hold as
Drusilla’s fangs descended and she lurched at him, going for his throat.

Buffy reacted without thinking. Backhanding Darla, she sprang forward, throwing Drusilla aside and barely avoiding William’s head as she slammed her fist into Angelus’ face. Luckily, this shocked the vampire enough to loosen his grip and Buffy pulled William free, dragging him after her as she sprinted down the street.

Running away wasn’t usually her tactic of choice but sticking around to finish the fight didn’t seem like the best idea either. Though the streets were now far more empty, they were in a well-populated part of town and the fight had already earned the attention of a few concerned onlookers, one of whom seemed to have run off in search of the police. Buffy only hoped that this fell far enough above Angelus’ threshold of acceptable public exposure.

Looking back, she was relieved to have her suspicions confirmed, as none of the group appeared to be giving chase. “This isn’t over!” Angelus yelled after her, flanked by the two female vampires as he clutched what was in all probability a very broken nose.

“Promises, promises,” she muttered under her breath as she hauled a disoriented William around a sharp corner. She didn’t like turning tail and running away, but her choices had been limited and she knew it. Even if she hadn’t been outnumbered, a fight with Angelus was not a fight she could win. He may not succeed in killing her, but she definitely couldn’t kill him.

Stupid timeline.
Once she was satisfied that they’d put enough distance between themselves and Angelus and company, Buffy released William’s forearm and slowed her pace to a brisk walk.

“Where are we going?” William asked shakily from behind her.

He’d remained silent up to this point, for which Buffy was more than grateful. She wasn’t really sure what to say to him after everything that had just happened. Clearly some kind of explanation would be necessary, but she didn’t know if her brain was currently functioning on a high enough level to render the inevitable lie even vaguely convincing.

“Somewhere we’ll be safe,” she answered simply.

“That woman—the way she looked at me—the things she said… Good Lord! Her face—” he trailed off, unsure of how to pose his question. Then, finally—“What was she?”

Buffy sighed. The whole truth was mind-boggling, even to her.

Well, you see, William, she’s a deranged vampire who’s going to kill you and transform you into a soulless monster just like her. Oh yeah, she’s also the love of your unlife and you’ll swear undying devotion to her for over a century until she dumps you for a slimy reindeer demon. That would go over real well. “I’ll explain everything later,” she mumbled instead. “We’re almost there.”

They were, and Buffy sincerely hoped that Dorothea’s civilizing presence would somehow smooth over William’s many questions. Otherwise, she wasn’t sure what she’d tell him. Her most promising idea at the moment was a theory involving roving carnies.

She didn’t know if it was because he was satisfied with her promise or because he was just too shaken to press any further, but William sank back into silence, limping lightly in his attempts to keep up with her pace. By the time they reached Dorothea’s home, his breathing had grown disturbingly ragged and Buffy thought he was beginning to look like he might topple at any moment.

“Are you alright?” she asked, as she reached to knock on the door.

“Yes, yes—I’m quite fine,” he answered, though the shaky way he leaned against the doorjamb suggested otherwise.

Buffy shrugged it off. William, unlike Spike, did not strike her as the type to hide his injuries. If had been anything seriously wrong with him, she was certain she would know.

A moment later, Gretchen carefully opened the door, gasping lightly when her eyes fell on Buffy and her disheveled companion. She hustled them inside without a word and barred the heavy door securely behind them. Dorothea was waiting in the parlor, her old eyes fixated on a piece of embroidery that rested across her lap. The commotion had clearly alerted her to their arrival—she looked up from her work and watched the pair enter, sweeping an appraising gaze over William before turning her full attention to Buffy.

“It appears that you’ve met with some trouble.”

The evenness of her tone was like a soothing balm and Buffy found herself offering the woman a light smile. “Nothing I couldn’t handle. Although, Angelus’ nose is a bit the worse for wear.”
“The vampire. You’ve confronted him again?” Dorothea caught herself, clicking her tongue. “I do apologize. By the looks of him, I assume your companion had some part in the encounter?”

“I’m sorry,” Buffy turned her head to glance at William, who was looking rather uncomfortable as he stood behind her. “This is William Pratt.”

She said nothing further and the older woman seemed to accept her silence, inclining her head in William’s direction. “Hello, William, you may call me Dorothea.” He blinked at her, then gave a small polite bow, as if not quite trusting himself to attempt a more verbal greeting. Dorothea apparently understood his predicament because, casting a sympathetic look in his direction, she addressed Buffy once more. “Am I correct in supposing that William will be needing accommodations for the night?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I don’t think it’s safe for him to go home right now.”

“Quite understandable. I’ll have Gretchen prepare a bed for our guest.” She gathered her work and tucked it away into a small basket that rested at the foot of her chair. “Why don’t you have a seat, the two of you,” she said as she, herself, rose. “It may be a short while before the room is suitably habitable—it’s been quite some time since I’ve had the pleasure of entertaining so many visitors—but we’ll take care of it in short order.”

William shuffled his feet nervously. “Please, Madam—Dorothea,” he blurted out, as though surprised that he’d really found the audacity to speak. “I apologize for being so forward—you’ve been incredibly kind in receiving me into your home. But—well—I was rather hoping that someone might explain to me what exactly is going on. I must be mistaken—or perhaps I have misheard—but you made mention of… vampires?”

“Ah, yes, I’d wondered if Miss Summers had apprised you of her, err, circumstances.” Dorothea turned to Buffy with a curious smile.

William’s face shifted into a look of still deeper consternation and Buffy knew that he had caught the discrepancy in Dorothea’s statement. “Miss Summers?” he inquired with some confusion. “This lady had informed me that her name was Anne Giles.”

The elderly witch continued to smile good-naturedly, though the corners of her mouth now seemed strained. “Well, I dare say I’ve caused enough trouble with my presumptions,” she shot Buffy a brief apologetic glance before returning her gaze to the man still awkwardly standing near the doorway. “Please, William, do sit down,” she continued, “I’m sure Miss, err, Summers will be more than happy to provide you with some more appropriate answers while I go and see whether we can’t get you situated upstairs.”

And with that, she was gone, leaving Buffy to stare lamely at William as he slowly made his way over to the small ornate couch by the fire.

“So, I take it that your name is not in fact Anne Giles?” he asked quietly, his back to her as he stood staring into the flames.

“No, not so much,” Buffy answered nervously. “But if it makes you feel better, Anne is actually my middle name, so it’s a little bit true,” she offered weakly as she walked over to stand by his side. “You should sit. You look like you could use it.”

“Ladies first,” he said, motioning to the chair behind her. She couldn’t help but smile. It figured that he could make the cliché sound so completely genuine.
Having lowered herself into the chair, she waited for him to do the same, noticing that he cringed slightly as he did so. She’d really have to check him out later. Medically, that is. For injuries and stuff. Not so she could see how his skin felt beneath her fingers as she—

“Why did you lie to me?”

The question effectively tore her away from her train of thought. Which, Buffy decided, was probably a good thing. “I’m sorry,” she answered quietly. “I didn’t think I had a choice. I kind of have a secret identity thing going on and there are a few reasons as to why I’d prefer not to go throwing my real name around.”

“And what, pray tell, might those be?”

*I’m actually from the future.* “I need to keep a low profile. There are some people who might— recognize me, and I’d rather they didn’t.”

“Would these people happen to look anything like the ones we encountered tonight?”

“Some of them.”

“So, tell me Miss—” he paused, as if searching her face. “Summers, was it?”

“Buffy. Just call me Buffy.”


It took her a second to realize that he must have interpreted the look on her face as distress. It was the way he said her name. A stranger’s name to him, nothing more, but there was something about the way it had moved on his lips. Like a caress.

She wiped her expression blank, lowering her gaze. “My mother gave me that name,” she said wistfully, then shot him a playful grin. “But you’re right, I guess it does lack that touch of classic elegance.”

The lightness of her expression seemed to placate him. He inclined his head, returning her smile sheepishly. “No, no, it’s quite perfect. It suits you.” But before Buffy had a chance to retort, he continued, his tone turning once again solemn. “You’ve still not answered my question. The people who accosted us tonight—were they really—”

“Vampires,” she finished. “Yeah, they were.”

“But how can that be? Vampires are the stuff of folklore and children’s tales—”

“You might quickly come to learn, my boy,” Dorothea’s quiet voice sounded suddenly from the other end of the parlor, “that the stuff of folklore has a rather bothersome tendency to make its way into our world.”

There was something about the way that the light filtering in from the hall illuminated her features as she stood in the doorway, that made Dorothea appear more ancient than Buffy had ever imagined was possible. The soft wisps of silver hair that had escaped the order of her elaborate bun framed her face like otherworldly spider webs.

But then, she stepped forward and the vision was gone. A kind smile softened the lines of her face. “I know you must have many more questions about what you faced tonight,” she addressed William,
“but I think perhaps they would be better explained tomorrow morning. Why don’t you let Gretchen take you up to your room?”

“Yes, perhaps that would be for the best,” William answered, wincing a bit as he moved. “I have but one last request—might there be any way of sending word to my mother? She’s quite ill, you see, and I’d prefer that she did not worry needlessly.”

“Of course,” Dorothea said gently. “If you’d like to pass a note to Gretchen, I’ll make sure that your mother receives it.”

William nodded gratefully and rose to leave the room, inclining his head to the two women as he passed. Buffy watched him intently as he followed Gretchen down the long hallway, vaguely aware that Dorothea’s gaze was just as intently fixed upon her.

“Quite an extraordinary young man,” the older woman remarked quietly. “Where ever did you find him?”

“He walked in on my little meeting with Angelus and tried to help,” Buffy said. It wasn’t like she was lying. Not exactly.

“And why did you feel it was necessary to give him a false name?”

“I didn’t know if I could trust him.”

“Yet you thought it prudent to bring him here?” Dorothea raised an amused eyebrow. “Come now, child, there’s something you’re not telling me. A fair bit of something, if my instincts are correct. Which, I might add, they usually are.”

Buffy dropped her gaze. This really wasn’t something she wanted to discuss. Timeline-related issues aside, it was a long and complicated story that she didn’t particularly wish to revisit at the moment. Which was in no small part due to the fact that she wasn’t even close to having it figured out for herself.

“Okay, yes, you’re right,” she finally admitted with a sigh. “But that’s a stretch of memory lane I’d prefer to avoid. I don’t think it’s all that important.”

“Alright, then,” Dorothea allowed, though the glint in her eye told Buffy she was rather inclined to disagree. “In any case, I’m quite glad you brought him to me. There’s something quite curious about him and I should say I wouldn’t mind having a closer look.”

“Curious?” Buffy echoed. “Curious, how?” The last thing she needed was Dorothea poking and prodding at William. She doubted that would be something he would very easily forget. Not that this night wasn’t already on the list of exciting memories he shouldn’t have.

“I’m not quite certain. I see—not destiny—” Dorothea looked pensive, “—no, that’s not it. Now you, you’ve got destiny,” she glanced at Buffy meaningfully. “But he’s something else—he’s got—potential.”

“Potential for what?” Buffy was fairly certain she could compile a rather lengthy list in answer to that question. She knew she was playing dumb, and she had a sneaking suspicion Dorothea did as well.

“I’d say it would behoove us to find out,” the witch replied calmly. “I suggest we keep dear William around. Call it instinct, but I imagine it might have been more than mere accident that brought him here tonight.”
“No.” The word was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“No?”

“I mean, no, I don’t think William’s got anything to do with this.”

“Well, now I know you aren’t being forthright,” Dorothea remarked with a quizzical smile. “You must learn not to think so little of me, Buffy.”

“I already told you, I’d rather not talk about it. It’s a future thing.”

Dorothea’s eyes narrowed. Buffy suddenly felt like a very curious bug pinned under a large microscope.

“You know him.”

This woman was starting to get to her. “Yes. Fine. I knew him.” She caught her unintentional slip into the past tense, but not in time. Tearing her gaze away from Dorothea, who had now lowered herself into William’s seat opposite her, she stared into the flickering flames.

“You loved him.”

Even given the witch’s seemingly preternatural ability to read people, was she really that transparent? Apparently. There was no hint of a question in the Dorothea’s soft tone and Buffy resigned herself to the inevitable. What could it hurt, really?

“Yes.”

“But how—unless?” She could feel Dorothea’s eyes fixed upon her, searching for confirmation. “In your time? But you say that’s over a century from now—how is that possible?”

“A vampire.” Buffy turned to look at Dorothea, her gaze heavy and determined. “I’m going to tell you this because I need you to trust me on this and I think that, in some ways, you already know. But after tonight, we’re never talking about this again.” Dorothea’s slight nod spurred her to continue. “You were right about William. He’s got potential—it’s terrible and it’s amazing—but in order for him to fulfill any of it, he’ll have to die.” Breathless, she steeled herself against the final words. “William will become a vampire, and if we do anything to interfere with that, the world might end a lot sooner than we’re expecting it to.”

The understanding dip of Dorothea’s head was halted by a sharp intake of air at the other end of the parlor.

There wasn’t really a need for her to turn around. Somehow, Buffy already knew what she would find when she craned her neck in the direction of the noise. A wide-eyed William stood in the doorway, a neatly folded sheet of paper hanging limply from his hand, looking for all the world exactly like a man who’d just received his death sentence.

“I’m sorry—quite sorry,” William stammered, his throat constricting against the words. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop—Gretchen—she had left, and the note for my mother—” he raised the piece of paper ineffectually. “Forgive me, I must go.”

Turning abruptly, he fled down the hall toward the vestibule.

Buffy reacted without thought. No more than a moment later, she was out of her seat and sprinting after him. For the second time that night, she reached out and clamped down on his forearm,
arresting his progress toward the exit.

“William, listen to me, you can’t go out there. It’s not safe.”

She wasn’t immediately surprised to see the fear in his eyes when he turned to face her. At least not until she realized that it was actually directed at her. “Please—release me. I don’t know what sort of witchery you are involved in, but I assure you, I am of no use to you.”

Buffy was at a loss. “I know—I’m sorry—but you can’t leave yet. After what Drusilla said, Angelus won’t just let you go. They’ll find you. Please—you’ll be in danger if you go now.”

“I don’t know what you are referring to,” he protested. “The only danger apparent to me at this moment is you and that associate of yours.” He darted a nervous glance in the direction of the parlor.

“No—please, William—we don’t want to hurt you. Why would you even think that?”

He looked at her, bewildered. “Why, I should think the fact that you intend to murder me would be evidence enough!”

“Murder you? Why would we—” She broke off. Of course, he had no clue what they’d been talking about. Alright, time for a different tactic. “No, William,” she continued more quietly. “We don’t want to kill you. I know what you heard, and I know how it must seem, but please, you have to believe me. Come back with me and I’ll explain everything.”

She could have stabbed herself in the heart for making that promise, but it seemed to mollify him. Warily, William succumbed to the tugging motion of her hand on his forearm, taking a step in her direction. He didn’t get far, however, before his legs folded under him and he pitched headlong into her. It was only Buffy’s acute reflexes that saved them both from tumbling to the floor, and one of her arms shot out to wrap under his shoulder as the other pressed firmly into his chest.

He gasped sharply and winced, but seemed to regain some of his equilibrium, immediately shrugging off her hold. “Please, that’s not necessary. I’m quite fine.”

“You’re obviously quite not,” she retorted, her suspicions confirmed when the hand she’s placed onto his chest came away stained with the reddish tinge of fresh blood.

Maybe William wasn’t so different from the vampire she knew after all, Buffy thought as she pulled back the flap of his jacket to find the light vest and shirt beneath it soaked with blood. Several thin slashes ran across the surface of the fabric, presumably just where Drusilla had taken a swipe at him earlier.

The stain had been easy enough to miss since it was largely concealed by the heavier fabric of his jacket. Still, she should have been more attentive, she reprimanded herself. It had been downright stupid not to check him over immediately.

“Damn it, William. Why didn’t you tell me you were bleeding?”

He stared at her for a second, clearly taken aback by her language, and then responded dismissively. “It’s nothing. Just a few scratches.”

“Just a few scratches and a whole bunch of blood that you’ve lost. More importantly, you’re obviously in shock.” She didn’t know if she was angrier at him for not telling her or at herself for failing to notice. “Come on, we’ll get you patched up.”

Finally allowing him to move away from her once she was confident he could stand on his own,
Buffy followed him towards the stairs. She had been ready to grab for him again when he abruptly turned back at the foot of the staircase but quickly realized that he was only backtracking to the parlor. With a steely gaze, William handed his note to Dorothea and proceeded to mount the stairs without a word. Buffy shot the older woman a grave look before following him with a sigh. She was obviously on her own now.

They entered the room that was to be William’s for the night in complete silence. As he sat down on the bed, Buffy stupidly realized that she had nothing with which to tend to his wound. Luckily, Dorothea appeared to have had more presence of mind and, only moments later, Gretchen entered the room carrying bandages and a small basin of water.

Buffy nodded her thanks before turning to William. “Take off your shirt,” she said awkwardly, in what she hoped was a soothing tone. “Please.”

He looked at her like she’d just grown a second head. “I beg your pardon?”

“I need you to take off your shirt.”

“I hardly think it’s appropriate—I’m—if you would be so kind as to step out, I’m fairly certain I can care for this myself.”

She stared up at the ceiling in desperate exasperation. Why did he have to make this so much harder for her? “William, you have no experience in caring for slash wounds. You’re clearly in shock. So, either you take off your shirt and let me help you or I leave you to pass out and bleed to death.” Ok, so that last bit was an overstatement, but still.

“Miss Summers, I’m rather of the opinion—”

“Fine, how’s this—you take it off it now or in a couple of seconds I’ll take it off for you.”

Maybe it was just something in her tone, or maybe it was the fact that the evening’s events had thoroughly convinced him of her ability to make good on her threat, but William complied without further protest. He slowly shed his outer garments, wincing as he finally peeled the drenched fabric of his linen shirt away from his skin.

The gashes weren’t terribly deep. Buffy knew that Drusilla was capable of much worse. Still, they remained open in several places and fresh blood continued to languidly ooze down his stomach.

Taking the basin and supplies with her, Buffy dropped to kneel before him and soaked a soft piece of cloth in the warm water before dabbing it against the cuts. A sharp sniff was the only indication he gave of his discomfort. She could tell he was doing his best to remain still and appear unaffected.

“You were right, it’s not that bad,” she said softly.

William remained silent, his eyes fixed straight ahead on something that was anything but her.

“I’m sorry you got dragged into this,” she tried again. “You can go home tomorrow as soon as it’s light. Hopefully they won’t try to track you, but you should probably be careful—don’t go out at night for a while, don’t invite strangers into your house—stuff like that.”

If he heard her, he didn’t show any sign of it. She continued to clean up his chest in silence, doing her best to interpret the hitches in his breath so that she could avoid causing him unnecessary pain. She was nearly done when he finally spoke.

“When Madam Dorothea said ‘in your time’—what—what did she mean by that?”
Buffy continued to work, trying her best to keep her manner casual. “I’m not really sure. I don’t understand half of what she says, to tell you the truth. Must be magic-talk. I’m sure you’ve figured out she’s big on the mystical by now.”

The piercing gaze he shot at her then told her that he was not in the slightest way convinced. “It would appear you knew exactly what she was referring to at the time. Please, if you somehow know of my future, I believe I have a right to that information.”

“I thought you said this stuff was folklore and children’s tales. How could I possibly know anything about your future?”

William let out a harsh chuckle. “How, indeed. I don’t hesitate to admit that before tonight I would have said you both belong in Bedlam—but—what I saw… that woman and the things she said… the way she made me feel—” He shivered lightly. “No, after tonight, I’m quite ready to accept that there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

Buffy had no idea what to say so, instead, she continued dabbing at the now mostly clean skin surrounding his cuts. The man was clearly not an idiot, he knew that something weird was going on. But how was she supposed to explain it to him without ruining everything?

They lapsed back into silence. Periodically, Buffy dipped her cloth back into the cooling water and gently swabbed at the few remaining droplets of blood that continued to appear around the edges of the wound. She found herself becoming entranced by the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest under her fingertips. Somewhere inside, his heart was beating away, perfectly unaware that it would soon be silenced forever.

“You said you knew me.” His voice was quieter this time, little more than a whisper.

Her hand froze over his skin. She didn’t respond. He’d been standing there longer than she had thought.

“You said you’d loved me.”

The cloth fell from her hand, tumbling to the floor, and she fell back onto her heels as her hand dropped to her lap, defeated. She stared at his feet on the rug in front of her. His shoes were fascinating, really. Certainly much more interesting than the piercing blue eyes she knew were studying her from only a few feet above.

“Why won’t you answer me?”

“I didn’t know you’d asked a question.”

“How?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

He fell silent again, continuing to gaze down at her intently, then took a deep bracing breath as if gathering his courage for some daunting feat. “Earlier, in the hallway—when you—when we—why did you do it?”

She didn’t know how much longer she could lie to him. And yet, telling him the truth was clearly out of the question. She stared up at his chest, unable to complete the ascent and actually look him in the eye. Tiny globules of blood were still welling up around the edges of the cuts, stubbornly refusing to capitulate to the natural processes of clotting. She really needed to wrap that. Still silent, she reached for the bandages, carefully unwinding the white strips and rising up off her heels to continue her
To her surprise, William recoiled before she even touched him. “I assume I’m in no immediate danger of succumbing to my wounds,” he said acerbically. He was becoming angry now and her avoidance strategy clearly wasn’t working. But all she could do was blink lamely, so he continued. “I saw what you did to those creatures. I’ve felt your strength. No ordinary woman should be capable of such things—” She could feel his eyes on her. “—Who are you?” he whispered. “What are you?”

“I’m—” she could have cried then. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to lie to you or to scare you. I’m not—I don’t know what else to say.”

He must have sensed her distress then because his next words were softer. “I’m sorry, Miss Summers—Buffy—I meant no disrespect. But you must perceive the difficulty of my position. You’ve brought me here—having rescued me from creatures who, by all rights, should not exist—having rescued me despite being a mere wisp of a young woman. And regardless of the impossibility of your words, I cannot help but feel that you do know me. Yet, my reason tells me that I have never laid eyes on you ‘till but two hours ago. So, tell me, I implore you, what am I to think?”

She willed the tears not to come. “I’m sorry, William, I really am. There’s an explanation for all this, but you have to believe me when I tell you that I can’t give it to you right now.”

“But why ever not?”

His earnestness tore at her. Could she tell him? She’s already screwed things up by running into him in the first place. And after what he’d heard—what did any of it matter now? If telling him these things happened to change the future, would that really be so bad? She reached for him again and this time he remained perfectly still, allowing her to apply the bandage to his wound. “Because if I tell you, very bad things might happen,” she said quietly as she leaned closer to wind the cloth around his back.

“You say I am to die. That I am to become one of those horrid monsters. I hardly think that anything you tell me will make matters worse.”

“You don’t understand, William,” she responded gently. “You say you believe that there’s more going on here than you can explain. Fine. But if you really mean that, you’ll believe me when I say that magic shouldn’t be messed with. Especially not the kind that concerns time.”

“Is that what this is, then? Are you some sort of fortune teller? A medium?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“So, you’ve seen the future? My future?”

“William—”

“Fine. You mustn’t respond. I understand. But tell me one thing—”

“What’s that?”

“Why me?”

“I don’t know.” She cut him off before he could protest. “That’s the truth. I swear. I don’t know.”

“Why will you not look at me?”
The edge of quiet pleading in his voice shook her. She lifted her gaze from her clumsy efforts to secure the ends of the bandage and, for the first time since they’d met, looked directly into his eyes. What she saw there broke her heart.

Fear, confusion, resignation, frustration, acceptance, and an indecipherable longing. All swirling together in a sea of clearest blue. She realized in that one moment that she’d made a terrible mistake.

“You see my death,” he murmured.

“No, I see you.”

“You know me.”

“I do.”

“But you’ve never seen me before.”

“I’ve seen what you can become.”

With that, the moment shattered. “A monster. You say I am to be a monster.” He hung his head, slumping back to prop himself up onto his arms against the surface of the bed.


“When will it happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do not know, or you will not tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

“How will it happen?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“But you say you have seen the future—how is it possible that you cannot describe that which you have seen?”

God, how had she gotten herself into this? She felt an odd sense of exhilaration. Perhaps it was too late to turn back now. So what if she changed the future? For all she knew, none of them would come out of this final apocalypse alive regardless of what her Slayer crypto-dreams were saying. Blind luck had carried them too far already. What did she really have to lose?

“I’ve seen only one part of the future. Only one time.”

“A century,” he gasped. “Dorothea said your time was a century from now. You knew me in your time.” Then he paused, chewing on his lip as though he was debating something in his mind. He pinned her with a steady gaze, tipping his head to the side as his eyes narrowed slightly. He was studying her. “Is it possible?” he said finally, his tone tentative and inquiring. “You’ve not simply seen the future, have you? You’ve lived it?”

Buffy didn’t know how to respond. She hadn’t meant for it to go this far. Except that maybe she kind of had. She had to admit to herself that at a certain point she’d become curious about just how much he’d be able to figure out if only she dropped a few hints. It had been like a game. A game she’d never really expected him to win.
“Why would you say that?” she tried to backpedal.

He chuckled. “I’ve always been told that I have quite the active imagination. Mother has some friends in Bromley and their former maid’s son—nice young fellow, name of Wells—he’s got the most queer ideas. Science that’s more astounding than any magic—time travel and all sorts of odd creatures and the like. Mother was quite scandalized to find me conversing with him. Said I would get my head all turned about and filled with fluff, but the chap may have been on to something.”

“William—this is real life, not science fiction.”

There was laughter in his eyes now. It was clear he recognized a victory when he saw one. “After tonight, real life requires a bit of qualification, does it not?” And then he did something that made her stomach perform a bona fide backflip. Sitting up now, he continued to stare directly at her and his lips curled into what she could only describe as a genuinely self-satisfied smirk. “Tell me that it isn’t so,” he challenged her. “Tell me that I’m wrong.”

She gaped at him, a deer caught in whatever the nineteenth-century equivalent of headlights happened to be. She knew she’d likely ruined everything—torn the entire timeline into itty bitty little shreds—but for that one moment, none of it mattered, because this proper Victorian gentleman was giving her the most Spike-like look she’d ever seen. This very shirtless proper Victorian gentleman. To whom she was leaning quite close. And who still somehow smelled ridiculously good.

Something in her gaze must have tipped him off because in the next second he was moving away from her, the smirk replaced by an awkward half-smile.

“I’m sorry, this is rather boorish of me.” He reached for the dressing gown Gretchen had left behind when she’d come to collect his bloodied shirt. “I should not have pressed you so, nor forced you into such a compromising position. Forgive me.”

She rose with a sigh and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. He shifted uncomfortably, despite the full two feet of distance separating them, and slumped forward, resting his folded forearms across his lap before wincing and sitting upright once more.

“No, you’re not wrong. I don’t really know what it all means, but since I’m still here then I guess the future hasn’t gone too wacky. Or maybe I’m just out of the loop at this point. Who knows.”

“This is fascinating,” he murmured, almost to himself. “To think, just hours ago, I never would have fathomed… so you say I am still living in your time? In America?” he paused, his expression oddly sour. “You are, in fact, American, are you not?”

“Umm, yeah, California, born and raised. Although we’d been in Bath for the last year or so before I popped up here. Why?”

“No reason,” he said, surprising her with a small grin. “It’s only that I’d been fearing for the future of my country’s native tongue.”

“I’m going to pretend that wasn’t meant to be an insult,” she shot back with her own tentative smile.

“So, I am a vampire, then,” he continued, the lightness of his expression melting back into sober contemplation. “Yet, we have some sort of relationship. That must mean I’m different from those creatures we encountered tonight?” he said, glancing at her hopefully.

“You’d changed,” she replied simply. “You’d earned your soul.”

“And before that?” he asked with trepidation, clearly unsure if he really wanted to know the answer.
“I was a monster such as they?”

She’d gone this far. Whatever came of it now, she knew there was no point in mincing details. Perhaps the future was wide open. “For a while, yes.” She didn’t have to look over to know what horror rested in his features. “But you’d changed—he’d changed—” she added. “William, the man we’re talking about, he’s not you. Not yet. Maybe not ever, now that I’ve told you all of this.”

“But you love him.” There was a tinge of melancholy in his voice.

“I loved him, yeah. Not when it mattered, but I did.” She didn’t really know why she was telling William all this. He had no way of understanding what she was talking about. Still, if she’d just changed the world forever, it was comforting to be able to connect with someone. “Anyway,” she continued, “there’s no way to know what’ll happen now.”

“You believe that the future can be changed?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“But that can’t be why you’ve come here. You’d indicated that you wanted to preserve the future course of events. How is it that you came to be in this time? And why?”

“To save the world, apparently,” she answered with an ironic laugh. “It’s kind of my job. Except I seem to be sucking at it as of late. And I didn’t choose to come here, these things just seem to happen to me from time to time.”

“Well, then, perhaps this was meant to take place. Perhaps we were meant to encounter one another tonight.”

“Maybe,” she said thoughtfully. “I don’t want you to worry about any of this, William. I know being told by a visitor from the future that you’re about to exchange your pulse for a shiny new set of fangs isn’t something you just leave alone and forget about. But there’s nothing we can do—I have no idea how this is all supposed to work—for all I know, none of that stuff might happen now.” She rose from the bed, giving him a sympathetic look. “I want you to try and get some sleep. We can talk more tomorrow morning.”

Buffy turned to leave the room, aware that William was still regarding her carefully from his seat on the bed. She needed to talk to Dorothea. It was unlikely that the witch would have any illuminating insights into the effects of her actions, but it might help to discuss the matter of someone whose life and death were not predicated on her revelations.

“Miss Summers—” She looked over her shoulder to shoot him an amused glance. “Buffy,” he corrected himself dutifully, then continued nervously, “The man you loved—this vampire that you say I may become—what happened to him?”

“He sacrificed himself to save us all,” she said simply and shut the door behind her, leaving him to gaze after her with wide-eyed astonishment.

***

William fell back onto the bed, allowing his legs to stretch out as they dangled off the side. He didn’t know what to think anymore. To say that this night had altered his entire world would have been an understatement.

It had all started out innocently enough.
Of course, running into Anne Giles—or Buffy Summers, as she turned out to be called—had brought some variety to the usual drudgery of the gathering he’d been attending. She’d been an odd sight, obviously not dressed for the occasion. Yet she was radiant in her casual garb and charmingly self-possessed despite her obvious agitation. She’d fascinated him from the moment he’d laid eyes on her, but he knew better than to invest his hopes in such a woman. Add to that the fact that she was a foreigner and that he’d quite fervently committed his affections to Miss Underwood—well, it was best to leave such matters alone and cherish their chance meeting for the beautiful moment it had been.

But then, she followed him into that hallway. Even in the dim light, it had taken him only moments to recognize her—her golden hair, the delicate outlines of her features—she would have charmed him then, had she not already done so only minutes before. But, as ashamed as he was to admit it, he’d also been a bit frightened. Who knew that such a small frame could house such astounding strength? And as odd and potentially scandalous as the situation was, he had fallen under her spell, nonetheless.

Cecily—had it really been Cecily in that room? But it couldn’t have been—all other thoughts had been washed away by the deliciously vital sensation of this strange woman’s lips on his. In that moment, he’d known that he was totally and irrevocably lost.

It seemed like something out of a romance. There was no rational explanation for it. They were no more than strangers and yet he knew without a doubt that there had been something wonderful about what they’d shared—something that stood above the conventions laid down by society—something that had felt important and right.

Then, there was the fight. The beasts. Her unbelievable heroism—to think that he’d rushed in to save her—and their escape. There was this house and the strange old woman within it. That old woman whose eyes shone with otherworldly wisdom. There was her strange admission that she’d known him and loved him—except, it hadn’t been him after all, but some unknown man of the future who was a monster with a soul and who wore his face.

There was the statement that he was to die. Twice, from the sound of it.

And then there was this strange conversation full of explanations refused and then granted, answers given and negated. He’d decided at the outset to throw reason to the wind and believe whatever she told him. After the events of this night, he owed her as much. Had he not made such a resolution, he doubted he’d have discovered as much as he did. His assertion that she had come from the future had been no more than a stab in the dark. The product of literary whimsy and his own boyish fantasy. And yet, somehow it had appeared to be the truth. He didn’t burden his mind with attempts at logical explanations. Rationalizations seemed unbefitting a night such as this had been.

He’d allowed her to tend to him, again despite the fact that his proper sensibilities rose up against the notion of being found in such a situation with a woman he barely knew. He’d marveled at the care with which she touched him. The way she’d looked at him when he could no longer stand being deprived of her gaze. Like she saw all of him

And finally, there’d been the moment when she’d taken it all away. Told him that this man she’d known was not, in fact, him. This beastly creature, this noble vampire who’d earned his soul, this martyr who’d somehow perished for the sake of others—her lover, he guessed—was beyond him. In that moment, he welcomed whatever death she’d seen in his future, if in dying thus he might become worthy of this woman’s love. His life would be a small price to pay.
Kicking off his shoes, William swung his tired legs onto the surface of the bed. With his arm flung heavily across his brow, he allowed darkness to envelop him.

***

Outside, rain was beginning to cast a fine mist. It floated like a haze under the street lights. A man with a low-slung bowler hat waited just beyond the reach of that pale glow, casting an occasional glance at the now-darkened windows above. Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, he melted deeper into the shadows of looming wall. But the newcomer seemed to know that he was there. It was another man, his own hat all but obscuring his eyes, who greeted his apparent associate with a terse nod.

“You’ve confirmed that the monk is here?” he whispered hoarsely.

“I have,” the other man replied. “It appears that we will not need to face the vampire after all. Though I cannot pretend that this new series of developments comforts me. They have found a powerful ally.”

“An ally?”

“A girl.”

The man scoffed. “Come now, Leonardo. Surely—”

“No, no,” Leonardo waved away his companion's disbelief. “You don’t comprehend my meaning. If I knew no better, I would say she was—a Slayer.”

“A Slayer?”

“I know. It cannot be. And yet—”

“No matter,” the other man returned. “Her involvement may present an inconvenience but it is unlikely that she will bring about a significant change in the Order’s plans. You are certain you remain undiscovered?”

“I am,” Leonardo assured him. “My inquiries have occasionally been forced to reach beyond my station in the order as of late, but I do not think that anyone has taken note. I have been with them for most of my life, after all. They have no reason to mistrust me.”

“See that you keep it that way. Do not overplay your hand and test their confidence. Even remaining here for too long is likely to raise questions.”

“Do not lecture me, Rowland,” Leonardo hissed impatiently. “I know the limits of my position.”

Rowland nodded, readjusting his hat. “I only mean that they will be on higher guard so close to the appointed time. Our access to the Key’s arrival into this world must not be put into jeopardy. You know better than even I what it has cost us to have gotten so close. You have been a dutiful servant to the Lord. I only wish to vouchsafe that your sacrifice has not been in vain.”

“Everything will be ready,” Leonardo assured him. “Inform the General of the girl’s presence. He may have his own ideas on whether she presents a threat to our plans.”

“Indeed. But do not tarry too much longer here.” Rowland bowed his head, turning to depart. “The link must be severed.”
“Such is the will of God,” Leonardo replied, leaning back into the shadow.
Any further conversation with Dorothea had to wait until the next day. When Buffy finally came
down from William’s room, Dorothea took one look at her and shooed her away, promising that they
would have a nice chat over morning tea.

Buffy couldn’t help but feel like Gretchen took extra care with arranging her hair that morning.
Despite generally insisting on dressing herself, Buffy had accepted Gretchen’s assistance before,
succumbing to the fact that her own hairdressing skills were distinctly lacking by this century’s
standards. Today, however, seemed to have raised the bar as the other woman fussed over
transforming her frazzled waves into curls only to pin them into what was becoming an ever more
elaborate nest atop her head.

“Just another minute, Miss,” she entreated soothingly. “You know, the young men, they’re inclined
to take you much more seriously when you put your best foot forward.”

Buffy somehow doubted that William’s opinion of her would be much altered by a change in
hairstyle, but she obliged regardless. After all, it wasn’t like starting over on her own seemed like a
viable alternative at this point. She was at Gretchen’s mercy. By the time that she finally made her
way downstairs, both William and Dorothea were already seated in the parlor, engaged in what
appeared to be oddly relaxed chatter as they sipped their morning tea. Buffy suspected that the
civilized decorum exuded by Dorothea and everything that surrounded her had done much to
assuage William’s doubts about his present situation.

“Ah, Buffy,” Dorothea chirped lightly as she spotted Buffy’s cautious approach. “Do come and join
us. I was just marveling at William’s quickness in grasping the more extraordinary aspects of our
situation.”

William fiddled self-consciously with his teacup, avoiding her eyes.

“Yes, uhh—” Buffy started, “I filled him in a bit last night. I suppose that we’re past the point of
keeping secrets about who I am, anyway.”

She sat down on the couch opposite their chairs, unsure of what else to do. Gretchen quickly
maneuvered to furnish her with her own steaming teacup and Buffy sipped at it gingerly, happy to
have something to occupy her hands.

“Quite right,” Dorothea nodded. “And it appears that William’s sudden arrival may be a boon
indeed. He tells me that he studied Literae Humaniores at Oxford.”

Buffy blinked. “That’s uhh—that’s very impressive—” She shot a furtive glance in William’s
direction. He had sat up straighter, plainly keen on his presence being regarded as useful but giving
no more clear indication of what that use might be. “Why—uhh—why is this impressive to us?”

Dorothea smiled kindly. “I had mentioned that we were anxious for Isaac to awaken because of the
important labor that lies ahead. That is, the document you secured, of which it would much behoove
us to discover the contents—”

“You told him about that?” Buffy stammered. She’d been taken aback by Dorothea’s willingness to
admit William into their confidence the previous night, in light of all the secrecy that had surrounded
her arrival here, but this—Buffy did not know what to do with this at all.

Dorothea seemed to read her concern. “As I said, call it a feeling, but I sense that William has a role
to play in our present adventure. We must be careful, of course, but he strikes me as trustworthy and I see no reason why we should not explore all avenues open to us.”

That appeared to settle the matter. Dorothea glanced at William expectantly and he placed his cup on the nearby table, gathering courage from her endorsement.

“I, err, I was only saying,” he began, for the first time turning to face Buffy, “that I understand your presence here is quite a delicate matter. I do not wish to meddle beyond the desired degree but, given that you saved my life, and that I—err—that you and I seem to share some connection—well, I was simply saying that I would like to offer my help, such as it is.”

Dorothea nodded approvingly. “And so you shall. I discovered William’s talents quite as a matter of accident in inquiring after his family background but, once revealed, they seemed just the thing for our current predicament. You see, William tells me he can read almost as many languages as my own brother.” She paused, bestowing an indulgent smile in his direction. “Well, human languages, at least.”

“Yes, indeed,” William acknowledged with somewhat strained nonchalance. “As I was just saying, the very existence of—err—demons? Is that the preferred generic appellation? Well, of course, it’s all quite novel to me. And to think that these creatures have a whole lexicon—nay, several lexicons, of their own—”

“Oh, dear boy, it’s marvelously fascinating,” Dorothea injected. “I admit, languages have never been my forte. Why, I can hardly tell my Gramulak from my Hebrew, though I do admire them so—but Isaac, well, you two will make quite the pair when he recovers—”

Buffy slumped into her chair with a resigned sigh. Dorothea had obviously taken an immediate shine to her newest acquaintance, and who could blame her. The mannerisms were a bit different but, watching them launch back into their repartee as though she hardly existed, Buffy was immediately reminded of how Spike had never once failed to charm her mother. It was just so like him.

“—but as you were saying—oh, Buffy—” Dorothea’s high tone interrupted her musings. “We must arrange for William to return to his mother. She’s quite ill, you see.” She glanced at William with genuine sympathy and not a small measure of admiration. “He’s very insistent on returning home at the first possibility and, as he’s going to be assisting us, it wouldn’t do to have any harm befall him. Perhaps, Buffy, you might accompany him?”

Buffy was less than enthused at suddenly being charged with playing body-guard to a man whose very physical presence threw her into an existential crisis. But, of course, Dorothea was quite right in perceiving a threat to his safety. All the woman’s wisdom aside, Buffy felt like she was supremely underestimating the danger that William’s involvement with them posed to the timeline. But it seemed too late to reverse that now, so keeping him out of harm’s way—at least anything that didn’t constitute a predestined harm—was surely the minimum requirement. She rocked back and forth in her chair a bit. Yes, she would have to go, she admitted to herself begrudgingly.

To her surprise, however, William also seemed somewhat less than keen on the idea. “Oh, I hardly think that will be necessary,” he protested. “Not that I would not be honored by the pleasure of Miss Summers’ company, but I would not want to impose—”

“Damnit, Spike,” Buffy muttered. It was so like him to be stubborn just for the hell of it. Of course in this case, if she were more honest, she’d have to admit the response had been borne out of her frustration with the overall situation rather than William’s polite refusals. That and it suddenly occurred to her that her tone had been rather louder than she’d intended. William and Dorothea were both regarding her a bit dubiously. She coughed. “Sorry, William, I didn’t mean—”
But he was too observant to miss it. “Spike—” he repeated. “Is that what I am called, in your world?” Taking her silence as affirmative he continued thoughtfully, as though rolling the odd name around in his mouth. “Spike. Well, it’s rather an uncouth name, isn’t it? Nor particularly menacing—”

He seemed almost disappointed in his alter ego. Somehow, she didn’t think that knowing the actually menacing origins of the moniker would offer him much reassurance. Rising slowly, Buffy looked out the window, where the sun was now shining dimly through what she had come to recognize as the usual light layer of smog.

“Never mind that. Dorothea’s right,” she said. “And I’m sure that everything she’s told you was in her best judgment,” Buffy glanced at the older woman respectfully. “But, those vampires we met last night, that puts us in my wheel house. And you’re on their radar now, like it or not. They won’t forget what happened. They’ll come after you. It would really be better if you stayed here—”

“No,” William cut her off with uncharacteristic firmness, rising to face her head on. “I’m afraid that is impossible. My mother is quite ill, and my continued absence will undoubtedly strain her health even further. I must return today.”

Buffy shook her head, resigned. If there was anything she understood about this whole situation, it was sick mothers. They would just have to be careful. It was likely that Angelus and the others lost their scent last night. At worst, it would lead them here and she trusted that Dorothea could take care of herself.

“Fine,” she said at last. “But we go together. We’ll just have to come up with some story about who I am—”

“Leave that to me,” William acquiesced. “But I would prefer that we leave at once. I really have been away for much too long already.”

Dorothea seemed happy enough to accommodate that request. A coach was called and Gretchen came bustling down the stairs carrying a small case that apparently contained several gowns for Buffy to take with her. Buffy suspected that Dorothea must have scavenged them from one or more of the younger women in the coven. It seemed unlikely that she herself had anything on hand that was both age-appropriate and of the proper size.

Before long, Buffy was peering anxiously out of the window of the small horse-drawn car as it rumbled gingerly over the cobblestones. William sat opposite her, absorbed in his own thoughts. Neither had really said anything since they had departed together. The silence was not wholly comfortable between them, but Buffy was at a loss for how to change that. Fortunately, it did not prove to be a lengthy trip. Only fifteen minutes later, they were pulling up alongside a stately house along what looked to be an even nicer street than the one Dorothea inhabited.

An imperial-looking older man with salt-and-pepper hair opened the door before they had even begun mounting the short set of steps. He bowed his head before casting a glance of polite curiosity in Buffy’s directions.

“This is Jones, our butler,” William explained, as he ushered her inside ahead of himself. “Jones, Miss Summers will be joining us for a few days. I did not have time to write with this information, so would you be kind enough to make the necessary arrangements?” He paused to shed his coat, which he casually handed to the man, before continuing. “I assume my mother is in the parlor?”

Jones nodded in confirmation. If he found anything odd in the fact that William had spent the night elsewhere and returned with a strange woman in tow, he showed no indication of it. “Very good,
sir,” he replied respectfully. “I shall have one of the maids prepare a room.”

Buffy had adjusted to Gretchen’s constant presence at Dorothea’s quickly enough, but the idea of not only a butler but a plurality of maids seemed like something out of a period drama. She shuffled uncomfortably. William seemed to pick up on her uncertainty and gave her a reassuring smile.

“It’s not terribly typical for us to entertain guests for quite so long these days, but I assure you that it’s no trouble at all,” he told her encouragingly. But then, he too seemed to shift into something more like nervousness himself. “Come, let me introduce you to Mother.”

He gestured at a door on the other end of the well-appointed entry hall. Buffy had only moments to register the polished décor of the place. Paintings of country scenes hung on the primly papered walls. An elegant woven rug muffled their footsteps as they crossed the room and headed into what proved to be the parlor.

It was a generously sized room with several finely upholstered couches, a small card table surrounded by some chairs, and of course ever more paintings. On the opposite end, a small woman with faded golden hair sat by the window in a sturdy looking chair—indeed the chair looked quite a bit more substantial than she did herself. Her fragile fingers moved deftly as they pulled the needle and thread through a delicate stretch of muslin. Buffy thought she heard her humming a vaguely familiar tune, though she couldn’t quite place it. The humming stopped as soon as they entered, and the woman looked up from her embroidery hoop. Her skin was pale with what was almost certainly ill health, but a smile beamed on her lined face.

“William!” she gasped, as though she had been waiting for this moment all day.

“Hello, Mother,” he smiled at her fondly, then cleared his throat and stepped aside to reveal Buffy. “This is Miss Buffy Summers,” he nodded gingerly towards Buffy. “She is—err—she is the sister of the old schoolmate I wrote to you about in my missive from last night.” He shifted uncomfortably under his mother’s still-questioning look. Apparently, this invented information did not fully account for Buffy’s present visit to the Pratt residence. “My friend was forced to go out of town suddenly, you see,” he continued a bit apprehensively. “And Miss Summers was to be left positively without company, so I offered her to visit with us for a few days. Their family now lives in America, as it happens, so she has no other contacts in the area. I do hope that it is alright—”

William was rambling now. But, if anything, his mother’s beaming smile had only grown brighter.

“But of course, William,” she replied, her soft voice positively straining with delight. “I should feel terrible if Miss Summers were to be abandoned thus. And to have such a lovely young lady in our acquaintance! I only regret that I did not know of her visit sooner so as to properly prepare the house. But no matter, we shall make you comfortable just as quickly as we can manage, my dear.”

This last statement was clearly addressed to Buffy. Buffy bowed her head gratefully, unsure of the proper thing to say in such a situation. She darted a furtive glance in William’s direction and was relieved to see that he no longer appeared the least bit tense. That seemed like a good sign, anyway.

At that moment, Jones appeared in the parlor with tea. Buffy was quickly learning that tea was the natural response to any arrival. She was initially grateful for the cover provided by this social nicety—that is, until William began to excuse himself.

“Well, I shall leave you two to get acquainted,” he smiled to one woman and then the other. “Buffy, I am sure that my mother’s lady’s maid will be down to show you to your room as soon as it is ready. Please let her know if there is anything you require—anything at all.” If Buffy’s face betrayed any discomfort at being left alone with Anne Pratt, he seemed to be utterly oblivious to it. “I shall be in
the library—you may find me there once you are settled.”

And with that he was off. Buffy shifted from foot to foot uncertainly.

“Come my dear,” Mrs. Pratt said kindly. “Come sit. No need to be concerned. I am quite used to my son abandoning me in favor of the library—I suspect that by tomorrow, you shall be too. We’ll manage just fine, you and I. Do be a dear and sit with me.

Buffy obliged, perching on the chair opposite Mrs. Pratt in what she hoped was a ladylike manner.

“Now isn’t that better,” said the older woman, her pale blue eyes gleaming with a kind of contagious affection. “You must tell me all about your family—America, you say?—how grand—”

***

A good hour had passed by the time that Buffy set out to seek William. She had spent some time regaling Anne Pratt with stories of her family in America, which, as she had realized halfway through, turned out to be at least partially based on the plot of *Little Women*. Finally, a neatly-dressed maid appeared to escort Buffy upstairs. When queried if there was anything more that she required, Buffy asked only how she might find the library.

The door to her destination was slightly ajar, as if inviting her to come inside. Buffy gently pressed against the heavy wood as she peered into the room. It was a large space, which Buffy felt was more of a cross between a library and a second parlor. Shelves of books lined the walls, to be sure, but the room also featured a seating area with two plush couches and several armchairs, all arranged around an impressive hearth. A grand piano occupied most of one corner, and a small writing desk stood unused in the other. She found William hunched over a large table at the center of the room. Though the table did not appear to be a regular fixture of the space—Buffy wondered if it had been brought in specifically for the task at hand—it was already in full use. Several stacks of books covered its polished surface.

William looked up at her as she entered, sandy hair falling across his forehead. His glasses had slid down to the tip of his nose and he watched her over the frames. She was oddly reminded of Giles.

“Miss—err, Buffy—I trust you’ve settled in to your satisfaction?”

“You know,” she remarked with a playful grin, “you’re really going to have to work on dropping the ‘Miss.’ I feel like I should be your third-grade teacher or something.”

“Force of habit,” he responded wryly, eyes darting back to the manuscript, which was spread out in front of him. “I implore your forgiveness.”

She made her way to stand behind him and leaned over his shoulder to stare at the incomprehensible symbols covering the page. “How goes the translating?”

He jumped lightly at the proximity of her voice, leaning away as much as space would permit to shoot her a wary glance over his shoulder. “As well as could be expected,” he responded in a pinched tone. “Considering that it seems as though I’ll be teaching myself several entirely new languages. Err—Buffy—would you perhaps like me to fetch you a chair?”

“A chair?” she asked, frowning in confusion. “No, that’s okay, I was just looking—” but then she noticed the subtle way he was still attempting to edge away from her and understood. “I’m sorry, am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No—” he responded a bit too quickly, “well—yes—it’s just that—are you quite certain it’s
appropriate for you to be… err… positioned in such a manner?"

God, he made it sound like she’d just draped herself across his lap. Buffy straightened, putting a few feet of distance between them. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to position myself badly. I guess my notions of personal space are a bit wonky by this century’s standards.”

She twisted her hands together, unsure of what to do with herself now that she’d apparently insulted him with her physical presence. She supposed she couldn’t really blame him, not after last night. It didn’t help that her knowledge of proper behavior in the company of Victorian gentlemen was extremely lacking. It also didn’t help that the Victorian gentleman in question happened to be Spike. And that he seemed to be repelled by her, which was a very un-Spikelike character trait.

Sensing her discomfort, William pushed his chair away from the table—causing her to take yet another leap backwards to avoid having her feet crushed—and swiveled to face her. “It is proper for men and women to behave so casually with each other in your time?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

“I guess I never really gave it much thought. I mean, it’s not like we go around groping each other all the time—but I guess so, yeah.”

“How extraordinary.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to pay more attention from now on,” she looked at him apologetically. “I guess it also doesn’t help that, in some ways, I know you a lot better than you know me.”

He eyed her appraisingly, then rose and leaned against the edge of the table so that he could face her properly. Suddenly, she felt very much out of place.

“I’m afraid this will sound terribly forward of me, but would you mind if I asked you a very personal question?” Her slight nod gave him permission to continue. Dropping his gaze, he stared at his feet for several moments, as if trying to make up his mind about something. Finally, he looked at her again, “What exactly was the nature of our—well, not our, I suppose—what was the nature of your relationship with this, err, Spike?”

Buffy could have laughed, except it really wasn’t the ha-ha kind of funny. Instead she sighed, walking over to one of the well-stocked bookshelves to make a gallant attempt at gathering her thoughts.

“Please forgive me, I don’t mean to pry, and I’ll certainly understand should you choose not to answer,” William continued carefully, observing her progress across the room. “It’s only that I know it must be difficult for you to be around me given the circumstances, and I thought that perhaps I would be able to approach our interactions with more sensitivity if I knew what it is that you see when you look at me.”

She didn’t know where to begin. Didn’t even know whether she should turn to face him or simply continue blindly staring at the wide array of unfamiliar titles lining the shelves. Everything felt off. She went to run a hand through her hair before dropping her arm ineffectually upon realizing that she’d just mess up her far-too-elaborate updo.

“It’s okay,” she said, finally forcing herself to turn towards him. “It’s just that I think this ranks right up there with the meaning of life as far as complicated questions go. We were… I don’t know if there’s really a word—or several words, even, for what we were.”

“Were you betrothed?”
This time, Buffy really did let out an ironic snort. “I’m sorry,” she quickly added, seeing his pained expression. “I didn’t mean it like that. And no—well, not unless you count—no, never mind, forget I even said that. We were enemies and lovers and friends and pretty much everything in between. Sometimes all at once. I guess you really had to be there,” she finished, taking in his understandably confused look.

“I see,” he answered simply.

“No,” she sighed, “you really don’t. But that’s okay. Really.” She walked over, being careful to keep her distance as she stood directly in front of him. “Look, I don’t want you to feel like you have to live up to anything here. None of that other stuff matters now. I know you’re not Spike, and I want you to know that I don’t think of you that way.”

For a moment something odd flickered in his eyes, but then he cleared his throat and nodded briskly, lifting himself from the edge of the table to once again settle into the straight-backed chair. “Well, in any case, I appreciate the clarification.”

Buffy wondered if she had said something wrong but, try as she might, she couldn’t guess as what that might have been. Why was it so hard for her to talk to this man? He was seated now, slender fingers toying nervously with a fountain pen, as he made an attempt to look anywhere but directly at her. She supposed it should count for something that he appeared to find the situation as awkward as she did. God—how were they going to get through the next two weeks?

As if on cue, Jones materialized at the door, bearing a small tray. The tray turned out to be a vehicle for a sealed slip of paper, which Jones delivered to William with a deferential nod. William slid the missive open and scanned its contents. Buffy sensed from the slight movement of his jaw that he was doing his best to think quickly.

“Jones,” William said to the waiting butler. “I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you with making arrangements for yet another unexpected guest. A—err—a monastic scholar I met while at Oxford had written to me some time back about a manuscript he thought I might find interesting. He’s arrived in town early it seems. I believe I shall invite him to join us for dinner. No, I don’t believe he shall need accommodations for the night,” William replied, apparently preempting Jones’ next query. “But inform my mother that we’re expecting him please.”

“Very good, sir,” Jones nodded again. He waited as William penned a hasty reply, and having retrieved it, elegantly swept out of the room.

Buffy gave William a quizzical look.

“A message from Madam Dorothea,” William clarified. “It appears that her brother is feeling considerably better since rising today. He is anxious to begin our work and I thought it best that we establish ourselves here. I’d prefer not to leave Mother—”

“What, uhh, what is wrong with your mother?” Buffy asked delicately. She’d noticed Anne Pratt’s intermittent bouts of heavy coughing during their conversation. “She’ll get better?”

William’s expression darkened. “I’m afraid she will not,” he said ruefully. “It’s consumption, you see. Untreatable.”

“I’m sorry,” Buffy said. Why hadn’t she known? It clicked for her, suddenly—that hummed song of Mrs. Pratt’s that she couldn’t quite place. She’d never thought to ask why a tune that Spike had said his mother sang to him when he was small should be the trigger used to send him into fits of blind murder. She sighed. “I’m really sorry. My mom—she was sick too, and—well, it’s awful.”
William looked at her with an odd sort of mournful interest, but didn’t pry further. Buffy suspected that neither one of them was overly glad to discover that this was the one thing they had in common so far.

“Yes, quite,” William said finally. “But I am certain that Mother will be glad to have some guests in the house. I imagine it gets quite dull with only me and the servants to keep her company.”

Buffy rather doubted this—Anne Pratt clearly doted on her son. But she answered William with a tentative smile. “Yes, well, I just wish I could remember what I actually told her about my family in America. Do you think she’ll notice if I come up with something completely different next time?”

William emitted a light chuckle. “I suspect she will, actually—she’s rather good with keeping track of people and their histories. Not to worry, though. I would just keep on inventing new relatives. The more elaborate the family tree, the better.”

And there it was again. Just when Buffy thought that she and William were doomed to eternal awkwardness, they seemed to have meandered into something like familiar banter. Of course, at that precise moment, she realized that she was now unreservedly staring at him with a look of—well, who knew what her expression was actually betraying at this point. And in the very next moment it occurred to her that William was returning this silent stare. She shifted uncomfortably. He coughed and cleared his throat. They both dropped their gaze.

“Would you—err—is there anything you would like?” William asked haltingly. “There’s a few hours yet ’till dinner. But perhaps some tea? Or—”

Buffy really didn’t think she could drink any more tea, great as it was for diffusing tension. But what was there to do in the nineteenth century? There was no internet, no TV, no radio even. She looked around, realizing that—ironically—she was literally standing in a library.

“Maybe a book?” she supplied. “Do you mind if I stay here and read?”

William nodded obligingly. “Of course,” he answered, waving towards one of the numerous bookshelves lining the walls. “That shelf there is mostly novels. Perhaps there’s something you’ll enjoy there?”

Buffy made her way over to the designated location and scanned the leather-bound volumes. She didn’t recognize most of the names. There were a few works by Dickens, but she didn’t quite think she was ready to revisit high school English just yet. Several rows down, her eyes lingered on *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*—she wondered passively if *Dracula* had been written yet. Then she wondered what Dracula was up to. Finally, deciding that it was best not to mix business with pleasure, she pulled a copy of something called *The Moonstone*.

“Fine choice,” William commented as she presented her selection to his curious gaze. “As I recall, that one is about the disappearance of a particularly large and mystical diamond.”

Buffy made a noncommittal sound, silently hoping that, at least, no apocalypse was involved. She settled into an armchair by the window and cracked open the book. And so, they passed the next several hours in near silence. She did her best to follow the winding plot—which turned out to be something like a detective story—looking up every so often to see William scribbling some notes or reaching for a new book. More tea was inevitably had. Some time later, a maid came in and flitted about the room, lighting several oil lamps.

The autumn light was slowly beginning to fade when, from the vantage of her window seat, Buffy saw a coach pull up to the house. A frail-looking man in a monk’s earth-colored robe dismounted the
steps of the small car. Isaac looked to be a bit younger than his sister, with thinning gray hair and the same sloping bone structure. He moved gingerly—less from age, Buffy deduced, than from the strain of his still-healing injuries.

“I think Isaac is here,” Buffy said, shifting to turn in her chair, the book balanced on her lap.

William emitted a light sound of acknowledgement, scribbled one final note, and capped his pen. Mere moments later, Jones was ushering Isaac into the library. The monk bowed lightly in greeting but William was already on his feet to meet him.

“Thank you, Jones, that’ll be all,” he said to the butler, shutting the door lightly behind the departing man. “Brother Isaac, I presume,” he continued, offering the man his hand. “William Pratt. Thank you for accepting my invitation to meet us here—your sister indicated that you’d had quite the ordeal, so I was loath to force you to travel, but—”

“Ah, think nothing of it,” Isaac replied, taking William’s hand. “The body is a dutiful instrument, when necessity calls. And Dorothea’s testimonial suggests that your home is equipped with far greater resources for the task that has befallen us than is her own. And you must be Miss Summers,” he continued, turning to Buffy, who had risen from her chair. “I apologize, our first meeting hardly lent itself to official introductions.”

Buffy nodded. “Yes, probably an understatement. But I’m glad you seem to be up and about. And, ‘Buffy’ is fine, really. You know who I am?”

“I do,” the monk replied. “And my sister apprised me of the latest developments. I dare say, my own involvement in them came as a bit of a surprise. The manuscript—”

“Do you know what it is?” Buffy asked expectantly.

“I’m afraid I do not.” Isaac replied. “The vampire who attacked me. He seemed to think it had something to do with the Key but, if so, it is not a document of which my Order was aware. You have it here?”

“Yes,” William answered this time, walking back to the table to retrieve the creased paper. “I’ve only just begun going through it, but I’ve identified at least ten different languages so far. That is aside from the ones that do not appear to be of human origin.”

He extended the manuscript to Isaac and the monk took it skeptically. “I’m sure you are correct,” he said after a moment. “There are a handful of demon languages I recognize here, and a few others I do not.”

William nodded. “Well, in any case, I propose we leave this matter until tomorrow. As I mentioned briefly, I’ve informed the household that you are an acquaintance from Oxford. I don’t believe it will raise too many questions if we plan to do our work here but I thought it best to introduce you over dinner.”

The monk inclined his head. “Yes, Dorothea mentioned you were an Oxford man. I studied there myself—many years ago now, before the Order. Perhaps I shall not have to obfuscate too much, then. As long as, of course, we mutually agree not to dwell on the precise nature of my monastic affiliations,” he finished with a conspiratory smile.

“Very good, then,” William replied. “I believe Jones will call for dinner any minute now. I did not want to assume, but will you be needing accommodations for the night?”

“No, no,” Isaac answered. “No need to trouble yourself. I must return to see my brothers. We have—
well, we have a timely matter that requires some preparation. Which reminds me—Buffy, Miklos will take you to Glastonbury tomorrow to see the Great Mother. I was to come with you but I’m afraid that, in my present condition, that will be rather impossible. But perhaps you should arrange to meet him at my sister’s house just after dawn tomorrow to avoid unnecessary questions?”

Buffy nodded her agreement. “Yeah, that seems like the best plan.” She looked to William, but he seemed to anticipate her request.

“Do not worry. I shall arrange transportation for you,” he said.

She began to thank him but found herself suddenly interrupted by the sound of something that could only be described as a gong.

“Ah, dinner is ready,” William announced, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

Buffy now realized that she had managed to skip both breakfast and lunch amidst the day’s commotion. Having eaten nothing but tea sandwiches and biscuits all day, she was monstrously hungry. She followed William and Isaac into the dining room, where Mrs. Pratt had already seated herself. As William made introductions, she lowered herself into a chair that Jones had obligingly held out for her and wondered just how disastrous her lack of proper dinner etiquette was about to prove. Fortunately, Mrs. Pratt and Isaac launched into an uproarious discussion of some apparently magnificent cathedral found in Oxford. Buffy was thus left free to eat in peace, rather grateful that no one seemed to expect her to participate in this conversation. At one point, Mrs. Pratt managed to rope her into the discussion by inquiring about Boston, which was where—as Buffy now vaguely remembered—she had declared that her family had settled. Buffy responded by inventing an uncle who worked at Harvard, based loosely on the character of Indiana Jones, which seemed to leave everyone perfectly entertained. She suspected that William was the only one to see through these descriptions of her fictional uncle’s highly exciting line of work but, if anything, he appeared to enjoy them even more than the others.

As dinner wrapped up, Buffy felt herself feeling surprisingly warm and sated. She suspected the wine—which she had consumed rather quickly during the first course, to calm both her hunger and her nerves—did not hurt matters. Mrs. Pratt announced that she would be retiring to the parlor, but Isaac excused himself. The hour was getting late. Perhaps sensing Buffy’s sudden concern, William charged Jones with making sure that Isaac would be delivered safely and directly to the doorstep of whatever destination he chose. Hoping that Angelus’ inability to extract any useful information from the monk had proved appropriately discouraging, Buffy did not argue. Instead, she followed William and his mother into the parlor where she contented herself with watching them play rummy.

She still couldn’t quite make sense of William. Watching him laugh with his mother, she couldn’t bring herself to believe that this was the same man she knew. He seemed so young. So proper. And yet so perfectly normal. But there was something deeply familiar about him too. The way the lowered his chin slightly when he smiled. That quirk in his lips.

She was torn away from her thoughts by Mrs. Pratt’s declaration that she was going up for the evening. The woman was glancing at the two of them somewhat expectantly. Buffy was confused, but William seemed to understand.

“Oh, go on, Mother,” he said soothingly. “I don’t think it will be terribly scandalous to leave us alone with all the servants still about.”

Mrs. Pratt continued to look a bit skeptical, but smiled at her son indulgently. “Well, I suppose so. Goodnight, then. And goodnight, Miss Summers.”
“Goodnight,” Buffy answered, rising from her seat.

“I guess I should probably go too,” she said as Mrs. Pratt left the room. “It sounds like I’m in for a pretty early day tomorrow.”

William lowered the glass of port from which he’d been sipping. “When will you be returning?” he asked, clearly careful not to seem too eager.

Buffy shrugged. “It sounds like it’s a full day’s ride? I guess that means by horse? Oh god—can I ride a horse for that long?” Somehow this had only just occurred to her, and there was nothing to be done for it now. “Well anyway,” she continued. “I think it’s just a meet-and-greet, so I guess the following day?”

William considered for a moment. “It was Glastonbury, if I recall correctly? I believe at a steady pace, you might expect about twelve hours. Probably not a journey to be made in two consecutive days, then. I expect your companions will want to take at least a day to allow the horses to rest.”

Buffy nodded. “If you say so.”

“You’re sure you won’t stay for a game? Do you know rummy? —Or maybe another glass of port?” he asked suddenly.

He was craning his head at her in that manner he had and suddenly she found she couldn’t resist. Did he really want her to stay or was he only being polite? Did she care?

“Well, maybe one more,” she said tentatively, retrieving her long-abandoned glass from a spindly-legged side table.

William smiled, picked up the decanter, and reached to take the glass from her extended hand. His fingers brushed hers as he went to wrap them around the slender crystal stem. Buffy almost gasped—whether it was the unexpected heat of his skin or simply the shock of the contact itself, she would never be able to tell—but she jerked her hand back, nearly spilling the small drop of amber liquid still remaining in the glass. She clearly hadn’t realized how on edge she actually was.

“I apologize,” William said quickly, concern lighting up his features. “Have I done something to—”

What could she say—was it the smile? The tilt of his head? His very existence? None of these things constituted a crime for which she could blame him. All of them, however, awoke a cyclone of butterflies deep in her belly. No, not butterflies—frickin’ bats. And the way he was looking up at her now, all earnest and apprehensive. It was late, they were alone, her nerve endings were still fuzzy with wine and suddenly she found that she wasn’t at all sure that she felt in control of herself. Now that he knew—

“No,” Buffy answered with forced calm. “No, I’m sorry. It’s not you. I just don’t think I can—I’m sorry, this is a mistake.” She deposited the glass back onto the side table and backed away. No, it was too much. “Goodnight.”

And with that, she was gone, leaving him staring after her in utter bewilderment.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

It wasn’t that Buffy had never been on a horse, though it had been well over a decade. The lessons for which a frazzled Joyce had signed her up when eight-year-old Buffy’s repeatedly voiced desire for a pony became too much to bear were fresher in her mind than might have been expected. Still, leisurely trotting around a track was one thing, while it turned out that galloping through the rough English countryside was quite another.

They set out early to take full advantage of the dwindling hours of mid-September daylight. It was a good couple of hours before Buffy felt like she and her tawny mare had adjusted to each other’s company enough that she felt comfortable paying any attention to her surroundings. The verdant hills were still shrouded in a vestige of morning fog. Gripping the reins tightly, she moved to readjust her shawl against the chill.

Miklos rode just ahead of her, while a younger monk whose name she hadn’t quite caught rode behind. Miklos had introduced his companion but Buffy had been momentarily distracted by the rather spectacular scar that marred the man’s forehead. It was as thought someone had burned him there long ago, mottling the skin into a discolored patch of tissue that only vaguely resembled skin.

In any case, both men had been silent since they had left Dorothea behind just past the break of dawn. Buffy did not resent the lack of conversation. When the basic act of staying on her horse ceased to be a sufficient distraction, she turned her attention to tracking their path through the rolling hills. She marveled at the difference between London’s grimy center, which seemed somehow even more choked with both people and smog than its twenty-first century version, and this impossibly green country road.

Another three hours later, however, she was ready to trade the monotony of one rolling hill after another for something that involved fewer sheep and more highway signs. They had made several stops and each time she got back on the horse her body protested just a bit louder. Eventually, Buffy found that she was thankful to feel numbness setting in.

Unfortunately, this numbness did not extend to her brain. Try as she might, she couldn’t stop herself from picking over the events of the previous thirty-six hours. It was like a scab that she just couldn’t leave alone until it finally bled.

She’d never really come close to moving on, of course. Meeting William wasn’t so much like opening an old wound as it was pouring salt onto a fresh one. God—what had she been thinking?—why the hell had she kissed him? She cringed inwardly. But then, he hadn’t really seemed to mind. It troubled her that she couldn’t tell. There was so much about him that seemed intimately familiar and yet, she couldn’t quite read him. It shouldn’t matter, obviously. Still, the questions scratched at her mind. He wasn’t Spike. But would he ever become him? What would happen now that she’d told him? What if you really could change the future? And did she want to?

It was not until the sun dipped very near to the horizon and Buffy had lost all feeling in her left leg that they descended a hill towards a small town. They headed, however, not for the town itself but towards what Buffy realized to be some hulking ruins set at its outskirts. Crumbling stone walls loomed ahead. It must have been a majestic structure, once—now its archways pointed upwards to empty sky.

When they reached the center of the enclosure, Miklos stopped and dismounted. Buffy was momentarily confused. There was literally nothing here save for open grass and a few molehills. But Miklos was looking ahead, seemingly undeterred. Buffy followed his line of sight and saw a figure,
silhouetted against the setting sun, rise as if out of the empty ground in the archway just ahead of them. Upon approach, Buffy noted that the mysterious newcomer was a man, appearing just slightly younger than Miklos, of sturdy build and a rough mane of what looked to have once been violently red hair.

Miklos nodded solemnly. “Hello, Alastair. My apologies for the unexpected visit. I’ve brought—”

“The Slayer, eh?” Alastair cut him off gruffly in an accent Buffy recognized as Scottish. He cast her a sideways glance before proceeding. “Not so unexpected, Miklos. We’ve had word from the hill. Come, they’ll be waiting.”

And with that, the man set off at a brisk walking pace. Miklos seemed to find this not the least bit strange, handing off the reins of his horse to the younger monk and motioning to Buffy to follow. Buffy surrendered her mare and moved to catch up. When she looked back a minute later, the man they left behind was nowhere to be found. Soon, they were out of the ruins once more and walking eastwards where a sloping hill supported another ancient-looking structure. This one was a single tower, jutting imposingly from the hill’s smooth peak.

“The Mother must have anticipated our arrival,” Miklos explained, sensing Buffy’s mounting apprehension. “The Abbey is an ancient stronghold of our order and we are accidental neighbors. They’re a reclusive group, the Mother and her followers—more so than we are, and that is saying quite a lot. But dangerous times make allies of us all.”

A few paces ahead, the man named Alastair let out a rough grunt. “Aye, allies. Though I cannae tell ye the last time we’ve had anything but orders from their lot.”

It was a short walk compared to the distance they’d already traveled. Buffy guessed it must have been less than a mile. They climbed the hill slowly along a lightly trodden path. The last rays of the languidly setting sun illuminated the modestly sized stone tower with a single open archway bisecting its base to open to the other side. The tower, like the ruins below, appeared cold, ancient, and entirely uninhabited. Yet the monk, Alastair, was walking with purpose towards the open archway. He stopped at its entrance, made a complex sign with his hand in the empty air and then stepped forward into nothingness. Buffy blinked to make sure she was not seeing things. The man was gone. She looked to Miklos questioningly. He appeared entirely unperturbed.

“Be careful as you step,” he said, moving ahead to follow Alastair. “There are stairs.”

And so there were. Having watched Miklos disappear into thin air just behind his comrade, Buffy took a steadying breath and moved forward. She wasn’t sure what she’s been expecting but somehow it never really came. She blinked and the descending slope of the opposing hillside was replaced by a dimly lit stone staircase. A few steps below, Miklos had stopped to confirm her presence before he turned and disappeared around the winding hall’s downward spiral.

The stairs led them deep inside the hill. They must have been roughly level with the base elevation when the tunnel finally opened up into a fairly large and considerably brighter room. Torches blazed on the rough stone walls where two tapestries hung on opposite sides of the otherwise empty space. They were threadbare and faded with apparent age but Buffy thought they might have depicted something like a battle. She was beginning to wonder what they were doing here, given that the room appeared not only empty but a dead end, when the wall opposite the stairs opened and two women appeared in the newly made doorway. Their hair was long and snowy white, flowing down their shoulders and over nearly identical gray robes. One of the women appeared to be slightly younger than the other but it was hard to tell. If pressed, Buffy would have had a difficult time pinpointing their age to anywhere between thirty and ninety.
Guardians, she thought with a sudden flash of realization.

The women said nothing, only nodding at the monks in recognition, but Buffy thought she might have seen one of them smile when their eyes finally turned to her. A moment later they separated to allow the newcomers to pass across the threshold. The next room was larger than the first. A large roughly hewn table stood at its center, laden with what looked to be the standard magical ingredients and other paraphernalia. Book and scroll-laden shelves lined those parts of the walls that were not occupied by the fiery sconces that were the room’s only source of light.

Scratch that. The room appeared to have another light source and it was located in the woman whose eyes now lifted from rearranging bits of crystal on the table’s surface. Like the others, she had long alabaster hair that fell far past her shoulders in a cascade of tiny braids. But her similarly ageless ebony skin seemed to emit a special kind of dim glow, as though someone was shining a light on it from within. The monks greeted her with a reverent incline of the head and Buffy suddenly wondered if she should do the same. She settled for opening her mouth and soundlessly closing it again.

Miklos broke the silence. “Great Mother, we bring the Slayer who was summoned. She—”

“She has some questions,” the woman interrupted. “As expected. It would be a concern if she did not. Leave us, please.” The monks did not appear particularly pleased with this request, but they obliged without question, retracing their steps out of the room followed by the two women who had admitted them. When they were alone, the lightly effervescent woman turned to Buffy, fixing her with a kind but searching look. “It’s been a long time since I’ve addressed a Slayer. Not since—not since the first.”

Buffy caught something distant and a bit sad in her eyes as she spoke those final words. It made her seem suddenly very human.

“The first?” Not the First Evil, surely. Then it dawned on her. Guardians. “The first Slayer?”

The woman nodded. “You know who I am, child?”

It was more or a statement than a question. “You’re the Great Mother—a Guardian?” Buffy responded somewhat tentatively. “I’ve met one of your—uhh, one of you. In my time. She said she was the last.”

“And so she was,” the woman said somewhat wistfully. “Just as I was the first.”

Buffy was trying to follow. There were a lot of firsts, suddenly. “You were the first Guardian?”

“The first Guardian to the first Slayer. You know the story?”

That one was a question. “I—I think so,” Buffy replied. “There were men—the Shadow Men—they took a girl. And, well, I wasn’t really a fan of their whole methodology—”

“Yes, they took the girl and then they lost her,” the Mother said solemnly. “We found her but by then it was too late. The demon had changed her too irrevocably, so we did the best we could. We gave her a weapon. And then we protected her for as long as we could, and when we could no longer protect her we protected her successor, and the one who came after, and the one who came after that. But you know how it is with men—they don’t like their power questioned—”

“The Watchers Council. The Shadow Men became the Council,” Buffy said. “But where were you? Why did you hide? You let them use that girl—all those girls—”
Her tone was becoming accusatory but the other woman regarded her patiently, sadness creeping back onto her otherworldly face. “Sineya,” she interrupted softly but firmly. “Her name was Sineya. She was my daughter, you know—”

That was enough to stop Buffy’s burgeoning tirade. “Your daughter—”

“Yes, my own child. I tell you this to convince you that I did not take her life lightly. Those who came after, they were her daughters. Children that she would never meet to replace the ones she would never have.” She sighed heavily. “You know how the world is put together, child, and we found that it was best for us to work in secret. But you are right, we have been too long in the shadows and the men’s Council has taken too many liberties. I am surprised you knew the story, for I imagine they have forgotten it—”

“There was a box,” Buffy offered helpfully.

“Ah, yes,” the Mother said with a light smile. “Well, the Shadow Men hide in their box and we hide in ours. It has been a long while since our number has grown.”

“How many Guardians are there?” Buffy asked curiously. “I understand you, but where did the rest of them come from? Are they all—?”

“Some of us were mothers of Slayers,” the Mother replied. “Some were Slayers whose duty never chose them. Others were just women—witches, you would call them. Not all of us choose the long life. It is a lonely existence and as the reach of the Council has grown we’ve increasingly chosen secrecy. There are only a handful of us now and our time is almost up. No need to worry, child,” She added, seemingly sensing Buffy’s concern. “Dusk must eventually follow dawn, and the world is changing. But you know this. Just as you know that you have been brought here for a reason—the final battle is coming.”

“Yeah, but last I checked, the final battle was coming a hundred-some-odd-years from now. Why bring me back here?” Buffy said with a mild challenge in her tone. She appreciated the history lesson, but real answers were still in short supply.

“It is a grave matter, to alter the course of time,” the Mother nodded. “There are rules that govern such things, and it is not our habit to trifle with these forces. But now, as the end approaches, there are those who would break these rules with impunity—this cannot be countenanced—so, yes, we have brought you here to protect what must be. To preserve the future as it must inevitably play out.”

“So, I’m more of a Kyle Reese than a Terminator,” Buffy smirked. “Fine, not a bad start. But why me?”

“It is foretold that the Key will appear in this dimension shortly. The preparations for its arrival have been underway for centuries, but we could not have foreseen the most recent actions on the part of our enemies. The Key must be kept safe—it has a role to play—you must know this,” the woman gave Buffy a meaningful look. “Just as you know of the devastating consequences, should it fall into the wrong hands.”

“So, someone is messing with time in order to make a grab for the Key?” Buffy said thoughtfully. “But if you’re so concerned with sticking to the rules, isn’t bringing me here just adding to the problem?”

The Mother smiled indulgently. “Would that we had the time to explain—time is a complex thing you see and not entirely as linear as it appears to most of us. You are bound to the Key. The role fell to you as an accident of time—you were there when you were needed. But now you are one with it
on some level. You are—caught in the loop, if you will.”

This was true enough, Buffy considered, given that the Key was her sister. But it wasn’t—not yet. Could it be possible that the Key’s future was the thing that had brought her to the past?

“You mean that because I—uhh—have a relationship with the Key in the future—” Was she allowed to tell this woman? Or did she already know? Certainly if there was anyone beyond time, it was her. “The monks, they used my blood to make the Key human. They gave me a sister.”

The Mother looked thoroughly unperturbed by this information. “Yes, that would no doubt have played a part. But I suspect it is more complex even than that. You see, the decision to summon you was itself reliant on something like a temporal disruption. Has Miklos told you that this is not the first time their order has tried to secure the Key?”

“He didn’t,” Buffy answered curiously.

“That is not surprising,” replied the Mother. “The Order of Dagon had something like a false start about a hundred and twenty-five years ago. The rituals were performed but the Key never materialized. It was after this that they shifted their base of operations back to England—they had been in Ireland then and the Abbey had stood largely abandoned for centuries. Well aside from its uninitiated occupants, of course.”

“So how do we know that this time will be different?” Buffy asked.

“We do not know this, precisely,” the Mother gazed at her intently as her long fingers moved across the rough surface of the table. “But we do know that something is different. We Guardians would not normally be involved in such matters—indeed, the Order of Dagon was unaware of our presence here until very recently. We are involved because of you.”

“Me?” Buffy repeated skeptically.

“Yes, you,” the other woman nodded gravely. “We are Guardians of the Slayer, not of the Key. And after centuries of seclusion, we received a call to intervene that we could not refuse. The Powers That Be themselves alerted us to the coming danger. Ancient and primordial forces,” she explained at Buffy’s confused look. “No earthly being truly knows who or what they are, but when they speak, we listen. Particularly because they do not speak very often, choosing generally not to interfere.”

“But they interfered now?”

“They did,” she confirmed. “Because it seems that the other side is no longer interested in upholding the conditions of their treaty. And they came to us because it seems that an extraordinary thing has happened—the fate of a Slayer has earned their notice.”

“I guess I should be flattered?” Buffy said somewhat suspiciously.

“I believe that you should,” the Mother answered. “You see, the Slayer is a minor player in the cosmic scheme of things—I have lived long enough to know this.”

Buffy could not help but feel affronted at this. “So I guess I don’t get a cookie for each time I stopped the world from ending?”

The Mother smiled indulgently at this. “Do not let it diminish your accomplishments, child. Only, the Slayer is ruled by destiny and destiny never ranks very high in the grand drama of the world.”

“And I’m what, different?”
“Yes, it appears that you are, though you would know better than I as to precisely why. All I know is that the intricacies of time have placed you here.” A wrinkle creased the Mother’s unearthly brow. Her fingers were still moving busily along the table’s surface, rearranging those bits of what Buffy thought might be quartz. “It cannot be said which thread was pulled first, but it is certain that you are now a part of the unraveling. It is why we were told to bring you here. You know this because if you did not, you could not have come. We were told to open a one end of a gateway, but it was your choice to open the other side.”

Buffy couldn’t quite wrap her head around this. It was true that she had pushed Willow to perform the spell, but she had no way of knowing what would happen. Certainly, she hadn’t been expecting this. In fact, none of this wouldn’t have happened had it not been for the inscription at the top of that mysterious piece of paper Dawn had dug up. She decided to abandon this line of questioning in favor of something more concrete.

“And the person I’m supposed to stop?”

“The forces of darkness have many faces,” the Mother said somewhat vaguely. “They stretch across time and dimension.”

“So I’ve learned,” Buffy answered hesitantly. “But seeing as you guys are extra full of wig about this, with my time-traveling and all, I’m guessing you’ve got someone specific in mind.”

The other woman appeared to think for a moment, as though formulating her next words carefully. “Based on what the Powers have revealed to us,” she finally said. “The matter at hand concerns a Champion—the Champion, in fact—the last. Indeed, it is why maintaining the coherence of the timeline is so crucial.”

Buffy’s heart skipped a beat at this. She thought it must have shown on her face. You know who he is?” Then she caught herself. “It is a ‘he’?”

“No,” the Mother answered, still carefully. “Unlike your kind, a Champion is not governed by fate. It is written that one will rise to join the final battle, but only choice will lead them to their path. There are those who hold the potential, but they must find it within themselves, it cannot be plucked out of them.”

“So there’s lots of Champions?” Buffy asked, somewhat confused.

“No, in the end, there can be only one.”

“Okay, so kind of like the Slayer thing?” Buffy was trying hard to process. “And you don’t know who this Champion will be?”

“Not precisely,” the Mother answered. “There is another prophesy, so ancient that it is known to most of a certain age, concerning a specific Champion—a vampire with a soul who will come to join together life and death in the coming cataclysm. This has long been known. The Powers have intervened to reveal that it is this Champion who will deliver the Key—it is why we have sought out this alliance with the Order of Dagon—and it is this course of events that must be safeguarded at all cost.”

“Deliver—” Buffy repeated, her head suddenly unbearably light and full of an uncomfortable prickling. The Mother offered nothing more than a slight wave of the hand as if to say that Buffy’s interpretation was as good as her own. Buffy grasped for something more solid. “But I thought I was here to protect the Key? And someone is trying to change all this?”
“You are here to protect the Key because we have reason to believe that someone is attempting to alter this course of events, yes.” She finally left behind the crystal shards, having apparently arranged them into a pattern that was to her satisfaction, and moved for what seemed like the first time. Buffy was struck by her gait. For a woman who was theoretically tens of thousands of years old, she was already imposing enough, but now she positively floated. “You are here because the agents of darkness have been attempting to take hold of the Key with the aid of a vampire,” she added finally.

“You are here to protect the Key because we have reason to believe that someone is attempting to alter this course of events, yes.” She finally left behind the crystal shards, having apparently arranged them into a pattern that was to her satisfaction, and moved for what seemed like the first time. Buffy was struck by her gait. For a woman who was theoretically tens of thousands of years old, she was already imposing enough, but now she positively floated. “You are here because the agents of darkness have been attempting to take hold of the Key with the aid of a vampire,” she added finally.

“You know of him?” This was the first time the other woman had expressed any overt emotion. Her voice reflected the surprise that had suddenly shifted her placid expression.

“Best of friends,” Buffy said, hesitating. It was all starting to come together in a manner she was rather dreading. “I should probably tell you, I might have an idea—a couple of ideas idea, actually, about who this souled vampire Champion is supposed to be. I knew Angelus—Angel in my time. He—well, let’s just say he fits the requirements. Or he will. Vampire with a soul, big noble quest for redemption. The problem is, as you’ve pointed out, he’s currently living out the more murderous phase of his life.”

“You know of him?” This was the first time the other woman had expressed any overt emotion. Her voice reflected the surprise that had suddenly shifted her placid expression.

“Angelus?” the Mother said, surprise etching itself even deeper into her features. “Are you quite certain?” When Buffy shrugged in response, she paused as if recollecting her thoughts. “Well, this certainly changes things. Imagine—Angelus with a soul—"

Buffy hesitated again. Of course, Angel wasn’t really the only one but his current entanglement with the Key definitely seemed to put him at the center of it all. As did the fact that he was the one left standing back in the present. She shook off the offending doubts. The Mother, however, seemed to be troubled by something as well. She was examining Buffy intently. If it had felt like Dorothea had been able to see straight through her, it was nothing to this woman’s piercing gaze. Her eyes were a pale gray, Buffy noticed.

“Child, listen to me,” she said with a sudden urgency. “You must be very careful. Your presence in this time is necessary and its extraneous consequences shall be remedied, but you must tread lightly. There’s no way of knowing where the loose threads are. You cannot intentionally affect the Champion’s actions with regards to his path—his future must not be tampered with.”

“‘Angelus?’” the Mother said, surprise etching itself even deeper into her features. “Are you quite certain?” When Buffy shrugged in response, she paused as if recollecting her thoughts. “Well, this certainly changes things. Imagine—Angelus with a soul—"

“Child, listen to me,” she said with a sudden urgency. “You must be very careful. Your presence in this time is necessary and its extraneous consequences shall be remedied, but you must tread lightly. There’s no way of knowing where the loose threads are. You cannot intentionally affect the Champion’s actions with regards to his path—his future must not be tampered with.”

“Well, yeah,” Buffy replied. “I kind of figured I shouldn’t stake him or anything. But it’s a little late for the rest—we’ve already met in this time—I’m not really sure about the psychological effects of finding out that the Slayer who kicked your ass in Victorian England has an identical twin in who happens to live in SoCal a century later.”

The Mother waved away her concern. “Time is a complex thing, but it tends to resist change as long as its balances of power remain unaltered. A spell has been arranged to conceal your presence in this time. The man you arrived with—I am sure you are aware that their order is most powerful—their magic will be sufficient to correct any minor effects produced by your intervention.”

“The monks? But they—” Suddenly it dawned on Buffy. “—you’ll rewrite people’s memories. Okay, been there done that. Neat trick.” She thought for another moment. “So that’s it then? As long as I don’t, say, kill anyone—can do whatever I want, no strings?”

“You must ensure the safe arrival of the Key—that is your task—remember, the timeline must be preserved. I leave the rest up to your best judgment.”

“Protect the Key, preserve the timeline.” Buffy repeated. “Got it. But there’s one thing I’m not quite clear on—if this Champion is supposed to, uhh, deliver the Key and Angelus is the Champion, why
is it such a problem that he’s sniffing around? Isn’t this supposed to happen?”

The Mother looked thoughtful. Buffy wasn’t sure whether she was comforted or unnerved by the fact that she was apparently not to only one to receive new information tonight. It was so tempting to view this otherworldly woman as an omniscient source of authority.

“You must remember,” she finally replied. “I never said that Angelus is indeed the Champion in question, though I agree that your testimony makes him a likely candidate. The one thing we can be certain of is that the present course of events surrounding him is a breach in the natural flow of time. It is because of this disturbance that the Powers have intervened. The forces of darkness must not claim the Key at this time, as for the rest, we shall have to see.”

Buffy found this answer deeply unsatisfying, but it seemed that there was nothing to be done for it. “So, I protect the Key, and then I go back?”

“And then you go back,” the Mother confirmed. “This is not your time and I am certain that you have a role still to play in your own. For better or for worse, there is something about you that pushed you into this course of events. Something that seems to have made all of us—Slayers and Guardians both—quite a bit more important.”

“And what will happen to you?” Buffy asked, the question suddenly leaping to the forefront of her mind. “The Guardian I met said she was the last—you won’t be there? In my time?”

“We will not,” the Mother replied sympathetically, though she herself seemed rather untroubled by this fact. “Those of us who remain—our time is running short. But we are all connected—Sineya and I—and you—the Guardians and the Slayers. The Shadow Men made you, but you made us. And so we shall all persist, one way or another,” she finished enigmatically.

With that, she glided over to the wall where the door had once been and tapped a quick pattern into it with her long slender fingers. As if obeying her command, the wall opened once more into the antechamber through which the had entered. Moments later, the two monks filed back in, though the other Guardians were nowhere in sight.

“Thank you for bringing her Miklos,” said the Mother. It only then occurred to her that the woman had never asked for her name. Perhaps it didn’t matter. “I believe we are finished here. You are welcome to pass your time here with us, child,” she addressed Buffy again. “Men are not permitted beyond this chamber, so your companions will rejoin you for your return journey on the morning after next. Or you may take advantage of their hospitality—it is your choice.”

Buffy waffled momentarily. She did not know what the monks’ accommodations looked like, but she thought she might prefer them regardless. There was something comforting about their stoic silence, whereas the charged atmosphere of this ancient place and the ethereal woman within it unnerved her in a way that was difficult to describe.

“Thank you,” she answered politely. “I think I’ll go with them. Just to make it easier—I’d like to get back as soon as possible—”

The Mother seemed unfazed by this. “Then this is goodbye for now.” She smiled softly at Buffy’s suddenly anxious start. “Do not worry, child, we will see each other again before the end. The witches brought you here, and the monks will return you. The energies involved are too powerful for a single coven to summon twice. We will speak again once your task is complete—in the meantime, I shall have to consider what you have told me. And what you have not.”

There was no accusation in that final statement. The Mother’s ancient eyes remained kind. Still,
Buffy was glad to follow Miklos and Alastair back up the long, winding tunnel. They did not speak as they walked briskly back down the hill through the cold night air. When they reached the ruins, Buffy was unsurprised to be led down another concealed tunnel to something like an underground cloister. She supposed that if you were an ancient order of mystical hermits squatting below a historical landmark, there were only so many ways to go about the task. She was shown to a small utilitarian cell that, stone-walled and subterranean as it was, proved to be relatively warm and dry. Most of all, Buffy was grateful to be left on her little cot with no company other than her own thoughts.

Not that her thoughts were proving to be particularly comforting. She didn’t quite know what to make of the so-called Great Mother, but that was almost beside the point. How were you supposed to make sense of a woman who was basically as old as humanity itself? No, what really troubled Buffy was much more immediate and tangible. Angel. And, well, Angelus—but really, Angel. It was becoming increasingly undeniable that she’d made a mistake by sending him away. He’d come bursting back into her life the night that he delivered a timely punch to Caleb’s face and that damn amulet into her hand. She begrudged his heroics.

That last time they had seen each other, when she had first come back, things had been epic and tragic and—off. Then Spike happened and then—well, then Spike really happened and she was forced to make sense of his newly-won soul. She hadn’t really considered what this would mean for her feelings towards Angel until he was literally in front of her. She would never really be sure what had possessed her to kiss him in that moment but, as she basked in the afterglow that never quite came, it began to dawn on her that their whole star-crossed thing had begun to lose its unique shine. He was no longer the only one. Not for the world, and not for her.

There’d been something poetic about their story that even her teenage self was insightful enough to recognize. A Slayer resentful of her calling and a vampire who’d been forced into his by being given something none of his kind had had before him. But she was no longer resentful, and Spike had shown up that fall, tortured and suddenly noble, despite himself. He’d won his soul—chosen a calling with no clear goal because of her. She had wanted to give him one. To show him that he was the one she chose—her champion.

But it was Angel all along. Maybe not for her, but it seemed that the world—that fate—was less flighty. Unbidden, William wormed his way into her mind. And here she was again, a hundred years in the past and dragging him into the path of a destiny that was not his. Buffy shut her eyes against the thought.
Isaac arrived at the Pratt residence shortly after breakfast, just as he had the previous day. William was, by then, already ensconced in the library. They had made reasonable progress the day before, but it consisted mostly of identifying the seventeen languages apparently represented in the manuscript. Now came the much lengthier task of actually translating this hodgepodge of passages. Today, Isaac had arrived with a few of the more rare dictionaries, including those dealing with demonic languages, which he had obtained from the Order of Dagon.

The two men had quickly grown used to working in companionable silence. Having divided the work by area of expertise, they mostly toiled on their own, and the white noise of ruffled pages was only occasionally interrupted by a consultation about a funny construction here or an unconventional declension there.

Around midday, one of the housemaids brought in tea and sandwiches and decorum forced them to abandon their labors. And so they sat at the large table, books and notes pushed to the side, sipping and chewing, as they shared the morning’s discoveries, which were proving to be less extensive than both might have hoped.

Isaac sighed as he lowered his teacup back onto its saucer. “I simply can’t imagine what a vampire would be doing with such a document. Still less so, why this would lead him to me. It’s quite bizarre, really—”

“You don’t think the creature was able to decipher the contents, surely?” William added.

“I cannot see how,” Isaac replied. “Perhaps someone had described it to him, but even still—based on everything we have ascertained so far, I simply don’t see the connection.”

“This is personal for you, then,” William supplied. “This document, whatever it is. Of course it must be—I am sorry for your ordeal—”

“Oh, no need, no need,” Isaac waved away William’s concerned look. “Of course, having the bedeviled thing waved before my eyes at such an inopportune time has left me with some lingering curiosity as to its contents. But I hardly think that it was actually responsible for the occurrence. Nor do I think its contents are likely to provide me with much closure on the matter.”

“Why then?” William asked, suddenly curious. “Is it simply duty? What is it that brings you here, fresh off your sickbed, to pour over these books?”

“Would you believe—scholarly curiosity?” Isaac chuckled. “You know something of my Order’s mission, I suspect?” William nodded uncertainly, and Isaac continued. “So, yes, perhaps duty is the best word. If there is something in this manuscript that concerns our charge, pressing or no, it falls to me to discover it. And why just now? Well, the answer to that lies with you, my boy.” It was he who eyed William with curiosity now. “My sister has a keen sense for people, and she chose to involve you in this task. Of course, this is far from the first time she’s relied on naught but intuition to do something others might consider thoroughly insane. I, myself, must admit that I rather lack her gift of insight. And so, I might ask you the very same question you asked me—why?”

William thought for a second. The reason why—why he was here, suddenly struggling to wrap his head around the grammatical constructions of demonic languages—was unbearably simple. So simple that he couldn’t bring himself to reveal it to the old monk. It was all down to her. But then, perhaps there was more, too. “It appears that I may not be long for the world,” he said. “Miss
Summers revealed—unintentionally, of course, but all the same—I am to die. To become one of those monsters.”

Isaac was looking at him now, aghast. “A vampire, you mean? But how—”

“I do not know,” William shook his head. “But I dare not disbelieve it, after all I have seen. And if it is to be so—well, I wish to do what I can. To help where I can. To discover what I can, perhaps—”

He trailed off, suddenly self-conscious. There was more—but it was a more that he couldn't quite vocalize. Now that he had seen the document in question, there was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that he couldn't quite pinpoint. It concerned him, in both senses of the word. Isaac’s eyes were on him, inscrutable.

“It is a dangerous thing indeed—to know the course of one’s destiny,” the monk said finally.

William nodded noncommittally. He reached over and picked up a page of notes, then, desperately eager to change the subject.

“Yes, well,” he said, “why don’t we get back to—now, look here. What do you make of this section in the Greek. It seems plain enough, but the repetition strikes me as odd—‘the chosen must not be chosen to choose?’”—

He shoved the copied passage over to Isaac, praying that the monk would understand his desire to return to a less charged subject. It wasn’t his destiny that troubled him, after all. Or, at least not directly. His destiny did not seem tangible outside of her role in it. The way she looked at him—as though he was another man, a greater man—filled him with a bottomless yearning. It was foolish, he knew, to imagine that he could fill the role of her lost lover. But then, William told himself, he always had been a fool.

William found her in the small garden behind the house. Buffy had been sitting on that bench for nearly half an hour before the soft rustle of footfalls across fallen leaves signaled his approach. Drawn out of her thoughts, she turned to watch him emerge from behind a rather unruly looking rose bush.

“Miss Summers,” he said, bowing his head in greeting.

She rolled her eyes, then smiled lightly. “Hi, William. I’m sorry I haven’t checked in—I figured you and Isaac would be in heavy translating mode.”

He eyed her curiously. “So, I was wrong in my appraisal—you’ve not been avoiding me, then?”

She had. She and her traveling companions had gotten in just before dark on the previous day. The journey back from Glastonbury had been just as uneventful and bruising as the journey there and Buffy felt that its effects were clear enough to the Pratts’ servants that they were happy to offer her some dinner brought up directly to her bedroom. Today, she’d risen early, taken breakfast in her room, and immediately headed back to Dorothea’s where she was relieved to find that the witch had no intent of questioning her about her encounter with the Great Mother. It was only her guilt for not watching over William as she’d originally intended that had driven her back to his home and into the garden before sunset.

The truth of the matter was that she didn’t want to deal with being around him. It was just too hard to maintain this formal pseudo-acquaintance. It had been different that first night—the night they’d met—maybe it had been the life and death atmosphere of it all, but she had felt like they’d connected.
Their subsequent encounters, however, were a giant pile-up of awkward. And it was better that way, she reasoned. The less warm and fuzzy went on between her and William, the better. She’d be going home and he—well—he’d be dying. And forgetting. And dying again.

Yup, definitely better to keep this whole thing as professional as possible. Except that professional didn’t really describe her feelings when she looked at William. Hence the avoiding.

“Avoiding?” she echoed. “Why would I be avoiding you?” Good thing denial was another of her many talents.

He looked ready to give up and let the matter drop, but something spurred him to continue despite his visible discomfort.

“I have to admit, I was rather hoping that you could supply me with the answer to that very question,” he said, shuffling his feet nervously.

Leave it to him to be persistent. Buffy allowed her head to drop back with a quiet sigh, rolling her tired neck before looking up at William once again. To her surprise, she found him gazing at her with an oddly transfixed expression, his attention riveted to the bare curve just above her shoulder.

Her look appeared to snap him out of whatever, if anything, he’d been thinking, because a moment later he dropped his gaze self-consciously and stared at his feet as one of them drew small circles on the graveled surface of the garden path.

“I’m sorry—”

“I apologize—”

Crunch.

Their clumsy exchange came to a halt as Buffy leapt up at the unexpected sound behind her.

“Don’t fret, it’s probably just a squirrel—” William began, as she carefully approached the thicket of greenery from which the offending sound had come.

Though the idea that she was quite possibly getting ready to slay a small rodent made her feel a bit stupid, Buffy decided in favor of not taking any chances. It was a bit early for vampires but, being the Slayer and all, she was more likely to attract slimy demons than furry-tailed woodland creatures. Maintaining a defensive posture, she crept around the edge of the bush. Sure enough, she suddenly found herself ducking as a large blade sliced through the air only centimeters above her. Recovering, Buffy swiftly moved to grasp the arm wielding the weapon and, giving the limb a forceful tug, smashed the sword’s hilt into the face of her attacker.

“Some squirrel,” she commented warily.

The man hit the ground immediately, knocked out by the unexpected retaliation. He was of medium build, dressed in old-fashioned armor, and chainmail, and a helmet—and why was this all suddenly very familiar? Whipping off the helmet effectively affirmed her suspicions.

“William, meet the Knights of Byzantium.” William barely had time to go from shocked to curious before they were greeted with the sound of clanging chainmail, which soon manifested itself in the form of four more Knights sprinting down the narrow path. “Don’t you guys ever travel alone?” Buffy mumbled, whirling around to appraise the new threat. She picked up the unconscious Knight’s sword and sidled up to William, shooting him a cursory glance. “Can you use a sword?”
He looked like using a sword was among the last things he wanted to do at the moment. “I—err—I can fence a bit—”

“Good enough,” she said, thrusting the weapon into his hands. “Stay behind me, swing if one gets too close. Try not to die.”

“What about you? Would it not be more expedient for you to wield the weapon?”

“I’ll manage.”

With that, she launched herself forward, delivering a series of powerful blows as her skirts whipped around her. They weren’t aiming to kill, she noticed, as she dodged their swings. That probably meant they wanted information.

Four against one were generally passable odds for her when alone, but she wasn’t particularly keen on having William use that sword she’d given him. Luckily, her opponents were human, which made it a bit easier for her to throw them around. Still, she thought, as she hiked up her dress and delivered a roundhouse kick that sent one Knight tumbling to the ground before spinning immediately to jab at another that had been approaching from behind, she couldn’t keep this up for long. She needed to start incapacitating these guys, one way or another.

In her peripheral vision, Buffy saw one of the Knights make his way towards William as the latter backed away warily, sword raised. She slammed her fist into the face of her current opponent and lunged at William’s attacker only to find herself grabbed from behind. Struggling against her assailant’s hold, she watched in horror as the Knight swung at William.

For a moment, she thought it was over. William’s eyes widened but then he met the blow, wincing at the impact. Buffy looked on as he clumsily parried his opponent’s strikes, his discomfort with the unfamiliar weapon eclipsed by the need to survive. Gathering her strength, she delivered a reverse headbutt to the Knight behind her and felt his body slump against hers as he slipped into unconsciousness. She appraised the situation. One Knight was struggling to rise from the ground, impeded by what she suspected were several broken ribs, while another lay unmoving only a few feet away. Throwing off her now unconscious attacker, Buffy rushed towards William.

He’d managed to hold his own, though his left sleeve was sporting a rather large tear through which she could see a good amount of blood running down his upper arm. Grabbing his opponent from behind, Buffy hauled the surprised Knight away to throw him to the ground. Before the man had a chance to scramble up, her foot made contact with his neck and she applied pressure, causing him to gasp for air.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” she said gravely. “I’m feeling cranky and I can pretty much guarantee that I’ll redefine the concept of going medieval on your ass if you keep this up.”

“You know not what you do,” the Knight gasped. “Our purpose will prevail.”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I know exactly what I do. I also know who you are and I know all about your purpose and, quite frankly, I’m kind of sick of it.”

Despite his reddening face, his eyes were steady. “You don’t deny it, then—by protecting the Key, you bring about the destruction of this world.”

“We’re done talking about the Key,” Buffy said calmly. “I believe as the person currently standing on your windpipe, I get to pick the topic of conversation. And I’m just dying to know how you found us.”
“I’ll tell you nothing.”

“Let’s see if we can’t change that.” She pressed her foot further into the Knight’s neck, making him gag as his body convulsed on the ground.

“Buffy—” William whispered from behind her. A steely glance over her shoulder silenced him.

“I, too, know who you are,” the Knight ground out. “The end of days must truly be near if those who claim to serve the forces of good have fallen thus. You may kill me, but I shall tell you nothing.”

Delivering one final downward shove with her heel, Buffy removed her foot from the Knight’s throat. She had no intention of killing the man, and it didn’t really matter how they had found out about her. She knew she should have expected them to appear sooner or later.

“Take your men and go,” she spat at him as he attempted to rise. “I know I’m wasting my breath here, but I’m telling you now to stay out of my way. I have a job to do and if you try to stop me, I will kill you, human or not.”

***

Buffy and William did their best to avoid the servants as they scavenged for something that would pass as first-aid supplies. Neither was in the mood to explain their disheveled state and William’s bleeding arm at the moment.

“We can go to my bedchamber,” William said. “We shan’t be disturbed there.”

Buffy acquiesced with a brisk nod. They made their way up the stairs silently and he led the way to a room some ways down the hall from her own, opening the door and motioning her inside.

She felt a twinge of familiarity, though she couldn’t quite place it. The space was traditionally decorated. Tasteful if ornate furniture and rich dark colors. Everything was so immaculate that Buffy found it hard to believe a man actually slept here. She suspected the servants made their rounds regularly enough to keep the entire house looking like no one ever touched a thing. Plus, it appeared that William pretty much lived in the library anyway. The only visible mark of his presence in this room were the small volumes left casually the surfaces of various items of furniture.

William shut the door behind them with a soft click and gazed at her uncertainly.

“Alright,” she said. “You know the drill. Let’s get you patched up.” Buffy was relieved when he began undressing without the ceremonial fuss. “You did good out there.”

He let out a sarcastic chuckle as he dropped himself onto the edge of a rather stiff looking couch. “You bestow far too much credit. Even my fencing teacher would have been horrified, and I might have said he’d seen me at my worst.”

“You stayed alive. That’s all that counts.”

“Still, I should have liked to have helped you by doing more than just staying alive,” he noted sullenly as she settled down beside him with the small bowl of water they’d managed to procure.

The gash looked like it was very close to needing stitches but Buffy decided to settle for a good bit of bandaging. Stitching up cuts had always been something she’d preferred to leave to young ER interns—the good thing about Sunnydale was that no one looked at you funny when you showed up with serious slash wounds several times a month.
“This doesn’t look great,” she told William gently. “I’ll bandage it up, but you’ll have to be careful with it for a week or two—”

He nodded and leaned back, propping himself up with his right arm as he allowed her to tend to his injury. “So, am I to understand that you knew those men?” he asked.

“Well, we’re not, like, best buds or anything, but I’ve seen some of their guys before,” she answered, dabbing at his wound with the iodine solution he’d managed to dig up. William emitted a muffled hiss but remained motionless.

“And they are after this Key you say we are to secure?”

“Pretty much.”

“But they do not wish to use it for evil like the vampires? The man you questioned—he said that protecting the Key will bring about the destruction of the world—they do not wish this?”

“No, they want to destroy the Key. Apparently, such is the will of God, and all that.”

“But we are attempting to preserve this dangerous… item?” asked William, now looking decidedly confused.

Truth be told, Buffy wasn’t too clear on the up and down of the situation anymore either, but she had resolved to trust the Guardian’s words that the timeline had to be kept intact. No Key would mean no Dawn. Two years ago, she wouldn’t have given any of this a second thought, but now—well, if the Key was about to be responsible for yet another apocalypse—she was just glad that the decision had apparently been made for her.

“Yeah,” she answered patiently. “I know it sounds kind of wacky, but the Key has a purpose to serve and we can’t interfere with that.”

He nodded silently, looking away. The soft rays of the setting sun filtered through the sheer lace of the curtains, casting slanted shadows across his face. It was still odd to see him in sunlight. Buffy tied the ends of the linen band around William’s arm. The wound on his chest was healing nicely. He’d removed the bandaging to reveal four long scabs that formed a skewed grid over his heart. She wondered how many new scars he would collect by the time she left him.

She reached out to run her fingers along the marks, inspecting the damaged skin. The intent of her gesture had been entirely clinical, but her fingertips appeared to have a mind of their own. They trailed along the smooth planes of his chest in a soft caress. William shuddered lightly but did not pull away. Mesmerized, she traced each line with the pads of her fingers, her nails gently scraping along his skin. His chest rose and fell beneath the ghostly touch of her digits—burning hot—why was he so hot? Thump. Thump. Thump. She flattened her palm to cover his heart as if trying to absorb the rapid vibration into her own flesh.

“Please—Buffy—” His whisper was hoarse. He was looking at her now, his eyes full of… something. For a moment, neither of them really knew exactly what he was asking for.

And then, just like that, it was gone. Buffy hastily pulled her hand away, curling it into a fist over her own heart.

The silence was deafening.

“What’s that?” she asked lamely, pointing at a book she’d noticed resting on the bureau several feet away. Okay, so, not her smoothest conversation starter.
William appeared momentarily flummoxed. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your book—what’s it about?”

He glanced in the direction she’d indicated, finally understanding. “Oh, that—that’s, err—it’s just poetry. Nothing terribly thrilling, I’m afraid.”

“I like poetry. Or, well, I liked the two poems that I read back in college. I haven’t had much time for it since—after—let’s just say, my life and poetic contemplation aren’t usually very mixy,” she finished self-consciously.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He looked as though he genuinely was.

“Would you read me some?”

“Now?” he blurted out in surprise, then caught himself. “I’m sorry—what I mean to say is, you wish to read just now?”

“Sure,” she answered. “I mean, I’m loving the whole going to bed at sunset thing I’ve got going on lately, but I wouldn’t mind having something to do with my evening that didn’t involve staring at the wall until I pass out from boredom. Unless, you’re busy, that is,” she added quickly. She didn’t actually know what had gotten into her. “I didn’t mean to assume—”

And then, to her complete surprise, William’s face broke into a good-natured grin. “Why, Miss Summers, you think little of me indeed to assume I’d resign a lady to such a horrid fate. I dare say, I could put off my struggles to decipher the ancient tongues of demon-kind and submit myself to the arduous duty of reading you a bit of Keats.”

His sudden animation threw her. “A who?”

William’s smile grew even wider. He rose from the couch, his earlier discomfort forgotten, and threw his shirt over his head in a careless motion. A couple of small oil lamps, placed at opposite ends of the room, had already been lit in anticipation of the coming dusk and their soft glow illuminated the deep shadows left by the sun’s receding rays.

“John Keats—one of my favorites, actually,” he said, lifting the book from its resting place on the edge of the bureau before placing it down again absentmindedly. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer I fetch something else.”

“Oh,” Buffy replied, still a bit disoriented, “No, that’s okay. I doubt I’d know the difference anyway. If you say it’s good, then read on.”

He seemed positively thrilled. The idea of Spike as a bookworm wasn’t entirely foreign to her, but everything she had learned about William now indicated that this must have been one of his more deeply held human traits. Which made her heart ache just a bit.

“Would you care for a drink?” he offered over his shoulder with a newly found nonchalance.

“Sure,” Buffy replied, eyeing the decanter of amber liquid he had pulled out of some hidden recess of the same bureau with a measure of hesitation. Things had somehow done a complete one-eighty from her earlier intentions of avoiding his company. It had not immediately entered her mind how intimate the request that he read to her really seemed. But part of her thrilled at the idea—like a fantasy, both chaste and lurid at the same time. Well, she had to admit, she could certainly use a drink.
He extended a hefty-looking crystal tumbler to her and she took it gingerly, sniffing at the contents. The heady burn of spirits hit her sinuses and she wrinkled her nose involuntarily.

“Scotch,” he specified with some amusement. “It’s really quite good, but probably an acquired taste if you’re not familiar with it. Are you? That is, would you like something else? I think Mother has some brandy in the parlor—”

“No, no, this is fine,” Buffy said quickly, taking a cautious sip. It was good. Much better than the Jack Daniels she’d come to expect at his future counterpart’s place. It was dangerously smooth and the peaty smokiness of it lingered on the back of her tongue as she swallowed. “It’s really nice, actually.”

William smiled with clear satisfaction. He was obviously relishing her sudden interest in his pastimes and happy to have shifted their interaction onto somewhat safer ground. Balancing the glass on her knee, she ran her hand across the couch’s richly woven upholstery as though noticing it for the first time. Something deep in the pit of her stomach fluttered, but then, just as quickly as it came, the sensation was gone. She looked up at him. William had poured himself a healthy drink, drained it, then poured another. Buffy smiled as he perched once again beside her, his long fingers toying with the gleaming ridges of the tumbler in vaguely anxious manner.

“You really like it? The scotch, that is—” he clarified. “It’s not a very typical ladies’ drink but then, you’re not a very typical lady.”

She understood that he was trying to pay her a compliment and thus resisted a snarky comment about the impending cultural revolution. Instead, she just chuckled, taking a larger sip from her own glass. It burned pleasantly in her throat before pooling in her belly, suffusing her body with warmth. Suddenly her mind seemed clearer than it had in days. She watched the soft sandy waves fall across his face as he inclined his head in her direction, examining her lingering smile. She’d been so wrapped up in her own thoughts, the mental gymnastics of trying to understand what it meant for her to be here, that she forgot how easy it could be to just sit with him. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t really Spike—somehow, in this moment, the ease of their mutual presence just clicked into place.

“Sorry about that— before—” she began, breaking the brief glowing silence.

“It’s quite alright,” he replied. “Having spoken with Isaac, I think I understand the gravity of the situation. At least as far as I’m able. Given the circumstances, it’s not irrational that there are things you cannot tell me.”

“No,” said Buffy. “It’s not just that. I mean—that, too. But, you’re right, I have been avoiding you. And a lot of that is because I don’t really know how to talk to you without—”

“Without seeing him,” he finished.

“Yes,” she nodded, “and no. It’s weird to explain. It’s just—being around you—it’s physical.” She flushed, suddenly regretting her sudden burst of frankness. He was eyeing her thoughtfully, the rising color in his own cheeks clearly not enough to overcome his curiosity. “It’s like I know you, but I don’t. It’s just—confusing,” she finished quietly.

He shifted. His body language hovering between habitual rigid decorum and something softer.

“You’re an extraordinary woman, Buffy—” She moved to speak but he continued. “No, I am quite genuine, and I don’t mean for you to take that statement as a platitude. It goes without saying that this whole set of circumstances is in itself rather extraordinary, but you—I am not wholly naïve. I am not the most self-possessed man by this century’s standards and, you and I, we may as well be speaking different languages at times. But it occurs to me that, given our rather peculiar circumstances, we are
afforded a unique opportunity to break the bonds of convention and be honest with each other in a way not usually possible between men and women. I do not pretend to know what you see when you look at me, but please understand that I don’t fault you for it.”

“You’re a good man, William,” she replied, downing the remainder of her glass and rising to pour herself more. He watched her movements guardedly. She held out the decanter and he allowed her to fill his glass.

“I want to help you, Buffy,” he said. His tone seemed to conceal something that belied his offer of honesty.

“You are.”

“I want to do more—I want to—” he trailed off.

She felt a rush of affection for him then that had nothing to do with the man he reminded her of. “Tell me about your life,” she said suddenly.

He seemed taken aback. “What about my life? I should think that you already know—”

She smiled self-consciously. “I don’t, actually. Spike and I had a complicated relationship and not much of it included deep conversations about the past. I thought that you’d have been—well, never mind—let’s just say this is not exactly what I expected.” She dropped her gaze, turning the tumbler around in her hands. “Tell me about your parents, how you grew up, how come you know all these weird languages—”

So he did. Eventually, warmed by the flow of still more scotch, Buffy stretched out on the ornate four-poster bed as William regaled her with summers in the highlands, the arcane intricacies of the British class system, and surely embellished tales of his time at Oxford. She was surprised to discover that he was only twenty-six—he’d be twenty-seven in December and she silently wondered if he would make it to his next birthday. Despite Spike’s generally youthful temperament, he had always seemed so much older than her. He was of course. Over a hundred years older, in fact. But this man was nearly her age—it was an odd realization. When it came her turn, she told him about her parents and her sister, omitting the more mystical dimensions of that latter relationship. Resisting his queries regarding her calling, she told him about her couple of semesters at college and how much she’d enjoyed her classes. Part of her somehow needed to convince him that she, too, was good for more than just feats of uncanny physical strength.

“Would you still like to hear that poetry?” he asked her suddenly. She had trailed off into why she’s had to leave school before realizing he had likely already discerned the answer.

“I would,” she responded enthusiastically, rearranging herself to sit upright on the bed.

William hoisted himself from his position on the floor, where he had slid to rest his back against the sofa. He reached for the decanter, but it was empty.

“I’ve had that scotch for nearly five years now,” he chuckled, almost to himself. “I never did think I’d have the occasion to actually finish it.”

Picking up the book he had abandoned—it seemed like hours ago now—he walked towards her, hesitating sheepishly. Scooting herself backwards as her skirts twisted around her, Buffy leaned against the mass of pillows at the head of the bed. She was pretty much ready to sell her soul for a pair of sweatpants at the moment. “Sit,” she instructed, sensing his uncertainty, and patted the covers to her side.
Somewhat to her surprise, he obliged, kicking off his shoes and swinging his legs up to sit beside her. Between the scotch and the hours of conversation, it seemed they were both happy to remain in the bubble of this newfound intimacy, if only a little while longer.

“You realize, of course, this is highly improper,” he remarked with an ironic glance in her direction.

“Yeah, yeah—now read.”

Shaking his head in amused resignation, he laughed softly. “And what would it please my lady to hear?”

“Something happy.”

“Happy? Well, then I may have selected the wrong book after all, but let’s see if we can’t find something to your liking.” He ruffled through the pages thoughtfully, stopping at one intermittently before continuing his perusal.

“Nothing about sunshine and daisies in there?” Buffy asked hopefully as she peered over his shoulder at the dog-eared pages.

“Not as such, I’m afraid,” he murmured, finally settling on a page. “Ah, but here we are—perhaps you shall like this one.” He folded his leg in front of him, resting the open book on his knee as he angled it towards the light. “Cat,” he began with affected majesty, “who hast pass’d thy grand cliacteric—”

What followed was a series of lines that made her picture a somewhat more battle-worn Miss Kitty Fantastico, sans the untimely crossbow incident. But that couldn’t be right. William finished and Buffy stared. “Okay, I know I’m really bad at this, but that was actually about a cat, right?”

“You’d do well to be kinder to yourself,” he chuckled. “You are, indeed, quite correct. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, “I did. I mean, I’m sure there are like a billion levels of metaphor or something that I’m missing, but it was—funny. You know, in that epic kind of way.”

He turned his head and she looked down at her lap, feeling his eyes on her. He was even doing that head-tilty thing that she’d learned to associate with Spike when he was trying his hardest to understand something. If it didn’t all take her into such psychologically sketchy territory, it might have been really interesting to compare the two. More and more, she was beginning to recognize traces of the vampire in the man sitting beside her—or was it the other way around?

“Why do you do that?” he asked suddenly.

“Do what?”

“Speak of yourself as though you lack understanding?”

“About the poetry, you mean? Well—I’ve never been much for the big words and complicated emotions, I guess.”

“And yet, you say you enjoy it?”

“I do. I just don’t necessarily get what I’m enjoying.”

He looked perplexed. “I beg your pardon, but, what’s not to… ’get’?”
“Well, you know, there’s all those literary terms I never really learned back in school—I think the
time I was supposed to spend developing my close reading skills was mostly taken up by stabbing
things—plus, once I dropped out, I definitely didn’t have time to sit around and think about poems,
not even those seventeen syllable ones, and—” She trailed off. He was shaking his head at her with a
smile. “What?”

“You.”

“What about me?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest self-consciously. “I wasn’t really
going for amusing, you know.”

“You’re not amusing. At least, not in the way you think,” he added quickly, seeing her skeptical
glare. “No,” he continued, the light smile returning to his lips. “You’re fascinating. You’re quite
possibly the most genuinely dauntless person I’ve encountered—and, I might add, the most capable
—yet, you don’t recognize your own strength.”

She didn’t want to go there right now. Not with him. Not again. “Okay, first of all, not really seeing
how this relates to rhyming couplets. And second, I’m pretty sure I’m on top of my strength-having.
Been there, done that, got the full collection of physical and psychological scars to prove it.”

“Forgive me,” he answered softly, looking appropriately reprimanded. “I don’t mean to presume. It’s
just—you think too much.”

She let out a sarcastic snort. “I should warn you, the last person who told me that ended up turning
into a psychotic killer for a couple of years.” The words were out of her mouth before she’d had a
chance to understand the full truth of her statement. She

William seemed not to notice, however, and took her comment in stride. “I only meant in the realm
of poetry, of course. I don’t pretend that we are familiar enough to make any such assertion regarding
your character. But, you see, poetry isn’t about analyzing—not really—it’s about feeling.” He was
gazing at her with a familiar intensity. “You shouldn’t rationalize away your ability to feel, Buffy.”

She plucked at the seam of her dress. “Too bad my high school teachers didn’t share your insight,
huh?”

“I never did give much credence to critics who deride verse on account of poor rhyme or awkward
prosody,” William continued thoughtfully as his head fell back against the headboard. “It seems to
me that, provided that the emotion expressed be of genuine character, one may very well forgive a
few technical faults.” He shot her a tentative glance out of the corner of his eye before finishing a bit
diffidently. “It’s the feeling that should count—you understand? —everything else is just minutia.”

Buffy smiled encouragingly at his sudden reticence. If she admitted it to herself, she knew she was in
serious trouble. She liked William. Really, really liked him. It had been inevitable, of course, given
that he wore the face of the man she’d spent over a year trying to resign to fond memory. Still, there
was something else about him. Spike had been sex and violence and self-assured swagger, all rolled
into a beautiful body that tasted like sin. Even after—well, he’d been so many different people in the
time she’d known him that the soul seemed like only another layer. She hadn’t allowed herself to
think about it—not until the very end—but the breathtaking complexity of him frightened and
astounded her more than she could have ever imagined.

And now, here was this living man who reclined somewhat nervously beside her. Warm and human
and full of the openhearted ideals whose shadows she’d only glimpsed though a century of
unrepentant monstrosity. She’d thought, for a few thrilling moments, when he’d first guessed at her
secret, that she might have changed everything. She felt panic at the irretrievable loss of her own
world—her friends and sister—but that panic had been laced with exhilarating possibility. A brave new world for her to mold. One with him in it.

Now, she knew that nothing she did here would matter. The Great Mother’s words rested like a warm security blanket over her actions in this time. She had her duty to perform, of course, but her success would ensure that nothing would change upon her return. The regularly scheduled apocalypse would still be looming, and he would still be gone. And anything she said or did in relation to the man next to her would be forgotten.

It was invitingly liberating. And it was hopelessly crippling.

“Read me another one,” she said, still smiling as she slumped down on the bed to prop up her head so that she could gaze up at him.

He appeared momentarily hesitant, taking in her new position, then resigned himself with a soft sigh. “Long or short?”

“Let’s go for long. I’ll work on this whole feeling the poetry thing.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully as he considered the book still resting on his knee. “Well, then, how about—” he flipped through the pages slowly. “Ah, here we are. A bit more serious than our last, I’m afraid, but quite rousing.”

“What’s it about?”

“Many things,” he smiled at her indulgently. “Beauty, and pain, and death, and immortality—but don’t worry about that—just listen.” He slid lower against the headboard, turning towards her as he angled the book to once more catch the soft light of the lamp and began to read. “Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave a paradise for a sect—”

Buffy allowed his voice to wash over her. He had rolled up his shirtsleeves and she could see that tendon in his forearm flex every time he reached up to turn the page. His long, elegant fingers ran over the pages and she passively wished that she could feel them on her skin. That she could move closer, could crawl into his arms, could ask him to hold her as he’d held her those last few nights. Instead, she listened. Periodically, her mind would snag onto the meaning of his words—he read of woods and flowers and what sounded like an enchanted feast—but mostly, she let herself to fall under the spell of his quiet tone. She floated on its inflections, drifted along on the rolling cadence of the verse. Gradually, she found her eyes becoming heavy, her mind swirling with words and nuances of meaning. Every so often, she would feel him shift slightly on the mattress beside her.

His voice continued to wrap around her fading consciousness. “Holy Power, cried I, approaching near the horned shrine, what am I that should so be saved from death?” he spoke softly. Something pulled at her memory but her brain was deliciously fuzzy with drink and the coming of sleep. “What am I that another death come not to choke my utterance sacrilegious here? Then said the veiled shadow—”

The bed was soft beneath her and she allowed herself to sink down into it, ignoring the cumbersome sensation of the boning in her bodice digging into the crook of her armpit. With a soft sigh, she released her hold on waking awareness as William’s words skimmed over the stilling surface of her mind. “Thou hast felt what ‘tis to die and live again before thy fated hour. That thou hadst power to do so is thy own safety; thou hast dated on thy doom,” the velvety whisper spoke into her ear, and then everything went blank.

***
William glanced down at the sleeping woman beside him. Perhaps “The Fall of Hyperion” had been a poor choice—clearly, he’d failed to keep her attention.

Ignoring the nagging voice that kept telling him the whole situation was grossly inappropriate, he slid down to his side and rested his head on his arm to examine her slumbering figure. The guilt he felt over taking advantage of her unconscious state to satisfy his selfish desires was momentarily outweighed by his need to commit every line of her countenance to firm memory. He watched her, mesmerized. For a full minute, his eyes were transfixed by the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest until he tore his gaze away forcefully, a dark blush coloring his cheeks. Had he really allowed himself to be so crass? He shifted his attention to her face, noticing for the first time the errant lock of golden hair that had fallen across her cheek. His fingers itched to sweep it away with a gentle caress.

It was astounding how peaceful she appeared now. How delicate and fragile. He still found it hard to believe, even despite the several demonstrations on his own person, how much physical power her small frame wielded. Power that she carried with such breathtaking grace.

Good Lord, but he was besotted with her.

She’d touched him tonight. He felt the color returning to his face at the memory of it. It didn’t mean anything, of course—it pained him to think of his unseemly response—what could he have been thinking in speaking to her that way? Still, her proximity thrilled him. The guileless ease with which she moved in his presence loosened his own inhibitions. He’d have to be more attentive in that regard, he resolved. Even now, he knew that he should rise. The hour had grown late but surely there were still things with which he could occupy himself—he could work on the translations, perhaps, or see to some more mundane domestic business.

Yet he made not a single move. His limbs felt heavy, much too heavy to carry him anywhere. It occurred to him that he should, at the very least, relocate himself back to the couch. It was against all precepts of conduct for him to remain so intimately resting at her side. But still, he lingered. His eyes, fixed upon her lovely sleeping face, grew ever heavier. The mentally taxing day spent pouring over the ancient texts coupled with the exertion of their unexpected confrontation, the stress of his injury, the spirits, and their hours spent in lively conversation—all were taking their toll. He rolled his head back and the ceiling blurred and swam before his eyes. Yes, he was definitely a good bit drunk, now that he noticed it.

It wouldn’t be so terrible if he just closed his eyes for a few moments—just a second or two—and then he would rise and go about his business. Yes, he resolved, just for a little while—
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

The weight of his body pressed her into the sheets—hips rolling and undulating—Buffy flexed her feet, trying to gain leverage to meet his thrusts. An arm snaked underneath her leg, hooking her knee to open her up still wider.

He was there above her, lips to her ear, muttering something indiscernible about air and angels.

It was perfect.

The new angle pushed her over the edge and she felt her orgasm flowing through her like a warm wave until she was floating freely, little fissures of light pulsating through her closed eyelids. Eventually, Buffy felt herself coming down, her body still humming with the pleasure of release. It had been a dream, of course. Spike’s nightly visits had stopped since her little temporal expedition—even since that night in the graveyard, really—but it wasn’t all that surprising that he would follow her into the past. Just like him, to haunt her wherever she went. And now, she would wake up in her bed and—

— find an arm snaking its way around her waist, pressing her against—well, this was certainly interesting. Buffy stiffened, trying to remember how she’d arrived in her present situation. The contours of the decidedly male body behind her were all too familiar. The way her own form folded perfectly against it. The comfortable weight of the arm over her side. How the hand curled under her ribcage, the thumb just barely brushing the underside of her breast.

It wasn’t—it couldn’t be —

Then she remembered. Dark colors. Immaculate décor. Delicate lace curtains, through which the first rays of the morning sun were just beginning to emerge. William’s room.

And William.

She forced herself to relax against him as her mind raced. She must have fallen asleep while he was reading, she reasoned. Oh God. Her dream—but no, that couldn’t be it. At the very least, she was still capable of distinguishing her dreams from reality. And they hadn’t had that much to drink. Plus, clothes. Yes, clothes were the defining bit of evidence here. He must have just fallen asleep beside her—they’d both been pretty tired—and then there was, after all, the scotch. She rolled her tongue around in her mouth, grimacing at the cottony dryness. And now, well, here they were. His warm chest pressing into her back, his breath gently brushing the nape of her neck, and the hard line of his arousal pressing into her bottom through her skirts as she nestled against him.

What the hell was she supposed to do?

It wasn’t that she minded. In fact, if she ignored the fact that her bodice felt like it had crushed a rib or two, she had to admit that it was all rather cozy. How long had it been since she’d been held this way? She allowed her body to melt into his unconscious embrace. No harm in enjoying it all while it lasted. It was likely to get very awkward soon enough—maybe she could pretend to be asleep —

Just then, she felt him stir against her. A deep exhaled breath tickled the back of her neck as his hand burrowed deeper underneath her ribcage. Before she could think better of it, her body moved to fold itself even further against his and her ass settled into his crotch. She let out a small involuntary moan.

He must have felt her or heard her or both because, suddenly, she felt him go rigid. And not in the good way. The seconds stretched on endlessly. She assumed that, like her, he was trying desperately
to figure out how awake his surprise bedmate was. It seemed they were standing on the razor’s edge of that intimacy they had created the previous evening. One step in either direction would make all the difference. Buffy knew she should break the stalemate—pretend to have just woken up, maybe—try to play it off casually. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. They’d fallen asleep and nothing had happened. Except she knew that if she turned towards him now, something would. Or, if it didn’t, she might never forgive herself for losing this opportunity to be with him one last time. A small voice piped up somewhere in the recesses of her brain: and so what if they did? Why was it so wrong? They were adults. He wouldn’t remember—oh God, could she bear it, knowing that he wouldn’t remember—

So, Buffy waited. Closed her eyes and remained absolutely still, commanding her muscles to soften into the languid inertia of feigned sleep.

Finally, she felt William cautiously retract his arm, releasing her as he slowly drew himself away from her body. The bed creaked lightly under his weight as he rolled himself off the mattress. A moment of silence. Would he try to wake her? Then Buffy heard slow measured footsteps crossing the room in the direction of the door.

There it was, then. At least she hadn’t made an idiot of herself by coming on to him again.

This was all great. Just great.

***

William shut the door of his bedchamber softly, praying that he hadn’t woken the sleeping woman within. The woman who was currently curled up in his bed. That same woman whose soft body had rested in his arms only moments before. He didn’t know how he’d gotten himself into such a scandalous mess.

The last thing he remembered was closing his eyes as he lay on the bed beside her—

Well, no, that wasn’t entirely true—there had been the dream—he blushed as the blurred memories surfaced in his mind. It had all been so strange… she’d been there, of course. Oh, how she’d been there…

He could feel the smooth slide of her skin against his, could taste the salty tang of her sweat—they’d made love—except, he couldn’t quite shake the odd feeling that it hadn’t been him there with her. His body had not been his own. It had all felt so real, and yet so indescribably removed from any typical sense of reality. Like some beautiful watercolor.

He shrugged into the dressing gown he’d hastily grabbed before fleeing his bedchamber and descended the stairs. The large clock decorating the landing had informed him that it was five past six. The servants would be rising about now, but he was glad to find the house generally deserted. The morning’s first light cast a cool blue pall over everything, and he rubbed his eyes, shivering lightly against the chill.

If he were honest with himself, he wanted nothing more than to crawl back into that bed. To hold her again. To imagine that his dream could become reality. He felt the heat rising on his cheeks once more. No, he told himself, as intimate as they had become the previous evening—she couldn’t possibly.

Still, he found himself unable to exorcise the thought. Perhaps, then, with the aid of a pen—

***

Buffy lay on the bed for what felt like hours before she finally forced herself to roll over and trudge
back to her own room. It was still early enough that everyone else in the house was asleep—well, everyone except, presumably, William.

She hoped that her absence from her room the previous evening wouldn’t raise too many eyebrows among the servants if she turned up there this morning. Not that she cared, really.

She wondered if she should go see him. He was probably in the library—that was clearly his safe space. Buffy splashed her face with cool water from a basin she imagined one of the servants must have left for her the previous evening. Yes, she’d have to go talk to him. It would be more awkward not to. If she knew him at all—and she felt that she was beginning to—he would be just as willing to let the whole thing go uncommented on.

Buffy wiped her face dry and eyed her reflection critically. All things considered, she thought she was doing a pretty good job acclimating to the lack of hot showers and blow dryers. Having spent the typically inordinate amount of time battling her hair into something that resembled an acceptable coiffure, she set out on her search for William.

He was, of course, right where she thought he’d be. He’d left the door open just a crack and she opened it without knocking. The startled look on his face informed her that this might have been the wrong decision. He’d been diligently scribbling something in a small book and his pen stood frozen in mid-stroke as his eyes locked with hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I should have knocked.”

A full second passed before he tore his gaze from hers and lowered his pen. “No, no, it’s quite alright. As it happens, I was just waiting for you to rise.”

The silence hung heavy between them.

William glanced down at his notebook, looking for all the world like he wanted nothing more than to slam it shut, but the wet ink glistened on the heavy paper. He cleared his throat nervously. “I believe I may have had something of a breakthrough concerning our text.”

Buffy was glad for this practical topic of discussion. She approached the table stood once more behind his chair to peer at the books still strewn across its surface. “What did you find out?”

At least he stayed put this time around. Maybe waking up with a handful of her breast had anesthetized him to the shock of having her stand next to him, she mused.

“Well, I cannot say that I am entirely certain of my translation,” William said, clearly trying to appear inconspicuous as he slid the notebook away from her, “but it would appear that this particular bit may be more relevant than I had initially surmised.”

Unfortunately, his attempts at stealth attracted Buffy’s attention rather than deterring it. “What’s that?” she asked leaning on the table to catch a better glimpse of the column of fresh writing covering the page.

William colored. “Oh, this is nothing—just some notes—quite boring, really. Now this text, on the other hand—”

But Buffy was not to be dissuaded. Draping herself over the back of the chair, she squinted at the loopy script. “Is that more poetry?” she asked, continuing to crane her neck in the direction of the mysterious document. “Is it your poetry?”

“Well—err—no. That is to say, it’s not quite—” William mumbled as he continued to ineffectually
push the book to a more distant corner of the large table.

“Why can’t I see? Is it, like, X-rated poetry? Because, I have to say, the last time I saw a guy get this defensive over something was when I dug up my friend Xander’s big box of porn,” she joked, reaching for the pages.

Buffy was about to close her fingers over the small book when William moved unexpectedly. She’d been hovering precariously, wrapping herself around the back of the chair to grab for the mysterious document, and he must have misjudged her position because he suddenly turned in his seat only to find his face buried in her cleavage.

It all happened very quickly. William gave a surprised grunt, pushing himself and the chair away from her, and Buffy, her posture already overextended, lost her balance entirely and pitched forward, reaching out instinctively as her hands searched for a grip on the table, chair, or anything solid. She felt William’s arms encircle her waist to keep her from toppling to the side.

The next moment seemed to stand frozen in time. She was extremely uncomfortable. The armrest was digging into her lower back, her elbow tingled where she’d banged it on the edge of the table, and her knee was currently lodged oddly underneath its surface. But none of those things mattered, because William’s lips were only a millimeter away from hers.

It would have been so easy to just lean forward and close the distance. She realized he must have been holding his breath because his chest was still against hers and she didn’t feel even the slightest bit of air stirring against her face. If she could just move her head ever so slightly—

Another second, and she was sure she’d have done it, but then William’s palm came up to cup her cheek and the moment splintered into a billion tiny fragments.

“Are you alright?” he asked gently, moving his face away from hers.

She shook her head. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.” It was just as well, really. “You know, if you didn’t want me to see it that badly, you could have just told me,” she added with a smile, trying to lighten the mood. Amazingly, it worked.

William dropped his gaze, grinning sheepishly. Then, his eyes came up to meet hers once more. “You’re quite correct, of course. I apologize. It’s only that you caught me rather off guard.”

His thumb was lightly stroking across her cheekbone and his other arm was still firmly wrapped around her waist. She wondered if he was even aware of it. “So, was I right?” she continued quietly, not wanting to sever whatever tenuous bond currently held them together. “You write poetry?”

Of course, that did it. William cleared his throat uncomfortably, dropping his hand from her cheek back to her waist as he gently lifted her off his lap to help her back to a standing position.

“I, err, well—I suppose, you could say that, yes,” he admitted finally, seemingly trying to settle his eyes anywhere but on her. “But, it’s not very good, I’m afraid. At least not by any conventional standard.”

She smiled at him playfully as she rested a hand on his shoulder and shoved lightly. Her gesture had the desired result—he leaned back and raised his chin to look up at her. “Well, then, that works out just fine because I don’t happen to know anything about this conventional standard you speak of.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” he shook his head, his eyes filled with something like awe.

“So, can I see it?” she tried again, keeping her tone light.
He continued to gaze at her, as if considering something, before replying, “Yes, I suppose you may. But not yet—” he added quickly “— it’s not quite finished, you see.”

Buffy nodded her acquiescence, savoring her victory. She couldn’t quite explain why, but it had suddenly felt very important that she see the poem. She wondered if Spike had ever written anything or if that part of him had died with William. She’d seen him reading often enough. He’d denied it at first, all puffed-up and defensive, but as their relationship went on she’d gotten used to walking into his crypt to find him with a book propped open on his knee. Of course, she would have guessed Stephen King over Wordsworth, and by the time she even came close to caring one way or the other, his books had been reduced to cinders along with the rest of the crypt. Even still, reading was one thing, while writing was entirely another. It intrigued her to imagine Spike as a poet. And if she were inclined to self-reflection, which she’d found she had an increasing amount of time for as of late—well, then it also filled in quite a few gaps that made sense of her otherwise schizophrenic romantic history. Probably to the point that it made her laughably predictable. What had they called it back in high school? This version of Spike had… Owenocity. “So, you said you’d found something in the document?” she asked, changing the subject.

William appeared immensely relieved. “Yes, well you see—there’s this bit here that I hadn’t been able to make sense of before,” he shuffled his notes. “It’s in Sanskrit, with which I’ve but very limited experience, and I had initially thought it to be quite irrelevant to our purpose but I’m beginning to believe otherwise.”

Buffy squinted at the page. Most of it looked like random squiggles to her, yet there was something familiar about the thing taken as a whole. She realized that this was the first time she had given the page more than a cursory look. There was something about the way that it was ripped right at the left-hand side there—and then it hit her. Dawn’s manuscript, the very same one that had sent her here, had been torn in exactly the same way. She tried to remember what the document her sister found had looked like. She’d stared at it for hours as Willow and Giles had been arguing the merits and dangers of attempting the incantation, as though looking at it would somehow turn the indecipherable marks into plain English. Yes, she’d seen all this before—except—well, except there was no invocation. The hastily scribbled inscription at the top that Dawn had identified as Latin didn’t seem to be there.

She barely had time to consider what this might mean when William’s insistent voice interrupted her contemplations.

“You see,” he continued, clearly not having noticed the suddenly distant look in her eyes. “This term here—dvijau—is usually used in reference to social class—or, well, also birds, actually—so I’d assumed this passage to be unrelated to our current situation. But then,” he shuffled his papers again, producing another page of notes that appeared to be covered with still more squiggles, “then, I came across this other passage where the Syriac uses a rather strange expression, which carries the exact same meaning—that is, ‘twice-born’—now, in this context—”

Buffy felt like she might be able to follow better if he would just stop waving random squiggle-covered pages at her, because she was currently rather lost. “Sorry,” she interrupted, “this is great and all, or it would be if I happened to read Sanskrit, but could we maybe switch to the Cliff’s Notes version?”

“Pardon me?”

“The point,” she clarified gently. “What’s the point?”

“Ah, yes, I apologize—” he glanced at her ruefully, “— what I’m trying to convey is that I believe
the text to be describing a person. Or, rather, two people. Some of the passages are rather vague, but the Sanskrit uses the dual quite regularly.”

“Alright, it’s about people. Great. Are these people actually useful to us?”

“Well, I should say so. From what I’ve been able to glean thus far, they’re going to save the world. Or, at least they might,” he added with an unnerving edge of hesitancy. “Possibly.”

“So, we think they’re going to save the world,” she frowned. “Unless… what? They decide to go on vacation instead?”

William leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. “I might be reading too much into what is simply an eccentricity of the text,” he said. “But, much of what is written here reads like—well—like a prophesy. Now, I’m loath to claim any expertise, given that this is the first time I’ve actually encountered a prophesy, but it would seem to me that such a text should be written in the future tense.”

“Uh-huh,” Buffy nodded, leaning against the edge of the table to look at him blankly. “Prophesy. Future. I can see where that would make sense, prophesies generally being all futurey and such. So, what’s the problem?”

“Well, that’s just it, you see. This text is written almost entirely—at least where the language of choice will allow—in the optative.”

“The op-what-ive?”

He chuckled. “Indeed. To put it simply, it’s a grammatical method of designating that something is contingent. That is, not a definite reality but perhaps a desire or a wish, or rather, as I believe may be implied here, a possibility.”

“So it’s a possibility that these two people will save the world.”

“It would appear so, yes.”

“Well, let’s hope they’re feeling generous, then,” she shrugged. “Any clue as to who our possibly-world-saving friends may be?”

“Not as such, no. But as I’ve said, I believe I’m beginning to make some advances. This twice-born business, for instance. The text seems to be implying that we’re dealing with individuals who have experienced a sort of rebirth. A second joining of the soul to the physical body, if you will.”

Buffy’s heart skipped a beat. People who’d experienced a return of the soul to their bodies. Two of them. And they would save the world. Nope, it wasn’t like she knew anyone who could fit that description, certainly not two anyones. The Great Mother had said there could only be one—but then, perhaps, she’d been wrong—

Well then, one down and one to go, Buffy thought. Was it really the universe’s grand joke on her life that she just happened to know two re-ensouled vampires? Would she lose the second just as she’d lost the first, to a noble decision to play the martyr? Perhaps it didn’t matter who took the first crack at wearing the amulet, after all.

She struggled to keep her face neutral. “Like people who have come back from the dead? Well, gee, that narrows the list a bit. Anything else?”

William was not put off in the least. “Well, as a matter of fact, yes,” he continued. “I don’t believe
that it’s quite as simple as that. The text makes no mention of actual resurrection—only a joining of soul and body. In fact, there’s an odd bit in here about the union of life and death. Quite fascinating, actually.”

Buffy snorted, her surliness a cover for the sheer panic blossoming high in her throat. “Well, I’m glad at least you’re entertained.”

He shot her a slightly hurt look, clearly disappointed by her apparent lack of enthusiasm.

“Yes, quite. I’ll just be returning to my work, then,” he said.

She slumped back against the desk in frustration. And here she’d thought their signals could possibly get any mixier.

“I’m sorry, William. That came out wrong. It’s just that research has never really been my thing. Usually, other people do the reading and I just make sure that the main character ends up on the business end of something pointy.”

At least that elicited a smile. “Indeed. Well, I’ll be sure to inform you the very moment I discover something that you may—err—stab.”

“Now you’re catching on,” she grinned. “Speaking of stabbing, how’s your arm?”

“A bit tender,” William admitted. “But I’m certain it will improve in no time at all.”

“Do you want me to take another look at it?”

She was almost relieved when he shook his head. “No, no, that’s quite alright.”

They were still toeing that shifting line of intimacy and while half of her wanted to leap wildly across it, the other half was poignantly aware of the fresh dull ache in her chest that had awoken along with her, wrapped in his arms this morning. Buffy figured it would really be best if, from now on, William kept his clothes on and she kept her hands off of him.

“Well,” she said cordially. “Anyway, I should get going, I have a whole load of—uhh—something to do.”

Unfortunately, Buffy had no idea what the aforementioned something might actually happen to be. The trip to Glastonbury, in all of its ass-bruising glory, had been a welcome distraction. Otherwise, her subsequent day at Dorothea’s had consisted mostly of aimless wondering back and forth while she waited for a piece, any piece of new information to materialize. Dorothea, claiming that she didn’t keep up with popular literature, had gifted her with a copy of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Buffy quickly discovered that she preferred her pilgrims with creamed corn and roasted bird in the equation. Though she’d hardly developed a taste for Victorian fiction, she recognized that William’s collection must have been much more fun by the day’s standards.

William must have caught on to her subterfuge, because he eyed her with amusement. “Buffy,” he called after her as she pushed herself off the edge of the desk and headed for the door. “May I ask, what are your plans for the day?”

Buffy stopped in her tracks. “Oh, well, I’ve got—you know—that thing I’ve been wanting to get done,” she answered, peering at his over her shoulder with mild suspicion. “You know, lots of different stuff.”

“I see,” he answered, his mouth forming a thin line even as his eyes twinkled with laughter, “Well, in
any case, I was planning on going out to take care of some business and I thought that perhaps you’d like to accompany me. I imagine you must have seen very little of London, to the exclusion of its splendid darkened hallways, of course.” He was mocking her. William was actually mocking her. “That is,” he continued lightly, “if you think you might be able to postpone your—thing.”

She couldn’t help but smile. He seemed to have developed a knack for detecting every time she began to withdraw. Surely, sightseeing was a harmless enough activity. “Sure,” she replied, resigning herself to the ongoing game of emotional ping-pong. “I’d love to.”

***

Several hours later and on the other end of town, Angelus exited a dingy looking pub. He thought he’d find Darla there—it was just the kind of place she frequented when she was in the mood to roleplay a bit before enjoying her meal. Unfortunately, his search proved fruitless. He had the distinct feeling that Darla had taken to avoiding him since he’d gotten caught up in this business with the solicitor, the monk, and their latest bit of apocalyptic arcania. Angelus remained skeptical, of course. He liked to think that his fascination with this mythic Key was more ironic than anything else—if some pretentious twit in a suit wanted to talk him into fulfilling his destiny as the destroyer of worlds, then he’d play along on his own terms.

But still, there was something about all this talk of destiny that piqued his curiosity. He couldn’t quite place it, but there was something indistinct nagging feeling that had taken up residence around the periphery of his thoughts ever since the bastard had thrust that damned scrap of parchment into his face. Perhaps he was meant for more than stalking socialites and disemboweling religious fanatics. Perhaps the Master’s cult had been onto something after all—and perhaps the doddering vampire had underestimated him all that time ago, just as his father had still longer back. Perhaps he really would be the one to finally lead the return of the Old Ones—

Just as if on cue, his thoughts were interrupted by a voice from the shadows. “Ah, Master Angelus, I was beginning to think that you had decided to pass your entire night in this fine… establishment.”

Angelus recognized the man by his manner of dress—far too professional for these parts. “You’d be another representative of that firm, then? Best be careful, lest you aspire to meet with the same end as your associate,” Angelus scowled. There was something in the man’s tone that he resented instinctively.

“Ah, yes, that was most unfortunate,” the man replied casually, falling into step with Angelus now. “Luckily, I am somewhat less fragile than my colleague.”

Angelus sniffed at him. “You’re not human,” he observed.

“Not as such, no,” the man replied. “But that is rather beside the point. We have been quite disappointed with your lack of progress with regards to the Key.”

“Aye,” Angelus growled. “And I’ve been rather disappointed that you’ve gotten me entangled with a Slayer without so much as a warning. That was not part of your original presentation, as I recall.”

“Ah, yes, the Slayer,” his new companion sighed impatiently. “These matters never do remain simple. Still, there’s no reason not to use her presence to your advantage. After all, what better way to track down the Key than through the person who has been charged with protecting it.”

“Aye, I would do that,” Angelus answered, his own patience fraying. “But, you see, the wench has an annoying habit of running away with my leads—first the monk, then the boy.”
“The boy?”

“Some prancing idiot. Hardly thought he was even worth eating until Dru started prattling on about twinkling lights and locks and keys.”

“Interesting,” the man replied. “Most interesting. Even still, it would behoove you to show some initiative. Remember, you will only have one chance at capturing the Key.”

“Aye, about that,” said Angelus. “I’m still not quite clear on why I can’t just let these monks do the dirty work and then take the Key off of their cold, dead, dismembered bodies.”

“One chance, Angelus,” the man said sternly. “You must be there when the Key—arrives. The monks have been rather greedy in guarding their secrets. You must endeavor to discover their plans.”

“And what's your stake in all of this? You don’t strike me as the type to relish a fine apocalypse for its own sake,” Angelus inquired suspiciously.

“My organization has its… interests,” the man answered. “Though, as it happens, they do not yet fall within the sphere of your concern. A word of advice, then. Well, four words, to be more exact: the Knights of Byzantium. Good night, Master Angelus.”

And with that, the man broke step with Angelus, turned down an alley, and was gone. Angelus paused to glower after him, weighing his options. He wasn’t particularly fond of this man’s presumptuousness—and still less of the same where it came to his clandestine employers. Still, he remained intrigued. Shaking his head, Angelus reprised his course down the darkened street. Perhaps Darla was to be found in the brothel just down the way.
The subsequent ten days ran out rather uneventfully. Buffy had taken to passing the vast majority of her time at the Pratt residence. William and Isaac spent their days toiling away in the library and she hovered on the periphery, catching the livelier bits of their debates about declensions and verbal roots. Luckily, William’s collection of contemporary literature was indeed much better stocked than Dorothea’s, and Buffy had had the opportunity to discover that, while she found Jane Austen deeply annoying, she rather enjoyed William’s dog-eared copy of *Jane Eyre*. She had never been much of a reader but, pressed on by the fact that there seemed to be little else to do in the nineteenth century, she was beginning to get into the habit. That day, she found herself dipping a toe into the works of George Eliot.

Buffy had come to accept that the more she kept her activities circumscribed, the less havoc she was likely to wreak on the timeline. The Great Mother’s advice to abstain from interfering needlessly in Angelus’s actions kept her from searching him out deliberately. She resigned herself to the fact that she would just have to do her best to secure the monks when the moment came. Having, therefore, nothing to do but wait for the appointed time of the Key’s arrival, she embraced the downtime.

She was also forced to admit that William’s company had proved a key element in this development. Buffy looked over at him with a light smile. The morning that they had woken up in each other’s arms seemed to have diffused something. Since then, having apparently come to a silent agreement not to press the issue, they had naturally taken to spending their days together but mindfully retiring to separate bedrooms. Somewhere along the way, their growing familiarity had effectively cut through the sexual tension, which made him less nervous and her less spastic. Against all odds, they had settled into something like an easy friendship. Still, every once in a while, the look he would get on his face when he thought she wasn’t paying attention made her think that maybe she wasn’t the only one trying to deal with feelings that weren’t entirely platonic. Sort of like the look he was giving her right now.

She raised her head and met his eyes, causing him to conspicuously return to his work. It was getting towards late afternoon, which was Isaac’s usual time to wrap things up and head back to the Order’s headquarters. Neither of them had tried their hand at the Linear B and there were some passages in assorted demonic languages that Isaac had not yet tackled, but there was no denying that they had made admirable progress on the translation. Unfortunately, for all this work, there had not been any further breakthroughs as to the meaning of the manuscript. It now seemed clear that it contained something like a prophesy concerning the role that either one or two people would—*might*—play in a coming cataclysm. The subsequent passages, disappointingly repetitive, went about dualities and singularities, signs and origins, but offered no real insight into what either concept might apply to.

Likewise unsolved remained the mystery of the document itself. Buffy was now sure that it was the same piece of paper Dawn would bring to them a hundred and twenty-four years into the future. What she couldn’t quite wrap her head around was the part of it that had yet to be written. *For the Slayer who seeks knowledge of the rise of the Old Ones, a means to invoke guidance.* Her time here had hardly yielded any guidance concerning the Old Ones. If this was truly the same manuscript, then there was no reason she had to travel over a century into the past to watch someone translate it. Yet, combined with the invocation, this hastily scribbled line seemed to serve no purpose other than to bring her here.

The real rub of it all was that Buffy was running out of time. It was the nineteenth of September. On their journey back from Glastonbury, Miklos had clarified that, as the fall equinox fell on the afternoon of twenty-second, the waning moon would be crossing its meridian about half past two the
previous night. This meant that there were just two days before whatever plan she had to safeguard the arrival of the Key would need to be put into decisive action. Never mind the fact that her plan extended about as far as keeping both Angelus and the Knights of Byzantium out of 28 Dean Street. She had spoken with the monks about protective spells, many of which were already in place. The spell that would wipe away all memory of her would take effect at dawn the previous day. Only the monks of the Order who had performed the spell would be exempt, and so she would join them at Dean Street before sunrise, where she would make sure they remained undisturbed. Beyond that, there was not much Buffy could do but wait.

She looked up to find William’s eyes trained in her direction once more. She still hadn’t told him. Somewhere along the way, she supposed, she had just passively decided not to. What would it accomplish, after all? Noting that Isaac had taken to packing up his dictionaries, she closed her own book.

“Done for the day?” she called in their general direction.

“Done for the time being, I believe,” William replied, hastily moving to rearrange some of his own volumes. “Isaac will take the materials with him to see if he can make any progress on the non-human languages, but I’m afraid that the usefulness of my expertise has been exhausted.

Buffy could tell that he was somewhat troubled by this fact. No doubt he too had come to rely on the easy predictability of their arrangement. What happened now was anyone’s guess.

“Yes, Buffy,” Isaac addressed her in his clipped accent. “I shall be in touch tomorrow to—err—make arrangements.”

His meaningful look did not escape William. “Please do let me know if you require any further aid,” he said to Isaac, his hopeful tone clearly overshadowing the basic politeness of the gesture.

Isaac nodded, his face stoic. “I shall, William. It has been a pleasure working with you.”

It became obvious to Buffy that he did not expect to see his new companion again. She watched as Isaac gave another curt nod in her direction and left the room, arms laden with books.

William shuffled his feet nervously. “Buffy—” he began.

But she interrupted him before he could get any further. “Why don’t we take a walk?”

It was not an unusual suggestion. A few days ago, William had shown her the rather picturesque park that was located only about half a mile from the Pratt residence. He nodded his agreement, seeming somewhat glad that he had gotten a reprieve from articulating the question they were both clearly dreading. They left the library together and he waited in the parlor as she went up to retrieve a shawl from her bedroom. It was not yet dusk, but the air had already begun to settle into an evening chill.

They walked silently down the cobblestone street. William had offered her his arm and she took hold of it instinctively. The ambiguity of their situation clashed dizzyingly with the comfort of this bit of physical contact. Entering the park, they took a right towards the rose garden. Many of the flowers had already given up their bloom but a few of the hardier varieties seemed to be holding on. Their light fragrance filled the still golden air.

It was amid the roses that he finally spoke. “Buffy, you know I must ask—what is to happen now?” his voice a bit hoarse.

She sighed. Without thinking about it, she leaned her head against his shoulder. “I don’t know,” she
answered finally. It was the truth.

Spotting a bench half-concealed between two particularly voluminous rose bushes, he led her to it. She sat down next to him with some reluctance. She didn’t think she could bear to look into his eyes just now. When it seemed like she could no longer keep her gaze downturned, she raised her head and looked off down the path, past his shoulder. The sandy waves of his hair swam in her peripheral vision, the sun’s slanting rays illuminating bits of gold within them.

“You need not hide it from me, whatever it is,” he spoke again plaintively. When she didn’t respond, he went on. “I know that there are things you cannot tell me, just as I know that the circumstances of our acquaintance are far from typical. My work with Isaac was a welcome pretext for you—that is, for our continued contact. But now—well, I would very much enjoy the continued pleasure of your company—that is, if you—I mean to say that I—”

He was rambling. William was not an inarticulate man, as she had come to find over the weeks they had spent together. Not when he felt sure of himself. But this uncertainty, which they had both known was coming, but which nevertheless appeared all too sudden now that it was here—this seemed to catapult him right back to the moment when they first met. She allowed him to go on because she didn’t think she could do much better. Eventually though, the tremulous note in his voice became too much.

She looked at him, finally. This seemed to reassure him somewhat as he trailed off, not quite knowing how to finish his sentence.

“I’m not really sure what comes next,” she said. That, too, was the truth. “You know it’s complicated. I think—I think, all we can do is just take it one day at a time.”

Not knowing what else to do, she took his hand. He looked down, lacing his fingers through hers. They were cool with the evening chill. For all their acquired ease, she couldn’t deny the deep pang of yearning she felt whenever she looked at him. She was no longer entirely sure at whom exactly that yearning was targeted—Spike or this man that he had once been—but it gripped her now like a vise deep within her chest.

Her hand must have tensed because suddenly his eyes were on hers again, searching. Buffy didn’t know what he saw any more than she knew what it was precisely that she felt.

Slowly, his other hand rose up to cup her cheek. It was a tentative gesture and she leaned into it without a second thought. Her gaze flickered downwards briefly as the corner of her lips just barely brushed his palm. He cocked his head in response. She smiled. And then, just like that, his fingers were pressing lightly behind her ear and he pulled her face towards his.

The vise tightened as Buffy absorbed the utter perfection of this moment. The sun’s last rays warmed her face as she inhaled the cool air, laced with just a hint of roses. William’s lips were soft, probing. Then their mouths parted against each other and she inhaled him. He was warm and tasted vaguely of tea leaves mixed with everything she had ever wanted.

The kiss demanded nothing. And yet, neither of them could quite bear to pull away. Finally, it was Buffy who withdrew, resting her forehead against William’s. The air was magnetic between them. She wanted to lace her arms around his neck. To grab him, to pull him into her and crawl inside him. It was beyond lust. It was a piercing need to hold on and never let go. But he was looking at her now, so she swallowed and settled for another smile.

The sunlight had nearly faded. “We should go,” she said quietly.
“So we should,” he replied. She thought she saw something like longing in own his eyes but could not allow herself to contemplate it.

They rose and, just as they had come, arm in arm, made their way out of the garden, back through the park, and up the cobbled street. Words seemed somehow unfitting. Not now. Not yet.

They arrived back at the Pratt residence to find that dinner had been set, and Buffy ate quietly while William made small talk with his mother. If the other woman had noticed that anything seemed off, she did not let on. Buffy was grateful for this. When dinner had been cleared, however, Anne Pratt politely announced that she would be going up, giving them something that seemed disconcertingly like a knowing look.

Having thus bid her goodnight, Buffy and William made their way into the parlor. It was early yet, and they had made a habit of passing their evenings in there, drinking and talking and reading. Tonight, William stopped short as soon as they were through the door. Turning towards her, he moved to take her hands into his. His eyes were intent on her face, as though he was hoping to decipher some hidden message that might be written in its features. When this proved unsuccessful, he sighed and bowed his head.

“I trust you, Buffy,” he said. “I am sure that you are telling me less about what you plan to do next than you know, but I am not fool enough to test my luck.”

She stared at him silently. What could she say? So, failing to summon words, she stepped forward and kissed him. Her hands left his to tangle in his hair and he pulled her close, wrapping her in his arms. They stood locked like that for some time, until it seemed to Buffy that if she didn’t stop now then she never would. Reluctantly, she broke the kiss, hands smoothing his curls back into place. The look he gave her was a bit melancholy, but his hand pulled at her waist as he stepped away from her.

“Read with me?” he offered, motioning towards the large chaise in the corner.

She obliged, walking into the adjoining library to retrieve her copy of *Middlemarch*. When she returned, he was stretched out on the chaise, his own book propped up on one bent knee. He stretched out a hand and she went to him, sitting beside him as he wrapped his free arm around her.

This wasn’t their usual habit, but tonight Buffy was glad of it. She leaned back into his chest, opening her book to the place she had marked. It was a thick tome and she was less than a quarter of the way in—it struck her that she would never finish it in time. This was a highly dispiriting thought and she retrained her eyes, allowing the page to go blurry in front of her. Instead she focused her attention on the comfort of William’s warm body.

After a while, it occurred to her that he would notice if she wasn’t actually reading, so she flipped the page, read a paragraph or two, then lost her place for lack of attention and had to start over. She much preferred their current arrangement to conversation, which she did not seem to be able to muster at the moment, so she was willing to keep up the pretense as long as she could. As long as William kept holding her. She longed to turn around and kiss him again, but something prevented her.

Nonsensically, she thought of the book of fairy tales she had picked up a few days ago. In it, she was surprised to find “The Little Mermaid,” which turned out to be the original version translated from the Danish, and which diverged quite significantly from her childhood favorite Disney adaptation. In this version, the eponymous mermaid traded her voice for legs and a human soul only to discover that every step she took would feel like walking on sharp knives. At the time, this talk of souls had reminded Buffy of the two vampires who had occupied a good portion of her thoughts as of late. For both, souls had seemed deeply entwined with pain. But now it seemed like the story had also become
a fitting analogy for her own situation. Every kiss from William was like a knife through the heart.

And so, they wiled away the creeping minutes in silence, each too distracted to accomplish anything that would pass as reading but unwilling to give up the effort because doing so would mean abandoning this bit of stolen intimacy. Eventually, however, there was no denying the late hour. Noticing that William had now yawned three times in the space of about five minutes, Buffy shut the book and rubbed her own bleary eyes. Slowly, she rose, tapping a gentle hand to his bent knee.

“I think I’m going to bed,” she said.

It occurred to her that this announcement had almost sounded like an invitation, though she hadn’t meant it as such. If William had registered the unintended subtext, he showed no sign of it. Resting his head on the back of the chaise, he fixed her with something that might have been a resigned smile.

“I think I shall have a drink before retiring,” he answered. “Goodnight, Buffy.”

“Goodnight,” she said softly.

With that, Buffy left the room, shutting the door lightly behind herself. She made her way up the stairs and into her room as if in a daze. Hands moving automatically, she stripped off her clothing and blew out the candles. Her body landed on the bed with a soft creak and she exhaled, trying to gather her thoughts. They proved ungatherable. She thought back to the kiss in the rose garden and the other kiss—the one in the parlor that had felt like, maybe, just maybe—her chest was tight again.

There was nothing for it. It was masochism pure and simple. Even now, she longed to go back downstairs. She imagined William reclining on the chaise, drink in hand. His body would be relaxed, its slender lines stretched out beguilingly. He would be surprised to see her return, but his arms would open to receive her. They both wanted the same thing, after all. She would straddle his lap, remove his glasses, and he would look at her with those eyes. She would feel him pressed against her then, she was sure of it. Hard and warm and—

It would be so easy. He had kissed her. He wanted her. They could have this. At least until—what? Until tomorrow? Buffy shut her eyes against the thought. No, it would only make things worse. She lay there for a long time, images drifting in and out of her tired mind. Eventually her body seemed to surrender, and she fell into a fitful sleep.

***

Buffy opened the door to the parlor to find the room dark, illuminated only by the pale glow of moonlight. A dark shape rested on the chaise, one leg bent, the other akimbo. William must have fallen asleep down here, she supposed. She approached his lounging form, thinking to wake him, but before she could reach out her hand he raised his head sharply. No, not William. There was a bit of a sneer in his expression.

“I am two fools, I know,” he spoke, flipping shut the small leather-bound volume that had been resting in his lap. “For loving, and for saying so in whining poetry.”

He had not visited her since that night that she and William had fallen asleep together. Though it had been long since she’d stopped searching for any rhyme or reason to his appearances, she had felt there’d been some significance to this absence. But damned if she could figure out what her subconscious mind had been trying to tell her.

Curious, she reached for the leather-bound notebook he’d been holding. He withdrew it, placing the
volume somewhere out of sight. The sneer had faded, to be replaced with something softer. “These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,” he said wistfully. “Reserve them for my love, not for their rhyme.”

There was something very William-like in his expression right then, and so Buffy softened too. Perching on the chaise beside him, she reached for his now empty hand. Their fingers intertwined and then she felt it. Emptiness. Absolute and all-consuming terror. She recoiled, an involuntary tremor running down her spine. She’d felt a hint of something similar only once before—in another dream—as she’d gazed down upon those sinister sarcophagi buried deep within the earth.

He looked at her sadly, as if he understood what she had felt. “I will show you fear in a handful of dust. This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine,” he said.

“What is it?” she asked unsteadily.

“My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,” he answered enigmatically. “And every tongue brings in a several tale, and every take condemns me for a villain.”

Buffy shook her head. This strange language he was speaking had been all well and good when there was nothing at stake. In the beginning, before her dreams had brought her to that cave. Now, it was a hindrance. Somehow her Slayer visions with their warning of the coming apocalypse seemed to have bled into this world inside her head that they inhabited together. This was the third time now that he had come to show her something that seemed to be very much connected to the real world. First, the cave. Then, he had brought her to what she had by now come to realize had been William’s room. And now—well, now she couldn’t help but think that it was all somehow connected.

“What does this all mean?” she pressed him, suddenly desperate. “Why can’t you just tell me?”

He sighed. “I could not speak, and my eyes failed. I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing—looking into the heart of light, the silence.” His gaze was downcast, resigned. “And thus I clothe my naked villainy with old odd ends stolen out of holy writ. All days are nights to see till I see thee, and nights bright days when dreams do show thee to me.”

Buffy rubbed her eyes. He was trying to tell her something, she knew it. Maybe he had been all along, and she just hadn’t been listening. Guilt and death and darkness. These weren’t un-Spike-like topics, but perhaps there was something more to it.

“Is this real, Spike? Are you real, somehow?”

He shook his head. Confused, Buffy reached for him again. She braced herself, anticipating that awful hollow sensation—but nothing came. She grasped his arm and felt his skin burning beneath her fingers. He seemed either unaware of or else wholly unperturbed by this. Locking his arm with hers, he pulled her gently by the elbow until they were face to face. Yet somehow his arm had slipped from her hand, so she went to grasp it once more and found nothing but thin air. She had only just managed to register how odd this was when she felt his warm breath on her face. His face was still mere millimeters from hers. She had expected him to kiss her, but he just looked at her, the longing clear in his eyes. So she kissed him.

There was a surge of light and suddenly it felt like a whirlpool had opened up deep within her. She blinked and was shocked to discover that his lips were no longer on hers—instead, his fangs were buried deep in her neck—she felt a pull somewhere deep inside her.

“Spike—” she gasped, and found that she did so, once more, into his mouth. The kiss was deep, like a wave on the ocean. And then it was over.
“Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged,” he said, his expression touched with melancholy. “Come to me in my dreams, and then by day I shall be well again.”

And Buffy opened her eyes to streaming sunlight.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

Buffy couldn’t quite force herself to face William the following morning. Today was the day. Today she would have to say goodbye. She didn’t come down for breakfast, remembering that he’d mentioned he had an appointment in the late morning. By the time she left her room, he had gone. She found Mrs. Pratt in the parlor, toiling at her embroidery, as was her habit. The older woman looked up when Buffy entered.

“Well, good morning, Miss Summers,” she smiled kindly. “I’m afraid that William has already left on business.”

Buffy nodded, returning her smile. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“There was a message for you earlier this morning,” Mrs. Pratt went on. “The man who brought it seemed quite impatient that you should receive it as soon as possible, but I couldn’t see the use in disturbing you before you were ready. It’s just there on the card table,” she said, pointing to a small folded scrap of paper on the corner of the spindly-legged surface.

Buffy moved to pick up the sealed note with as much patient decorum as she could muster. Anne Pratt remained unaware of her true reasons for being here. In Mrs. Pratt’s mind, Buffy was only the sister of William’s boyhood friend, though she had clearly begun to hope that her son’s interests might extend beyond that superficial connection. None of this, however, gave her any cause to assume that when Buffy received an urgent message, the matter may in fact require immediate attention. Buffy knew better.

And sure enough. The paper was small for a good reason—there were only three words written on it. Come now. Dorothea’s name was signed below in the same hasty scrawl. Buffy’s heart skipped a beat. There was no world in which this could be good news. Forcing the polite smile back onto her face, she turned to Mrs. Pratt. What could she say? She wasn’t meant to have any friends or family in town, besides this fictional brother, who had been forced to depart at a moment’s notice. That was the whole pretext for her being their guest.

“Thank you, Mrs. Pratt,” she began, hesitantly. “But it, uhh, it turns out that my brother needs me to take care of an errand for him pretty much immediately. He’ll be back in town soon and—well, it’s a little complicated, but would it be possible to call a coach?”

Mrs. Pratt frowned. “Oh dear, now I do wish that I’d sent the maid up to you earlier. We could have caught William before he left—surely, he could have delayed his business to accompany you. Are you quite sure you’ll manage alone?”

She was only being kind, but Buffy struggled to hide her impatience. “I’m sure, thank you. But it’s really important that I go as soon as possible.”

Mrs. Pratt still looked rather out of sorts, but she rang for Jones all the same. Buffy shrugged off her offer of breakfast. And no, unfortunately, she had no time even for tea. She really had to be going. Minutes later, then, she stuffed herself into a coach where she tapped her foot nervously for the quarter of an hour or so that it took to reach Dorothea’s.

When Gretchen finally opened the door for her, she had all but expected to find everyone dead. As such, she was relieved to find Dorothea’s parlor filled with people who were, at least, very much alive. She stood surrounded by Isaac and three other monks, all of whom, though breathing, did look positively the worse for wear. One, the scarred monk who had accompanied her and Miklos to
Glastonbury, was sporting a rather substantial black eye, while the other two held the posture of men who had more than a couple of bruised ribs between them.

“Buffy,” Dorothea greeted her grimly. “Thank the Lord. I was hoping you might arrive sooner, but I suppose it’s rather just as well.”

“What happened?” Buffy asked breathlessly.

“They were attacked,” Isaac stated. “At night. At Dean Street. Several were killed. It was the Knights of Byzantium. They knew—Lord knows how—they knew precisely when the protective spells around the flat would be at their weakest. My brothers were performing their final ritual preparations for the Key’s arrival. These three men were the only ones who survived. I was spared only because, not being needed for this particular set of rites, I chose to stay with my sister last night.” He bowed his head.

Dorothea shot him an exasperated look. “And praise be that you did so.”

Buffy’s mind raced. So the Knights had not given up—not that she’d really expected them to. She knew that they were likely only biding their time.

Isaac stepped towards Buffy. “Can we speak elsewhere?” He cast a meaningful glance at Dorothea and she inclined her head in acknowledgement. “My sister is making arrangements with her coven to create a new set of protection spells for Dean Street. With their aid, and with Miklos and the others arriving tonight, we can still proceed as planned. But I have another matter to discuss with you.”

Buffy nodded her approval and followed Isaac into the library. He motioned her to shut the door and ran a hand through his thinning gray hair.

“What is it?” Buffy asked quietly.

“Good, let us speak softly,” Isaac replied, his voice barely above a whisper as he waved her closer. “Dorothea will manage my brothers, but I do not wish for us to be overheard.”

Buffy frowned. “You don’t trust them?”

“I do not,” Isaac said carefully. “Not enough for this, in any case. I have been worried for some time. A few of us have. Leonardo—the one with the scar—you know him. Well, I am sure you must have noticed yourself. Does his scar look familiar to you?”

It did, of course. Buffy hadn’t thought of it at first, when she first met the monk on their trip to Glastonbury, but coming face to face with the Knights soon after had left little doubt in her mind. Leonardo had been a Knight. She had assumed she wasn’t the only one to have made the connection. It appeared that she had been right.

“The tattoo,” she answered plainly. “I thought so. But why trust him at all, then?”

Isaac sighed. “We all knew, of course. He never spoke of it plainly, but it was clear enough where he’d run off from when he came to us. And he has been with us for most of his life—since he was a boy of no more than twelve. He’s like a son to Miklos. We’d always been careful, of course—but after all these years—"

“So you’re not sure?”

“I am not. But after last night, I am not willing to take the risk. It was the perfect time. Had my brothers successfully completed the ritual, the shields around the flat would have been impenetrable.
It was the Knights’ best and final chance to break through, and they took it. I struggle to believe that it was mere coincidence.”

“But they failed,” Buffy pressed. “The coven can help you complete the shield spell. So that was their whole plan?”

Isaac shook his head. “They succeeded in thinning our number significantly. It will be difficult for so few of us to mediate the energies safely.” His expression grew darker. “Abraham and Viktor survived only because they had the good sense to hide after the initial blast that broke the shield. Leonardo was rendered unconscious early in the assault—if my suspicions are correct, he should have been the only one left alive. Had that been the case, our chances of completing the ritual would have proved nonexistent.”

Buffy took a deep breath. “But you can still do it?”

“I believe we can,” Isaac replied. “But that is not all I wanted to discuss with you. I’ve translated the rest of the manuscript.”

Buffy quirked an eyebrow. “I thought you and William hadn’t managed to make much more sense of it. What changed?”

Isaac smiled faintly. “Well, it remains true that neither one of us has been able to crack the Linear B.” Buffy snorted with nervous amusement, but he went on. “Nevertheless, as usual, the answer presents itself in the very last place one tends to look. There were a few passages in some of the cruder demon languages. Such as are relatively simple in their grammar, but not my specialty. I was not at Dean Street last night in part because I had had some rather obscure dictionaries delivered here so that I could consult them as a last resort.”

“And?”

“And I cannot say that the specific referents of the prophecy have grown any clearer, but I am now reasonably certain that we have the full scope of it.” Isaac motioned Buffy over to the table, where she now noticed what was surely that latest batch of dictionaries, as well as the manuscript itself. “As far as I can determine,” Isaac continued, “the manuscript is actually a compilation. This is why some of the earlier passages that William and I translated seemed to repeat one another. I believe that we have before us a transcription of many separate versions of essentially the same prophesy. Someone went through the trouble of collecting them all—and perhaps there are more that do not appear on this single page.”

“And what do they say?” Buffy asked softly.

Isaac lowered himself into the chair and leaned back as if to collect his thoughts. His fingertips drummed against one another delicately. “The passages I translated last night speak of a key—of the Key, I believe—and its role in a coming battle. The Key will be forged, body and soul, by two individuals who are bound by the two great powers, by love and by death. The two will both be born twice, and both will die twice. There will be a Champion. The Champion will be two, but the two will be one. There’s much talk of the joining of night and day, good and evil, life and death, body and soul. And the battle ahead—well, this is the bit William translated early on—it seems that the matter comes down to a choice. A choice between these dualities perhaps? The demonic passages are a bit more precise, but incomplete. They say, the Champion might be the Key, the Key will choose the door—make of that what you will.”

Buffy leaned over the desk, staring at the ragged piece of parchment. It still looked like a whole lot of densely packed squiggles to her. But somewhere in these squiggles lay her past and, it would appear,
her future. Or—well—not hers exactly. People she loved, though. Dawn, at the very least. And—Spike? Angel? Both? Or perhaps neither. Her head throbbed. It was not yet noon and she was already so, so tired. This particular apocalypse clearly wouldn’t come for over a century. If only she didn’t have to deal with it right now.

“Isaac?” she asked suddenly. “The notes you and William made—you have them all here?”

“I do,” he nodded.

“Good. I need you to give them to me. Except for this,” she motioned at the manuscript. “Do you know about the Watchers’ Council?”

He looked at her quizzically. “I do,” he repeated. “Though I can’t say that I have any contacts there. Why do you ask?”

“We need to make sure that they get the manuscript. It ends up in their archives—that’s how we find it in the future.” She racked her brain. What was the best way to make sure that the manuscript reached its destination? If only they had a name— “Giles,” it came to her suddenly. “Send it to Giles at the Watchers’ Council.”

Not Rupert Giles, certainly. He wouldn’t be born for over half a century. But she could hear Giles’ voice in her head, intoning how his father had been a Watcher, and his father’s father before him. Surely this meant there was a Giles at the Council. It was her best shot.

And just in time too, as a quick rap at the door was followed by Dorothea’s entry into the room. Her face was lined with concern.

“Leonardo wishes to leave,” she supplied meaningfully. “I sent the other two up to rest, but he refused. Insisted that he needed to return to Dean Street.”

Isaac glanced at Buffy. She didn’t need to be told.

“Let him go on foot. Make some excuse. I’ll follow him.” Buffy said quietly. She placed her hand on the manuscript. “Make sure the Council receives this—do it before tonight.”

“I will see that it’s done,” Dorothea said. “But come, Leonardo is waiting.”

Buffy turned to follow her then froze. Something wasn’t right. “Wait, Isaac, your Latin is pretty good right?” The monk nodded, confused. Buffy grabbed a fountain pen from where it lay on a stack of notes and handed it to him. “I need you to write something at the top of this. Keep it as basic as you can: ‘For the Slayer who seeks knowledge of the rise of the Old Ones, a means to invoke guidance.’”

Isaac looked at her skeptically but complied. She watched him hastily scrawl the sentence across the top of the page.

“And Dorothea,” she turned to the witch. “The invocation you used to bring me here—to open the portal. Is it the same as the one you’d use on the other side? At the other end?” Dorothea nodded. “Then write it here. Just below the other line.”

This was it. This was how. Buffy was sure of it.

***

It was only a couple of hours later that Buffy stood before Dorothea and Isaac again. Her expression
was set in a grim mask. Leonardo had unwittingly led her to the Knights of Byzantium just as she’d hoped. Neither of them, however, could have expected the scene that greeted them. There was blood—so much blood. And the bodies—

Well, it was best not to dwell on the details. The men had not died quickly. She hadn’t entered the room in the run-down house where they were all laid out. She doubted Leonardo would have noticed if she strolled right up behind him at that point, but she could see all she needed from her spot at the door. Feeding had clearly not been the primary intent of the attack. The bites were barely noticeable amidst the rest of the carnage. But they were there. Vampires, Buffy concluded. Which meant, almost certainly, Angelus.

“We have to assume Angelus knows anything that the Knights knew,” Buffy said to Isaac, having reported the basic details of her discovery. “Which means, we shouldn’t be surprised if he shows tomorrow night.”

“And Leonardo?” Isaac asked. “I doubt there is much he can do to interfere with us now that he is all alone, but—”

“I don’t think you’ll see Leonardo again,” Buffy replied. She had left the man sitting amidst the ruined bodies of his comrades. He had had the look of someone so utterly defeated that she’d almost pitied him.

Isaac massaged his temples. “I wonder if we should be relieved?”

“Relieved?” Buffy said incredulously.

He nodded, his expression dour. “Dangerous though they are, vampires are actually much easier to keep at bay by means of magic than are humans.”

Buffy supposed this was true. “What I can’t figure out is—what does Angelus mean to do with the Key? The Knights wanted to destroy it, we know that. But he wants to… use it somehow? Can he even do that?”

Isaac thought for a moment. “Not without performing some very complex magic. But then, of course, the Key can be unpredictable. Perhaps whoever set him on this errand—the dark forces—knows something about him that we do not. Some reason why he might be capable of disrupting our plans for the Key.”

Like if he happens to be the Champion, Buffy thought sourly. She still couldn’t wrap her head around the convoluted mythology surrounding the Champion and the Key. But if the Great Mother was convinced that Angelus was up to something outside the natural order of things, then Buffy saw no reason to question the notion that keeping an evil vampire away from an incredibly powerful mystical tool was the right thing to do.

“So we keep Angelus out,” she said resolutely. “And as far away as we can, ideally.”

Isaac nodded. “Since we do not know what it is that the vampire intends to do, I would say that is our best plan of action. I would like to give Abraham and Viktor a few more hours of rest, but it seems prudent to return to Dean Street before dark—will you join us?”

Buffy shook her head. “I have something I need to take care of first. I’ll come later.”

Isaac nodded again. “Remember, you must be there by first light.”

“I know,” Buffy said, inclining her head in acknowledgement. “I’ll be there. But I have to go now.
Will you bring the notes with you when you go?"

It was Dorothea who spoke now. She had been listening to their conversation in silence, her brow furrowed in concern. “I shall have some things packed up for you, Buffy.” She rose from her seat, then, and took Buffy’s hand between her weathered palms. “I expect this is the last time we shall see each other. Be safe, child.”

Buffy smiled at the old witch in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. “Thank you,” she said. “For everything.”

***

Buffy knew she had to go back—had to see him one last time. She had no plan, really. Not what she’d do or what she’d say. On a practical level, she told herself, she had to at least make sure that he was alright. If Angelus had decided to put whatever plot he had hatched into action, she couldn’t rule out the possibility that it might involve William. She knew she couldn’t ultimately protect William himself, but she had to believe that the entire household being ransacked by vampires was definitely not part of the timeline.

She arrived at the Pratt residence just before sunset. Jones informed her that Mr. Pratt was in the library and moved to escort her there, but she waved him off. The man obliged, having grown somewhat used to Buffy’s unorthodox ways of navigating the household. William had once joked that Jones had resigned himself to her lax manners as soon as he had discovered that she was American.

The library door was shut, so she administered a soft knock before entering. William was seated at the small desk by the window. He looked up from the notebook in which he’d been scribbling, his face breaking into a relieved smile at the sight of her. He rose immediately to meet her, taking her hands in his.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, clearly trying not to betray his concern. “Mother told me that you were called away this morning. I thought perhaps—”

“Everything’s fine,” she answered quickly. There was no need to trouble him with the full story. Not now. Still, she needed to ensure that he’d be careful. “Isaac’s people had a bit of a scare. It’s those vampires we met that first night—they’re still around. It’s all alright, but I just wanted to tell you—in case—well, just so that you’d remind everyone in the household to be careful. Don’t invite in strangers after dark, stuff like that.”

“I’ll do that.” William didn’t look like he entirely believed her reassurances, but he seemed loathe to press the issue. He let go of her hands and walked back over to the desk. Making sure the ink was dry, he shut his notebook and turned back to her. “But it’s all sorted? You’re home for the evening, then?”

She smiled at that, despite herself. Home. No, she wasn’t really home. “Yeah,” she replied simply.

“Good,” he said. “What would you like to do? Dinner won’t be set for another hour or so—perhaps another walk, or—”

She looked curiously at the notebook he had just tucked away. “Didn’t you promise me that I could see that poem? Is it finished?”

He grinned at her nervously, leaning back against the desk as if to shade the volume from her sight. “I believe it is but—well, I don’t think this is quite the time—”
“Why?” she teased, sauntering towards him.

She was trying to play it off casually but, in truth, she really wanted to see the damn thing. She had been drawn to the idea since she first discovered him scribbling it that one morning, but now it had taken on a whole new significance. It seemed like a piece of him, somehow. An intangible piece that she could take with her.

She didn’t make a grab for it this time—she wanted him to want to show her. So she leaned into him, hands on his chest, as if in mock seduction. “I wanna see.”

His hands shot to her waist, gripping her body against his. She looked up to see his eyes clouded with clear want. Suddenly the seduction seemed very real. Her lips parted involuntarily. She could feel the current running between their conjoined bodies. And then he was kissing her. It was a far cry from their first fumbling bit of contact in the hallway, or the sweet but relatively chaste kisses they had shared subsequently. The slow, languid movement of his lips on hers made her head spin. Buffy wondered, rather despite herself, how many more of Spike’s considerable talents William might be able to recapture if given the chance and a prod in the right direction.

It was over too quickly. William pulled back, a blush coloring his cheeks, though Buffy wasn’t quite sure whether it was embarrassment or arousal.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he murmured. “That was boorishly forward of me.”

She knew this was likely a terrible idea. Could feel the now-familiar ache rising in her chest. Was certain that, in the end, this would only bring her more pain. And yet, none of that seemed to matter. Before she could even think to pull away, everything within her rebelled at the idea. So, she didn’t.

“What if I said I liked you boorishly forward?” she responded instead, running her fingers along his temple to clear away the stray curls.

“Then I should consider myself most fortunate.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I should very much like to do that again,” he whispered, leaning into her touch.

But it was she who kissed him this time. Closed her lips over his and savored the deep intake of breath that preceded his mouth opening beneath hers. She twined her arms over his shoulders and felt his hands travel up her back, pulling her even closer, as his fingers snaked their way into the hair gathered loosely at the nape of her neck. She moaned into his mouth as she flattened herself against his body. The unmistakable hardness of his growing arousal pressed into her hip. Driven by nothing other than pure instinct, she ground against it.

He gasped, breaking the kiss, and drew back to study her with darkened eyes. “Buffy,” his whisper was hoarse. “Perhaps we should—what I mean to say is, I’m not certain that it would be proper to —”

She had a feeling they’d left his general notion of what would be proper in the dust a few miles back. Possibly weeks ago. “Do you want to stop?” she asked simply.

He cleared his throat self-consciously. “I—well, I think that it might be untoward for us to, err—”

“Forget about being toward for a second,” she said, not daring to move a muscle lest the moment should shatter. “Do you want to stop?”
He answered her with another kiss. His hand trembled lightly as it left her hair to stroke along the curve of her shoulder. “Not here,” he whispered against her lips.

Somehow, she couldn’t imagine casually strolling upstairs past the servants and Anne Pratt right at this instant—even if they wouldn’t remember come morning. She extracted herself from William’s embrace and walked over to the door, turning the key with a devilish smile.

“Here seems just fine to me,” she told him nonchalantly.

William’s expression shifted from surprise to consternation back to glassy-eyed arousal and then he was wrapped around her again, hands roving. Grabbing at his jacket, she pulled him backward towards the large table in the center of the room. For the previous two weeks, it had been littered with books and notes but now it stood bare. When her hips hit the edge, Buffy braced her hands on either side to lift herself onto the wood’s rich mahogany surface. Her narrow skirt proved a bit awkward to negotiate but she managed to hoist it out of the way so that William came to stand between her parted knees.

Her hands roamed his body. A clump of shirt here, a taught span of muscle there, soft hair and warm skin. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized that his warmth no longer threw her. Because it really was him. There didn’t seem to be much of a point in trying to figure out what that meant any longer. It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. Not now—not anymore. A few mystical syllables and all of this would be gone. Disappeared. Like a puff of smoke, or so much dust, or something equally clichéd that didn’t remind her of Spike.

William moved to pull her closer to him, stepping forward to fuse their lower bodies together. Buffy again felt the hard ridge of his erection pressing into her through her undergarments. She gasped in pleasure, her hips bucking against his, as her hands came to settle on his lower back.

He drew back, likely thinking that he must have hurt her somehow, but she smiled wickedly and wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him in closer still. Hand snaking into her hair, he glanced down, a look of light confusion shifting slowly into something like amazement. Buffy realized that, for the first time in her life, she might have found herself with a man who had less experience than she did.

Fortunately, if this was indeed the case, it was not proving to be much of an impediment. He pressed himself into her as his tongue darted out to taste her lower lip. They were both breathing heavily now.

“Will you tell me?” he whispered.

“Tell you?”

“What it is you want from me—how to please you?”

Now she had to know. “Have you—uhh—have you done this before?”

He drew back a bit and looked at her, not comprehending. Then dropped his hands back to her waist and smiled sheepishly. “Oh, err, well—there was a time or two, back at Oxford, you see—there were a few of us who—not something I’m proud of—but it was quite a respectable establishment, actually—”

Buffy was beginning to get the idea. She supposed she was relieved, really. Somehow, the idea of having been the one to deflower Spike was a bit much, even all else considered. “I see,” she returned his smile.
“Is that alright?” He was looking at her a bit uncertainly now. “I should say, I haven’t—not like this,” he trailed a finger down the curve of her neck. “Not like with you—but I had assumed that, perhaps, in your time, it wasn’t so unusual—”

She silenced him with another kiss. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out then.” Spike always had just known, somehow. “Just be you.”

Buffy closed her eyes as his lips descended to taste the skin along her collar bone. Tentative fingers traced the curve of her breast above the dip of her bodice. Her chest fluttered wildly beneath his touch. She silently cursed the volume and complexity of Victorian clothing. She needed him. As much as she longed to feel his naked body against hers again, it seemed impossible that she could wait for it just now. But then, they did have all night—

Her legs tugged at his hips and one of his hands descended to brace against her knee. Her head dropped to his shoulder. She took hold of his hand and tugged to guide it towards that searing core of her own arousal. “Oh God,” she muttered. “Oh God—please—touch me. Just touch me.”

She heard his breath seize. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling her, and his hand slid up her inner thigh, under her skirt, higher and higher to where their bodies were pressed together. She could feel the rasp of his fingers through the thin linen drawers that apparently passed for underwear in this day and age. There was one small mercy—the garment, frumpy as it was, sported an open crotch seam.

“Yes, there,” she moaned softly. “Please—”

His fingers snaked into the linen and cupped her mound, probing lightly. She gasped and nuzzled his neck, hands gripping his shoulders. She still remembered what it was like to feel him inside her. His name was a barely audible breath flowing past her lips. Maybe this was what she needed after all. Maybe this could make everything right. If she could just tell him—

It took her a moment to realize that his fingers had withdrawn, and she could no longer feel his breath in her hair. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes to find him gazing down at her, his eyes full of resigned disappointment. Confused, she reached to pull him closer.

William opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, as if unsure whether he should speak at all.

“Buffy—as much as I wish to—as much as this—” he broke off, momentarily distracted by the slow progression of her fingertips down his abdomen, then, setting his jaw, went on in earnest. “While nothing would make me happier than to continue this, you must know—that is, I cannot—I do not wish for us to deceive each other with false pretenses.”

“Huh?” Between the smoldering burn of her arousal and her running inner monologue, her brain felt all loopy. She wondered if she’d missed something. “No. There’s no deceiving. This is very much a deception-free set of activities.”

His expression was pained. “All this,” he tenderly ran his fingers along the curve of her shoulder. “This is more than I’d ever hoped for. But I’m afraid that I cannot give you what you truly want. That you will not let me. You must know,” he continued quietly, “I am not he—”

Somewhere, the lines of meaning refused to cross. She stared at him, uncomprehending. “He? Who he? And again, huh?”

He let out a sigh that floated somewhere between frustration and surrender. “You know of whom I speak—Spike—your Spike.”
Buffy froze. It was amazing how one word—one name—could feel like gallons of icy water when it cascaded off his lips. “Why—how can you—do you really think that’s why I’m here?”

“Is it not?”

“Of course not,” she protested, knowing, even as the words left her mouth how unconvincing they sounded.

He was angry now. She saw a tendon in his neck tighten and clench. “Buffy, I may be a fool, but I am not deaf.”

“Deaf? Why would you be—” and then it hit her. *Shit.* How could she have been so stupid? So unaware? The name had been a shard of ice when he’d thrown it back at her—but that name—that same name had fallen from her own mouth so naturally only seconds before that it hadn’t even registered. She’d actually called him Spike without missing so much as a beat. “Oh God. William, no. I didn’t mean—I’m so sorry—I know you’re not him—I do—”

“Are you quite certain?”

“You have to understand, it’s not that easy. I know you’re not the same person, I get that, but then I look at you and you are,” she said weakly. “It’s not about me wishing you were someone else. That’s not why I want you.”

“Why, then?” he challenged her.

This really was it. This was her chance. There was nowhere to hide, nothing to say to avoid his question. She stared at him, frozen. It had all seemed so simple just moments before—if she could just tell him this time—if she could tell him what she hadn’t been able to tell Spike—

But in that single moment, as his demanding eyes pinned her with a tremulous uncertainty, she realized that she couldn’t. Still couldn’t. Again couldn’t. Not to him. Not like this.

She closed her eyes briefly, knowing that it was over even as her lips moved to form the words. “Please—do we have to do this right now? Can’t it just be simple? Can’t we just—”

God, why did he have those eyes? And why did they have to be giving her that same look?

She knew then that she’d made a profound mistake. William breathed another heavy sigh as moved away from her. She didn’t stop him, her grip around his waist breaking ineffectually as he slipped from her arms.

He didn’t go far, but the few feet’s distance seemed like miles. “It’s alright, Buffy. I am not the man you love. I know that well enough. I suppose I’d only hoped that you might—” his gaze fell to the floor between them. “But, no matter.”

She knew what he’d wanted to hear, of course. That she’d chosen him over the ghostly memory of what he was to become. The only problem was that he was no more real to her as the human William than as the vampire she’d left behind to burn. She couldn’t choose him. She couldn’t have him.

No matter who he was.

She pulled her skirts down, feeling suddenly all too exposed. “William, that’s not it. I’m not—” she struggled to find the right words, but they wouldn’t come. It was too hard. “You know that this can’t work,” she finally said. “Not really.”

“No,” he said quietly, his lashes still low to shield him from her searching eyes. “I imagine that it
can’t. I realize that I make for a rather poor imitation of the man you want, and as ardently as I
admire you—” his gaze flickered up to meet hers and something in his eyes screamed at her in
warning. The familiar look of abject determination mixed with blind hope told her everything she
needed to know. “Buffy, I lo—”

“Don’t.” She couldn’t take it anymore. Not again. Not when he sounded so much like—“I can’t do
this, William.” Her eyes prickled. It was disgustingly ironic, really, that over a century away from her
own world, she still couldn’t give him what he needed from her. “I can’t love you.”

He dropped his gaze momentarily, then looked at her once more, his face colored with defeated
understanding. “Because I am not he.”

Something inside her snapped. He jumped in surprise as she stood upright, wild eyes locking onto
him. “No.” Her voice sounded strange. Like it wasn’t really hers—all nasal and shaky—God, did
she actually sound like that? “Because you are he, William. Because you can’t ever be anyone else.”
She swallowed the lump in her throat and continued quietly, willing the tears not to fall. “I can’t love
you because you’re going to die.”

It seemed like forever that he stared at her in the deafening silence of this room where they had spent
so many hours together. Then, slowly and methodically, he stepped back and adjusted his clothing.
He seemed suddenly so far away. It was an odd feeling. When he spoke, his tone was calm and
measured.

“I do suppose therein lies the rub,” he said, fixing her with one last solemn glance. “Because I would
gladly offer up my life this very moment if it meant that I might be worthy of your love.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away towards the door, unlocking it with a shaky hand.
He did not look back at her. The door closed behind him.

She didn’t call after him. Didn’t follow him. There was nothing else left to say. Buffy realized her
mouth was still open, as if hoping to reclaim those last words. She promptly snapped it shut. It wasn’t
the most tactful thing she could have said, not by a long shot, but that didn’t make it any less true.
Plus, by tomorrow, he wouldn’t even remember. He was lucky in that way.

Buffy leaned back against the table. She hated herself for thinking like this. Like his feelings didn’t
matter because all she had to do was just press some cosmic restart button and the past would go
back to being the way it had always been. She stared out the window, where the sky had darkened
into an inky black. The soft light of the room’s lamps obscured her view through the glass.

Why couldn’t she have lied to him? Looked at William and poured out her love to Spike. If she were
truly honest with herself, she’d known from the very start what had been at stake between them.
She’d seen the question in his eyes that very first night. It was odd, really, that loving her had come
so naturally to him. Almost too convenient. But, then again, if anyone could pull off predestined love
at first sight, it was William.

The kicker was that she knew exactly why she couldn’t have given him the lie of her love. The
words alone would have turned it into truth. And she couldn’t do that. Not again. She’d had her fill
of telling men she loved them only to have them throw it in her face by intermittently turning evil,
dying to save the world, or both. And this time, both were pretty much inevitable.

Still, this wasn’t the goodbye she would have chosen. Tears still prickled at the corners of her eyes.
She walked over to the window absentmindedly. Her fingers toyed with the lace of the curtains.
How many hours until dawn?
Then, in the periphery of her blurred vision, she caught movement in the street below. A dark form was intently strolling down the sidewalk. William’s dark form, it hit her suddenly, as the soft glow of the street lamp caught his hair. A wave of panic shot through her body, but quickly faded into dull resignation. Time resisted change, the Great Mother had told her. Was tonight the night that William met Drusilla? It would be ironic, really.

Buffy contemplated following him, but somehow couldn’t bring herself to. She thought about returning to 28 Dean Street, but couldn’t quite seem to manage that either. So, she circled the room aimlessly. What would she do if William never came home? Nothing, she supposed. At first light, there would be nothing left but her apparent duty with regards to the Key.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

William had seen enough by now to know that walking the streets alone after dark was likely not the wisest plan. At the moment, however, he could not bring himself to care. Instead, something inside him almost reveled in the possibility of danger. He adjusted his coat against the light mist. Yes, whether street thugs or creatures of the night, he had little care for anyone who might try to arrest his progress.

Progress towards what—he hardly knew. His shoes beat against the cobblestones just as his heart hammerered wildly against his ribcage. He almost turned the corner towards the park, then thought better of it. No need to relive that particular moment. The memory alone made him wince. How could he have been such a fool? Had he really thought that it was him she wanted? He didn’t blame her, of course—not for her words, not for her desire to see him as someone else, not for any of it. Not really. It had stung him, certainly, to hear the other man’s name on her lips. And he was another man—this Spike—William was certain of it. Buffy’s reactions to him over the course of their developing relationship had made that clear enough. As much as she insisted that he wore this other man’s face, he had come to suspect that they shared very little in the way of commonalities.

That final statement of hers had confused him, however. There had been something almost like fear in her eyes then. At the loss of her lover—perhaps that she would inevitably see it mirrored in the loss of his own life—William had not forgotten the revelation upon which their whole acquaintance seemed to be founded. He was to die. Over the past two weeks, he had found himself increasingly surprised at how little this knowledge seemed to trouble him. Perhaps he didn’t really believe it. Or perhaps he was curious about what lay on the other side.

The street lamps cast their dim glow upon the glistening cobblestones. This swirling mist would soon turn to rain. It occurred to him that he was not at all certain how far he had walked. Then he heard it—another set of footsteps somewhere behind him. His pulse quickened. Surely not tonight. He turned the next corner. The footsteps seemed to follow. William resisted the urge to turn around. Keeping his pace measured, he kept walking, turning another corner just to make sure that his apparent stalker was not simply another accidental pedestrian. No such luck. William noted, with some nervousness, that it had been a good while since a coach had passed him on the darkened street. Ahead, though, there was light. A square. Maybe even people. He quickened his pace.

Whoever was following him did not appear to be dissuaded by this new destination, but the square was well-lit and rather more populated, which gave William some comfort. He crossed the street towards the small garden area and a coach rumbled by behind him. Perhaps he could make his stand here. Spotting a bench situated under a particularly bright street lamp, William made his way towards it. A darting glance over his shoulder indicated that his hanger-on must have fallen back some ways. He sat down on the damp bench.

A minute passed. Then two. William had almost concluded that his evasion efforts had proved successful when he saw a human form approach out of the corner or his eye. He had barely any time to react when a rather respectable looking man sat down on the other end of the bench.

The man gave no sign of having acknowledged William’s presence up until the very moment that he suddenly spoke.

“Good evening, Mr. Pratt.”

William almost jumped, but caught himself. The man’s accent was genteel—a fact in perfect correspondence with his overall appearance. He was properly outfitted, complete with hat and
overcoat. Rather in the manner of a solicitor, William thought.

“Were you following me?” William said, his voice surprisingly steady.

“I may have been,” the man responded casually.

“May I inquire as to the reason?” William said. “And after your identity, sir. You appear to know my name, but I do not know yours.”

“My name is of no importance,” said the man. “You need only know that I work for a certain organization—a society, if you will. And you, Mr. Pratt, have been brought to our attention as of late as a rather interesting man.”

William glanced at him skeptically. His father had been a member of the Freemasons, and his grandfather before him, though William had elected not to carry on the tradition. It occurred to him, however, that his present companion was not likely to be one of their emissaries. “I suppose it would be useless to ask after the name or character of your society at present?” he asked instead.

The man nodded. “At present, yes.”

“Why, then, have you been following me?” William pushed. At appeared, at least, that this man posed no immediate threat.

“A few weeks ago, you had the pleasure of meeting a certain woman, Mr. Pratt.”

This effectively cut through William’s mounting impatience. He swallowed but said nothing.

“Do not worry,” the man continued, as if picking up on William’s apprehension. “We intend no harm to come to either her or yourself. Indeed, the very opposite. You are aware that your friend is—how shall I put this—not of this time?” William nodded tersely. “Ah, very good then. And, might I assume that you also have some knowledge of your own role in the events of her world?”

“She has told me some things, yes,” William replied cautiously. How could this man possibly know? Perhaps he was from the council that he had heard Buffy mention on several occasions?

The man seemed unperturbed by William’s hesitation. “Would you like to know more?” he asked meaningfully.

Despite himself, William turned to him. This couldn’t possibly be right. He had no grounds on which to trust this man. Had no idea, even, who he really was or whom he represented. But none of this seemed to really matter just now. Slowly, William nodded.

He expected the man to speak again, but instead he took off his glove and reached out his hand. The long, well-manicured fingers pressed to William’s temple and his vision burst into a colorful blur of images.

A dark-haired woman—why did he recognize her?—was laughing as she straddled his lap. His mother gazed at him with a look that he’d never before seen on her face. A girl screamed, her hair wild and her eyes full of terror as she crawled away from him. Blood. So, so much blood. And then, Buffy—dancing, laughing, fighting—fighting him. A tower. A cave. A cross. And fire. Fire burning him from within.

The images moved too quickly for him to consciously examine them, but he felt it all. He knew. A hundred and twenty-three years. And then it was all gone, and he was looking at the strange man’s angular face.
“You see now, Mr. Pratt,” he said firmly. “You see now why you cannot let her go back.”

William looked at him, bewildered.

“This man that you have not yet become—this monster—he will try and die in the place of one who was greater than him. His death will accomplish nothing. Miss Summers will choose wrongly because her feelings will cloud her judgment, and he will be found unworthy to do what is needed. She is not long for this world—no, no, she won’t die,” he added in response to William’s sudden look of alarm. “But you know as well as I that she does not belong here. You, on the other hand—I am sure you understand by now that your life is forfeit. Come tomorrow, she will depart, leaving you to die.”

“Why are you telling me this?” William asked warily.

“Because you can stop it. You have seen that she has feelings for you. Well,” he paused. “Perhaps not you, exactly, but that will come with time. She has got nothing to return to, only a grim world with no possibility of salvation—she and your future counterpart have seen to that. Ask her to stay. She’s still a woman and, as such, she is just as prone to the tender weaknesses of her kind as any you have known. You can give back to her much of what she’s lost in her world—love, a normal life, even, perhaps, children—convince her, and she will not refuse you.”

William tried to think rationally, but the sudden flood of a century’s worth of experience was still crashing over him like waves washing out a child’s attempts at a structure in the sand. “And what of her world?” he asked finally.

“Her world is doomed, you’ve seen as much for yourself,” the man said, his tone once again perfectly casual. “But by staying, she can alter the fabric of time. Your life can change it all, whereas your death will only precipitate the end of days. Choose life, Mr. Pratt—that is my advice to you. Have a pleasant evening.”

With that, the man rose and walked away without so much as a backward glance, leaving William alone on the wet bench.

***

As the hours dragged on, Buffy grew increasingly determined to wait for William until the last possible moment. She knew he was angry. Understood why. And, frankly, she had not the slightest notion of what she could do to change it. But she also knew that she couldn’t live with herself—couldn’t possibly move on—if she left it like this. They had built something between them over the previous two weeks. Something delicate and fragile. Something simultaneously distinct from her relationship with Spike and totally inextricable from it.

Buffy lingered in the library until Jones came in to announce dinner. She waved him off politely. And Mrs. Pratt after him. The older woman had not been thoroughly convinced by William’s departing excuse of urgent business but seemed determined not to pry. Eventually Mrs. Pratt conceded to a solitary dinner. It was creeping up towards midnight by the time that Buffy decided that it would be more polite with regards to the servants if she went up to her room. Sleep was out of the question, of course, and she paced the chamber anxiously for several minutes. What if he didn’t come back?

The house was quiet now, everyone having retired to their respective quarters. Picking up the small, squat candle that burned by her bed, Buffy quietly ventured down the hallway towards William’s bedroom. He wouldn’t be there—she would have heard him come in. But, right now, being in that space where he slept seemed better than nothing. She reached for the handle, hoping that she had the
right door as it dawned on her that she’d been inside only the once. Mrs. Pratt’s bedroom, as she had ascertained long ago, lay on the other end of the hall, closer to her own. At worst, therefore, the room would be vacant, but Buffy had no desire to be discovered searching the house at random. Fortunately, her instincts proved correct.

The room was lit up by a couple of oil lamps and several candles, presumably left by the maid in preparation for William’s return, and a fire crackled in the small hearth. Besides these markers of use, the space appeared even more uninhabited than the previous time she had seen it. Even most of the randomly scattered books had been cleared away. Then Buffy’s eyes landed on a small cream-colored envelope that rested the bureau by the window. She hesitated. It hadn’t been her intention to go snooping, but curiosity got the best of her.

She made her way over to the bureau, candle still in hand. The envelope was inscribed with a single word: Buffy. Placing her candle on the smooth wooden surface, she faltered again, even as her fingers itched to reach for this tantalizing artifact. It was meant for her, surely, but he hadn’t technically chosen to give it to her. Buffy glanced at the small mantle clock that stood on the other end of the bureau. It was a quarter to midnight. Damn it. She was running out of time.

On impulse, more than anything else, Buffy reached for the envelope. She unsealed it before her conscience could get the best of her, finding inside a single folded sheet of paper that looked as though it had been carefully ripped out of a notebook. On its surface, two blocks of text were scribbled in William’s slanted hand.

*She shines against the darkening skies,*
A ray of sun—twin storms, her eyes;
A herald, glorious and fair,
Before whom all my soul lays bare.

*Love overcomes my trembling heart,*
For should my soul come to depart,
My love’s sweet image will abide
In its stead, as my heart’s true guide.

“A bit different, I should say, from some of my other work,” William’s voice sounded from behind her.

Buffy jumped. She hadn’t heard him enter.

“I was not familiar with that form you mentioned—seventeen syllables, was it?” He went on. “They’re tetrametric couplets. Sixteen syllables, so not quite the same, I imagine.”

Buffy turned, the leaf of paper hanging loosely from her fingertips, to find William standing by the door. His hands clasped neatly behind his back, his eyes strangely unreadable. He was drenched, but seemingly unconcerned with this fact. He wasn’t wearing his glasses and his hair was slicked back with rain—God, he looked so much like—

“William—” she began.

“I met a man tonight,” he interrupted her quietly, but forcefully. “He showed me my future, or, at least, what would become of my future if I should allow the current progression of events to run its course.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it.
Hardly aware of her silence, he went on. “You were there. How odd it all was—” his gaze was fixed on some distant point, as if trying to recapture the vision he described. “—even having imagined what your world must be like, I never expected—but no matter,” his eyes returned to hers, his wistful tone gaining immediacy. “He showed me what I was to become, the atrocities I was to commit. He showed me you—how I hurt you, how you fought me, how I loved you, and how none of that mattered in the end. He told me I would die for nothing.—No, let me finish,” he added, perceiving that she was about to interrupt. “He told me that you were leaving—that it would happen tomorrow—is this true?”

She nodded silently.

“Well didn’t you tell me?”

Why didn’t she, indeed. Try as she might, Buffy could come up with no better reason than the sheer inconvenience of it all. The fact that, had she told him, he’d be giving her the same stricken look he was now. “I didn’t think you’d understand,” she said finally, dropping her gaze.

She felt his eyes piercing into her. “So, you were simply going to go?” The hard edge of rising anger was evident in his voice. “I should imagine that, after all that has happened, I might deserve the common courtesy of not being left to wonder what terrible fate has befallen you, causing you to disappear without a trace. I should imagine that I might deserve, at least, a goodbye.”

The coldness of his tone frightened her. It would have been easier if he’d shouted, but the icy anger that coated his words was more than she could stand.

“It wouldn’t be like that,” she began gently. “You wouldn’t remember. There’s a spell,” she explained, seeing his confused expression. “And it’ll make it so that no one remembers I was ever here. There’s no other way—I wish there were, but there isn’t—we can’t change the future, I know that now.”

“So that’s it, then? You’ll just wipe away everything that’s happened? Everything we’ve—” she saw the nearly imperceptible twitch in his jaw as he cut himself off. “I’ve seen the future, Buffy.”

“William—you can’t know that it was real. What you saw—what he made you see—there are ways of forging these things. You just can’t be sure.”

He responded with a dismissive shake of his head. “Perhaps. And perhaps I could recount the entirety of what I saw to you so that you might confirm its veracity,” he said. “But that hardly seems necessary. The man had no motivation to show me what he did, were it not true. In light of his argument, there were other visions he could have fabricated that, I might imagine, would have been far more persuasive.”

“And what argument was this?”

William chuckled to himself, as though remembering some long-forgotten joke. “He instructed me to convince you to stay.” he began, leaning against the doorjamb. “He said that you’d chosen wrong, in the end, when you charged me—when you charged Spike with bearing the amulet. He wasn’t worthy—” his voice dropped as his gaze met a particularly interesting scuff of dirt on his shoe, “—I wasn’t worthy, and, because of this, your world is doomed.”

Buffy felt the bile rising in her throat. Little pins prickled the insides of her skull as she tried to process the information he was relaying to her. It couldn’t be true. She’d been over the possibility so many times in her head that now that it was being dictated to her from an outside source, the whole thing seemed unbelievably absurd.
“He said that I should stay?” she asked weakly, wanting to cling to something else—anything else—a thing other than the stinging vocalization of her worst fear.

“He said that if you stayed—if I didn’t die—we could change it all.”

If he didn’t die. Buffy’s mind reeled. If William lived, there would be no Spike, and if there was no Spike—it was too much to imagine the consequences.

“And you believe him?” she asked tentatively. Logically, she knew there was no point in even posing the question. They couldn’t change anything—not without causing the universe to implode—even with her limited understanding of magic, she knew this, but that didn’t seem to matter right now. Right now, Buffy wanted to believe.

“Of course not,” William responded abruptly, shattering this fragile illusion of hope. “I am not a simpleton, I understand enough to know when I am being used,” he shot her a meaningful glance. “Surely, this man had an agenda, but that does not preclude the truth of what he showed me. I saw it, Buffy. I felt it.”

“Fine. Say it’s true. Say he showed you the future—your future—what then?”

“You must go back.”

“And do what?” She allowed the poem to slip from her fingers and it fluttered back onto the surface of the bureau. “What if it’s true? I fucked up. The world is doomed. And there’s nothing I can do to change it?”

Cringing slightly, William watched her as she paced across the room. Her head felt like a pressure cooker, crammed full of thoughts and doubts and regrets, and the gasket was about to blow. The tension that had been building in her body ever since she walked out of the Hyperion that first morning in early June to face her brave new world had reached a breaking point.

Thump. Thump. Thump. She heard the pounding of her heart, felt the organ hammering away at her ribcage, like a prisoner intent on escaping his cell at last.

“Buffy,” he began quietly, his tone remaining firm despite the nervous hitch in his breath. “Stop. Think. What interest would this man have in convincing us of anything if there were truly no hope?” She turned to meet his searching eyes and he went on, heartened by her attention. “If he is not on our side—as we have no reason to believe he is—why should he try to influence our actions if the future were already his?”

“Then why talk to you?” she shot back. “Because you know what works real well when you’re trying to influence someone’s actions? Going to them directly. Or, better yet, if you just happen to be evil? Killing them! And yet, here I stand, all packed for my flight back to the future.”

“Perhaps because it’s not entirely about you, Miss Summers.”

She wasn’t sure which shook her more, his resumed use of her surname or his suddenly steely tone. “What do you mean?”

“You forget,” he said, his voice no longer betraying any sign of emotion. “If you return to your time, I die. It is my life, he said, that could change it all. It’s the choice—my choice—to live or to die.”

Buffy stared at him, frozen. “I’m sorry, William,” she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. The frenzy was gone as suddenly as it appeared, squelched by the thought that she’d once again managed to hurt him with her lack of consideration. “I understand this is hard for you. Knowing that
you’ll die—everything that’s ahead—it’s more than anyone should have to face. But I need you to know, no matter what that man said, even if it’s true, even if I did screw up—you didn’t die—Spike didn’t die for nothing.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“I felt it, Buffy. I was in that cave, I felt my soul consuming me from within.” His eyes were distant once again, his gaze unfocused. “It was not nothing.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “No, it wasn’t.”

“But it was not enough. Not for me.”

“Of course it—wait, huh?” She shook herself, certain there was something she hadn’t caught. “What do you mean not enough?

“Whatever that amulet was intended for, I believe it accomplished its task,” he explained, finally moving from his position in the doorway to approach her. “It felt right. Regardless of what that man told me—what he showed me—I cannot help but feel that everything happened exactly as it was meant to. It wasn’t you who chose wrong—who failed—it was I.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, stepping forward to meet his gaze with questioning eyes.

“What I felt when that light surrounded me was pure love, but what I saw within myself was a man who had lost sight of love’s true essence.” He was only inches away from her now, so close she felt she could sense the tension radiating off his body. “Your Spike was a man who died for a set of ideals he no longer truly believed in. I do not wish to become that man.”

“Spike was a hero,” she declared stubbornly.

“Spike was a coward,” he countered, the challenge implicit in his tone. “He died a hero’s death, certainly, having sacrificed himself for the sake of others, but he lacked the courage to open himself up to love. I feel I understand you, now,” he added, raising his hand to caress her cheek. “You and he were more similar than you imagine.”

Buffy wanted to argue, to shout at him that he was wrong, but her resolve crumbled. “It was my fault,” she said, blinking rapidly to keep the tears from falling. “If he lacked the courage, it was because I took it from him.”

“Perhaps that is true,” William replied, his voice softening. “At least in part. But no one is without blame. You have both caused pain to one another, but love cannot be conquered by pain. In some ways, love is pain. The true hero, then, I think, is one who chooses to love regardless.” His hand left her face as he lowered it to lace his fingers through hers and, running his thumb over her knuckles, he continued. “He loved you, you must know that, even if he found himself unable to accept that love in return. I—”

Buffy was no longer listening. Her head spun with sudden realization. “You said you saw everything—that you felt what he felt?” she spoke urgently. “Did he believe me?”

“Did he—Buffy, I can’t—”

“Please,” she begged. “You have to tell me. I need to know. He really didn’t, did he?”
William stared at her in silence. She hated the pity in his eyes. “I really can’t say,” he spoke finally. “I felt flashes—fragments—nothing more.”

“But you saw enough, you must know.”

William sighed heavily, releasing her hand. “I don’t know that he could—” he broke off, seeing the tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry, I know there is nothing I can offer you, I only—”

“No,” she stopped him, wiping roughly at her face. “Don’t apologize. I’m the one who should be doing that. This must be a billion times harder for you and I can’t even—”

“I’m not afraid to die.”

“How can you say that?”

“I’ve had time to make my peace with what I know must be,” he said, stilling her fidgeting hands with his. “My only regret is that I cannot give you what you deserve. Not now, and not in the end.”

Buffy looked down at her hands, cradled in his larger ones. How could he be so rational about all this when she was literally falling apart? He was the one with a death sentence on his head, and yet here he was, comforting her. It was ridiculous, really.

And, even worse, she knew that he was right. Spike had been a coward. They both had been. *We’ll go be heroes,* he’d said. And they did—they were—but not in the way that mattered when she lay awake at night thinking back to those last moments in the cave. Offering up your life for love was easy when compared to offering up your heart—the past few years had taught her as much—and yet here was William, freely giving away both.

Blinking away new tears, she gently slipped her hands out of his to place one squarely on the damp fabric covering his chest as the other traced the curve of his jaw. “Did you think about it?” she asked, stepping forward until she was virtually pressed against him.

“How about what?” he replied, eyes glued to hers as his hands instinctively found their way to her hips.

“Ask me to stay.”

He gave her a sad smile. “Of course I did. I laid the scene out in my head countless times. How to convince you, how you would respond, how we could live out the rest of our lives—there was a particularly inventive one where we got married and became missionaries in India to escape it all, though, come to think of it, I may have stolen that one from Currer Bell—but that doesn’t matter now. Somehow, I knew from the beginning that this is how it would end.”

“For the record,” she said softly, tilting her head to keep his gaze as her arms crept around his neck, “I might have been crazy enough to say yes. Even if it meant moving to India.”

Before he had a chance to respond, she captured his lips in a gentle kiss, feeling his embrace tighten around her as his mouth molded itself to hers.

They remained like this for several moments, both knowing what must come once this tentative kiss eventually ended. William was the first to break away, his hand coming up to cup her face and delicately guiding her head back, even as his other arm pulled her body tighter against his, not wanting to lose contact.

“Nothing has changed,” he said.
“I know.”

“It makes no difference what I remember or what I might know. I am still not Spike.”

“I know. I don’t care.”

“You are still going to leave and I am still going to die. And I won’t remember, will I? I won’t be able to make him believe you.”

“No, you won’t.”

And there it was, that same familiar expression, as his head tilted slightly and he gazed at her, twinkling eyes narrowed in spellbound interest.

“Why, then?” There was no challenge in the question now, only curiosity, like he was trying to figure her out.

Buffy took a deep breath. It was time to follow the advice she’d heard all those years ago as she stood in the desert. If she was really full of love, she needed to suck it up and be the Slayer and forge some strength from it, pain be damned.

“Would you believe me?”

“Buffy—you can’t—I shan’t be a substitute for—”

She silenced him with soft fingers on the corner of his mouth. “I won’t lie and tell you that I don’t see him when I look at you,” she said carefully. “But I know who you are, and I know who you’re not—you have to understand, I can’t help knowing who you’ll be—but you also have to understand that, right now, I’m talking to you and not to Spike. He’s gone. I can’t change that. Just like I can’t change what’ll happen tomorrow. But it’s not tomorrow, it’s tonight.” She tore her gaze away from the smooth curve of his bottom lip, which her index finger was now attentively tracing, and looked straight into his eyes. “And tonight, I love you, William.”

For a few moments, he studied her in silence, as if trying to read something in her expression, and then, without warning, his lips were on hers and the world dropped away.

She felt his arms encircling her, pulling her into him, and she responded in kind. She thought that she would feel frenzied—desperate—as she had hours ago during their last aborted encounter. But there was a clear focus to her mind now. She kissed his lips, his jaw, his neck. There was still a chill on his skin from the rain. His clothes hung wet on his thin frame. His mouth was warm, though—warm and alive.

She pushed the soggy wool off his shoulders and began working on his necktie. Her hands moved slowly, deliberately. He watched her interestingly, his fingers toying with a loose strand of hair at the nape of her neck. She pulled off his tie, his vest—he shivered lightly—the wet linen of his shirt was nearly transparent. A sudden worry overtook her. This is how people caught pneumonia. But of course she knew that he wouldn’t die of a respiratory infection.

“We need to get you warm,” Buffy said gently, as she started to unbutton his shirt. “Let’s get you into bed.”

He smiled at her, another shiver running down his body. “Under the circumstances, I don’t imagine it’s too crass to assume that you’ll join me?”

He took her hands in his and pulled her along with him until he stood mere feet from the room’s
small fireplace. His back to the crackling fire, he stripped off his shirt and let the wet cloth fall limply to the hearthrug. Buffy watched as the warm glow of the flames silhouetted his pale skin. She had seen him this way before, but this was the first time she felt at liberty to enjoy it.

Noticing his arched brow, she blushed lightly and began working of the long column of buttons that ran down the front of her bodice. His hands reached to still her fluttering fingers. “Let me.” She let him.

His elegant fingers unclasped the buttons slowly and methodically. She shrugged out of the long-sleeved bodice, then reached back to undo her skirt, her petticoats and drawers, her stockings, her shoes. As the layers of heavy fabric fell to the floor, she found herself before him in her linen chemise, suddenly nervous. One glance at his face indicated that he shared her feelings. Somehow, she thought, for both of them, ending up here must have seemed at once thoroughly inevitable and yet totally unexpected.

It was as though he’d read her mind. “We’ve done this before,” he said softly. She looked at him, momentarily confused. “Well, not we two, I suppose. But—”

Of course, Buffy thought. This must be confusing for him too, now—his head filled with memories that were his, and yet were not.

“No, we haven’t,” she answered firmly, reaching for him. “This is different. It’s new.”

He kissed her again, as her fingers fumbled with the fastenings of his britches. The damp fabric was stretched tight across his narrow hips. He kicked off his shoes and dropped the wet layers, stepping out of them gingerly. Her eyes lingered on his body, determined to memorize every inch of him. The lines weren’t soft, exactly—but smoother. He was all leanness, without any of the knotted muscle.

But he was watching her expectantly. “Fair’s fair.”

She blushed again, and complied, pulling her chemise over her head. And so they stood, naked and gazing at each other, each not quite sure what was to happen next. Now it was Buffy who shivered. William’s back was still to the fire and she stood before him, effectively shielded from the radiating warmth.

The slight movement was enough to jar William out of his focused study of her form. He stepped forward, wrapping his arms around her once more. Her hands traced his chest, still cool like white marble. But when her fingers brushed his ribs to settle at the small of his back, she found it burning hot. His right hand came up to cup her breast and she gasped faintly.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, lips pressed against her temple. “More than I could have ever imagined. And I am grateful—so grateful—”

She silenced him with a kiss. Hot tears stung at the corners of her eyes. She commanded them not to fall—but that was pointless, of course.

“Oh my Buffy—oh love—don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” He kissed her forehead. Her mouth. Her chin. Her neck and her ear. Her cheekbones. And then her mouth again. She tasted the salty drops on his own lips.

Untangling herself from him, she took his hand and led him to the bed. Pressing lightly, she brought him to a seat at the foot of it. He offered no resistance as she straddled him. One arm rested on his shoulder as she reached the other down, down between them, until her fingers wrapped around the hard length of him. He gasped—from the coolness of her touch, or simply from the sensation, she
couldn’t be sure—his eyes were fixed on hers.

She took him inside of her, then. His jaw fell slack as his eyes closed briefly but, moments later, they were on her again. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a very ordinary thought gnawed at her. *Birth control.* This wasn’t Spike, after all. She ran the mental math—probably not. Surely not. Then she decided she simply didn’t care. Another thing to deal with if and when the time came.

William reached back and pulled the bedcovers over his shoulders and around her, cocooning them both in warmth. She began to move atop him slowly as hands and lips roamed free. She couldn’t have said how much time had passed. He stopped her every now and then, hands grasping her hips firmly, as he closed his eyes to master himself. The candles had guttered out long ago, and the lamps had run out of oil, but the faint glow of the fire’s embers lit the room. The tension of her own arousal buzzed inside her. Suddenly the heat of the covers was too much, and she shrugged them off as she pressed him back onto the bed. His hands came up to knead her breasts and she thought she couldn’t bear it any longer.

He drew in a ragged breath, his hands clutching at her hips once more. Stilling her. Pressing her down against him. But she couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Covering his body with her own, she kissed him roughly. Her hips bucked against his arresting hold. She felt him deep inside her, pulsing. Her clit pressed into his pubic bone, rubbing against the warm, rough patch of hair. Then the warmth seeped into her. Filling her. Radiating. She gasped and convulsed. Once. Twice. His hands had left her hips to grasp her face and she opened her eyes to find him watching her. Something wild and wonderful shone in his own gaze. Then, without warning, he rolled her onto her back. She felt his hot breath as his forehead came to rest on hers. And, with a groan, he spilled himself into her.

***

Buffy opened her eyes cautiously—she hadn’t meant to fall asleep—the last thing she needed was to wake up naked next to a panicked William who no longer had any idea who she was. It was still dark. Good. She propped herself upright, suddenly realizing that there was no one sharing the bed with her. Blinking against the dimness of the moonlit room, she inspected the familiar chamber.

That was when she saw him. The moon’s silvery light illuminated his bone-white hair—for a moment, she thought he seemed almost translucent—a ghostly apparition reclining in the only-too-solid chair by the window. She could see him watching her—judging her—his features arranged into that unreadable half-smile.

She rose from the bed, running her eyes over the rumpled sheets that still bore traces of recent lovemaking, suddenly feeling inexplicably exposed in a way that went beyond her nudity. But she made no effort to cover herself. There was nothing he hadn’t seen before, and it was already all too plain what sorts of activities she’d been engaged in prior to his appearance. Why did it matter anyway? It was beyond ridiculous for her to be feeling guilty in front of Spike about sleeping with a man who was essentially him. Also—hello—dream?

His eyes swept over her body, his expression remaining maddeningly indecipherable as he rose to make his way towards her. She hadn’t thought it was possible to combine leisurely detachment and predatory danger so seamlessly within the space of only a few steps. Buffy stood motionless, silently observing his progress as he circled around to approach her from behind.

“Now thou hast loved me one whole day,” he spoke into her ear, his tone as cryptic as his smile had been. “Tomorrow when thou leavest, what wilt thou say?”

She moved to turn her head towards his voice, but he was already gone, resuming his slow stalking movements around the periphery of her vision.
“I’m done saying, Spike,” she answered listlessly. “William and I—unlike you and I, unfortunately—had an understanding. It’s over now, I know that, and it’s okay. You’re not him and he’s not you. He’ll forget me and keep living just like he did before I was ever here. Until, you know, he dies and turns into you, which I’m not sure qualifies as a marked improvement at this point.

Suddenly, he was right in front of her, standing so close she wondered how it was possible that they weren’t touching. Something a bit sad had crept into that vexing quirk of his lips.

“Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it,” he said, leaning in until she was sure he would kiss her. “How many cowards whose hearts are all as false as stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins the beards of Hercules and frowning Mars, who inward searched, have livers white as milk?”

She could have sworn she’d actually felt his lips move, dropping the words directly on to hers. It was maddening. Every last bit of it.

“No, you’re wrong,” Buffy shot back, pulling away, “William wasn’t a coward—he put us both to shame—but you didn’t mean him, did you?” she said, scrutinizing his ironic expression, “God, Spike! Why do we—no, scratch that, this is my head, isn’t it?—why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep seeing you like this? There has to be a reason!”

He looked down at her, his face as impossibly close as ever, that wry smirk still stretched across his features. “Thou art a dreaming thing,” he spoke, inclining his head. “Only the dreamer venoms all his days, bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.”

“Okay, so that’s it, then? Is it guilt? Over you?—Over him?” She gestured towards the empty bed. “Is it just my messed up brain and its apparent need to spend every night reminding me about how I’m probably responsible for condemning the entire world to big devourey death? Because what? I let you play the hero instead of just telling you how I felt?”

She looked at him expectantly, breath ragged and eyes shining with more unshed tears, wanting him to say something—anything—even as she hoped he would say nothing at all.

“Springes to catch woodcocks,” he shook his head dismissively, his smile softening as his hand rose up to stroke her brow. “None can usurp this height, but those to whom the miseries of the world are misery, and will not let them rest. Fear not the future, weep not for the past.” His tone was gentle, comforting, and she couldn’t take any more.

Buffy’s face crumpled. “How can you say that, when I’d give anything to stay and change it all? I’m trying, I really am, and it’ll be fine because it just has to be, but walking away from him—from you—again? You’re right, I am a coward. I’m not suffering for the world here—you don’t know how much I wish I could just tell the world to go to hell—I just wanted some time—” she broke off, her head bowing to rest against the hard surface of his chest.

His arms encircled her and he held her lightly, his hand running through her hair, as the quiet sobs shook her frame. She wasn’t sure how long they stood this way, but eventually her gasping breath returned to its natural rhythm and she drew in a sharp inhale as she felt him pulling away.

He gazed at her with veiled eyes. “What if this present were the world's last night?” he said in a trailing whisper. Is that your line or someone else’s? An alarm went off in her head. Something was different. And something else was all too similar. But, more importantly, something was wrong.

“Spike—” she began, then, louder—“Spike!” as he slipped from her arms, his backward steps carrying him away, closer and closer to the doorway at the other end of the room. Somehow, something inside her knew that if that door closed on him now, she would not see him here again.
She tried to move, but it was as though her body had turned to stone. Concentrating, she forced her limbs to obey, springing forward to cling to him. “Spike—God, please, don’t leave—I’m sorry, it doesn’t matter, none of that stuff matters. This is enough. Please, just stay.”

His hands clasped her arms. “Sweetest love,” he spoke softly, his voice touched with strange immediacy. “I do not go, for weariness of thee—my days among the Dead are passed—this is my play’s last scene, here heavens appoint my pilgrimage’s last mile. The past fades from our charmed sight. My task is done, thy lore is learned. The present now recurs.”

She opened her mouth to protest, to beg him again to stay, but instead found her lips covered by his. His kiss burned her—his tongue was liquid fire as it thrust into her mouth—and then it was over.

“Journeys end in lovers meeting,” he whispered, his breath hot against her cheek. “And dearest friend, since we must part, drown night with hope of day.”

She opened her eyes, wanting nothing more than to look into his, lest there be some answer hidden in their depths—but, he was gone.
Part II: A Chronicle of Wasted Time

Buffy stared at the ceiling, the uncanny feeling of déjà vu washing over her.

It was dark. Still night, then. That was a good start. She turned her eyes to the chair by the window, fully expecting to see Spike reclining into it nonchalantly, just as before. She squinted, blinking the last traces of sleep from her eyes. The chair was empty.

It took her another second to realize that the heavy weight resting across her abdomen was, in fact, William’s arm. She relaxed, allowing herself to savor this final moment of intimacy. He slept soundly, head nestled next to her breast, and she reached down to stroke his hair. She had to go. It would be better this way. Even as she longed to wake him, to talk to him, to make love to him one last time—she knew it would be both of their undoing.

She had already tempted fate by allowing herself to doze off. They’d talked for what seemed like hours in the faint light of the fire’s embers, about everything and nothing. Part of her had been glad that he hadn’t seemed keen on digging into the fragmented memories of a life he hadn’t yet lived. There was no sense in it, he’d said. Not for him. He was glad of the knowledge, disquieting and painful as it was. Staring into the abyss, it helped him to understand himself, and—he’d looked at her with something almost like pity—to understand her. She’d resented the pity, and told him so. Not that it was misplaced, exactly. But she didn’t need it. Not anymore. She was glad of it too—this open understanding they were now able to share—this full naked knowledge of each other and what they must be.

He’d made love to her again. It had almost broken her resolve, then. She had wanted nothing more than to slink into, melt in, to live forever in the warmth of his mouth. And when he’d looked up from between her thighs and smiled, his lips wet with her, she imagined for one excruciating moment what it might be like if she stayed. But then he buried himself in her a second time, whispering all the meanwhile how brave and beautiful she was, how strong. How he loved her. And how he wouldn’t forget—not really—even if he forgot her face. Because he knew—he’d felt it—that little phantom glow of her within him.

She slid out of his embrace. Everything in her being protested as the frigid night air hit her skin. The mantle clock told her it was nearly four in the morning. Still a couple of hours until sunrise then. She dressed quickly then stood there, watching him. She longed to touch him one last time but tore herself away. Instead, she picked up the poem from where she had left it on the bureau the night before. It was meant for her, after all. And he would not remember. Before her will gave out, she turned and quietly slipped out of the room. Down the stairs. Out of the silent house and onto the dark city street. Taking a deep and halting breath, Buffy set out on foot across the several miles that separated her from 28 Dean Street.

A deep chill hung in the air. The street was empty and nearly silent. Every once in a while, a horse would whinny petulantly from its stall, set deep in an alley between the stone buildings. Buffy commanded her feet to keep moving. She was still—or already?—so, so tired. She couldn’t think. Each thought threatened to pull her back to William. To his arms, and his lips, and his warm skin.

It was nearly dawn by the time that she reached the unassuming stretch of brick that housed 28 Dean Street. The Order owned the whole building, but it was the second-floor flat that had been designated for the ritual. Easier to protect, Isaac had told her. She knocked on the front door and was greeted by a monk she did not recognize.

“Buffy Summers?” he confirmed.
She nodded and followed him inside.

“Jacob,” he introduced himself curtly as he locked the door behind her. “Come, the others are upstairs.”

The entry hall was sparsely decorated, just enough to keep up appearances in case anyone came poking around. Buffy followed Jacob up the stairway and through the heavy wooden door that separated the upstairs flat. She felt the air around her ripple as she passed through it. Jacob closed the door, bolted it, then performed a complex series of hand gestures and Buffy felt the walls pulse. The shield was up, then.

She looked to the monk for confirmation and he nodded. “It is done. The shield is permeable from within—that is, you may leave. But if you do so, you will not be able to re-enter.”

Buffy inclined her head in understanding. It was just as well. The sky had begun to lighten as she had entered the house. The first rays of the sun would scrub the outside world of her presence. It was best to keep it that way.

She followed Jacob through the entry hall and into the parlor, where the rest of the Order was gathered. There were seven of them in all. Isaac, and Miklos, and the two injured monks from yesterday, plus two others she had not previously met. Leonardo, she was told, had not reappeared.

And so they hunkered down for their watch. They had about twenty hours until the fated moment arrived. No one really spoke. Some read, some napped, others simply sat. Buffy changed into a set of men’s clothes, which Isaac had brought for her along with the translation notes and her original outfit, the latter having apparently been preserved by Dorothea against Gretchen’s vehement protestations. With no appearances left to keep up, and the possibility of a fight ahead, there was hardly any reason for her to remain in the restrictive gown. Thus re-attired, Buffy curled up on a threadbare couch and did her level best to get a few hours of sleep. She managed to drift off a few times, but somehow this left her even more tired than she had been. As the sun crept below the horizon, she took to performing a circuit around the flat’s several windows.

It was close to midnight now. A clock down the end of the street chimed the quarter hour. But, to Buffy’s surprise, the street was still quite busy. They appeared to be in a rather fashionable part of town. It was mid-week but she imagined that hardly mattered when one was not afflicted with the inconvenience of a job. The early morning’s chill had given way to a sunny day and now a rather temperate night. The usual damp mist she had come to associate with London was nowhere to be found. A block or so down the way, somewhere closer to the chiming clocktower, a raging party appeared to be in full swing.

Buffy was getting restless. Initially, locking herself away with the monks had seemed like the best course of action. She had assumed the streets would be quiet and any stray movement therefore easy to detect. Now she rather wished that she could be closer to the hustle and bustle below.

“Miklos,” she approached the old monk. “You’re positive no one will be able to enter the flat?”

He nodded affirmatively. “Barring some very powerful magic, yes. The shield is impenetrable. At least until the final moment, when we must abandon it to mediate the Key.”

“Then I’m thinking I might be more use to you outside,” Buffy proposed. Miklos eyed her skeptically, but did not immediately argue. “There’s a lot of action down below,” she went on. “I’d rather have a sense of what’s going on. And if Angelus decides to show, I’d like to know it before the last possible second.”
The monk nodded. “You understand that you will not be able to re-enter?”

“I do,” Buffy replied. “But if it’s down to a fight, then I’d rather not wait until it comes to us here.”

“Go then,” Miklos said. “It will not be long now. You know what must be done—and may the Lord be with you.”

Buffy inclined her head in reply. “Bolt the door behind me,” she said. “I know it has nothing to do with the shield, but an extra physical barrier can’t hurt.”

With that, she availed herself of one of the several candles littered around the parlor and left the flat. The entry hall was dark. Carefully, Buffy made her way across it, lighting the small oil lamps that framed the front door, followed by a few of the others in the connecting rooms. A narrow hallway led from the front vestibule to a side door. She expected it was the service entrance opening into the adjoining alley. Abandoning her candle, Buffy approached the door, unbolted it, and peered outside.

The alley was dark but not pitch-black. A slant of light poured in from the street and a couple of gas lamps flared dimly in their sconces—one by the door she had just existed, another on the house across the way. Deeper down the alley, another lamp lit the stables belonging to the neighboring house. Several bales of hay had been left out, perhaps due to a late delivery.

Buffy edged her way closer to the mouth of the alleyway. She was unlikely to attract much attention, dressed as she was. That is, as long as no one assumed she was trying to rob the place. She pulled her newsboy cap tighter over her hair. Coaches rumbled intermittently along the street, which was littered with people. Couples strolling, mostly. Presumably enjoying the unseasonably warm weather as they made their way from wherever they had spent the evening, or perhaps on their way to some new late-night diversion. Nothing seemed particularly out of order.

Buffy had nearly started to head back inside to check the other side of the house. A moment later and she would have missed him. But there, strolling absentmindedly down the street, was William. She nearly gasped, but caught herself. It was as though some weird cosmic energy had taken it upon itself to keep bringing them into each other’s orbit again and again. Like it was mocking her. William stopped to check his pocket-watch and then cast a glance around. Buffy quickly moved to sink back into the shadows—but it was too late. He had spotted her. His eyes lingered on her briefly and then moved on, though his hand seemed to move instinctively to his pocket, where he had just deposited the watch.

He didn’t recognize her. This was hardly surprising, of course, especially considering that she was currently dressed like a teenage boy. All the same, Buffy felt a dull stab of—something. Disappointment? Grief? Jealousy? He was going on with his life as though she had never existed. She hadn’t existed. Not for him.

Buffy watched a few seconds longer, as William headed for the festivities apparently taking place in the house down the block. When he disappeared inside, she relinquished her post, slinking back through the side door. It was no use wondering what he was doing. His life no longer concerned her. She made her way carefully to the window at other end of the front hall, then to the small library at the back of the house, then the kitchen.

By the time she heard the clock strike two, she had repeated this circuit about a dozen times. Almost—another half hour or so. Buffy made her rounds one last time. She dared not exit the house into the alleyway so close to the appointed moment, so she settled for mounting the stairs and peering out of the small window on the landing. On the other side of the heavy wooden door, the monks had begun a steady chant. One minute. Two. Nothing. She was satisfied, but then—
There was movement in the alley below. A figure had stumbled in, barely visible under the dim lights emanating from service entrances on either side. It paused, then collapsed onto the hay bales. She squinted through the darkness. Then her heart sank. A downcast head glimmered with sandy waves. William? It couldn’t be.

But it was. He was clearly upset. She saw his hands fidgeting in the darkness, tearing at some white thing clasped in his fingers. She longed to go down to him, but knew it was impossible. He wouldn’t know her. He shouldn’t, anyway. Then suddenly, his head tilted upwards, as if he had sensed her. It took her only a moment to realize that it was in fact something else, or rather someone else, that had attracted William’s attention. Through the single pane of glass, she could just barely make out a woman’s voice.

“And I wonder,” the voice drawled. “What possible catastrophe came crashing down from heaven and brought this dashing stranger to tears?”

Drusilla. Buffy saw the slender dark silhouette and felt something hot and sickeningly liquid pool in the pit of her stomach. Oh God—no. It couldn’t be. The ringing in her ears prevented her from hearing William’s response. She felt utterly powerless. As powerless as she’d felt as she’d held Angel and watched the mouth of Acathla opening to swallow them both. Or when she held Dawn, dripping with blood, and watched the world crack beneath their feet. But no—this was worse. The world wasn’t ending, of course. Not exactly. Not for her, anyway. The first time, she’d killed her lover. The second, herself. This time she could only watch. Just like she’d watched him burn.

The monks still chanted on the other side of the door, but she couldn’t hear them anymore. Before she knew it, she was running down the stairs and through the little hallway. She couldn’t interfere, she knew as much. But she had to see. She had to witness this moment. This was the last memory she would have of him. It seemed fitting, somehow. She was about to see him die for the second time.

Buffy cracked the service door, careful not to make a sound. Drusilla was dancing now, babbling something about burning baby fish.

William edged away from her. “I’ve heard tales of London pickpockets. You'll not be getting my purse, I tell you,” he muttered defiantly, clearly not sure what to make of this performance.

“Don’t need a purse.” She bowed before him, the dim light illuminating her face. Then she continued her approach, as if something was pulling her towards him. Her gloved hand reached for his heart. “Your wealth lies here—” then up to stroke his brow, “—and here.” And then the black spider-like fingers crept lower. “In the spirit and… imagination.” Buffy wanted nothing more than to look away. But she stood paralyzed. Transfixed by Drusilla’s low, mesmerizing tone, much as William himself appeared to be. And so she looked on in horror as Drusilla’s thin fingers curled into the wool of his trousers and his eyes dropped shut. “You walk in worlds the others can't begin to imagine.”

“Oh, yes!” William gasped. Then seemed to come to his senses. “I mean, no. I mean— Mother's expecting me.”

Drusilla was undeterred. Buffy understood that she was going in for the kill. “I see what you want,” she crooned. “Something glowing and glistening. Something… effulgent.”

She had him. “Effulgent,” echoed William quietly.

“Do you want it?” Drusilla asked.
“Oh, yes—” he gasped, reaching for her. Buffy’s heart broke to see the wonder, and the fascination, and the sheer lust mingling on his face. “God, yes.”

As Drusilla bowed her head, Buffy’s concentration was broken by a looming sense of presence behind her. It wasn’t a movement, or even a sound, but the subtle tingle she had come to associate with a warning—vampire! She glanced behind her to find a hulking shape looming by the stairs leading to the upper flat. It was Angelus. She recognized him instantly.

It was needless to say that she had not heard him enter. He had been in the process of quietly mounting the first step when he, too, seemed to have detected an unexpected presence. Now his nostrils flared in her direction. Buffy tensed, forcing herself not to turn. Waiting for him to make the first move. Angelus hesitated, seemingly torn between his goal—which he understood lay upstairs with the monks—and this novel discovery.

She could feel his body shifting and knew he felt her just as she felt him. Angelus was an experienced vampire. She had caught him off-guard when they first met earlier, but now all of his senses were trained on her. Surely he recognized a Slayer, even if he no longer recognized her. Buffy’s mind raced. The door was barred. Even if the shield collapsed, it seemed unlikely that Angelus would be able to enter the upstairs flat until it was already too late. Still, all options weighed against each other, distracting him into engaging her seemed perhaps most likely to safeguard not only the Key but the lives of the monks inside. Surely it was almost half past. They were so close.

Angelus must have known this too. He seemed to be weighing which of the two he found more intriguing—a unknown instrument of apocalyptic mayhem or a Slayer apparently caught in the throes of emotional anguish.

Somewhere far away the clocktower began to strike the half hour. Upstairs, the monks were chanting. And just outside, William was dying. Buffy and Angelus had been frozen in their wordless standoff—his scream tore through both of them. Buffy’s head whipped around to lock eyes with the vampire and he narrowed his gaze curiously at the look of desperation she knew shone on her face.

He stalked towards her now, having evidently made his decision. The monks continued to chant, forgotten. Buffy forced herself to focus. In her distress, she had not considered that drawing Angelus away from the monks meant that she would have nowhere to go but through the door and out into the alley, where Drusilla and William were locked in their deadly embrace. And though she wanted nothing more than to interrupt them, she knew she could not. Setting her jaw, she stood her ground.

Angelus reached for her throat, arm lashing out, but she blocked him. A well-placed kick knocked him backwards. He stumbled, caught himself, and moved to lunge past her. It was all she could do to prevent him from tumbling both of them into the alley—grabbing his elbow, she swung him into the wall of the narrow hallway, losing her own footing in the process. Before she could recover, Angelus locked her arm behind her back and her head hit the opposite wall with a sickening crunch. Blood trickled into the corner of her right eye.

Swatting at the red trickle, Buffy was just moving to rise when Angelus’s large hand tangled itself in her hair. To her horror, she felt herself being dragged through the door and out into the alley. It was then that she registered that the screaming had stopped. For some reason, this fact seemed to capture Angelus’s attention too and, when she was able to look up, she understood why. Drusilla was crouched above William’s prone form, her eyes fixed on a glimmer of green light that had appeared just overhead. It rippled, as though the air was turning itself inside out.

Swatting at the red trickle, Buffy was just moving to rise when Angelus’s large hand tangled itself in her hair. To her horror, she felt herself being dragged through the door and out into the alley. It was then that she registered that the screaming had stopped. For some reason, this fact seemed to capture Angelus’s attention too and, when she was able to look up, she understood why. Drusilla was crouched above William’s prone form, her eyes fixed on a glimmer of green light that had appeared just overhead. It rippled, as though the air was turning itself inside out.

Angelus’s hand loosened its grip on Buffy’s hair, and she slipped free. But even still, Buffy couldn’t take her eyes of the undulating light. It drifted upwards towards the window of the second-floor flat, as though pulled there by some magnetic force. It disappeared momentarily through the glass, but the
rapt observers barely had time to register this when it shot, like a laser-beam, through the roof of the house and disappeared into the night sky.

Buffy blinked. Her eyes drifted down to William’s lifeless form and suddenly her mind was clear again. Before Angelus and Drusilla could so much as turn their heads, she scrambled, crab-like, back through the side-entrance to 28 Dean Street, slammed the door, and bolted it. There was no bolt on the front entrance, only a lock, which she found broken—presumably a casualty of Angelus’ initial entry into the place. She was in the process of barricading it with the heavy bench that had decorated the entrance hall when she heard the upstairs door open. Isaac stood on the landing, stooping slightly from exhaustion but calm and collected.

“Vampires,” she called up to him.

He nodded curtly. Casting a quick glance behind him, he began an incantation. Moments later, his wavering voice was joined by six others. His brothers filed onto the landing, arms raised in unison. They continued to chant as they descended the stairwell and Buffy felt their words resonating off the walls of the house. With whatever energy they had left, they were building another shield.

Buffy could hear faint scuffles outside the service entrance, but no discernable attempts at entry. She imagined the vampires would be able to feel the magic by now—she certainly could. With any luck, they would cut their losses and go. Would they leave William? She didn’t know which would be worse. Finding his body out there, or knowing that they had him.

Eventually, the chanting ceased. The monks had spread out throughout the bottom floor of the house, but those of them that she could still see looked ready to collapse. Isaac sank to the floor not far from her.

“The shield should hold until dawn,” he said. His head fell heavy against the wall. “We will remain on guard until then.”

“It worked?” Buffy asked simply.

“It did,” Isaac replied.

Buffy leaned against the service door. On the other side, there was now only silence.

“William is dead,” she said.

Isaac’s gaze snapped to her, but he said nothing. Only nodded. And so they held their vigil.

***

At first light, they had set out towards Glastonbury. It had been a long night but, after a couple of hours, the fresh air and the sunlight seemed to give them all a bit of a second wind. Buffy gave her mare a gentle kick to catch up to Isaac, who rode with Miklos at the head of the party. He acknowledged her with a nod and they rode on in silence.

“So, it was William’s life, right? William’s soul?” she spoke finally. “The sacrifice?”

Isaac seemed to consider for a moment. “I suppose it must have been,” he answered. “How—how odd, really. But fitting, I suppose.”

Buffy didn’t respond. It was fitting, in a way. But her tired mind struggled with what it might mean. The Great Mother had said it was the Champion who would deliver the Key. But what did that mean? Did sacrificing your soul count? And what an odd way to go about a sacrifice—William had
hardly known what he was doing when he stumbled into that alley. The questions swirled around in her all-too-mushy brain.

“Where is the Key?” she asked suddenly. She had simply assumed that the monks would trap it somehow. She didn’t ask, and they hadn’t seen fit to supply the information unsolicited. But it became clear last night that this had not been the plan. “I saw it last night. At least—I think I saw it. But then it just sort of shot into the sky.”

It was Miklos who answered this time. “The Key is not a thing, you see. It is—maybe more like an action—an energy of sorts. I imagine this is why it needed a soul. They are not so unlike, a soul and the Key. The soul may have pulled it into our plane—gave it form, but such things cannot cohere without a tangible medium of some kind. Our circle served as such a medium, but it could only ever be temporary. Even shared by seven men, the energies are too great for a human body to sustain. We had to send it somewhere else—somewhere we could anchor it safely. We’re on our way there now.”

“Glastonbury?” Buffy asked incredulously.

Miklos nodded. “It’s an ancient and powerful place, that hill where the Mother resides. The land there—” He trailed off.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. The sun was making its way down to the horizon when Buffy spotted the little village. Just as before, they veered off towards the abbey. This time, though, they did not continue towards the hill and Glastonbury Tor. Instead, Alastair greeted them amid the ruins with several other monks and took their tired horses. Miklos led the way into the heart of the ancient stone structure. When they reached what must have once been the altar, he raised his hands, performed yet another indecipherable gesture and then—well, the most accurate thing she could say was that he disappeared underneath the stone. The other monks followed. Isaac, sensing her hesitation, offered her his arm and together they stepped downwards into the darkness.

There was a tunnel, then some stairs. Though not nearly as many stairs as had taken them underneath the hill. They were again in something like an underground cloister. This must have been a different section of the subterranean structure than the one where she had stayed on her previous trip here. Having walked past a row of monk’s cells, Buffy found that they’d entered a larger room. The walls were roughhewn stone and undecorated, with the exception of several bronze crosses. At the center of the room stood another altar, though Buffy suspected that this altar was not quite of the Christian variety. And behind the altar, shrouded in her usual translucent glow, stood the Great Mother. Five other women, Guardians presumably, surrounded her. A small handful of monks stood at the periphery.

The ageless woman smiled kindly at Buffy. “And here we are again.”

“You’re not at the hill,” Buffy said, somewhat lamely.

“No,” the Mother answered. “That hill will not be fit for human habitation for quite some time now—even for odd humans such as we are.”

“The Key?” Buffy asked.

The Mother nodded. “Are you ready to go home?”

Buffy found herself hesitating. But what was left for her here? She shifted the small leather traveling sack that held her old clothes and the translation notes from hand to hand.
“Not quite, I see,” the Mother smiled. “What troubles you, child?”

Buffy struggled to put the thing into words. “I think you were wrong,” she finally said. The Mother quirked a curious eyebrow. “When you told me that I couldn’t interfere with the Champion’s path,” Buffy continued. She had spent the entire ten-hour journey here trying to piece it all together. She still didn’t know the answer, but at least the questions had come into sharper relief. “You said the Champion would deliver the Key, and these guys,” she motioned to the monks, “said the Key needed the sacrifice of a soul, willingly given for love, or—or, something like that. But the man—William—who sacrificed his soul for the Key—he wouldn’t have been able to do that if it weren’t for me being here. It’s too random, otherwise. The only way it makes sense is if you count the fact that, before the memory spell, he was offered the chance to live and he turned it down. He knew he would die, and he made me go through with it all anyway.”

The words had come tumbling out. They had made sense in Buffy’s head—like the solution to an elaborate word problem—but now that she said it out loud, it sounded far too convoluted again.

Still, the Mother was considering her with an intent look. “Yes,” she said finally. “You appear to be far more deeply entangled in this than I could have imagined. But what of Angelus—he was not involved? You had mentioned that he would win his soul—and this, William? He is human, yes?—not a vampire?”

“That’s the thing,” Buffy stammered. “He is—now, he is. And he’ll also get his soul back. On purpose, even—not with a curse, like Angel. But Angel—Angelus—he was there when it happened too. Can this mean that he’s still somehow the Champion?”

The Mother was silent for a moment, thinking carefully. “Perhaps. Or perhaps not. But you know both of these vampires? Both have their souls?”

“Yeah,” Buffy answered, then stopped short. “Well, sort of. Spike—William, I mean—he’s dead. I mean, really dead. Burned.” The other woman said nothing, only gave her an odd questioning look, so Buffy continued. “Well, there was this thing. The First Evil—it’s really complicated—but there was an amulet and a scythe. Your scythe, actually—”

The Mother stopped her, then. “You have found the weapon?” she asked, with only mild surprise. “I thought you might have, when you said that you had met a Guardian.” She considered for a moment. “I can see why the Powers might be interested in you then. If you have found the weapon, the end must truly be near. You are not just the Slayer, you are the last one.”

Buffy shuffled her feet. “Well, I’m not sure about that—see, we kind of did a thing…”

“A thing?” The Mother said, her dark glimmering brow creased with confusion.

“We—uhh—we did a spell. With the weapon. There’s lots of Slayers now. All of the Potentials—well, they’re more like actuals. It’s like Slayerpalooza, really.”

There was a look of utter astonishment on the Mother’s face now—one that was quickly blossoming into something that looked very much like delight. She glanced around at her sisters, then back at Buffy. “So, you’ve done it!”

Now it was Buffy’s turn to be confused. “I guess? You—this is what we were supposed to do?”

“My child,” the Mother said. “We forged the weapon by harnessing the Slayer’s essence. No, not the demon that the Shadow Men put inside her, but the human soul that bent the demon to its will. We knew the day would come when the Slayer would need more power. The Shadow Men created their
contingency—I gather you’ve already been presented with their solution—”

“The Shadow Box,” Buffy whispered. “They wanted to put more of that demon inside me.”

“Yes,” the Mother replied gravely. “And, since you are standing here today, I can only assume that you refused. You would have had power, yes, but I am sure you understand that carrying that power alone would have destroyed you in the end.” Buffy was nodding slowly. The Mother went on. “We came up with our own contingency. Using a different power. Not death, but love. Soul. Connection. It could not be borne by you alone, it had to be shared. You are the last one—for now there are many.”

Buffy nodded now, reassured somewhat. Perhaps the spell was not a mistake after all, but then—

“But then why is the world ending?” she asked pleadingly. “We’d thought that maybe we were wrong in casting the spell. That the First—the Old Ones—that we had somehow made things worse.”

Now the Mother smiled. “I imagine you did.—Worse. And better.”

Buffy could only gape at her. “Worse and better?”

“The end is coming,” the Mother said calmly. “It’s like a game of—I believe you call it ‘chess.’ Every move you make brings you closer to the inevitability that the game must end. You made such a move in casting that spell. But if, as you say, the First Evil has truly manifested, then you are already many moves into the thing. You must know—from beneath you, it devours.” Her eyes narrowed now. “But these two vampires—”

“That’s the thing, Angel is the only one left—”

“But you thought William must be the Champion? You say he was burned?”

“Yes, by the amulet—something Angel got from Wolfram and Hart, this evil law firm.” Buffy explained. “Big shiny gem thing.”

“The soul stone?” The Mother gasped. “I thought it must be a myth.”

“You know what it is?” Buffy asked, astounded.

“No one knows what it is,” the Mother replied. “The legends say it was drawn from the heart of the earth. From the source of life itself. If it is real, then it is the greatest weapon that exists within the final battle. And you say this William wielded it?”

“Yes, but he’s dead,” Buffy said with despairing finality.

The Mother’s brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, but then her eyes softened and she let out a twinkling laugh. “But, my child, the soul stone cannot kill. And the Champion cannot die.”

***

Buffy stood just outside the circle of chanting monks. She wore her old clothes again, being rather more attached to them than the rough masculine clothing she had arrived in. She did plan on bringing one souvenir from the past along with her—the translation notes that Isaac and William had spent the better part of two weeks laboring over were clutched in her hands.

Well, maybe two souvenirs. William’s poem, folded neatly back into its envelope, was tucked into
the rear pocket of her jeans. She had thought it would be a painful reminder, but one she cherished all the more for that fact. And it was—but it was something else too, now. It was hope.

Buffy watched Miklos split the air open before her, opening the shining portal that she could only hope would bring her back where she belonged. On the other side of the circle of monks stood the Guardians. The Great Mother smiled serenely at Buffy, perhaps sensing her hesitation.

“Good luck, child,” she said.

Buffy swallowed. There was no sense in delaying it. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward into the shimmering void. For the second time, she felt herself being drawn down and in, blinking at the blinding flash of light. Gradually, her vision cleared to reveal the concerned faces of her friends. They stood there, just as she’d left them, and she got the sense that what for her had been two weeks, for them must have been closer to two seconds.

“Giles,” she said, her voice small but firm. There was no time to waste. “Get me some plane tickets. We’re going back to Sunnydale.”

With that, she shook herself, thrust the stack of paper into Giles’ flailing arms, and briskly walked out of the room, paying no heed to the turning heads and dumbfounded stares she left in her wake.

Giles blinked, wrenching himself out of his stupefied silence just in time to call after her, “But Buffy, why on earth?”

Her answer came as a single word—almost no more than a gasp that trailed behind her retreating form.

“Spike.”

She descended the stairs, catching a glimpse of his thoughtful face as he spun the dangling amulet one last time before rising to greet her. It must have been one of those great panoramic shots. Study of two—what were they to each other, anyway?—in a musty basement.

Their eyes met from across the room. A beat. He spoke first.

“Decided against partaking in the dragon slaying, then?”

“I’m hoping to save that for tomorrow.”

Neither had moved. The uncertain silence descended again. Why had she come down?

“Best get some rest, I reckon,” Spike made another effort, taking a tentative step towards her.

Rest. Yes, rest was definitely good. Too bad she was more wired than a hamster on crack.

“Well, you know what they say, no rest for the wiccan,” Buffy deadpanned. There was that, then. Clearly, witty humor was out for the night.

At least that earned her a lopsided grin. “You’re slipping. The only wiccan in this house is currently upstairs with her very own Slayer-to-be, working out the finer points of tongue piercings.” Another step. “I’d be of the opinion that you could stand to take a leaf out of her book and unwind a bit, love.”

“Are you offering?” she asked coyly before finally breaking eye contact to make her way over to the punching bag. Angel’s cartoon counterpart glowered at her from beneath its Neanderthal brow.

“All right, wasn’t Willow bound for a night of textbooky fun? Last I checked, it was like midterm week all over again up there.”

Spike slumped back onto the cot with a heavy sigh. “Not as of the last half hour. And, not that I’m complaining, mind you. Bloody well rather listen to that than Little Red Riding Hood and the Burninator up in the dining room.”

Giving Angel a noncommittal jab, Buffy turned back to examine Spike’s reclining form. This was one of those many times when she wished things could go back to the way they were between them. Not that she really wanted to revisit the horrible pile of badness that was last year but, tonight of all nights, she craved the physical comfort.

If she were honest with herself—and honesty, she’d decided, was definitely the best policy—she knew that it wasn’t just about comfort. Or lust-induced attraction. She’d felt closer to him in the span of these last two nights than she’d felt to anyone else—ever—and part of her couldn’t help but wonder.

Spike had gone back to staring at the shiny trinket that still hung loosely from his hand, his eyes strangely distant.

“Whatcha thinking?” she prodded, slowly making her way towards the cot.

He looked up at her and suddenly she felt like maybe she didn’t know him at all. “What if this
present were the world's last night?” he murmured, speaking neither to her nor to himself.

“Is that your line or someone else’s?”

“Lifted it from a bloke by the name of Donne, if you must know,” he chuckled. “But it fits, dunnit?”

“I prefer to remain optimistic,” Buffy commented, coming to stand in front of him, close enough that her knees were framed by his splayed legs.

He shot her a curious glance. “That so?”

It wasn’t really so. Which meant that it had to be now. The hours stretched before her like a gauntlet of doubts and anxieties and something had to give. Heart hammering wildly, Buffy lifted one knee, then the other onto the cot and straddled his lap.

“Yup. Show me a glass and I’ll tell you exactly how full it is,” she said quietly, hoping that keeping the conversation going would somehow make this feel more natural.

He didn’t say anything. Didn’t touch her. Just continued to stare at her with that quizzical expression. Her confidence faltered. “Is this ok?” she asked nervously.

“You tell me,” he answered, giving nothing away.

He was making this way too hard. She briefly wondered if she’d made a mistake.

“Do you want me?”

“Don’t let’s pick at that again, pet. That’s not what this is about and we both know it.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “What is it about, then? I don’t want to do this tonight, Spike. No more games. I thought we’d gotten past that.”

Rocking back, she moved to lift herself off of him. The mood, if it had even existed in the first place, was definitely nowhere to be found now.

Two firm hands gripped her hips, arresting her retreat. She noticed, for the first time, how nervous he looked. Maybe she wasn’t the only one who needed to unwind.

“I’m sorry, love,” he said, leaning back against the wall behind him. “Didn’t mean to put you off. ‘S just that you already know exactly where I stand.”

Did she? She supposed that she should have. Fine, then, she’d let him have it his way. First move it was. Taking a deep breath, Buffy lifted her gaze to meet his. “Why don’t you show me?”

With that, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his—it was a feather-light touch that just barely constituted contact—because she needed to be sure, because she couldn’t rush into it, not like before. But perhaps that had been exactly the wrong thing to do. No response. She was really done embarrassing herself for the night—maybe her bed was still free—

She didn’t get far. Abandoning his reclining position to follow her retreating lips, Spike caught her in his arms and pressed his mouth to hers, firm at first, then tentative and gentle. His probing lips felt pliant against hers, and soft—so unbelievably soft—as though he was afraid she might shatter.

It could have been their first kiss. There were ways in which it was.
Reluctantly, Buffy drew back, feeling suddenly lightheaded.

There was something about the look he was giving her that made her profoundly sad, though she would have been hard-pressed to explain why.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she whispered.

“‘Bout what, love?” he responded softly, as his long fingers delicately plucked the pins from her hair.

She didn’t move, allowing him to brush the tumbling locks from her face. “About this.”

“So do you?”

“I asked you first.”

He sighed. “Let’s say I do—what would you tell me?” She opened her mouth as if to speak, her eyes uncertain, but he trailed his fingers down her jaw, pressing his thumb to her lips. “‘S’alright. Hypothetical, that. Like we said earlier, best to leave it be.”

She didn’t think she wanted to leave it be—leaving didn’t smell of progress to Buffy—but he was right, what did she have to tell him? On this, the world’s last night, any spoken words would carry too much finality. Would seem too much like a desperate goodbye.

“Spike—tomorrow—you know what we’re doing, don’t you? You understand. Because, the others? I’m not sure that they get it. I mean really really get it. But, then—maybe if that amulet actually does something—”

They both looked down at the object in question, which rested on the pillow beside them. Spike let out an amused snort. “Remaining optimistic, eh?” Then his expression darkened again. “Yeah, pet, I get it. Let’s make the bugger choke.”

“It’s not really the kind of victory I was hoping for,” Buffy sighed, placing her head on his shoulder.

She felt Spike’s chest flutter against her own—the sheer oddness of that movement never failed to strike her. “I reckon we all thought a handful of us would walk away from this to fight another day,” he murmured into her hair. “Me, I always knew I’d go down fighting. Just a matter of when and where. And whom. Would have wagered my unlife it’d be you not so long ago.”

“Well, hey, you never know. Maybe you’ll still get your wish—one to ten thousand isn’t such bad odds—not when we have an old choppy thing and a shiny rock on our side. Or, you know,” her eyes prickled annoyingly, “you could just do what comes naturally and piss me off mid-battle, in which case I’d be happy to introduce you to something pointy.”

He drew in a sharp sniff. “Might just have to take you up on that offer, love. Wouldn’t do to have one of those cave vamps get the best of me.”

Buffy lifted her head and shook herself. “Okay. Enough with the morbid. No point in counting our chickens before they’ve been torn to tiny bits.”

Spike, having released her, propped himself up on his hands. “Right you are,” he stated, his attempt at an upbeat tone somewhat thwarted by his misty-eyed appearance. “You sure you wouldn’t rather join your mates upstairs?”

“Are you kicking me out?”
“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She smiled, wrapping her hands around his middle to tug him against her. “Then quit putting ideas in my head. This whole sulky vibe doesn’t suit you—the market on dark and broody is officially saturated, you know.”

He pressed her to him once more, his fingers snaking into her hair. “Have it your way, then,” he said. “Count me chipper as a chipmunk. I gather you’ll be staying the night?”

Buffy’s hands came up to cup his face as she leaned into his embrace. “It’s a time honored tradition spanning an entire two days. I don’t see any reason to break it now.”

A light smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “True, that is. Wouldn’t want to go counter to such a long bit of history. I just figured I ought to tell you—I wasn’t much planning on sleeping.”

“I wasn’t either.”

Before Spike had a chance to retort, she was kissing him again, her hands caressing his cheekbones. This time, she didn’t have to wait for him to respond. His mouth opened against hers and he swallowed her exhaled breath.

They were definitely done talking, Buffy decided, as her tongue found its way into his mouth. She could have stayed like this forever—wrapped tightly in the circle of his arms, the taste of him flooding her head like an intoxicant—because suddenly the apocalypse seemed altogether unimportant and her world contracted to encompass only the five hours and twenty some-odd minutes remaining until sunrise.

It felt different. The supple pressure of his lips and the cool glide of his tongue were both soothingly familiar and yet somehow incredibly new. It turned out that just the simple acknowledgement—that absence of the need to detach herself from the guilty pleasure of being with him that had shrouded all of their previous encounters—made all the difference in the world. This was Spike. She was kissing Spike. And it was right.

Sighing into his mouth, Buffy nested closer to him. Yup, definitely Spike. The conclusive evidence of that fact pressed deliciously against her inner thigh.

She thought that perhaps they ought to take this slow. It seemed like the thing to do, case being that this was probably the last time they’d have with one another. But, eager for more, she ground herself against him, eliciting just the slightest gasp as his fingers gripped her hair. On the other hand, maybe slow was overrated.

It almost reminded her of that first time in the crumbling building. The raw desire flooded her head and there was no time for thinking, no more time to evaluate or question. With fumbling fingers, she reached for his fly, tugging at the stubborn button until it gave with a muffled pop.

Spike tensed, his hands loosening to glide down her back. Was something wrong? It couldn’t be. Her hand wormed into his pants to free his erection. Nope, nothing wrong there. It sprang up, wedged somewhat awkwardly through the opening of his fly and she experimentally swirled her thumb across the tip, feeling his involuntary moan reverberate all the way down her own throat.

They had hours to take things slow but, right now, she needed him. Needed to feel him inside her. Except—shit—pants. Stupid goddamn pants. With a petulant grumble, she tore her mouth from his.

A split second later, she wished she hadn’t because he was looking at her in the oddest way. As though he was waging some epic struggle inside the confines of his skull. His hands were still on her
hips, fingers kneading lightly, and Buffy wondered if they were on some sort of lust-driven autopilot.

She released his cock, dropping her gaze to watch it bob haphazardly. She thought of asking him what was wrong, but decided against it. Truth be told, she would have been stupid if it hadn’t occurred to her that he might misinterpret the whole thing—sex was quite justifiably the sketchiest of territories as far as they were concerned—especially when so much was on the line. No, talking wouldn’t do, even if she did manage to produce a few coherent sentences on the subject without inadvertently saying something that would send both of them on a downward spiral of anger, regret, and self-loathing. Which, kudos to her, she was very good at.

Sucking in a shaky breath, she raised her eyes.

“Buffy,” he began, seeing his opening. “You know well enough I’m here if you need me, but this—I don’t want to just—no, bugger what I want, but you and I both know that—”

“She cut him off with her best attempt at a steady tone. “Shut up.”

Bracing her hands on her thighs, she pushed herself off of him. The forlorn look that settled over his features made her hate herself just a little, even as she fought the urge to slap him for his thickheadedness. He actually thought she was leaving. God, what a mindfuck. Rising to her feet, she hastily popped her own fly, hooked her thumbs around the waist of her khakis and through the thin lacy straps of her why-yes-I-did-subconsciously-imagine-I-might-have-sex-tonight panties, and divested herself of both in one swift motion.

“Let’s get something straight.” She punctuated her return to the cot with a decisive squeak of the springs as her knees hit the flimsy mattress. “This isn’t about pity, or me using you to work out my own issues, or even the fact that the world will probably be ending in six hours. If you don’t want to do this, then, please, stop me right now.”

Hands on his shoulders, she came down to hover just above him, the tip of his still-erect cock poised against her body. Her eyes locked onto his, asking him, silently, to refuse her.

He blinked at her, expression melting back into perplexed curiosity, but no refusal came.

Buffy decided that was as close as she was going to get to an invitation. With a soft grunt, she impaled herself on his length, her pubic bone impacting his as she felt the dull stab of his cock deep in her belly. She wasn’t as ready as she could have been, but that hardly seemed important at the moment.

“Fuck.” His head hit the wall with a soft thud.

Complete silence followed.

Buffy vaguely realized that she wasn’t breathing. She figured it was just as well, because breathing didn’t really feel like the appropriate thing to do right now. The stillness was perfect. Whole and all-encompassing. Maybe if she stayed just like this, dawn would never come.

She stared at Spike. He was beautiful, just then, like some wonderfully profane sculpture of a saint in deep rapture. He wasn’t breathing either, though of course this was a rather more natural state for him. His head rested against the wall at an odd upward angle, his eyes shut and his mouth slightly open. If she didn’t know better she’d have thought he was actually dead. Erotic asphyxiation, no props required.

Unfortunately, she was currently far more likely to fall prey to said condition than he—a deep gasping breath tore through her, filling her lungs with much needed oxygen, and the world went into
a tailspin. It was like she’d come up for air after being underwater for a bit too long. The room floated around her in a flurry of dull color.

Spike’s eyes snapped open, his hands automatically coming around to circle her waist.

“Bloody hell, Slayer.”

Her forehead fell against his. The coolness of his skin was a welcome balm for her feverish headrush. He didn’t say anything else—just held her—and Buffy melted into the security of his embrace. She wasn’t sure how long they’d remained like that—hours and seconds seemed like equally likely estimates. Little by little, the basement began to fall back into place around her, colors and shapes settling like the tiny plastic bits of white in one of those cheap snow globes.

Spike’s hand was stroking her hair. Spike’s nose barely brushed hers. The tip of Spike’s cock was nudging her cervix. Little fragments of Spike surrounded her, inside and out, and she found herself suspended in an ephemeral matrix of firm muscle, tobacco-scented cotton, and cool flesh. The dizzying lightness in her head had trickled down her spine to pool in the warm pit of her pelvis.

She found that her body’s natural impulse to move was quickly overpowering her mind’s attempts to grasp at the crystalline stillness of that first breathless moment. When Spike’s fingers descended to trace the curve of her thigh, the last bit of motionless tranquility fell away. Buffy dropped a light kiss onto his mouth before pulling away to press her hands into his shoulders. Eyes fixed on his unreadable expression—odd, really, because she’d always been able to tell exactly what he was thinking when they had sex, even when she hadn’t wanted to, which was pretty much all the time—she raised her hips to glide up his length until he threatened to slip from her, paused momentarily, then sank back down with a satisfied exhale.

They fell into an erratic rhythm, clumsy and hurried, mouths searching and hands grasping—hard then soft, slow then fast—in a desperate meeting of two bodies that had gone far too many months without intimate contact.

Neither lasted long. All too soon, Buffy felt everything within her tighten and contract as she buried her head in Spike’s shoulder. Her fingers clawed at the fabric of his t-shirt, bunching it into tight fists, as her brain looped around a single command: keep moving. A downward motion slammed her clit against his pelvic ridge and the contraction splintered into a thousand tiny spasms. A moment later, she felt him pulse and explode inside her, silent except for a low groan deep in his throat.

She rode out the residual twinges of her orgasm, face still resting against his collar bone. Somehow, she couldn’t quite bring herself to look at him. Not yet.

He’d been uncharacteristically quiet—the absence of his ever-flowing stream of expletives and endearments had left her parched for reassurance—and she wondered again if she’d misread him somehow.

“Spike?” she finally mumbled into the soft cotton.

“Yeah, love?” his hoarse whisper returned uncertainly.

“What just happened?”

His chest contracted against hers in a truncated chuckle. “Do you fancy a diagram?”

She let out her own amused snort. “I guess I pretty much handed you that one.”

His hands were still holding her hips against his, fingertips pressing into skin she was sure must be
showing signs of bruising by now. “Let’s start with, not the most commendable demonstration of my manly vigor,” he spoke ruefully into her hair, “and I’ll leave the rest for you to suss out.”

“I meant what I said, you know. This isn’t like last year. I—I want to be here right now.” She emphasized this last point by finally raising her head to look at him. It was suddenly deathly important that he understood—although, what it was, exactly, that she needed him to understand was a little beyond her at the moment. “I want to be with you,” she added earnestly, hoping that somehow it would all make sense to him.

He gazed at her thoughtfully, then nodded as if having arrived at some secret conclusion. “Right, then.”

She waited, expecting him to say something else, but an odd silence was all that followed. “That’s it?” she prodded expectantly.

His expression softened. “No, of course that’s not bleedin’ it. You know better than that—or, leastways, I hope you do—and I know I’m being a right pillock, acting the way I am. This isn’t how I imagined it happening between us, the times I was crazy enough to let myself imagine it at all. Not on a bloody cot in the bloody basement with the mini-Slayer brigade having a pre-apocalypse slumber party upstairs and imminent death peering over our shoulders.” He ducked his head to avoid her searching gaze. “I owe you better than that.”

Buffy dipped her chin, trying to recapture his eyes. “You don’t owe me anything, Spike. Not after everything. Not tonight. We’ve got a handful of hours here—let’s not waste them.”

She picked up one of his hands, lacing her fingers through his. He was still inside her, his half-hard cock filling her just enough to be felt, and she realized with a flutter of amusement that they were both still fully dressed.

Well, aside from her lack of pants, anyway.

Spike gazed down at their entwined fingers. “And if we make it through tomorrow?”

Now there was a loaded question, if ever one existed. She couldn’t let herself think of it. Somehow, it seemed to her that to define the possibility, to reify its circumstances, would only negate it. The promise of a life after tomorrow—a life that had both of them in it—was best left as a luminous but indistinct beacon of hope.

She licked her lips. “Why don’t we focus on getting through tonight first?”

His grip on her hand slackened. She was losing him. Tightening her own fingers, Buffy pressed the back of his hand to her chest as she leaned in to drop a soft kiss on his bottom lip.

She took a deep breath, finding herself suddenly nervous. She was sure he must have felt her heart bursting through her ribcage—was it as loud to him as it was to her?—her lips slid to his ear. “Make love to me, Spike.”

She felt his jaw twitch against her cheek and a moment later he was kissing her and, just like that, everything dissolved into a blur of tiny moments all strung together like perfect little pearls.

It was better this time. Slow and deliberate, just as she’d thought it should be. Each new sensation was a pinprick in the hazy rapture that enfolded her: His hands kneading her naked breasts. The electrifying pinch of his teeth on her clit. The glorious sensation of him filling her as every swirl of his hips hit that perfect spot. The earthy taste of his cock at the back of her throat. The soft tickle of his eyelashes against her inner thigh.
It seemed that they’d fallen out of time once again—the hours wrapping around them as they moved together, now silent, now speaking of some inconsequential thing—it was enough for her to forget who they were and what was to come.

Finally, what seemed like centuries later, Spike lowered her head onto the pillow as he came to rest on top of her. Something stabbed at her shoulder. Raising herself up to kiss him, she crooked her arm to fish underneath the corner of the pillow and her fingers wrapped around the smooth crystal surface of the amulet.

She broke away to regard the unwelcome reminder.

“I reckon it’s just in time,” Spike murmured gently, turning his head toward her hand. “It’ll be sunrise in less than an hour.”

Buffy carefully lowered her discovery to the floor below. A desperate longing flooded her. There wasn’t enough time.

He must have read her mind because when his eyes returned to hers, they seemed to reflect her mournful desire. “This is it, Buffy. It’s right now. Us, here, together. This is what matters, sod what happens in that cave.” He had resumed pumping into her. Slow, smooth strokes that made her want to close her eyes and melt into him. “I love you,” he breathed. “I need you to know that.”

And, all of a sudden, she was astounded to find the words on the tip of her own tongue. *I love you.* Did she really? She supposed that she had for a while now. Still, the acknowledgement was brand new. She’d spent so much time pushing that looming reality to the back of her mind—denying it to her friends, to Angel, to herself—that her readiness to reveal it to him now came as a complete surprise.

She opened her mouth to speak, a slow smile spreading across her features. Then, paused.

She couldn’t do it. Not when they were hours away from probable death. He was wrong—right now wasn’t enough—not for her. No, she’d tell him after, because part of her yearned to hold on to the faith that there would be an after. Saying it now would only serve as an admission of the inevitability of their deaths and, despite herself, Buffy wanted to believe.

Does it have to mean anything?

Not right now.

Maybe when… maybe after—

So, she smiled at him and bit her tongue, traitorous tears burning her as she kissed away the unbidden disappointment that crept into his eyes. She couldn’t tell him—wouldn’t even think of it—because maybe, just maybe, after would come.

Feeling the sweet tension humming through her body, Buffy met his gaze, willing him to understand what she needed to do. Willing herself to save her heart for a time that was better suited. And yet, as her climax overtook her, the frenzied tattoo of her heart resonated through her mind as a sole undifferentiated truth—she loved him so very much.

***

*Just south of the Sunnydale crater, August 27, 2004.*

Thump. Thump. Thump. Buffy’s temple rested against the glass of the passenger’s seat window as
the car careened down Highway 101. With each mile, the frantic beat within her chest grew more desperate.

She didn’t know what they would find. Apparently, the highway had been rerouted around the gaping chasm that Sunnydale had left in its stead. A few more miles and they would have to turn off the well-paved road and travel the remaining distance along the cracked old pavement that dead-ended at the place she had stood a year ago, gazing at everything she was about to leave behind.

She looked over to see Giles clutching the steering wheel with an illegible expression darkening his face. The last few days had been a blur. She had shared only bits and pieces of her time spent in the nineteenth century. Yet, they had all taken her at her word when she said they needed to return to Sunnydale immediately. Because… well, because Spike.

She didn’t know how to explain any further, in no small part because she didn’t really know herself. But, my child, the Great Mother had said. The Champion cannot die. What did that mean? Had they just left him there? Had they left him in the ground like they had left her?

She’d bled the day she returned from the past. Her math had been right, then—no trace remained of that night she’d spent with William. She was grateful, of course. Not least because her body had somehow perfectly timed itself to avoid any adventures in Victorian menstrual management. And in the larger sense, too. It was one less complication. But it was also a door closed—on William—on the idea that there could be something so basic and human at stake between her and Spike.

The climb down was an arduous one. As had the hike back to where the school had once stood. No one had been sure what the expedition would involve but it seemed certain that digging would become necessary. Xander knew some guys. The construction company had relocated up the coast to Santa Maria, which had experienced a predictable boom in population—both human and otherwise, she’d heard—after the Sunnydale disaster. But the men had been in Sunnydale long enough to know not to ask too many questions.

When they finally reached the ruins resting atop the Hellmouth, she’d half expected to see him sitting there, just waiting for her with that smirk on his face. Took you long enough, pet. But the rubble lay empty. Digging down to the seal seemed like the only reasonable game plan. With only a couple of jackhammers and a lot of heavy lifting, it took days. Buffy suspected that old camaraderie was not the sole thing keeping the construction guys there—their labor, backbreaking and seemingly aimless as it was, couldn’t have come cheap. As time dragged on under the hot sun, she became increasingly nervous. Did the others believe her? Were they humoring her, hoping that somehow this pointless project might finally bring her closure? Did she even believe herself?

On the fifth day, they finally reached what remained of the cavern. The Hellmouth had essentially closed in on itself but, with the rubble of the school building somewhat cleared, she began to recognize the familiar contours of that ledge where they had made their final stand.

On the morning of the seventh day, she stood at the center of the small cleared space. It was no longer obvious how to proceed and the others loafed uncertainly on the periphery. They had found nothing. What were they supposed to find, anyway?

Buffy plopped down onto the rock-strewn ground. The absurdity of the situation had suddenly descended upon her in full force. Her head was pounding and tears welled up, unbidden.

Willow squatted down next to her. Buffy hadn’t even heard her approach. “Buffy…” she began tentatively. “I’m not saying we should give up but… well—”

“We should give up, Will.” The words sounded surprisingly steady. “I thought—I don’t know what I
thought. I didn’t think. I really wanted to believe that we’d find… something. I’m not even sure what that something is supposed to be. The thing is—I still believe that. I just feel it.” She looked over at her friend with desperation. “That’s insane, right? Tell me it’s insane.”

Willow sighed, sinking into her heels to adjust her awkward squat. “I don’t know, Buffy. I really don’t know.” She looked out over the piles of cracked stone, concrete, and metal. “You know, when Tara died, before I went all vengeance-crazed and vein—I just couldn’t accept it. I held her in my arms. She was dead. It was obvious she was dead. But everything in me insisted otherwise. It just wasn’t possible—”

“But this isn’t like that, you know?” Buffy chewed at her lip. “I’m sorry, Will. I know what you’re saying. Maybe that’s all I’m doing here—just refusing to accept it. I mean, any of this dust could be him, you know? How would I even tell?”

Tears etched patterns down her sunburnt cheeks. She’d seen him start to burn, after all. What had she possibly been expecting? There was no body to find, dead or alive. Nothing but dust.

Willow rested a hand on Buffy’s shoulder as Giles made his way over to stand beside them.

“Buffy…” he began, echoing Willow’s plaintive approach.

She wished they wouldn’t act like she might break at any moment. Except maybe she was about to. Buffy looked up at him, hating the pity in his eyes.

“Tell me what to do, Giles.”

He made a faltering movement towards her, then appeared to think better of it. “Buffy, I know this is not what you want to hear—perhaps we should be looking for alternative ways to understand what the Guardian said to you—”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. “What, like, ‘he’ll always be alive in your heart?’ That can’t be it, Giles. There has to be something to this. I need this not to be for nothing.”

He shifted his weight. “From everything you’ve told me, Buffy, it seems unlikely that we’ll find a discernable trace of Spike here. You may not believe me, but I do wish it were otherwise. There is, however, something that we have a much higher likelihood of being able to recover.”

Buffy looked over at Willow, who seemed far more collected than she’d been just moments ago. They’d talked about this. Without her.

“Why are we all really here, Will?” Buffy asked without inflection. “It’s not because you guys think my wacky goose chase is a good idea—”

“It’s not that we didn’t believe you. We didn’t know what we’d find when we got here,” Willow hastened to explain. “But, Buffy. The amulet—it’s gotta still be here somewhere. Damaged, maybe, but still. If we found whatever’s left of it maybe we could use it. Maybe it would tell us something.”

Buffy gazed at the ground silently. The hot sun was beating down on her, making her eyes water. Or was that something else? Of course, it made sense. The amulet was in the dream that had started all this—but that felt like ages ago. Spike was in the dream, too. Spike was in all her dreams. For a wild week she had allowed herself to believe that meant something.

It was time to return to reason. “It’s okay, Will. Giles. I get it,” she finally said, collecting what was left of her splintered emotions. “You’re right.”
They looked relieved. She didn’t blame them.

“How do we find it, Will?” she continued, her voice taking on a steely resolve. Something good had to come out of this. Something useful. “Is there a spell—or—?”

“We’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way, I think,” Willow replied. “To do a locator spell, I’d need to know what I was locating, and I never got a very good read on the amulet.”

She looked to Giles, expectantly, like she was hoping he’d pick up the slack on something.

Giles sighed. “Do you remember where, Buffy?” Buffy looked at him, not quite comprehending and he continued reluctantly. “Where he was, when—”

Buffy closed her eyes. Of course she did. Buffy rose and walked across the dusty space. They had found the remnants of the seal and the narrow path that had taken them onto the ledge. She looked across the piled up stone. There—at the entrance into the main cavern. She walked over to the spot and closed her eyes, remembering.

“Here,” she finally said. “I think he stood here.”

***

Buffy twisted the knob forcefully and pushed the door open, hearing the lock snap. She was certain neither Giles nor Xander would be thrilled about her mode of entry but, under the circumstances, she felt they might forgive the damage. Or at least write it off as an after effect of her dealing with the revelations of the last few weeks.

It had taken them another day of clearing and then carefully sifting through the rubble, but they found it. Even covered in dust, the gleam of the stone was unmistakable. Impossibly, it appeared to be completely undamaged. And so, in possession of their prize, they had returned to Bath. Buffy had been mostly silent since those moments in the pit. No one seemed inclined to challenge her on it, either. The group had apparently reached an unspoken consensus that, under the circumstances, a second period of mourning was unavoidable.

Unfortunately, since their arrival the day before, they had gotten no closer to learning any useful information about the amulet. Giles continued to insist that contacting Angel’s team should be treated as a last resort. Buffy had shared with them all the Great Mother’s insistence that it was some mythical “soul stone.” When she had pressed the woman further as the monks were preparing for the time conduit spell, she had managed to extract little that went beyond what Angel had told her when he handed her the thing last year. Old, dangerous in the wrong hands, and jam-packed with purifying power. The Mother’s assertion that the stone could not kill was based upon this reputation. Fire was the great purifier, after all—if it had happened to set Spike on fire then that was the most obvious explanation. The name, vague as it was, did not give them much to go on in terms of research. Willow had held the thing in her hands, shrugged, and suggested that perhaps they could try a couple of experimental spells. Buffy had categorically refused to so much as look at it.

That is, until she had woken up an hour ago with the inexplicable knowledge that this was exactly what she needed to do. It wasn’t a dream or a rational thought—more like a feeling deep in her bones. Sleeping seemed out of the question. So, here she was, breaking into Giles’ office in the middle of the night.

Walking through the dark room, she wondered again what it was that she was doing. Maybe this really was just about closure. She pulled open the drawer where Giles had deposited the thing only hours ago, snapping yet another lock in the process, and reached for the gem. It glimmered in the
moonlight. Suddenly, she paused. Her fingers hovered millimeters above the stone’s smooth surface.

This was silly. Slayer-dreams aside, there was no reason to expect anything to happen here. Her index finger closed the gap.

Light! So much light. Buffy gasped as all those sensations she’d felt so acutely in her dream suddenly came flooding back—the bliss and the clarity and the peace—and then, just like that, it was over. She squinted her eyes, trying to readjust to the renewed darkness of the room.

“Buffy—?”

Her heart stopped. She’d know that voice anywhere. Pulling her hand away from the amulet, she whirled around to find him standing behind her.

“Spike—”
“Buffy,” he gasped again. “How did—where are we? The Hellmouth—”

“It’s gone.” She said absently, like she was reporting the weather. She couldn’t move. Was she seeing things? Her eyes scanned the room. She was still in Giles’ study. Everything was just as it had been, so it didn’t appear that any more time travel had taken place. Her gaze snapped back to the black-clad figure before her. “Spike—you’re—are you?—”

He looked just as he had when she’s left him in that cave. Even his posture seemed the same, legs slightly splayed as he stood with his arms at his sides. Except he wasn’t on fire. She stepped to reach her hand towards him.

“All real?” He just stared. Taking another step, she made to place her hand on his chest—

—and hit thin air. Buffy pulled back with a gasp. Spike’s face shifted into a shroud of confusion and he looked down at himself. Reaching for her hand, his fingers went to wrap around hers, but this too proved unsuccessful. It had been a while since Buffy had seen a ghost, but a familiar prickle crept over her skin.

“What the bloody hell is this?” Spike growled.

Buffy’s jaw tightened. “Don’t you dare wear his face,” she ground out. She’d known they couldn’t have been done with the First, but this was too much.

“Whose face!?” Spike exclaimed. “Listen, you evil bugger, I don’t know what kind of hell dimension you’ve sucked me into, but I’m done listening to your nonsense. I’m not your personal puppet show so just go on and take your incorporeal arse to pester someone else for all eternity.”

“My incorporeal ass? What are you even talking about?” Buffy was tired, she was confused, and above all she was pissed off. After everything, all she got out of that damn amulet was the First popping up to play its mind games again? “I know what your end game is—” she continued but, just then, the words stuck in her throat.

A low rumble shook the room, growing stronger and louder as it reverberated through the walls. Wood creaked all around her as Buffy steadied herself against the heavy desk. A heavy painting came crashing to the floor behind her and she instinctively stumbled towards the doorway. If a lifetime in California had taught her anything, it was earthquake preparedness.

Gradually the trembling subsided. She braced herself for an aftershock but it never came. Casting a quick glance around her she set a brisk pace for the main hall of the building. Doors were opening and shutting in the dormitory section above.

“What the hell is going on!?” The thing that wore Spike’s face trailed after her. She ignored it.

Looking up, she saw Willow and Kennedy appear at the top of the main staircase. If they looked shaken it was nothing compared to the expression that overtook their faces at the first glimpse of Spike

“Spike!” Willow yelped.

“The First,” Buffy answered coldly.

“Spike?!” Xander’s voice echoed from the other end of the hall.

“No, not Spike,” Buffy repeated forcefully.

“What do you mean, not Spike?” Spike yelled.

“It’s the First, Xand,” Willow explained, hurriedly descending the stairs.

“Wait, you think I’m the First!? She’s the First!” Spike pointed to Buffy with bewilderment.

“Oh good Lord,” Buffy bristled. “Really? That’s the tactic? This is just lame!”

“She’s the one that’s all not solid!” Spike argued.

Having finally reached Buffy, Xander poked her shoulder. “I don’t know buddy, she seems pretty solid to me. I knew you were solid, Buffy,” he added quickly, inclining his head in her direction.

“Well then you’re all the First!” Spike yelled. “Bloody hell!”

“Bloody hell!” Giles echoed as he hurried down the stairs with Dawn and a few young Slayers in tow.

“The First,” Buffy, Xander, and Willow intoned as one.

“Not the motherfucking First, goddamn it!” raged Spike, raising his hand to pound on the banister but stumbling as his arm passed directly through the thick wood. He looked genuinely flummoxed.

“What the everliving fuck is going on!?”

“You guys,” Dawn piped in, eyeing him skeptically. “He seems kind of flailey to be the First. Also, what’s up with the earthquake? Does England normally have earthquakes?”

“Not as a rule,” Giles answered tersely. A small crowd of groggy residents was quickly gathering around them. “Everybody, go back to bed,” he waved them off. “There appears to be no danger at present. Go on! The rest of you,” he turned towards Buffy and the others, “come with me.”

Sweeping down the hall towards his study, Giles eyed the open door with mild surprise before ushering everyone inside. He threw the door closed only to jump back with a surprised yelp as Spike barreled directly through the wood.

“Jesus!” Dawn squeaked.

“Would someone please tell me where we are and why I’m suddenly not solid?!” Spike demanded.

The group eyed him with apprehension. Eventually, Giles spoke. “Buffy?”

Buffy shuffled her feet. “I don’t know, Giles. I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about my dream from when this all started and what the Guardian said and how none of it made sense, so I came here to look at the amulet. I don’t know why. It just felt like the thing to do. I touched it and suddenly there was this light, and there was… that,” she said motioning at the figure of Spike. “And then things got all quakey, and now here we all are. Sorry about your locks.”

Giles reached to pick up the amulet from the still open desk drawer. “You touched the amulet, and then there was a—a light, you say?”
The thing looked as ordinary as ever, gaudiness aside. “Yeah,” Buffy answered carefully. “Like a flash. Sort of like what happened in my dream, but—I don’t know—quicker?”

Giles offered the gem to her tentatively. She reached to take it into her hand. Nothing happened. It felt cold and heavy in her grasp.

“I don’t know—” she said with resignation, toying with the metal setting.

“Do we think the flashiness and the earthquake are related somehow?” Willow offered. “You said one happened right after the other, right Buffy? I mean—is there a chance you, I don’t know, activated something?”

“Like an earthquake?” Kennedy finally pitched in. She was shuffling her feet impatiently.

Buffy thought. Suddenly it came to her. “The earth will tremble, and it will begin,” she mumbled slowly.

The others looked at her, not comprehending.

“The earth will tremble, and it will begin,” she repeated. “You said that to me, Will. In the dream. Well, not you you, I guess. Guardian you. Right before showing me the pit full of hibernating demons.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound encouraging,” Xander mused.

“You know what’s not bloody encouraging?” Everyone swiveled to look at Spike, who had taken to jabbing his finger through the wall. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, but could we please take a second to address the fact that I’m Casper?”

The group regarded him with suspicion. He’d been so uncharacteristically quiet that they had almost forgotten he was there.

Finally, Willow leaned over and muttered to Giles. “Do we have a way of telling if he’s actually the First? Do you think it’s safe to try to get a read on him?”

Giles leaned back against his desk thoughtfully.

“Err… Spike,” he said finally. “Can you tell us how you came to be here?”

Spike started with a frustrated huff, but apparently thought better of it. “I don’t bloody well know, do I?” he answered, the resignation clear in his voice. “Where is here, exactly?”

Giles eyed him skeptically. “Bath,” he said after a moment, giving little away. “We’re in Bath.”

Spike looked utterly lost. “Bath… England?”

Giles only nodded.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Willow asked, her tone slightly softer now.

“The cave…” Spike broke off. “I was—the amulet—Buffy?—” His eyes found her. Buffy was looking at him intently, her eyes guarded.

“The cave in Sunnydale?” Willow pressed.

“Yeah,” Spike shook his head, his gaze traveling back to the witch. “With the lot of you—”
“And then?”

“And then—” he shuddered lightly. His eyes jumped back to Buffy just for a moment. “Did I— did we win?”

“Yeah, mostly,” Willow replied carefully. “So, you’re saying that the last thing you remember before this is the Hellmouth? That’s it?”

Spike shifted uncomfortably. “I—I don’t know. I remember burning.” He shuddered again, more perceptibly this time. “Then—I was… somewhere. It’s not really the kind of thing you describe, I recon. ‘Somewhere’ isn’t even the right word for it. But then—here.”

Xander approached him cautiously. “So you’re, what? A vampire ghost? Is that a thing?” He asked, jabbing his finger at Spike’s chest several times and watching as it apparently disappeared into the surface of Spike’s t-shirt.

“Will you bloody quit that?” Spike stumbled back, affronted. He appeared to concentrate momentarily and his features shifted. “Looks like I’m a right prodigy after all. A vampire ghost with a soul—anything you can make of that, Watcher?”

Giles furrowed his brow. “Curious,” was his only reply as he rubbed intently at his temples.

The rest of the group had barely moved since Spike had reasserted his presence. No one seemed to know exactly what to do. Buffy still stood at the far corner of the room, her gaze on him intense but illegible.

Finally, Willow took a deep breath and moved from Kennedy’s side to stand directly in front of Spike. She closed her eyes and, slowly raising her hands, traced them just outside the space that would have been occupied by his body.

Moments ticked by and the only audible sound was the occasional nervous movement from the observers on the periphery.

“He’s not the First,” Willow finally said quietly but conclusively, blinking her eyes open. “Beyond that— I don’t know.”

More silence.

“Are you sure?” Buffy finally spoke, her voice barely audible.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Willow replied. “The energy patterns are totally different. But this—I’m not sure how to even begin to describe what’s going on here. He’s not a ghost either. Ectoplasm, the stuff ghost bodies are technically made of, is sort of the inverse of electromagnetic energy. The way that it reacts with electromagnetism allows ghosts to become visible but it also draws in heat. That’s why you get that rush of cold when a ghost passes through you.” She looked around to faces showing only mild levels of comprehension. Giles was grinding his jaw thoughtfully. She continued. “Anyway, what’s going on with Spike is almost the opposite. It’s like he’s emitting energy. You can actually feel it, no magic required. It’s like heat. The closest thing I can compare it to is—I don’t know—ether, maybe?”

Spike rubbed his neck impatiently. “So how do we fix me? Not that I don’t fancy being all special, but—”

Willow shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m not sure this is really a ‘fixing it’ kind of situation. There’s got to be some reason why you’re like this— I’m sorry, Spike,” she looked at him ruefully.
“My only guess is that it has something to do with the amulet. There’s a lot going on right now and I don’t think we have the resources to sort it all out. But we’ll try.”

Giles sighed. “I’ll call Wesley,” he said, his shoulders slumping. “I still don’t think that inviting the likes of Wolfram and Hart into this matter is the most desirable course of action, but we may have run out of other options. As there appears to be no imminent danger, I suggest that we adjourn while I see what I can find out.” He looked at the old clock on the wall. “It’s just after business hours in Los Angeles. Perhaps I will be able to catch him without too much unnecessary interference.”

Everyone shuffled around for a second before gradually filing out of the study. Dawn gave Spike a ponderous look as she passed him on her way to the door. She had not spoken since her initial evaluation of the situation and it appeared that she did not seem ready to change that for the time being. Buffy was the last to move. Never taking her eyes off of Spike, she crossed the room until he was all that remained between her and the exit. Spike looked at her and then at Giles and then at her again. Giles cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Giles, we’ll be in my room,” she finally said, her tone carefully measured, as she retreated a few steps to place the amulet she was still holding back onto the corner of this desk. “Please let me know what you find out when you’re done talking to Wesley.”

With that, she turned to give Spike one expectant glance before passing him to leave the room. Spike shuffled from one foot to the other, gave Giles a curt nod, then followed her out.

Neither spoke until they reached Buffy’s room at the end of the hall. Closing the door softly behind them, Buffy turned to look at Spike, her expression indecipherable as ever. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. Buffy perched herself on the corner of the bed. And so, each positioned at their own end of the sizeable room, they stared. First at each other, then at the floor, then at each other again. The silence hung heavy between them.

***

He felt the soul incinerating him from within, like a raging flame fed by the rays of the sun. Searing. Blazing. Scorching. Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forests of the night.

In the early days, he’d questioned whether there was really such a thing as a soul. It seemed to him that he should’ve been able to feel its absence—to sense that there was something missing, maybe—but he was right certain that he’d felt no different when he clawed his way through the damp earth than he’d felt as he kissed his mother goodbye two nights before.

He’d once posed the question to an ascetic he and Dru had picked up on their trek through Kashmir—a frail wisp of a man, he was, shriveled and nearly nude, but spoke the Queen’s English better than the bird herself—who’d told him a curious thing: vampires aren’t technically demons, you see, because demons have souls. But a vampire’s soul is but a shadow, he said, a phantom imprint that lends the body the appearance of sentience, like light bouncing around in a closed space, removed from the source. The vampire, then, is merely a placeholder, a cipher—neither human nor demon, alive nor dead—a creature who exists in a state of ultimate nonexistence, without true consciousness, without connection.

Spike asked the man if he was quite sure he’d find a better existence in death, advancing on him with fangs bared. The man said nothing more—didn’t tremble, didn’t even blink—only muttered some scrap of Sanskrit. Shivo’ham, sounded like. Then Spike ripped out his throat.

He’d asked Angelus once, too. After the curse. The poof glowered at him like he’d uttered some blasphemy. Of course, the damned soul was real. He’d felt the difference when he’d been turned—
felt the shackles come off, like he’d been freed from some great burden—there was no more love or hate or fear, only hunger and power. But then it was back, and he felt the thing squirming around in his chest, eating at his insides. So, yeah, it was fucking real, what of it?

He’d accepted it then, sort of like he’d accepted God before that, as a nebulous reality that you thought to be true because others said so. Still, he wondered if maybe there was something he’d missed. Even when he went searching for his soul, even when he asked the glowy-eyed bugger for it, he wasn’t quite sure whether he wasn’t asking for some fairy dust.

But his soul had returned, and he’d felt the crushing weight of a century of sins bearing down upon his shoulders like a damning cross. He understood Angelus, then. Understood the worming canker of guilt that ate at his mind, and the words of the renunciant came back to haunt him. He felt his existence and he wanted nothing more than to make it end.

Still, it wasn’t until that moment in the cave that he truly got what the bloke had been on about. There, he’d felt his soul in all its glory—felt it flow into the reality of all that was around him—there, he’d felt connected and whole.

I love you, she’d said. Stared at him with those big eyes, lips all atremble, and uttered the three little words he would have given his life a million times over to hear. But it came to him, in that instant, that it couldn’t be real. A trick of the light. A mirage. Only the blinding flash of his soul fooling them both. Maybe she even believed it herself—for that one moment, as the brilliance of the sun scorched away his sins to reveal everything that was best in him, perhaps she’d really thought she loved him—but he knew better.

Now she sat silently. Spike realized that she hadn’t spoken directly to him since she’d accused him of being the First. Maybe it was better that way. It seemed like anything she might say would only further prove that nothing of that moment remained between them. Hours ticked by. Or maybe it was minutes.

“Were you where I was?” she finally asked, her small voice cutting through the silence.

The question had caught him off guard. “Huh?” he stared at her lamely.

“When you—after the cave? Were you where I was? Before I came back—after the tower?”

He sighed raggedly. “I don’t recon so, pet.”

“Do you remember?”

He did. And he didn’t. “It’s like you said, yeah? Time didn’t really mean anything. It was like a flash and it was forever. But if what you got was heaven, this was—” His eyes darted to hers and then he dropped his gaze. “This must’ve been hell. Not in the traditional sense, mind you. No fire, no brimstone, none of that tripe they feed you in Sunday school. That would’ve been better. It was just—nothing.” She was looking at him, eyes wide, but he didn’t feel like she saw him at all. He tried again. For some reason it was important that she understood this. “All that stuff you said back in the day? About being—how was it you put it—finished, being whole—this was the opposite. I wasn’t me. I wasn’t anything. I was alone and I was empty. No hope. Just—nothing.”

“And then you were here?”

“And then I was here.”

“Spike, I—”
“’S’okay, Buffy. Really, it is. You don’t have to say anything. We won, right? We’re here—well, you lot are here, I’m—I don’t know what I am.

“We’ll fix it.”

There was that lip, quivering but determined. God, he loved her. That thought, and the flash of memory it ignited, was like a stake through the heart. Or like fire—fire consuming him from within. He gazed down at his hand where, moments and an eternity ago, flames had licked at their entwined fingers.

“Spike—” Bugger. It was like she knew what he’d been thinking. It was the most naked he’d ever felt.

There was a knock on the door. Buffy shook herself and pulled her sweater tighter around herself. “Come in—”

The door opened softly to reveal Giles’ cautious face. He peered around the corner of the door jamb, as though not knowing what he’d find, and then entered tentatively before closing the door behind him.

“I spoke to Wesley,” he began, his voice tired and resigned. “They’re coming. First flight out in the morning.”

“Who’s coming?” Buffy asked, not comprehending.

“All of them, it would seem,” Giles shrugged. “Wesley, Fred, Angel, Sirk, some woman named Eve. The whole bloody firm.”

Buffy grunted noncommittally. She didn’t appear much more pleased than Giles at this bit of news, though Spike wouldn’t have been equipped to say as to why. Last he saw, she’d been rather fond of old Angelus.

Giles wearily rubbed his eyes behind his glasses and motioned towards the window, where the first rays of morning sunlight were starting to peek over the horizon. “I recommend that we all try to catch a few more hours of sleep. No doubt the next few days won’t provide much opportunity for rest.”

Buffy nodded. “Thanks, Giles. I know you weren’t excited to call them. I get why. I hope it’s the right move.”

“As do I,” he gave her a wistful glance, as though there was more he would have liked to say. “As do I.”

With that Giles excused himself and left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Buffy rose to adjust the curtains against the invading sunlight. Spike was just contemplating the least awkward way to leave the room when a flash of light caught him. He jumped instinctively, then paused. Lowering his hand from where he’d raised it to shield his face against the stray beam of sunlight, he examined it thoughtfully.

“Spike—” Buffy, who had spun around at the commotion, was gazing at him with openfaced wonder.

Spike held his hand in the sunlight, watching as the rays illuminated the pale surface of his skin. “Well, would you look at that—” he whispered. Crossing the room, he peered through the open curtains and closed his eyes against the intensity of the light.
Buffy stood beside him, speechless. She raised her hand to his illuminated face. Any moment now, he was sure he would feel her fingers against his cheek. But the contact never came. She drew her hand away, disappointment coloring her features.

“Ain’t nothing in this world for free,” he said solemnly, stepping away from the window. “I’ll let you get some sleep, pet.”

“Stay—” she blurted suddenly, reaching her hand towards him even as she must have realized the uselessness of the gesture.

“I’m no use to you like this.”

She almost looked hurt. “Just stay. Please.”

He sighed. How could he possibly refuse her? Plus, it wasn’t as though he had anywhere else to go. He walked over to the bed. And then walked directly into it, stopping at the center. Well, that was out. He looked at her miserably.

“I guess I’ll just cop a squat on the floor then. Will have to ask Red about the metaphysics but, as experience would have it, that seems to be the only surface that’s still a surface.” He extricated himself from within the bed and sat on the floor, wrapping his arms around his shins.

Much to his surprise, she was suddenly kneeling beside him. “It’s okay. I don’t really like that bed anyway. Smells funny.”

There they were, then, reclined on the floor like two stargazers peering at the night sky. He wished that he could touch her. Hell, he wished that he could touch anything. He’d been ready for it to be over—certainly had not been wagering on ever seeing her again—and part of him wondered once more if any of this was real or if it wasn’t some more literal iteration of the lonely hell he’d found himself interned in.

“Spike—you’re really here, right?” she said so softly that he almost missed it.

“I think so,” he replied.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he registered that her breathing had evened out. She must have dozed off. It was just as well, he decided as he turned his head to gaze at her soft features. What more did they have to say to each other right now, really? Unbidden, his hand came up to trace the outline of her brow. He could almost feel her skin beneath his fingertips. Almost. Sighing, he folded his arms behind his head and glued his eyes back onto the blank ceiling. And he thought.

***

Buffy woke several hours later with a flash of panic. Had it all been a dream? She was on the floor of her bedroom but, when she turned her head to the side, to where Spike had laid down next to her, she did not find him there. Groaning at the ache in her neck, she pushed herself up.

She nearly jumped when she saw him by the window, the front half of his face totally immersed in the fabric of the curtain.

“Spike?” she called.

He did jump. Then turned to look at her sheepishly.

“Can’t open the bloody curtain,” he explained.
“Do you want me to open it for you?” She asked, not sure what else to offer.

“Nah. Just got bored of my own thoughts, is all. But you’re up now.”

Buffy stretched and yawned. The digital clock on the nightstand informed her that it was almost noon. “Yeah, I guess I am.” She looked at him for a moment. “So you’re still not solid?”

Spike waved his hand through the curtain in response. “Doesn’t seem that way.”

“You’re here though.”

“I guess I am,” he sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know this is weird. But we’ll figure it out.”

He shrugged at her. “Better than wherever I was, I reckon.”

Not knowing what else to say, Buffy hoisted herself off the floor and headed into the small bathroom to splash water on her face. Sticking a toothbrush into her mouth and twisting up her hair, she returned to the bedroom to set about ruffling through a drawer in search of more day-appropriate clothing.

“How long has it been?” he asked suddenly.

Buffy froze, a pair of jeans dangling limply in her hands. Of course. How could he know? She returned to the sink to spit out her toothpaste, grateful for the extra moment to collect herself. “A little over a year,” she said finally.

“Bloody hell,” he shook his head. “I mean, I figured it must’ve been a while since you lot had had time to move to Bath. But a year—”

Buffy walked over and sat on the bed. “It’s September now. 2004. We came here right after—well, you wouldn’t know, I guess. Sunnydale. It’s basically gone.”

Spike stared at her incredulously. “Gone?”

“Yeah, the whole town. It’s one big crater.”

He shook his head again, leaving his spot at the window to stand in front of her. “Well, shit. You all got out though?”

“Mostly,” Buffy nodded. “We lost a few of the girls—you saw that. And Anya. She didn’t make it.”


“I do know,” Buffy said.

“Everyone else, though?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “Most of the gang is here. Even Andrew. Faith and Wood are in Cleveland.”

“A year—” he repeated again, as though trying to wrap his head around it.

“Four hundred and seventy-six days.” Buffy said quietly. “Seventy-seven, today. But today doesn’t count, does it?” He looked at her with something like surprise now. She knew he understood the
“Spike, I—”

“It’s okay, Slayer,” he stopped her with a wave of his hand. “It’s a right long time. I didn’t reckon we’d just pick up where we left off. I know you wouldn’t have expected—you’ll have moved on—”

“Moved on?” Buffy stared at him incredulously. She rose from the bed abruptly and stepped towards him—then caught herself. What could she do? He stood not two feet in front of her but there was a distance between them that had nothing to do with proximity. Had nothing to do, even, with the fact that he wasn’t currently solid. He was looking at her with some unvoiced question in his eyes. Was she brave enough to put the answer into words? Buffy sighed. “We should check in with Giles and the others,” she said, picking up the jeans again. “See if there’s any update on when Angel and his team will get here.”

Spike only nodded, taking a few steps back. Buffy walked over to the closet and mindlessly pulled out the first shirt she saw. She scrunched the garments in her hands. “I, uhh—” she said. Spike looked at her uncomprehending. “I need to change.”

“Oh,” he said. Then— “Oh! Right, then. I’ll, err—” He made for the door.

“No,” Buffy said. “I mean, you don’t have to leave. I just—”

“No,” he protested, awkwardly. “I should go. I’m just not used to—” he eyed the door skeptically. “Well, here I go, then.” And he walked straight through the wood.

Buffy cursed under her breath, wriggled out of her sweats, and tugged on the new clothes. She opened the door moments later to find Spike standing there, self-consciously shuffling his feet.

“Didn’t want to scare anyone,” he clarified.

Buffy looked at him sympathetically. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go find Giles.”

They set off through the hall and down the stairs. When they got to the bottom, Buffy turned towards the dining hall. It wasn’t impossible that Giles would be there at this hour but, in any case, food was quickly becoming a necessity. Buffy was more than halfway across the main hall when she realized that Spike was no longer beside her. She turned around to see him standing some ten feet back, a look of supreme consternation on his face.

“You coming?” she called.

“I aim to,” he answered. “As soon as I figure out why I can’t bloody walk any further.”

Buffy looked at him, confusion coloring her own features. Spike made to step forward, but it was as though there was something that tethered him in place—like a rope that had been stretched to its limit. He successfully took a few steps back, then moved forward, only to be met with the same problem. He tried again and again, but to no avail. He looked at Buffy in utter misery.
Part III: The Fall of Hyperion

It was after midnight when Angel’s group arrived. The day had been spent investigating Spike’s condition, which, as it turned out, not only appeared to make him incorporeal but also limited his range of movement. Through trial and error, it was ascertained that Spike could not pass outside of a radius of roughly two hundred feet from a certain point. That point turned out to be Giles’ office. This choice of location left everyone generally flummoxed until Andrew, of all people, pointed out that perhaps it wasn’t Giles’ office that was special but, rather, the crucial artifact that currently rested there. Thus, by the evening, it was determined that Spike could move freely as long as someone accompanied him with the amulet at a distance of no more than one hundred and ninety-seven feet. Unsurprisingly, this revelation did nothing to improve Spike’s mood.

Everyone—everyone being, in this case, Buffy, Giles, Willow, Kennedy, Xander, Dawn, Andrew, and Spike—had recongregated in the study when one of the new Slayers appeared and breathlessly informed them that an expensive looking car had just pulled up to the building. Only the older girls were still up, since it had been determined early on that giving people who were functionally adults a bedtime was going a little too far. The younger girls had been shepherded off to bed a couple of hours ago but, with the buzz of excitement about the place making it feel even more like a summer camp than normal, Buffy strongly doubted that they were actually sleeping. Giles had held an assembly during the day, explaining the minimum necessary details concerning Spike’s identity and presence. The girls were also informed about the arrival of the LA team, and then sternly warned not to talk to any of them under any circumstances. Giles, of course, had never been one to fully understand the minds of teenage girls. As the group left Giles’ office to greet their guests in the main hall, Buffy thought she spotted a gaggle of pajamaed Slayers of various sizes peering around the corner at the top of the stairs.

She carried the amulet now, and Spike trailed alongside her. The rest of the group followed behind, leaving a healthy radius of space around Spike, due presumably to not wanting to accidentally walk through him. Having reached the main entrance, Buffy unlocked and pulled open the door to come face-to-face with Angel, who spearheaded the small group consisting of himself, Wesley, Fred, a stately looking man Buffy recognized as Rutherford Sirk, and another woman she did not know. He nodded and they filed in.

“Hi Angel,” Buffy said as he moved past her. She wasn’t really sure what kind of greeting felt most appropriate between them at this point. Especially not with Spike glowering over her shoulder.

When they were all inside, the two groups turned to face each other, like rival delegations. Fred had waved excitedly at Willow when she had thought no one was looking. Otherwise, though, warm camaraderie was in relatively short supply.

“You all know each other,” Angel motioned around him. “This is Eve,” he added gesturing at the fashionably dressed woman to his right. “She’s, uhh—she’s our liaison to the Senior Partners.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Buffy answered sourly.

“Why don’t we take this someplace—err—a little more private,” Giles suggested as he motioned them down one of the hallways. “There are some classrooms here that should be large enough.”

Buffy nodded and set off without another word. The others followed.

Spike, who had been eyeing Angel warily, finally nodded in his direction. “Angelus.”
“Spike,” Angel replied in acknowledgement. “I hear you did good.”

Spike shrugged. “Reward’s not all it’s cracked up to be though,” he flapped his spectral hand in the general space occupied by Angel’s shoulder as they fell in step alongside each other.

“So I’m told,” Angel responded ambiguously.

They had entered the first room in the hallway, which was outfitted in much the standard manner of a classroom, complete with blackboard, and multiple rows of desks and chairs. The two parties dispersed themselves around the room, with Buffy and Giles both coming to lean against the larger desk at the front.

Eve approached Spike, who had situated himself over at the left edge of the room. She reached out a hand and watched as it passed directly through his chest. “Fascinating,” she said softly.

Spike eyed her with distinct skepticism but did not say anything.

Giles cleared his throat. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” he was speaking primarily to Wesley now, who nodded in acknowledgement. “There’s much to discuss, but I suspect that the bulk of it is best left until tomorrow.”

“I know we left the details rather vague when we spoke on the phone, Giles,” Wesley said. “But you are welcome to take full advantage of our resources. I can get you admission to Wolfram and Hart’s London branch, though I’m afraid that none of the texts can be removed from their building. Someone will have to make the trip—”

“Quite right,” Giles nodded. “Perhaps we should plan to leave tomorrow. Willow, would you—”

Willow shook her head. “I think I’ll stay here, Giles. Maybe between my sciencey magic and Fred’s magicy science, we can figure out what’s going on with Spike. You should take Dawn, though.”

Dawn perked up at this suggestion and Giles inclined his head towards her in acquiescence.

“What is going on with Spike?” Angel asked. He clearly hadn’t meant to direct the question specifically to Buffy, but his eyes met hers nonetheless.

“I’m Casper, is what,” Spike answered. “That’s really the lot of it. That and I can’t seem to get more than fifty yards from that damn amulet.”

The LA group looked at him with interest, but it was Eve who spoke.

“So this is connected to the amulet,” she said. It wasn’t really a question so much as a statement. “You’re sure.”

“He popped up like this when I touched the stone. Your stone,” Buffy said leadingly. That wasn’t all of it, of course, but she figured there was no reason to supply this woman with more information than was strictly solicited. Angel and the old gang were a different matter, but she had little inclination to overshare with a direct representative of Wolfram and Hart. Not without getting something in return.

Eve seemed to understand as much.

“I see,” she said. “Well, I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of it. And it’s not our stone, by the way. We were simply—holding on to it. The firm has certain interests in such things, and it has quite the mythology behind it, you know.”
“So we’ve gathered,” Giles said, eyeing Eve suspiciously. “But enlighten us, please.”

Eve smirked. “Well, Mr. Sirk here is really the man to talk to about that. The Ancient Prophesies Wing is a special area of his.”

“Fine,” Buffy said. “Then tell us about something that I bet is a little closer to your area. What are Wolfram and Hart’s interests in all of this?”

Eve looked at her with something like surprise. “Well, I should think that’s obvious,” she replied plainly. “The amulet was meant to be worn by a Champion. Someone responsible for the fate of the world. I hope it’s not terribly surprising that the Senior Partners find the fate of the world to be of interest?”

Buffy drummed her fingers on the surface of the desk. “No, that’s not surprising. I’m just a little worried about what side of the apocalypse you all are rooting for.”

“I think at this stage, sides are rather beside the point, Ms. Summers.” It was Sirk who spoke now. “Our organization is more interested in identifying the key players. We had recruited your friend Angel due to his—err—history and reputation. But now it seems that we are faced with another person of interest.”

“And that would be me,” Spike said. He had been uncharacteristically quiet up to this point.

“Don’t get too excited,” Angel said. “They’ve been interested in me because of the whole vampire with a soul thing. Now that you have one too, well—”

“Not so special any more, are you?” Spike taunted, sounding like he was getting a little closer to being in his usual element now.

Angel ground his jaw. “Like I said, don’t get too excited.”

“Like hell,” Spike retorted. “So, what’s the deal?” He turned to Sirk. “There’s a lotta talk of interest here. Interest in what? What is it that made Angelus such a special boy?”

“Oh, nothing you’d be interested Spike,” Angel ground out before Sirk could reply. “Saving the world. Big quest for redemption. Some of us don’t think that a soul is a pickup line.”

Buffy found herself clenching her fists but resisted the urge to say anything. She’d been preparing herself for this all day. There was no imaginable world in which you could put Angel and Spike in the same room and not expect a certain amount of male posturing. Nor was she surprised to wind up at the implied center of this posturing.

Spike, of course, bristled. “Don’t see as I was talking to you, Angelus. And I wouldn’t look so righteous either, if I were you.” He ducked around Eve and approached Angel head on, now. The challenge clear in his posture. “They may not know the real you, but I do. You’ve never done a thing that didn’t have something in it for you. So what is it? It’s not just honor and absolution—that’s not your bag—”

Angel glowered at him. The tendon in his neck was the only perceptible motion in his whole body. But, behind Spike, Eve spoke again.

“Are you familiar with the Shanshu prophesy—”

“Sorry, the shan-who?” Buffy asked. She’d really had her fill of prophesies over the last month.
“Shanshu,” Eve continued calmly

Spike rounded on her. “Well, don’t hold out on us now, ducks.”

“The prophesy talks about a vampire with a soul who will play a pivotal role in the apocalypse,” Eve said.

“For good or for evil, anyone’s guess,” Angel interjected, his eyes still fixed on Spike. “Don’t forget that part.”

Spike ignored him, all attention focused on Eve. “So, I did that, yeah? Now what—”

Angel snorted behind him before Eve could reply. “You think you’re the only one that’s averted an apocalypse? Get in line, pal. Doesn’t work that way.”

Eve continued, unperturbed. “He’s technically right. Apocalypses aren’t that uncommon—but this is supposed to be different. The big one. For this age anyway. So, now that you’ve taken up the stone—yeah—the Senior Partners are paying attention.”

“Where is the stone?” Angel asked darkly, clearly not pleased with the progression of this conversation.

Buffy reached into her pocket. Extracting the amulet, she walked over to Angel and deposited it into his palm. Angel weighed it thoughtfully as Spike eyed him with open animosity now.

“Missed your chance, I reckon,” Spike said finally, feigning casualness, as though he were commenting on Angel having arrived late for the train. “Too bad the Slayer didn’t enjoy your company enough to ask you to stick around—”

In retrospect, she’d never quite understand why, but that was when Buffy snapped. Maybe it was the exhaustion. Maybe it was the nervous tension that had permeated the whole day. Maybe it was the fact that she had picked over that very decision in her mind until her whole head felt raw—sure that it had led not only to Spike’s unnecessary death but to their apparent failure to avert the apocalypse. Maybe it was just that damn smug look on his face. Angel had made to lunge in Spike’s direction, but she pressed a firm hand into his chest, rounding on Spike herself.

“Damn it, Spike,” she ground out. “Could you, literally just for one second, not act like this is some kind of pissing contest?” The others were eyeing her apprehensively, clearly not quite understanding the source of her emotions, but right now she didn’t care. “And you,” she pivoted to Angel again, her eyes pinning him. “You didn’t feel the need to tell me that this might all be part of some evil corporate plan before you handed me that damn thing?”

“We didn’t know,” Angel said uncomfortably, thumbing at the setting of the amulet. “Maybe I shouldn’t have trusted Lilah when she handed me the folder, but there was too much at stake. Plus, it was supposed to be me—”

“Like hell, it was supposed to be you—” Spike interjected, bristling again. “Says bloody who? Some prophesy? Well, guess what, you wanker—you’re not the only vampire with a soul anymore. And I earned mine—what did you do? Couldn’t keep your dick in your pants and your fangs in your face around some shaman’s precious daughter? Way I see it, that’s still my bauble you’re pawing—my bloody destiny—”

Buffy had had enough. She snatched the amulet from Angel’s hands, wheeling around to face Spike. He shrank back, not prepared for the mix of emotions coloring her face.
“You wanna talk destiny, Spike? You wanna be a big damn hero?” she yelled. “Here—have at it—” she chucked the stone at him and headed for the exit. “I can’t with either of you right now—”

“Ow!” Spike yelped behind her. Stunned silence followed. Buffy turned to see him rubbing his chest, his other hand clasped around the amulet. The amulet that by all accounts should have gone directly through him. “Ow—” Spike repeated thoughtfully, more out of confusion than pain.

Everyone else stared. He passed the amulet between his two hands, his eyes traveling to Buffy. She approached him cautiously, her anger suddenly extinguished as quickly as it had flared. Reaching out her hand, she gathered up the hanging chain, almost expecting to scoop the thing as if out of thin air. She gasped when her fingers impacted flesh. Hot flesh. Spike’s flesh. She stood frozen. Finally, her hands wrapped around his, the amulet still cradled inside. They remained like that, their eyes glued to one another’s as if seeing each other for the first time, until Angel cleared his throat rather more forcefully than necessary. Buffy released Spike’s hands hesitantly, as though afraid that he would disappear if she lost contact. Nothing seemed strictly impossible at this point. Something in his face indicated that he might have shared her concerns. She turned from him but remained close, their shoulders nearly touching.

“Well,” Giles said thoughtfully. “I can’t think of a better reason to conclude that the amulet is at the center of all this. I suggest that we make this matter a priority tomorrow, but it’s getting rather late. You are all welcome to stay here, of course—”

Angel waved his hand. “We’ve already made arrangements. We didn’t want to impose. We can head to London with you in the morning. I’ll leave the more practical stuff up to Fred—I don’t know what equipment she needs—”

“I think Willow and I will manage alright here for now,” Fred spoke for the first time, smiling at the other woman. “I’ve got some basic tools and I feel like we’ll need to iron out some of the theory before more equipment becomes relevant.”

“Fine,” Angel said. “We’ll sort the rest out tomorrow, then.” He headed for the door of the classroom. His eyes lingered on Spike and Buffy for just a moment. “We’ll leave you all to get some sleep.”

Eve and Sirk filed out of the room behind Angel. Fred hung back a bit to give Willow a quick hug and make plans for the morning, while Wesley stopped to shake Giles’ hand.

“I know you’re skeptical,” he said quietly to the older Watcher. “You’re right to be. We’re well aware that we’re sleeping with the enemy, I want you to know that.”

Giles only nodded. Wesley sighed and put a gentle hand on Fred’s elbow. She smiled at him warmly and inclined her head in Willow’s direction. “See you tomorrow.”

They left the room together, following the rest of their party in exiting the building. When the door had shut behind them, Giles took off his glasses and rubbed his bleary eyes.

“Well, I suspect that went about as well as it could have,” he said.

“Giles,” Buffy turned to him. “This moo-shu thing—”

“Shanshu,” Spike corrected her, and she looked at him with mild surprise.

“Fine, Shanshu,” she went on. “Do you know anything about this?”
Giles slumped a bit against the desk. “Not much, I’m afraid. It’s discussed in the Scrolls of Aberjian, I believe. An ancient collection of prophesies, spells, and the like. I haven’t seen the text myself—it was thought to have been lost centuries ago—Wesley has it. Well, I suppose Wolfram and Hart has it, now. As far as I understood, when I talked to him last year, it was one of the reasons he was willing to work with them. It came from their vaults, originally. He was hoping that with their resources, he might finally be able to make sense of all of it. There was a missing piece, if I’m not mistaken—”

“I see,” Buffy said. The wheels in her head were turning. “And it’s about a vampire with a soul and the apocalypse—a Champion—doesn’t that sound a whole lot like what we’ve been dealing with? That manuscript Dawn found? The notes I brought you?”

Giles rubbed the bridge of his nose. “It rather does, doesn’t it?” The previous two weeks had been such a blur that they hadn’t had much time to discuss the implications of the translation Buffy had supplied for the crumpled piece of parchment. “Shanshu—I believe Wesley said it was Bantu? It was the reason they’d become so interested in the text. He thinks it might mean that the vampire mentioned in the prophesy will—how was it that he’d put it—‘live until he dies.’ Live, being the operative meaning of the word.”

Buffy looked at Spike. He watched Giles silently, apparently mulling over what, if anything, this new information meant for him. Buffy wasn’t so sure herself.

“You should take a look at those notes, Giles,” she said finally. “There’s a lot in there about souls, and life, and death, and whatnot. If I’m remembering it right, anyway. Show Wesley, if you trust him—maybe he can make something of it. Just don’t bring it to Wolfram and Hart. Them, I definitely don’t trust.”

The Scooby Gang, herself and Giles excluded, had stood together, like a silent wall of support against the encroaching outsiders. Now they dispersed, mumbling goodnights as each tiredly shuffled towards their respective sleeping quarters. Spike stood there uncertainly. He had no sleeping quarters. In fact, he had no quarters of any kind.

Buffy glanced over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

There was that, then.

***

Buffy shut the door softly behind them, suddenly profoundly nervous. Taking a breath, she crossed the few feet that separated her from Spike. When she reached for him, it was tentative, unsure whether this was all just some fluke. Warm, solid cotton greeted her hand as it splayed across his chest. Beneath her palm, his heart was silent. It was bizarre on so many levels. She hadn’t bothered to turn on the lights and the soft moonlight shone on his hair, his skin, and the sloping lines of his body.

She looked at him silently. He looked back, his expression an odd mixture of hope and resignation. When her hands had unexpectedly grasped his downstairs in that classroom, it felt like the startling heat of his skin had melted something between the two them. As he’d looked at her then, she was sure that they understood each other. But when decorum had forced her to release him, the tenuous connection seemed to break. She ran her fingers down his abdomen as though reassuring herself again that he was all there. Then she kissed him. What else was there to do? Her hands wound through his hair, wrapping around the back of his skull, as she pulled his face towards hers.

He appeared surprised but recovered quickly. His arms enfolded her, and she pressed herself against
him with a desperation that she hadn’t known was still inside her. It had grown quieter and smaller over the passing months, but only because it had wound itself tightly like a spring. The moment her lips touched his, there was no coming back.

She felt tears on his face and was shocked to realize they were her own. Whatever reservations he’d appeared to have, whatever he’d been holding back since he appeared suddenly in Giles’ study, none of that seemed to matter now. For that, she was grateful. Slow as she’d been to accept that he was really back, she had had what seemed like an eternity to process what it might mean to see him again. He, on the other hand—she had no idea where he stood. Not after that night. Not after the cave. Not after wherever he’d been since then.

“Spike,” she relinquished his lips finally, burying her face in his shoulder as her arms held him so tightly she suspected it couldn’t be comfortable. “I didn’t think I’d ever be able to do this again.”

“I know, love,” his hand wound itself absentely through her hair. “I can’t say as I was counting on it myself.”

“No,” she shook her head. “You don’t understand. There’s just so much—so much that’s happened. So much I need to tell you—”

She broke off. What could she tell him? He wouldn’t remember—

“Hush now. Tell me later. I reckon the world’s in great peril, but that’s nothing new, is it now?” He muttered softly, still cradling her against him.

She tried to protest but thought better of it. Instead, she kissed him again, slowly and languidly this time. Sliding his coat from his shoulders she pulled him back onto the bed. The amulet fell heavily against her abdomen as Spike braced himself atop her. They both looked down. It was fitting somehow, that the unwieldy reminder of everything that had happened should be wedged uncomfortably between them at this moment. And that at the same time it should be the only thing that allowed them to be with one another now. Buffy thought that was a metaphor if there ever was one.

Spike chuckled self-consciously. “I suppose it would’ve been too much to ask for a stylish wristwatch instead.”

Buffy gave him a sympathetic smile. “I’m sure we can find a way to work around it.” Tugging on the chain, she pulled him in for another kiss.

His mouth was hot. She didn’t quite know what to make of that. But she supposed that, just now, it wasn’t the temperature of his body that she was interested in. She scooted further back onto the bed and came to stand on her knees. He seemed to hesitate a bit, but she reached for the chain again and gave it another tug, and so he crawled towards her until they were finally face to face.

She pulled at the hem of his shirt, careful to avoid the amulet as she drew it over his head. He was just like she remembered him, all pale flesh and sinewy muscle, like one of those classical sculptures. Her hands ran over the hard surface of his shoulders, his chest, his stomach. Hot. All hot. White marble baking in the sun. She looked up at him and found his eyes dark, almost glimmering. She still couldn’t quite believe that she was touching him. The feeling appeared to be mutual.

“Oh God—Spike—” Her voice almost broke.

His hand reached for her face and she leaned into the touch, nuzzling his palm. Taking it into her own hands, she kissed his fingers, his knuckles, the mound of his thumb. She looked at him again
and found those same dark eyes watching her from beneath heavy lids—like he was drunk with the feel of her. Moving slowly, as though through honey, he pulled her towards him—tugged her own shirt over her head, fingers reaching back to fumble with the clasp of her bra. He couldn’t quite get it, which was probably a first. She reached back to help him. He smiled diffidently as she shrugged out of the garment.

A guttural noise, something between a moan and a gasp, tore through her as his hands finally came up to cup her breasts. It seemed to break him out of whatever trance he’d been in because a moment later he was wrapped around her, arms firm, hands roving. Through some chaotic set of maneuvers both pairs of pants were eventually relegated to the floor. Spike’s lips meandered down her body. He paused at the puckered bit of skin just over her belly, tracing the unfamiliar scar with his finger.

“It all really happened, didn’t?” he asked softly.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “It did.”

He returned to his ministrations, his tongue flicking out as he planted a kiss on her hip bone and then made to move lower.

“No,” she breathed. “Come here.”

He appeared to hesitate again, but then obliged. A tug on his shoulder brought them face to face once more. Wrapping her leg around his waist, she drew his hips towards hers to feel the dull stab of his erection against her pelvis. The amulet pressed painfully into her ribcage but, in this moment, she didn’t care. Their eyes met, and he was inside her.

She drew his lips down to hers as he began to move. It was astounding that he was getting any leverage given how closely their bodies were pressed against one another. She pulled him closer still. In the circle of his arms, their bodies locked together in that steady rhythm, it felt like nothing else mattered. She kissed him for what must have been the thousandth time as something joyous blossomed in her chest.

He had that way of moving his hips. The utter perfection of it made her dizzy and she gasped for breath—he was like a furnace around her. A firestorm, swirling with heat. There were no words, only breath coming quick and shallow. His forehead fell to hers and her nails dug into the back of his neck. All too soon, she contracted and then she shattered. A deep moan just barely resonated in her throat before his mouth swallowed it. Somewhere deep inside her body, she felt him shudder, his dull teeth closing on her bottom lip. Then, his ragged exhale brushed her cheek as his body slowly began to relax.

She wasn’t sure where he found the strength or the coordination—her own extremities felt like wet putty—but he sat up and scooped her into his lap, never breaking contact. They sat there, wrapped in each other, for—she wasn’t sure how long. Eventually, her fingers found his, entwining as she pressed his hand against her breast.

“The world’s not ending, is it?” His voice came out raspy.

“Not right now,” she answered.

“Not tomorrow either?”

“No, probably not tomorrow.” He began to recline back but she squeezed his hand, pulling him towards her again. “Spike?”

“Yeah, pet.”
“I love you,” she said simply.

There was no point in building this moment up any further. Whether he believed her or not—whatever those words meant to him, coming from her—she had to tell him while the world wasn’t collapsing around them. She owed him that much. Owed him a second chance to take her seriously. Except that now she was afraid to meet his gaze, not knowing quite what she’d find.

His hand came to cradle her cheek. When she finally did look, what she found was complicated. He didn’t say anything, just kissed her again. Soft, probing. When he pulled away his eyes seemed distant.

“Twice or thrice had I loved thee, before I knew thy face or name—” he mumbled softly.


He blinked and was with her again. “Sorry, love,” he glanced at her sheepishly. “Just came to me. Did I ever tell you William was a sap for poetry?”

She could have laughed. “Ever write anything?”

The look he gave her was somewhat bewildered. “Nothing that wasn’t bloody awful,” he said finally, clearly hoping to have that be the end of the conversation.

She pressed a kiss to his temple before climbing off of him and stretching out alongside his already slumping body. Her eyes passed over the thin scar that wound its way around his left bicep. Had that always been there? It bothered her that she wasn’t sure. But it was so light—hardly noticeable if you didn’t know what you were looking for.

“Spike, how did you get this scar?” she asked, her head pillowed on her arm, gazing at him interestedly.

He looked down past his left shoulder, shrugged, then furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “You know, I don’t rightly remember. That’s an old one. Before I was turned, I think. Odd though—my human life wasn’t exactly a rowdy affair. You’d think it would stand out—”

He didn’t remember. How could he? Should she—could she—tell him? There was no timeline to disrupt now. Why couldn’t he know? And yet, somehow the enormity of it all—the complexity—felt beyond her powers to explain.

“It doesn’t matter,” she smiled. “I just couldn’t remember if I’d noticed it before—” A yawn overtook her. “Do you think we could migrate under the blankets? Your weird new body heat has its benefits, but these English nights do get chilly.”

He chuckled as he pushed himself up and crawled under the covers, holding the warm layer open for her. She followed him, suddenly struck by the ordinariness of this gesture.

“Thought you said it smelled funny?” Spike teased, wriggling to ensconce himself into the soft warmth of the bed and wincing as the amulet stabbed him in the process. He pulled the chain away from his body. “Wouldn’t it be a right proper end to all this if this bloody thing strangled me in the night?”

He paused, suddenly unsettled. Buffy, who had finally managed to worm her way underneath the covers, looked at him with light concern. He seemed to be concentrating on something very intently, a growing sense of consternation settling over his features.
“Spike? You okay?”

He took a deep and abrupt inhale, hand rising to clutch his chest. “I dunno—I—I think I need to breathe,” he mumbled hesitantly.

“What do you mean, ‘you think’? You’re not sure?”

“Well it’s been a while, yeah? And I mean—you know me—I’ve mostly kind of always done it. Just liked it, I guess. The smells, smoking, an’ all that. Not all vampires do. Angelus used to make fun of me for it,” he scowled at the memory. “But I never really needed to. Well, not for a long while anyhow. Dunno that I really remember what it’s like needing to.” He paused again, an intent expression on his face. Buffy imagined he might be trying to hold his breath. Finally, a gasping cough tore through his body. “Well—bugger me—”

Buffy crawled to lay her head against his chest. His skin felt warm—hot, even—beyond feverish. She listened intently. His diaphragm rose and fell somewhat erratically, clearly unaccustomed to operating out of necessity. Above it, however, there was only silence.

“But your heart—” she looked at him quizzically. “How weird—”

He reciprocated her gaze, clearly unnerved by this turn of events, then closed his eyes with a sigh. “No sense in fretting about it tonight, I suppose. Seems doubtful that you an’ I will suss this one out.”

He wrapped his arm around her almost reflexively as she nestled against his shoulder. Then his body tensed. “Buffy, what if I—in my sleep—what if I stop—”

She lifted her head, taking in his concerned expression, then understanding dawned and she giggled with involuntary relief. “What if you stop breathing?” Theoretically, this was all bizarre enough that it might have been a legitimate concern, but there was something so endearingly childlike about the worried look on this face. “I think if you really need to, then you won’t,” she replied reassuringly.

He seemed not entirely satisfied but, after a moment, shifted his head backwards with another resigned sigh and pulled her closer towards him. “I don’t bloody like this,” he mumbled.

It was all a bit too uncanny for comfort, she had to admit. But, laying there pressed against him, she was finding it difficult to complain. Her brain churned violently with the events of the past twenty-four hours. The past month. The past year. Eventually, the rise and fall of his chest beneath her ear evened out. She lifted her head to find him peacefully asleep, the light of what must have been a nearly full moon dancing on his sculpted features. Part of her wanted to wake him up just to tell him how beautiful he was. She gazed at him longingly, some fluttering thing suddenly fighting to escape from deep within her chest. He hadn’t said it back. Not really. What did that mean? Suddenly, his arm around her seemed like an empty reassurance. But there was no helping it now. He was here. That was all that mattered. He was here and mostly whole, contingent ghostliness aside.

She pressed herself against him, willing her unruly thoughts into silence. As she relaxed against the solid furnace of his body, the familiar smell of flowery detergent wafted into her nostrils. It suddenly occurred to her that he didn’t smell like anything. And so, stretched somewhere between elation and despair, Buffy slept.
Giles and Dawn left for London early the next morning. On the Wolfram and Hart side, Fred was the only one to stay behind. She and Willow camped out in the library, heads bowed together over intricate diagrams and complex strings of math. Spike had been forced to stand motionless for a good half hour while Willow performed a full-on magical body scan. Just when he'd thought he was home free, she confiscated the amulet to subject it to its own round of scrutiny. Fred left a bit after dinner, promising to return the next day with some tools, which would hopefully round out Willow’s more impressionistic diagnosis.

As evening fell, Willow retreated back to the library. Buffy checked in on her a couple of times, only to find her buried in some impossibly thick book on sacred geometry. If she were honest, Willow was more than a little disappointed with herself for not taking the time to do all of this a year ago. Time had seemed to scarce back then, with the seal about to pop beneath them, and minions of the First always knocking down their door. Theoretical knowledge had seemed just too—well, theoretical. She looked up to the sound of the library door opening, expecting to see Buffy back to check on her again.

“Still at it?” Kennedy’s tone was flat as she strolled over to the table where Willow sat working.

“Still at it,” Willow confirmed.

Kennedy leaned over her shoulder and eyed the book skeptically. “Is there a math emergency?”

Willow supposed that “emergency” wasn’t really the right word. Of course, she knew Kennedy shared that opinion—she had hardly bothered to mask the passive-aggressive note in her tone. No, not an emergency. But there was something interesting about this supposed soul stone. Now that she had taken a closer look, it occurred to Willow that she’d never seen anything quite like it before. Or—scratch that—she had. But not all in one place like this. There was something hidden in the energetic geometries of the thing that one normally only found… well, on a much larger scale. And not in a blingy necklace. She’d seen something similar when she’d first started practicing, all those years ago, but—no—in retrospect, that crystalline orb seemed like a cheap knockoff compared to this. It was almost like a body. But not a body. It was life—

“I mean,” Willow said, her eyes glued to the book. “If the math can help us figure out what’s up with Spike and this stone, then hopefully there won’t be an emergency.”

Kennedy sighed. “Spike doesn’t seem all that worried about it. Or Buffy, for that matter. They’re off doing—whatever it is they’re doing these days. And you—”

“And me?” Willow prompted her. She didn’t really want to have this conversation right now, but it seemed more or less inevitable. The tension of her exhaled breath sat low in her diaphragm, as her body closed in on itself in anticipation of another fight.

Kennedy set her jaw. “And you’re using math to avoid me.”

“I’m not—” Willow began reflexively, but trailed off. She was.

“You are,” Kennedy said, almost needlessly. “Come on, Will, we’re big girls.”

“Maybe we just need some time,” Willow said. She might have expected yelling by now. Usually they were at yelling a couple of sentences in. Kennedy’s continued calm threw her.
“We’ve had a year,” Kennedy responded. It occurred to Willow then that she might have come in to pick a fight, but now she just seemed—deflated. She turned around and leaned against the table. “Maybe our time’s up.”

Willow chewed her lip. “Just like that?”

“Do you want to keep fighting?”

Willow knew she did not. There was nothing left in her that really wanted to fight with Kennedy, which led her to the gnawing realization that there was nothing left in her that wanted to fight for Kennedy either. Was it really that simple?

Kennedy nodded. “You can have the room.” And just like that, she was gone, passing a surprised Xander on her way out of the library.

Xander watched her retreating form thoughtfully. “This the moment we’ve all been waiting for?” He asked Willow, shutting the door as Kennedy rounded a corner.

“Yeah, I guess it was,” she said, feeling suddenly all too deflated herself.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“Who? Kenn—”

Xander shook his head. “You know who I mean.”

Willow dabbed at the corners of her suddenly prickly eyes. It hit like a punch in her already hollow gut, then. Of course she did. When had she stopped? The magic was part of it, too, she supposed. That part of her had all turned to black malignant rot as soon as Tara took her last breath. But something new had sprang from the decay that following summer, something small and resilient—something that had needed time to grow. It reassured her that Kennedy never really got the magic—it made it feel more her own somehow. But now—maybe now she was ready—

“Yeah, I do,” she conceded. “Which feels so messed up, you know? Like, part of me wonders if Kennedy was just a really long rebound. Which makes me feel like a totally shitty person, but also—shouldn’t I at least feel… I dunno—rebounded?”

Xander nodded solemnly. Pulling a chair out to sit by Willow. “I know what you mean.”

Willow looked at him. “I know you do.”

Xander sighed. Leaning back in the chair, he put his hands over his face. “I know she went out fighting,” he said finally. “But I just can’t help but think, it’s not fair. Just because she isn’t part of some grand cosmic plan—she doesn’t get to come back—”

“Death never feels fair,” Willow said.

And so they sat, together. Each lost on their own thoughts.  

***

Giles and Dawn returned late that evening— Giles had called just after dinner to say that they wouldn’t be staying the night. Willow had set up camp in the library, while Xander, Andrew, and a few of the older Slayers had been in the common area, engaged in some very noisy video game. When a clearly bored Spike asked Buffy if she was planning on patrolling, the gesture felt so
reassuringly normal that she hadn’t had the heart to tell him that looking for demons in Bath was an
exercise in futility. So they’d gone on something that was less of a patrol and more of a leisurely
stroll. Spike appeared to realize this halfway through, but didn’t complain, and they’d walked in
semi-comfortable silence. They returned to the school just as Giles and Dawn were getting out of the
car near the entrance.

Dawn gave them a quizzical look.

“I was just showing Spike why I don’t really go on patrol anymore,” Buffy clarified. “Hopefully you
guys found more information than we found demons.”

“I imagine we did,” Giles said. “Why don’t we gather the others.”

Buffy unlocked the front door and stood back as the others filed inside. “I bet Xander’s still in the
common room—will you get him, Dawnie? And Willow was in the library when we left. Maybe we
can meet in there.”

“Wait a minute, Dawn,” Giles called. He strode after her and handed her a set of keys. “Will you
please also retrieve those translation notes from my office? And the manuscript.” He looked at her
significantly and she nodded in understanding and headed for the common room. “Any progress
with the amulet?” Giles asked Buffy as they set a course for the library.

“Some?” Buffy replied. “Willow and Fred spent a whole lot of time talking about energy patterns
and whatnot. She’ll be able to tell you more than I can. But it seems to be keeping Spike solid, which
I guess is a good sign.”

Giles pulled open the library door. Willow was indeed inside, pouring over the same very thick book
on sacred geometries. Xander sat beside her, apparently deeply occupied with staring off into space.
As they entered, Willow looked up at the three of them, somewhat more red-eyed than Buffy had
remembered leaving her.

“Hi, Giles,” she said. “Is Dawnie with you?”

“I sent her to find Xander, but I guess that’ll be a failed mission,” Buffy answered. “I was just trying
to tell Giles about what you and Fred have been doing all day, Will.”

“Well,” Willow said, “we’ll have to see what we can find out when Fred comes back with some of
the equipment she brought with her from LA tomorrow but, best we’ve been able to figure, we’re
dealing with a very special kind of crystal. Were you able to find anything in Wolfram and Hart’s
books?”

Giles shrugged. “Precious little, I’m afraid. The soul stone, if that’s in fact what we’re dealing with,
seems to be largely mythical. I can’t even quite determine whether it’s a single artifact or one of
several.” He walked over to sit in the chair opposite Willow. “Perhaps to use your language— we
might be looking at a crystallization of the earth’s animating force. When it’s referenced, it’s usually
in connection with certain geological features—ley lines, Hellmouths, and the like. Sirk pointed me
to one very dodgy reference to such things being mined from within the spine of the earth, which I
can only imagine is a reference to the Deeper Well. But otherwise, our best hope of figuring out what
it is probably lies in more experimental means.”

“Wait,” Buffy said, turning around to run her fingers over the stone, which rested on Spike’s chest.
“The Deeper Well like where all those demons are hibernating?”

“So that’s what’s cool about it,” Dawn said, striding into the room. “I couldn’t find Xander—” she
added, but trailed off as she registered the room’s occupants. “Oh— Well, anyway. It’s not just a
demon prison. It’s literally this hole that runs all the way through the earth.”

Xander turned to look at her skeptically. “Like Bugs Bunny style? Does it go to China?”

Dawn giggled a bit. “Actually, you’d be surprised. I guess Bugs was really on to something. But no,
not exactly. One end of it is apparently not far from here, in the—Cotswolds?” She looked to Giles
for confirmation of her UK geography. He nodded. “So, the other end is somewhere in New
Zealand. I guess that’s what they mean when they call it the spine of the earth. It goes all the way
through but it’s also like the earth’s central nervous system or something. Sometimes it’s also called
the earth’s heart, which I guess is because the words for mind and heart are the same in a lot of pre-
modern languages—”

She trailed off, noticing that at least half of the group was looking at her with utter confusion.

Willow jumped in to help. “You know the Hellmouth?” She looked to Buffy and Xander.

“Better than I’d like,” Buffy nodded skeptically.

“Well,” Willow went on. “We’ve always used that word, but it’s actually not a very good one. Not a
very accurate one anyway—just something that people came up with because they were scared of it.
I learned a lot of this from Miss Harkness and the coven that one summer. Magic, life, death,
everything springs from deep within the earth. Hellmouths are sort of like a geological feature—like
fault lines, or fissures, or even nerves maybe—where mystical energy can come through. But there’s
a main channel—as far as I can tell, that’s what the Deeper Well is?” She looked from Dawn to Giles
for confirmation.

“I believe so,” Giles said.

Buffy chewed her lip thoughtfully. “So, if the amulet was used to close the Hellmouth in Sunnydale,
then maybe we can use it to close the Deeper Well? Then we don’t have to worry about Dawn being
the Key?”

Willow leaned back, her brow furrowed. “I’m not sure that the Deeper Well is something that can be
closed. I mean, we didn’t really close the Hellmouth, we just kind of blasted it to smithereens. But
it’s still there.”

“Oh,” Buffy said, her shoulders slumping slightly.

“But I’ve been thinking about that,” Willow continued. “I mean, why this thing—if it’s like a crystal
of earthy soul energy—why it would have reacted the way that it did, and right when it did. The
spell I performed—I’d mentioned to Giles that I was worried we shouldn’t have done it, that maybe
it was why everything was out of whack now, since it was really the amulet that helped us win the
battle.”

“But the Guardian I met—the Great Mother—she seemed to think that it’s exactly what we were
supposed to do,” Buffy supplied. “Remember, I told you that.”

Willow nodded. “Right, but, well—uhh—remember why I was so nervous about it? The spell used
the scythe to tap into the Slayer’s power, into the connection between the current Slayer and all of
the Potentials. It basically meant that I had to kill all of them—just for a split second, like a chain
reaction—until every last Slayer had been called. To kill something is by definition a soul-related
thing.” She turned to Giles, now. “What if it triggered something in the stone? Not directly, I mean.
But loading the Hellmouth with that much Slayer-power would have shifted the balance of things a
Giles nodded slowly. “It’s certainly a theory.”

“And what about the Old Ones, Giles?” Buffy asked. “I mean, I know we need to figure out what’s going on with the stone but,” she looked at Spike a bit apologetically. “Now that Spike is solid, it seems like we should focus on the more immanently devourey part of this apocalypse.”

“I’m afraid that there’s nothing terribly new on that front in the sources.” Giles said. Taking off his glasses. “It’s actually more of what I’ve been able to glean from Wesley and Sirk about Wolfram and Hart’s institutional history. It’s all rather older than I was aware, and I suspect rather more troublingly connected than anyone will tell me—I don’t imagine Wesley actually knows, though I know he suspects. These Powers That Be—the forces of good, as it were—they retreated from the earth because it is their policy not to meddle. The other side, which I suppose we might identify with the First Evil, agreed to do the same. Then, as we know, came the Old Ones along with the Higher Beings. This is where human mythology starts—every civilization has them—gods, titans, whatever we want to call them. When it became clear to the Higher Beings that the other side was not interested in keeping up the truce, they went to war with the Old Ones. Eventually, lesser demons and humans inherited the earth. Wolfram and Hart, on the face of it, exists to negotiate the arrangements of this ongoing truce. What is generally known, of course, is that they are far from impartial. Which brings me to the matter we spent most of our time on—the Prophesies of Aberjian.”

Spike perked up at those final words. “That’s the Shanshu business, yeah?”

Giles nodded. “Wesley translated a good portion of the scrolls over the last four years. Not all of it is related, but the scrolls do offer a set of prophesies that light the path to the final battle. Unfortunately, the end appears to be missing.”

“The end?” Buffy asked. “Of the prophesy?”

“The end of the scroll, literally,” Giles answered. “Which as it happens, is likely also the end of the prophesy. It had been torn off, which is why I returned here. Dawn?—” Dawn offered him the stack of papers she’d been holding. Giles took the torn manuscript from the top of the pile and placed the rest of the stack on the table. “And I believe I was correct. Where did you say this originally came from, Buffy?”

Buffy thought for a second. “Angelus had it, he’d gotten it from someone he’d killed, I think. Someone who told him about the Key.”

Spike had approached the table interestingly, eyed the manuscript in Giles’ hand, and then picked up the stack of handwritten notes. He flipped one page, then another, a ponderous look settling upon his face. “Where did these come from?”

Buffy shifted uncomfortably. She hadn’t actually told the others much beyond the fact that she’d recovered the manuscript from Angelus. When presenting the notes, she’d referred to Isaac but not to William, not wanting to have to explain the rest of it. “We, uhh, had some people working to translate the manuscript.”

“Who?” Spike pressed curiously, his eyes still fixed on the slanted handwriting. “Who wrote this?”

“Well,” Buffy said, swallowing. There was nothing for it. “You did.” Everyone, Spike included, was staring at her aghast now. “Remember when I took my trip to the past?” She said, glancing at the others.
“Wait, you went to the past?” Spike interrupted her, bewildered. “Well, balls, I guess I did miss a lot.”

“Yes. To 1880,” Buffy answered, patiently. “It was to help protect the Key, like I said,” she explained to the rest of the group. “Because of the, you know, disturbance in the Force or whatever—which was Angel, as far as anyone could tell. That’s what the Great Mother said the Powers told her anyway. But then—” she didn’t really know how to explain it. “Let’s just say things got complicated. Partly because I met you,” she looked at Spike now.

“Me?” he asked incredulously. “I reckon I’d remember that, pet. 1880 was an eventful year for me, but still.”

“That’s just the thing. You wouldn’t remember. No one was supposed to. The Order of Dagon—the monks who protect the Key—they cast another memory spell. Like when they—” She glanced at Dawn uncomfortably.

“Like when they made me,” Dawn finished for her sister. “It’s okay, Buffy. I’ve dealt with the fact that the first fourteen years of my life are basically imaginary.”

Buffy looked down, then returned her gaze to Spike. “Well, anyway, you and one of the monks—you translated the manuscript.”

Xander snorted, walking over to stand by Spike and Giles. “Wait, Spike translated something?” He looked at the manuscript, then the notes. “Spike translated this?”

Spike didn’t seem sure whether he should look embarrassed or indignant. “Yeah, what of it? I’ve got depths.” Then he turned to Buffy uncertainly. “So, we met? All the way back then? And I was—”

“You were human.” Buffy answered the question that he hadn’t actually asked.

“Oh bloody hell—” Spike’s mouth opened, then abruptly closed. “Well, alright then. I’m sure we’ve all heard enough of this story. Let’s move on right along.”

“Oh, no, no, no—” Xander said giddily, clearly picking up on Spike’s discomfort with the subject. “I want to hear all about human Spike.”

Giles shot Xander a stern look, though he appeared rather curious himself. He took one of the pages and examined the notes. “You did this?” he asked, with something almost approaching respect.

Spike looked over at the page, then frowned. “No, that’s not mine.”

“Those must be Isaac’s notes,” Buffy supplied. “The monk I told you about,” she clarified when this comment was met with nothing but blank looks.

“Here,” Spike handed Giles the page he’d been examining. He’d clearly decided that his only hopes of maintaining any dignity rested on embracing this newly revealed scholastic side of his persona. “I’m pretty sure this is mine, then. Thought I recognized the handwriting.”

Giles scanned the page, then took the rest of the stack from Spike and flipped through it slowly, examining the notes. “Classics?” he asked matter-of-factly, his eyes still running over the rows of text.

Spike grunted brusquely in the affirmative.

“Cambridge?” Giles followed up.

Dawn, Willow, and Xander were all staring at him wide-eyed. Spike crossed his arms defensively.

“So,” Buffy interjected, hoping to diffuse the situation. “Was there anything in Wesley’s translation that’s more short-term useful? From what I remember, all the stuff in these notes seems like it’s kind of abstract. Not much of an action plan.”

“Well,” Giles said. “There are some rituals I’d like to cross-reference with this last section. But as things stand, there was one line in Wesley’s notes that I found rather curious: ‘The Champion will find himself in the resting place of the Key.’”

“The resting place of the Key?” Dawn asked, puzzled. “Like me, the Key?”

“I suspect so,” Giles answered. “But I don’t see how the line could be referring to you directly.”

“The resting place of the Key,” Xander said quizzically. “Should we have Spike sit in Dawn’s room or something, just in case? See if he finds himself? And I guess we’d better throw Angel in there too —”

Neither Spike nor Dawn seemed particularly excited about this potential solution.

Buffy thought for a second. It was a long shot, but— “What if it means where the Key was before it was Dawn?” she ventured.

Giles looked at her with some skepticism. “With the Order of Dagon?”

“No—” Buffy said slowly. “The monks, when they channeled the Key, or whatever—they said they couldn’t actually hold onto it. It was too powerful. They had to anchor it somewhere.”

“Where did they anchor—it?” Dawn asked. Her tone was a bit cautious. Not quite comfortable. Buffy supposed that having to refer to yourself in the third person as an “it” tended to do that.

“There’s this place, where the monks first took me to see the Guardians and the Great Mother,” Buffy explained. “We went to this place just outside of Glastonbury—Glastonbury Tor—the Abbey down there, it was where the Dagon monks had their headquarters, but the place on the hill… I’m not sure if we can even get in, really, or what’s there now. But there was some serious mojo involved. The Guardians couldn’t stay there anymore because of it. Maybe it’s worth a shot?”

“Glastonbury Tor,” Giles said thoughtfully. “Avalon? There are legends of course and it’s long been known to be a site of fairly powerful energies, but the Council has no records substantiating it as the location of anything other than myth. The Order of Dagon was in the Abbey, you say?”

“Well, more under it,” Buffy clarified. “I doubt they’re still there.”

“I should say so,” Giles replied. “It’s a museum now.”

“That and it really sounded like the monk who told me about Dawn was the last of them,” Buffy said. “The Guardians too. The woman Caleb killed in Sunnydale—she seemed to think she was the last.”

“I suppose there’s no harm in trying. Glastonbury is less than an hour from here by car.”

“We can go tomorrow.” Buffy looked at Spike, who nodded in confirmation. So she turned to Willow. “Will? You should come with us, I think. I don’t know if we can get down into the hill, but
we definitely won’t be able to do it without magic.”

“Okay,” said Willow. She closed her book with a tired sigh and tapped her fingers on the worn leather cover. “I guess we should wait until evening? Although—Spike—you don’t really have a problem with the sun anymore. But I’d like to do some work with Fred before we go. And Angel was gonna bring some more stuff for her from the lab in London.”

“Yeah, and I’ll bet that Angel will want to go too,” Buffy said, careful not to check with Spike this time. She heard him give a light snort regardless. “So, it’s settled, we go after dark tomorrow.”

Dawn looked as though she was about to speak, but then seemed to decide against it. This had to be all sorts of weird for her, Buffy thought. She was eighteen now. Basically an adult, and they had all become accustomed to treating her as such. Had she asked to come with them, Buffy knew that her tried-and-true “it’s just too dangerous” excuse would have held up about as well as a wet noodle. Still, she was glad not to have Dawn press the issue—despite having been the one to propose the idea, something about the prospect of taking her sister to this place made her deeply uncomfortable.

Walking up behind Dawn, Buffy wrapped her in a hug. She had to tiptoe to press a kiss to the back of Dawn’s head, thinking for the billionth time how inconvenient their height difference was when she was trying to act parental. “I love you, Dawnie,” she said softly. “Key or not.”

Dawn leaned back against her. “I know.”

***

“What were you gonna tell me, then?” Spike asked, as soon as Buffy had shut the bedroom door behind them.

She turned and looked at him uncomfortably. “Eventually?” she said. “I didn’t really know how. You really don’t remember, do you?”

“Not a lick.”

“Maybe it’s better that way?”

“Save me the embarrassment, you mean,” he said sulkily. “When?”

“I saw you die,” she answered, her tone grim. “But we met a couple of weeks before that.”

Spike thought for a moment, then his face settled into a mask of abject horror. “Oh God—you saw—” What had she seen? He thought back to those last days. To that final night. To Cecily Underwood—well, he’d thought she was Cecily Underwood, anyway. If he reflected on it, knowing that the woman who tore his heart to pieces had actually been a vengeance demon made him feel somewhat better, at least in theory. But the memory still burned. Bloody hell—why couldn’t he remember? And then he thought that maybe he did. It came back to him suddenly, that vision that he’d had as he lay in the alley, dying. He’d thought he’d seen an angel. Blood streaming down her face like a bloom of roses. He narrowed his eyes at her. The shadow of a weeks-old cut—not quite a scar, just a bit of pink skin that would fade in time—marred her brow. He reached to touch it almost involuntarily. Could it be? “You were in the alley—”

Buffy shifted awkwardly, dropping her gaze. “I’m sorry.” She said it like she’d just confessed something deeply intimate, but of course he was the one who was standing there fully exposed. Worse than naked.

“Fuck, Slayer.” He backed away from her and sat on the bed, bowing his head into his hands,
elbows on his knees. “I’m sorry. Not how I wanted you to see me.”

He’d already been feeling pretty raw about poor sopping William, having put himself on the spot in front of the Scoobies. And then there was Angelus. Somehow seeing the bugger never failed to catapult him back to those days before he and Dru had set out on their own. Back when there was still so much more of William left in him.

She’d come to stand before him. “I don’t know how to explain it to you, Spike. It’s weird for me too.”

He looked up at her and couldn’t quite bring himself to decipher the expression in her eyes. It looked too much like pity. “You said we’d met two weeks before—before I died?”

“We did.”

“And so, we—what? Knew each other?” He couldn’t really picture it.

“Yeah, I guess we did.” She sighed. “It’s so weird that I have to do this again.”

“What’s that, then?”

“You—he—William,” she began haltingly. “Well, I knew you as you. I remembered all this stuff about you—but that version of you didn’t know me at all, obviously.”

He was a bit confused. What she was saying made sense, true enough, but he couldn’t think as to why it should matter. “And, now?”

“Well, now I know all this stuff about who you were, but it’s not really a version of you that exists—for you, I mean.”

He sighed, resigned. “If you met William, pet, I expect you got the gist of it.”

“Yeah, I think I did,” she said after a pause. Then her lips lifted into a smile. “You were a good man, Spike. Who would have thought?”

That was damn near the last thing he’d expected to hear. “You feelin’ alright, Slayer?” He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Wouldn’t’ve thought that was your type.”

She shot him another enigmatic smile. “Maybe I’ve got depths too.”

She was mocking him. She had to be. He lunged at her then, with a quiet grunt—half-frustrated, half-unnerved. “I’ll show you depths.” She didn’t dodge. Didn’t resist either. He grabbed her roughly by the elbow and pulled her against him. She was still smiling—surely teasing now. He lowered his head, baring his blunt teeth at her. If this was how she wanted to play it—“You’ve seen something that only one or two others in the world have seen—no,” he corrected himself. “I reckon just one—just Dru—even Angelus never saw that me. Dangerous knowledge, that. How’s it make you feel?”

She leaned in and bit his lip. Hard. But then she surprised him again. Reaching her free hand up to press against his cheek, she kissed him more tenderly than anyone had ever done in his century and a half of existence. It almost made him wonder for a second what had happened between her and William. But he dismissed the thought as quickly as it had arisen. Surely not. His grip on her elbow slackened. It felt inappropriate all of a sudden, to be holding her so crudely. All the same, he felt himself harden at the gentle pressure of her lips on his.
“Will you tell me?” he asked her when she pulled away. She furrowed her brow, confused. “What happened, I mean. With you and—me. When you went back.”

She thought for a moment, then nodded. “I guess it can’t hurt anything now. But after.”

“Af—”

With a devilish gleam in her eye, she reached down and pressed her hand against the increasingly noticeable bulge in his pants. Perhaps rather harder than she strictly needed to, Spike noted. “After.”

He eyed her judiciously, even as he felt the guttural growl rising in his throat. Fuck if he knew what she wanted from him. So far, she’d accused him of being the First, stared at him blankly, screamed bloody murder at him, kissed him, let him inside her, told him—well, there was no sense in dwelling on that—and snuggled up to him like a fucking kitten. And that was just the last forty-eight hours. Now here she was, expressing some kind of harebrained fondness for his blithering human self—he’d have thought she was trying to spare his feelings except, of course, when had she ever—and all the while tossing this hot-and-cold routine at him. Well, no, not cold, he corrected himself. There was nothing cold about the way she’d just kissed him. Hot and—there was no word for this other thing in his Buffy-lexicon.

His grip on her elbow tightened again, and he grasped her other hand by the wrist, extricating it from his crotch. The tenderness was gone. She was watching him from beneath her lashes like a bloody vixen, lips wet and slightly parted. This, at least, was a look he understood. Here was a need he could satisfy.

He leaned even closer to her. Took hold of her other wrist with that same hand and pinned both behind her back. His chest felt tight in a way that went beyond his newfound need to breathe. They were on well-trodden ground. “This what you want, Slayer?” he murmured, narrowing his eyes. “You wanna play?”

“No,” she said softly. There was an edge in her voice that seemed to scream danger—he just wished he knew what kind. “Not play.”

He continued to look at her, but she did not elaborate. Her eyes, too, proved illegible. So Spike did the only thing he knew how—he kissed her. Softly, because he needed to be sure. It was she who leaned into it, mouth opening, teeth pulling at his lip again. She made no move to dislodge her wrists and he dared not let go. His growing arousal swirled inside of him, but it only heightened the desperate turmoil of his thoughts.

He broke the kiss, breathing hard. “Fine. Won’t play.” She butted her forehead against his, lips set in a stubborn pout. Like it was his fault he couldn’t read her bloody mind. “So what, then?” he asked hoarsely. “What do you want, Slayer?”

“You.”

“You’ve got me.”

She drew back slightly. God, he could drown in those eyes.

“Want all of you,” she said. As though the meaning of those words should have been plain as day.

He walked her backwards, then. Feet shuffling together, right then left, like a dance, until her calves hit the edge of the bed. He released her wrists as he pulled her blouse up over her head. No bra. He supposed he should have noticed that earlier. How many times had he stared at her chest when he thought she wasn’t looking, trying to trace out the lines of her perfect little tits with his eyes? But
back then he’d somehow felt like he’d been entitled to it. Now, well—sod it, just now, she was pulling at the button of his pants. He grasped her fingers, tucking her hand back behind her.

“Not just yet.”

“But—” he silenced her with another kiss.

“You want all of me, pet? Let me do this for you. Yeah?”

She nodded. He pushed her jeans down, then, taking her panties along with them and leaned into her until she had no choice but to sit back onto the bed. Dropping to his knees before her, his hands teased her legs open. She opened herself to him without hesitation and the scent of her arousal hit him like a cloud of opium. He bowed his head, lips working along the silky skin of her thighs—always made him feel a bit reverential, it did, being this close to the center of her. It was like standing at the gates of a temple he could never hope to prove worthy of entering. Even though she’d never actually let him in, not really, the physical proximity felt like a glimpse of that holiest of holies he knew lay somewhere deep inside her. He’d seen the origin of his bloody world in her beautiful cunt. He pressed his lips there now, and felt her shudder. Slowly, he tasted her with his tongue, lapping up her wetness.

“Talk to me, Spike,”

He glanced up at her confused. “Talk to you?”

She was looking down at him. Golden hair tumbling down her shoulders, eyes glassy with arousal. Fucking goddess.

“Like you used to.”

He dropped his gaze back to where she lay spread out before him. “Used to do a lot of things,” he said glumly.

Why the bleeding hell did she keep trying to goad him into going back to that other time. Back when they’d used the violence of their fucking as a substitute for—well, plain old violence. No, if they were gonna do this, it would have to be different. He couldn’t allow himself to presume. Back then, his desire for her had been like bloodthirst—now it seemed as natural as breathing. So much more out of his control, yet so much more vital. It was better this way. As this passive need. You couldn’t ask the air for anything in return.

And so, he’d give her what she deserved. Not this gnawing hunger that still lay inside of him, with its vicious greedy vulnerabilities poured out in demanding endearments. He put his mouth on her once more. Kissed those lower lips of hers languidly, his tongue flicking inside. She leaned back with a small noise, and a quick glance upward told him that she’d fallen back onto one of her elbows. Her breath was coming faster now. Good.

But then her eyes were on him again. Persistent little minx, he thought. She opened her mouth to speak, but her words came out in a moan as his lips latched onto her clit and he began to suck.

“Liked the things you did,” she spoke, between gasps. Her head lolled back, but still she wouldn’t let it go. “Talk to me, Spike.”

“Bit busy down here, love,” he said into her pubic hair, smiling a little despite himself. When she wanted something—

“You’ve got fingers.”
He nearly chuckled at that.

“That I do,” he replied, using one of the aforementioned fingers to draw slippery circles around her labia.

“Now you’re just teasing.” She pouted at him again, but the expression didn’t trouble him this time. Her skin was flushed all over, her eyes shadowed with desire. He may not have been able to read her mind, but he felt bloody damn sure of what she was thinking just now.

His lips returned to worry at her clit as he slipped a finger inside—a pump—then two.

“Fuck.” The word came out of her in a sigh.

“Maybe you should do the talking, Slayer,” he murmured between flicks of his tongue.

Her hips bucked against him, trying to get nearer, and he stilled them with a forearm across her belly.

She was close now, he knew. Her breathing had descended into ragged gulps and her splayed knees trembled around his shoulders. And still she seemed to be trying her damnedest to stay upright. He couldn’t have said why—it wasn’t like her not to lay back and just enjoy the ride. At least he used to imagine that she did it to enjoy the ride. Part of him, of course, always knew she also did it to forget that it was him between her legs.

“Fuck, Spike.”

Her gasp surprised him. He’d gotten so wrapped up in the sensation of this paradise of hers splayed out before him that he hadn’t realized she was watching him. But there she was. Eyes dark, and dangerous, and wild. He’d never seen such a look on her face before. Not even that last night.

Though, she had looked at him then, he remembered. But this was different. There was something deep down in those eyes—an invitation maybe, or a promise.

“Oh God, don’t stop,” there was a note of pleading in her breathless tone now. “Spike—please, don’t stop—”

Apparently, he’d downright forgotten what he was doing. He didn’t see how, with his fingers crammed up inside of her and his mouth dripping with her, but he had. Perhaps it was because he now found he couldn’t quite tear his eyes away from her face. He wanted to drop everything and shake her—make her tell him all her secrets. He knew there were secrets hidden somewhere in the black depths of that gaze. Instead, he bowed his head again and covered her with his mouth. Fucking her with his fingers, with his tongue, until she seized and broke against him like a wave.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God—fuck—Spike—love—fuck, fuck, fuck—”

The words came tumbling out of her like little pebbles floating on that cresting swell of her climax. And something in her tone, then, lit a yearning within him. To give himself over to her. To believe.

A deep, senseless yearning that would certainly lead him to his doom. He was Odysseus and she was his island of bloody sirens and this sucking tide of her pleasure would surely shatter him upon the jagged edges of her.

And there she was, pulling him upwards. Drawing him in. He was still fully clothed and it made him feel safer, somehow. She’d shown him something private with that look of hers, he knew. Just like he knew that nothing that private ever came for free. He steeled himself against whatever he would find in her face now. But when his eyes met hers, there was nothing jagged there. Instead, there was something soft—almost suppliant.

“Talk to me,” she spoke, fingers pulling again at the button of his fly.
He smiled at her then. Gave in. Met her softness with his own and allowed himself to feel that upsurge of pure and unadulterated affection.

“What do you want to hear, love? Anything—”

And the pout was back again, like he should have known. “At least tell me I’m pretty or something.”

“Pretty?” He looked at her, aghast. Then leaned in to kiss her deeply, relishing that she’d be able to taste herself in his mouth. “Bloody beautiful—my sweet beautiful Buffy—my fierce goddess—”

He was babbling now, he knew, his fingers fumbling with her hair. The control he’d held onto so desperately was slipping from him, undone by that odd supplication in her gaze.

“Good,” she smiled. “Like that. It’s my turn now.”

***

Buffy lay on her back, head pillowed on Spike’s chest. He was stretched out in a similar manner, perpendicular to her, one arm draped over her ribcage as the other was folded under his head.

“So—it was my soul?” He asked a bit incredulously. “The sacrifice? My death?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Seems like a right odd thing to get credit for, though—” he said ponderously. “Seeing as I didn’t really have a choice in the matter. Didn’t know what I was doing, did I?

Buffy flipped onto her stomach to look at him, almost jabbing herself in the eye with the amulet, which rested on Spike’s solar plexus, in the process. She’d accidentally yanked it over his head along with his shirt earlier, at the start of the second round, and they’d both received a very immediate confirmation that he really did need it on him in order to be solid.

“But you did,” she said. “Have a choice, I mean. Before the memory spell, you knew that you’d die. But you chose to help me. Even after that guy showed you your future, you didn’t buy what he was saying—I was almost ready to, but you said I had to go back.”

Spike thought for a second. “I suppose I’d have thought it’d be a very heroic death. Poetic—” he looked up at her, startled, suddenly. “Bloody hell—is that why you asked me if I ever wrote any poetry last night?”

Buffy smiled, perhaps a little more wickedly than she should have.

“Oh God—” Spike groaned. “Please tell me that I didn’t make you sit and listen to that lot of drivel I was writing back then.”

“You didn’t,” Buffy reassured him. That much was true, at least. “Although I do remember you telling me that it was the emotion behind the words that mattered.” He groaned again, even more painedly this time, so she added, “I kind of liked that.”

“You did, did you?” He asked, mock cynical, propping himself on one elbow. “Well, how’s this for you? Roses are red, violets are blue, you’ve got nice titties, and one fine arse too.”

He smirked at her and Buffy laughed. Smacking him playfully on the side of the head, she crawled up to lay on top of him. “I guess that must be one of your newer compositions,” she said.

He lifted his head to kiss her. “I dunno, pet, I reckon ol’ William would have thought the same thing.
—he just wouldn’t’ve said it.”

Buffy snorted. There was one element of the story she’d been careful to leave out. Well, multiple individual elements, which all totaled up to the same thing. That they had fallen in love over those two short weeks. She with this unexpected human version of him and, astonishingly, he with her. Somehow, that part felt beyond her abilities to explain. What could it do, but muddle things?

“So we were—what?—friends?” he asked slowly, as though reading her mind.

“I guess we were,” she said, in a tone that she hoped sounded utterly casual. And final.

He considered her for a moment. “But—” he began, then trailed off with a gasp. She ran her tongue down his neck before nipping at the skin there. They had discovered, through what Buffy maintained was perfectly natural experimentation, that his skin retained no marks. Sufficiently distracted, Spike reached up to roll one of her nipples between his fingers.

“I don’t want to think about you dying anymore, Spike,” she said quietly. “Let’s be us. Here.”

Still, the heat of him on her skin couldn’t quite drown out the thought that had taken up residence in her mind—what were they to each other, now? Here?
Fred showed up in the morning toting a gadget that looked reminiscent of something the supermarket checkout clerks used to scan particularly cumbersome purchases. Andrew trailed after her muttering something about the Starship Enterprise until he was officially banned from the library. While Fred and Willow were engrossed in waving said gadget around an increasingly disgruntled Spike, Buffy took the time to call Angel. She wasn’t really relishing the prospect of a road trip with him and Spike at each other’s throats, but it seemed improper not to involve him in something so clearly Champion-related. Not when the stakes were so much higher than she’d realized. Angel appeared to share her reservations but agreed to meet them at the school just after sunset. Wolfram and Hart’s necrotempered cars would allow him to travel in daylight but he was understandably not keen on the idea of dashing into the school in a cloud of smoke. Especially, Buffy suspected, not since Spike had apparently become sun-proof.

She returned to the library to find Spike hovering somewhat sullenly while Willow and Fred were engrossed in something that looked dangerously like a spreadsheet. The amulet lay on the table beside them.

“How goes it?” Buffy asked cautiously.

Spike made as if to slam him hand on the table, only to emphatically dip it in and out of the wooden surface. She gave him a sympathetic look.

“I may have an idea,” Willow said, looking considerably more cheerful than Spike.

“Does this idea include me getting my magical solidifying necklace back?” Spike muttered.

Willow looked around, surprised, then suddenly apologetic. “Oh gosh. Sorry, Spike. You can have it back now. But,” she picked up the amulet and offered it to him, “we may also have a more permanent solution.— Well, maybe not permanent exactly, but it’ll at least make it so that you can be solid without having the amulet directly on you. I should be able to give you a pretty good range too, depending on—uhh—external factors. Maybe a mile or two.”

Spike perked up a bit at this and Buffy looked at Willow curiously. “You figured out how it works?”

“Well, sort of,” Willow said, then glanced to Fred.

“So, best we can figure is, the stone a really weird kind of ethero-energetic networking device. Kind of like a router maybe, but for spiritual energy,” Fred explained. Buffy and Spike nodded in unison, their expressions blank. Not deterred, she continued. “Well, right now, Spike is kind of like a signal being transmitted from the stone. But to be solid, he needs to be hardwired into it—so, like, touching. And Willow and I were thinking, if we could tap into an external source of energy to use as an amplifier then maybe we could strengthen the signal enough so that he can be solid at long range.”

“So less ethernet and more wifi,” Willow added excitedly.

Spike, expression still utterly befuddled, nodded approvingly. “Jolly good, then. Let’s amplify me.”

“Can we do that?” Buffy asked. “You said external source of energy—what would that look like?” She had the sinking feeling that this would necessitate a trip to the offices of Wolfram and Hart.

“Well, so, that’s the best part,” Willow said, beaming, clearly proud of her problem solving. “The stone works based off of geological energies—if you’re right about this place in Glastonbury, then
maybe we can kill two birds with one stone.”

“Oh—” Buffy said, relieved. “Well, okay. Cool.” Then she paused, frowning. “But, this sounds more like a band-aidey move. He’ll still be connected to the stone, right?”

“One step at a time, pet,” Spike said, slipping the chain of the amulet over his head.

“We’re working on it.” Willow added diffidently. “If I could just figure out why you touching the amulet set the whole thing off in the first place. I mean, I held it, Giles held it, and—nothing.”

“Hey,” Fred said to Buffy, with a spark of truly nerdy excitement. “What if we scan you—”

This optimism proved to be short-lived, however. No matter how much they prodded Buffy with the supermarket scanner, no signs of unusual ethero-energetic patterns emerged. Inspired, Willow also tried the old-fashioned way. It took half an hour of her and Buffy sitting cross-legged on the floor until she was forced to conclude that, although Buffy’s aura was brighter than a typical human one—she was a Slayer who’d come back from the dead a couple of times after all—there was nothing that offered any hint as to Buffy’s connection to the soul stone.

They set off to Glastonbury just after sunset as planned. Willow drove one of the Council’s cars and Buffy quickly claimed the passenger’s seat to her left, leaving Spike and Angel to negotiate the back seat. As Angel sniffed sharply, Buffy was hit by a deeply disturbing thought. As far as she could discern, Spike didn’t smell like anything—as though his body wasn’t a body at all. She did, though. Could Angel… tell? She decided not to contemplate the matter any further.

The ride passed mostly in silence. It was difficult to see much in the dark, but Buffy was still struck by how different the landscape around Glastonbury appeared since the previous time she’d been there. The Abbey was still there, of course, by it was now surrounded by the markings of a tidy tourist industry. Once they left the parking lot and began their climb up the hill, however, things began to seem more familiar. It was early September now and it occurred to her that she had last walked this path on an evening very much like this one—only a hundred and twenty-four years ago.

The moon had not yet risen and there was hardly a streetlight in sight, so they had to rely on flashlights. The bright beams danced on the sloping path in front of them. Finally, they reached the top of the hill but, as they approached the archways of the old tower, Buffy sensed movement up ahead. She trained her light on a short pointy-looking man, wearing a violently checkered shirt, a leather coat that was just a few decades short of cool, and a fedora.

Before she could fall back in any pretense of a defensive posture, the man spoke. “Fancy meeting you all here,” he drawled. “I see you’re really sticking with it—brought the full love triangle.”

She recognized him then. Apparently, so did Angel. “Whistler,” he said.

“You know this bloke?” Spike asked skeptically.

“Immortal demon sent down to even the score between good and evil,” Buffy intoned. “Did I remember that right?”

“That’s about the gist of it, yeah,” Whistler replied, then nodded at Willow and Spike. “You two I haven’t met before, but you’re in the game now too, of course.”

“So, what are you doing here?” Buffy asked impatiently. “Is it really that time of the apocalypse already?”
“I like this place,” Whistler said casually. “Site of one of my prouder moments, actually—helped this guy pull a magical sword out of a rock here once. But you’ve already got your fancy weapon, don’t you? You’re here for something else—knowledge.”

“And is this the part where you conveniently tell us everything?” Buffy quipped.

“What can I say,” Whistler replied, regarding them sardonically from beneath the brim of his hat. “The Powers That Be are getting a little tired of watching you all groping around in the dark. Normally they like to let you humans figure things out on your own—good for the free will. But we’re in the home stretch now and when it comes to information, the other side definitely has the good guys beat.”

“Alright, enlighten us then,” Spike said, still eyeing the small man somewhat warily.

“You’ve been reading the prophesies, I take it?” Whistler leaned back against the wall of the stone archway. “I figured you must be, especially since Angel here has the hookup at Wolfram and Hart—bold move, by the way—but it’s an old tune. We’ve all been here before—big apocalypse, vampire with a soul, yadda yadda.”

“Don’t forget the Key,” Buffy interjected severely. “That wasn’t on the table last time.”

“So you have been reading the prophesies!” Whistler exclaimed, apparently pleased. “You’re right—we all thought the vampire was the key—forgot all about the fact that there’s an actual Key floating around out there. You’ve probably figured out that the role of Champion is a bit of a twofer, then. Vampire with a soul and a plus one.” He eyed them meaningfully.

Buffy nodded, slowly. She recalled something along those lines from Isaac’s description, at least. Not that it made any sense to her. The others only stared blankly.

“What do you mean, a plus one?” Angel asked, his brow furrowed in skepticism.

Whistler chuckled. “Alright, maybe not then. She knows, it looks like,” he said, nodding at Buffy. “The rest of you better read your Aberjian. You’ve had it laying around—how long now? The Champion will be two and the two will be one?”

“Well, thanks, that explains it,” Buffy snorted, shifting from foot to foot impatiently. “What else ‘ya got?”

“Fine, fine, so it’s a little vague,” Whistler waved his hands defensively. “You might want to take another look at all those parts about the Key though, the rituals too—body and soul, bound by love and by death—none of this is ringing a bell?”

“Listen, you wanker,” Spike interrupted. “Do you even know what it means? Because—”

“The Key will be forged, body and soul, by two who are bound by love and by death.” It was Willow who interjected now. “Yeah, I read it,” she nodded at the group. “But I don’t see what we’re supposed to do with that. Are we supposed to know who these two are?”

Whistler grinned at her. “If you do, there’s a hell of a lotta people who’d love to hear about it. You three,” he waved his hand dramatically at Angel, Buffy, and Spike. “You’ve been causing all sorts of confusion up there, you know. Never seen so many bets being placed. The romance— the intrigue!”

“Happy to entertain,” Buffy said sarcastically.

“Yup, it’s a mess alright,” Whistler continued, separating himself from the wall. As he walked closer
to them, he took off his fedora and twirled it in his hands. “Should have known, really. Destiny and free will—you just can’t have it both ways. Not with the big stuff, anyway. Now, you,” he pointed the hat at Angel, “we’ve had our eyes on for a while now. Ever since the Order of Dagon miscalculated the arrival of the Key to just down the block from where Darla sank her fangs into your pretty young neck. Then there was the whole deal with the Beast, plus your general tendency to wreak havoc—so much to atone for!—so when the Kalderash stuck you with a soul, we figured it had to be a sealed deal. And then—” the little man was becoming more animated as he spoke, “—then you fell in love with her and got her into that whole mess with the Master. Man, kid,” he pointed at Buffy now, “when you died that first time, the audience just went wild. Oh, no, no,” he added, noting Buffy’s somewhat disgusted look. “You really did well there. No one gave a fig about you until that moment. Slayers are boring, you know. All chosen and destined and duty-bound. But you—you broke out of the loop. After that, you chose to be the Slayer—imagine that—and you chose to be with him. That put you on the radar.”

“But when we met last time,” Buffy said suddenly, “you said you’d gotten it wrong. Because Angel lost his soul—”

“Yeah, and I told you that you were all alone back then, but that wasn’t exactly true, was it?” Whistler cocked his head to Spike now. “We were afraid we’d gotten our prophesies all mixed up, you know, since Angel was making a damn good play at ending the world instead of saving it. And you—” he gestured to Spike, “you just snuck in right under our noses. It took us a while to realize that we’d been right all along—a vampire with a soul had come forth to help rid the world of Acathla—points for unorthodox execution, too. Didn’t think the whole soul thing worked retroactively. But then, it wasn’t the big one like we’d thought.”

“So that’s it then, I’m out?” Angel said slowly, his tone flat.

“No, not so fast,” Whistler replied. “Like I said, your boy Spike here came out of nowhere. We’d been watching you for a while, Angel—we were so sure it was you—Spike didn’t have a soul and, to be honest, you just seemed like a grander personality. The bad guys thought so too. Why do you think the First was so interested in you when you came back with your soul? Now, there’s all that business with the Key, of course—the timeline—you’ll know about that,” he winked at Buffy, “but that was all pretty murky. The Acathla episode didn’t help things, but it wasn’t a deal-breaker either. But then you left her, and we all got real confused. We thought for a while maybe it was him, but not you,” he nodded at Buffy. “But then, of course you went and died again. And you, Spike, you went and did your thing in Africa, which finally put you on our radar.”

“I thought you said ‘not so fast,’” Angel interrupted.

“That I did, my man, that I did,” Whistler continued. “It was Cordelia that put you back in play, as it happens. For a while we thought it would be you and her, especially once she ascended. But then one of our own broke rank—you’ll remember Jasmine—and derailed the whole thing. If she ever snaps out of that coma, though, look out!”

“Wait,” Buffy was looking at Angel with dawning understanding and some mild revulsion. “You and… Cordelia?!”

Angel shrugged, not looking at her. “So, who is it, then?”

“Beats me,” Whistler said. “This sort of destiny is kind of like love—fickle. Could be you and Cordelia, could be the two of you,” he wagged his finger at Angel and Buffy, “or the two of you,” now he pointed to Buffy and Spike. Finally, he smirked at Spike. “Could be you and Cordelia, I suppose, but that would be quite the plot twist at this point.”
“But—” Buffy narrowed her gaze. “How can you not know? Aren’t your bosses supposed to be all omniscient or something? And the prophesy—”

Whistler shrugged. “The Powers may know—who knows what the Powers know—or maybe they don’t. Either way, the rest of us are way further down the cosmic ladder. And prophesy ain’t destiny, you of all people should have learned that by now. Think of how much ink is spilled by you mortals in your history books, trying to figure out what happened, how, and why—and that’s the past—”

“So what’s up with the trinket, then?” Spike asked, fingering the amulet on his chest.

“Oh, the soul stone, you mean,” Whistler said. “Well, I gotta say, it does put you one step ahead. That and the fact that your lady—assuming she is currently your lady—isn’t in a mystical coma. The undead and the undying—that’s our kind of power couple.”

“Wait, undying?” Buffy asked. “That’s rich. Sounds like I’ve been doing my share of dying over here.”

Whistler looked at her with surprise. “Not any more you’re not.” Buffy stared at him blankly. “You’re immortal, chickadee—didn’t you get the memo?”

“I’m what?”

“Immortal,” Whistler said again. “Ever since this one here,” he gestured at Willow now, who had been standing off to the side and observing the proceedings with mild fascination, “brought you back. Suffered any mortal wounds lately?”

Buffy shook her head in disbelief. She supposed she had gotten a little more banged up than usual a time or two in the last couple of years, but nothing that should have killed her, surely. Well, except maybe that time she got stabbed down in the Hellmouth—“That’s not possible.” She turned to look at Willow, shaking her head. “It’s not. Tara checked. She—she said I was totally human, just with a magical sunburn or something—”

“You are human, darlin’, more human than most anyone’s ever been,” Whistler said. “More alive. Tell me this—did you have any trouble adjusting?” Buffy continued to stare at him in disbelief. “Listen, I could try to kill you, but I don’t think you’d appreciate that. Don’t sweat it—it’s not that impressive in the grand scheme of things—not like you’re a Higher Being or something.”

“Good to hear Cordelia still has me beat,” Buffy said warily. “She’d like that.”

“Well, anyway,” Whistler said. “All I’m sayin’ is, if you found the prophesy confusing, you ain’t the only ones. In fact, it’s why I’m here—to give you a push. The guys up top are real anxious to have it sorted out. We’ve got two vampires with souls, two real special ladies—you can do the math on the possible combinations—so, I guess it comes down to: which of you are bound by love and by death?” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Willow cleared her throat while the other three regarded each other somewhat awkwardly.

“Well, we’ve all died at some point,” Angel said finally. “More than once, even.”

“I guess y’all better sort out your feelings then,” Whistler winked, putting his hat back on his head. He patted Willow on the back as he strolled past them casually. “Be careful down there—some powerful magics bubbling up. Spells tend to kind of… decohere. And remember, kiddos, all you need is love.”

And with that, he was off down the hill. Buffy cleared her throat.
“Well,” she said, a bit uncomfortably. “That was—something—as interludes go. Will, you wanna see if we can get inside? I think the entrance was right there.” She pointed at the archway where Whistler had been standing moments before.

Willow stuffed her flashlight into her pocket and walked forward, her hands outstretched. She drew wide motions through the air, her eyes slipping shut. “Looks like a basic concealment charm,” she said after a moment. “Ah, and a lock. Let me see if—” She placed her palms together, folding one finger than another, shook her head, then tried again. The rest of them stood watching her. “Here we go!” She said brightly about a minute later, lowering her arms. “I think—” she stepped forward and disappeared.

Angel and Spike looked around, a bit bewildered.

“I think that means it worked,” Buffy said, moving forward. “Careful, there’s stairs.” She stepped into the spot where Willow had just vanished and found herself on a dark staircase, her flashlight landing on Willow’s sneakered feet in front of her. “Good job, Will,” she said, moving forward as Spike and Angel stumbled onto the steps behind her.

Buffy led the way, being the only one who had any familiarity with the place. Carefully, the beam of her flashlight trained just underfoot, she took step after winding step down into the heart of the hill. The others shuffled slowly after her. The air was dark and damp around them and their footsteps reverberated against the ancient stone walls.

Suddenly—inexplicably—a memory arose in Buffy’s mind. She and Dawn lay huddled together, Dawn’s scrawny nine-year-old body nestled against hers. Dawn had crawled into her bed, as she often did when their parents were fighting. Her mother’s voice yelled something on the other side of the door. Buffy moved to whisper something to Dawn—but Dawn wasn’t there. Buffy was alone in the dark. She shook her head, as if trying to dislodge the memory, and refocused on the steep line of steps in front of her.

“Buffy—” Spike grabbed at her elbow from behind. His voice sounded odd, as though not quite his own—almost like—

She whipped around, blinding the rest of them with her flashlight in the process. “What is it?” she asked with concern.

He was squinting at her, a sort of puzzled expression on his face. “Nothing—” he said after a moment. “Sorry. Thought I saw something.”

She shivered, retracting the light ahead of them once more. One step. Two steps. Dawn was complaining that she didn’t want to go to the zoo on her birthday. But, wait, that wasn’t right—going to the zoo had been Buffy’s thing, before she’d gotten obsessed with ice skating instead. Something in Buffy’s head felt like it was unraveling. She tried hard to keep her focus on the present, but the memories flooded her brain. Memories of Dawn, and then—memories of not Dawn. Somewhere behind her, Willow yelped as she almost missed a step.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m good,” she reassured them.

Buffy blinked. As suddenly as it had started, the visual noise in her head was gone. Her flashlight beam fell on a flat stretch of stone up ahead. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. Everything was just as she had remembered it. The antechamber was pitch black, but a quick scan revealed the same tattered tapestries on its walls.

“This is the place,” Buffy said. “The wall on the opposite side there opens, but I don’t really know
Willow handed her flashlight to Buffy walked across the dark room. She was just about to start the same process she’d used to get them down into the hill when Spike yelped loudly.

“Bloody hell!”

“What is it?” Buffy asked, whirling just in time to see him flailing wildly.

Spike had drawn out a knife, which he now swung in the direction of his own left calf. Unbending, he displayed his conquest. A large, black spider was speared on the blade, its legs twitching feebly.

“Gavroks,” Angel said ominously.

“Gavroks?” Spike echoed in surprise. “You sure? Not something you usually find just crawling around, are they?”

“No,” Angel replied. “Not in this dimension anyway. That’s why they’re such a hot black-market commodity.”

Willow moved cautiously back towards Buffy, retrieving her flashlight. The four of them scanned the room with their beams, but it seemed like a lost cause. The space was too big.

“Maybe we should set up here, Will?” Buffy suggested. “Is there enough mojo for you to do your thing? I’m not super excited to find out where those things are nesting.”

“Oh yeah,” Willow said. “There’s more than enough power down here. I’ll need at least half an hour though. If you could just try and keep the creepy crawlies at bay, that would be super.”

“We’ve got you,” Buffy replied, drawing out a dagger. They’d all come armed. She, Spike, and Angel spread out around Willow as she crouched on the floor with her bag of magical equipment.

“Uhh, actually, Spike,” Willow looked up at him. “I’m gonna need you over here. I think you can keep the amulet on, that way you stay solid. But I’ll need you to stay in this circle and—well—ideally, try not to move.”

Spike sighed. “Buffy, you keep them spider things off me, yeah?” He stepped into the circle of white sand that Willow had just meticulously poured out onto the ancient stone floor. “I’m a bit concerned that Angelus will be so overzealous to save me that he’ll stab me in the process.”

Willow motioned Spike to sit and he plopped down reluctantly across from her. Closing her eyes, she began to chant slowly. After a minute or two, a small light began to grow out of the amulet on Spike’s chest and he eyed it somewhat nervously. The light filled the room with a faint warm glow and Buffy thought she saw some long spindly legs disappear into a crack in the wall. She and Angel circled the room, their backs to the ring of sand that held Willow and Spike, but the spiders seemed to find the light even more unnerving than Spike did. Behind them, Willow’s fingers moved delicately in the space just over Spike’s heart, as though she was weaving something that none of the rest of them could see. Her eyes were intent and her brow wrinkled. In fact, she had the look of someone who was trying to do calculus while performing open-heart surgery.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, her hands fell and the light died out. Buffy clicked her flashlight back on. A soft scuttling noise emanated from one of the corners.

“Did it work?” Spike’s voice sounded from behind her. She trained her flashlight on him.
“There’s only one way to find out,” Willow said.

He lifted the chain over his head and placed the amulet on the floor in front of him. He looked around, considered for a second, and reached a hand out to Buffy. There was a glimmer of dread in his eyes. She reached for him, her own heart suddenly beating quicker with trepidation. Her fingers grasped his and she let out a small sigh of relief. His skin was warm—not feverish hot like it had been—but almost human. She smiled at him reassuringly and he smiled back for a moment, but then something drifted in like a cloud across his eyes and he released her hand.

“Great,” Angel said from the other side of the room. “Mission accomplished. So, is that it then?”

“I don’t know,” Willow said. “I mean, does either one of you feel like you’ve—I don’t know—found yourself?”

Spike and Angel exchanged wary looks. Spike picked the amulet up off the floor and stuffed it into the pocket of his coat.

“Maybe we should check the rest of the place to be sure, now that we’re done with the spell?” Buffy suggested. “I mean, who knows, maybe we’ll find another magical sword, or a magical tennis bracelet, or at least a fortune cookie or something.”

Willow shrugged. “Or a bunch of magical spiders, but what the hey.”

Spike pulled his knife again. “No sense in not trying. Open the door, Red.”

Willow tucked away her flashlight and advanced on the wall, arms raised. Buffy came up behind her, flashlight on one hand, dagger in the other. This time the wall opened quickly, revealing another dark room. But, this time, the darkness was moving. The spiders shrank from the light, scuttling over one another. There were hundreds of them. Buffy shuddered.

“I don’t think there’s anything here for us,” Angel said behind her.

Spike moved to the front, his flashlight trained at the center of the room. The large wooden table was still there, but its surface was empty now. The shelves that lined the walls were empty too. A particularly bold spider scampered over Spike’s foot and he brought the knife hard down through its rigid body.

“Let’s seal it back up, then,” he said, his gaze still sweeping over the dark space.

Willow waved a hand and the wall closed in front of them. “Time to go?” she asked hopefully. “I think this counts as at least a partial win, and there’s some stuff I’d like to look into when we get back—I think maybe I have an idea—”

“I guess so,” Buffy answered. The beam of her flashlight was trained just to the left of Willow’s face. She could see the shadow of something like nervous restlessness on her friend’s face. She imagined her own expression might betray a similar range of emotions. There was something in the air of this dark and ancient place—something uncanny and far from comfortable.

“Yeah, I think we’ve seen all this place has to offer,” Angel said, turning back towards the tunnel of stairs.

They made the upward climb in silence. When they were finally back in the night air, they fanned out, glad to be out of the confined space. Buffy’s head spun a bit. Some of it, she suspected was due to the deep, almost gulping breaths of fresh air she had taken. But some of it was more complicated.
“So—uhh—anyone else’s head feeling a little funny?” Willow asked carefully as they climbed back into the car.

There was a moment of silence. Angel coughed uncomfortably in the back seat and, through the rear-view mirror, Buffy saw Spike shoot him a wary look. Funny didn’t really begin to describe it. It was fine, she supposed, if she didn’t dwell on it. But if she did, she was confronted with two overlapping childhoods. One where she had a sister—and one where she did not. It now occurred to her that if it wasn’t just her—if she wasn’t just going crazy and there was some actual explanation for this—then the others might be experiencing a more limited version of the same thing—not fourteen years, but four.

“Dawn,” she said looking at Willow.

Willow nodded as she turned the key in the ignition. “I guess that’s what your friend meant when he said spells tended to decohere down there.” She thought for a moment. “But it’s not gone right? You remember both versions too? I guess maybe it just kind of put a hole in whatever the monks did to weave in the new memories—”

Buffy was about to agree, then froze. The monks. If whatever residual magic they just walked into undid one memory spell, then—

She turned her head to look at Spike. His eyes were trained towards the dark car window, and Buffy got the distinct sense that he was purposefully avoiding her gaze. Next to him, Angel looked to be deep in thought, his expression set in a troubled frown. Shit. She shifted in her seat uneasily.

***

“You didn’t tell me all of it,” Spike said when they were finally alone. His expression was unreadable. Not angry, exactly. But maybe confused—or disappointed?—Buffy couldn’t quite say.

It had been after two in the morning when they’d gotten back to the school. Angel left without coming in, mumbling something about having business to take care of. Giles and Dawn had still been awake, clearly waiting for them to return. Buffy announced tiredly that Spike was more dependably solid, and she was apparently immortal but, as neither qualified as an emergency, she’d be going to bed. With that, she was off to her room, leaving Willow to explain, to the best of her ability, what they had learned. Spike had grunted ambiguously and trailed after her.

Of course, going to bed had been an ambitious goal. So, she’d been right. He did remember. And, by all accounts, he was probably right to be—whatever he was. She hadn’t told him. But how could she have? How did one describe something like that—what had happened between her and William? Especially to someone who had such an intimate stake in the matter, given that it was his own unremembered past. *Gee, I know it’s been awkward but, by the way, I basically assaulted you in a dark hallway, but I guess you were into it because we spent the next two weeks joined at the hip and—oh, yeah—after you got over me calling you by the wrong name in the heat of passion, which was your name anyway, you decided your future self was a coward, I bawled my eyes out, and we had a night of mind-blowing sex. Because we were in love. But, no pressure. But, also, SURPRISE!* It felt like the kind of speech one should finish off with jazz hands.

“I told you the practical stuff—” she began weakly.

“The *practical* stuff?” Spike snapped. “Fuck, Buffy—what was that? We were—we were—”

“I was in love with you,” she finished for him. There was no sense in dancing around it now. “First you you, then the other you—I don’t even know anymore. And you—”
“You were in love with me.” He shook his head in disbelief and set about pacing the small room. “And I—who was I?”

She didn’t really know how to answer that. She had some sense of what he was going through, of course. She, too, now had two versions of her life swirling around in her head. But there was nothing terribly earth-shattering about the revisions for her. She’d known what must have been there, beneath the spell that wove Dawn into her mind. On the car ride back, she had taken one look at the sum total of her memories and concluded that she preferred the version with Dawn in it. That was that, as far as she was concerned. She was still the same person, after all.

“Like I said,” she finally replied. “You were a good man. Spike—it doesn’t matter what happened between us then. I was a mess and somehow, in the end, I think you understood that. You understood why. And I thought that, maybe, if we could have that then I’d be able to move on.”

“It doesn’t matter—” he trailed off. Then—“Well, did you?” he asked, pausing his circumambulation of the room to stare down at his boots.

“Did I what?”

“Move on?”

“I mean, it never really came to that. This all only happened about three weeks ago for me,” Buffy said carefully. “But you have to understand—I thought I’d never see you again. At least, the second time, I got to tell you before it was too late.”

“And now?” He turned to her.

Buffy was trying her best to be patient. She wished she had even the slightest notion of what it was that he wanted from her. She hadn’t told him that she’d spent two weeks last month figuring out her feelings for his past self because she genuinely had not known how. As long as he didn’t remember, that time with William—with this version of himself he’d never known—remained just hers. But now he did. And damned if she understood what this information meant to him. Or even how he felt about her, at this point.

She sighed, running her hands through her hair. “And now you’re back. And it’s all weird again.”

He huffed with frustration. “Bloody right, it’s weird. When is it not weird?” He took a step as if to start his nervous pacing all over again, then seemed to reconsider. An accusatory finger pointed in her direction. “You know what I think is weird? How you could tell me every detail about what you did in the past but somehow leave out the fact that, during all of it, you and I managed to find time for a whole bloody tragic romance!”

Buffy had had just about enough. He clearly had no idea what the previous year and a half had been like for her. From the start, ever since he’d miraculously reappeared a few days ago, it was like he’d been continuously surprised that she even remembered who he was. Like she hadn’t mourned. Like she’d barely batted an eye and moved on. If he couldn’t understand why it might be difficult for her to talk about what had happened between them in the past—well, that was just further proof that she’d been right to keep it to herself.

“Why does that matter so much?” she said finally, her tone measured.

He had been about to turn away, but now his head snapped back and he looked at her like she was utterly insane. “Why does it— Because I’m in love with you, you bloody bint!” he practically yelled. “How many bloody times do I have to say it?”
“Are you, though?” she challenged.

He stared at her, speechless. Then—“Oh, fuck it all, not this again—”

“No, hear me out,” she said, approaching him until they stood toe to toe. “This isn’t like before. I know that, but I’m not sure you do.” She looked at him expectantly and he craned his head a bit, waiting for her to continue. “Let’s put aside for a second the fact that you haven’t actually updated me on your feelings since you got back from, you know, hell. That’s understandable. But tell me this—can you really say you love me and then completely refuse to even entertain the thought that I might love you back?”

He looked at her, puzzled. As though she had just shown him some odd thing—one that he had never seen before, and for which he had no frame of reference. “I mean, I know you said—” he began, but she cut him off.

“Don’t tell me what I said. This isn’t out of pity. Or because the world is ending. Or you’re dying. Or it’s some version of you that you barely remember.” She looked up at him, her jaw set. “I know I messed up before—I should have told you earlier—but I’m telling you now. Can you actually accept it?”

He continued to stare at her, so she lifted her chin, meeting his gaze. Her heart beat wildly within her chest and all she could hear was that same thump, thump, thump of it, vibrating all through her body. She realized that she was nearly holding her breath just as she noticed that his was coming quick and shallow. There was a glint of something like fear in his eyes—that deer in the headlights look—but there was something else too.

“Accept what?” he asked softly. She closed her eyes, not sure if she wanted to punch him in the face or collapse in a heap onto the floor. But she felt his hands on her upper arms and looked at him once more. “Say it again.” There was a slight tremor in his voice.

“I love you.” There was one in hers too.

He considered her for a moment, then stepped closer, his fingers coming up to cup her chin. She continued to hold his gaze. His lips parted slightly, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards just a millimeter as he dipped his head, like he was looking for some kind of confirmation. She looked back at him still, willing him to understand. William had understood—William had believed her. Maybe this was as close as they’d get to the moment of truth—was Spike really William, or had that part of him died? In the alley? Sometime over that century of carnage? In that cave atop the Hellmouth?

The eyes that looked back at her now were not William’s eyes. Or were they? Did a century of experience really change the basic emotions of sadness and regret? Or of hope? Spike’s eyes were soft, now—so much like William’s—and so much, she realized, like his own.

“Right, then, so you do,” he finally nodded, a bit unsteadily, and leaned in to kiss her.

But she pulled away. She thought, in the end, she deserved to hear the truth too.

“Yelling at me and calling me a bloody bint doesn’t really count as saying it back, you know,” Buffy told him, gazing at him insistently from beneath her lashes.

Spike chuckled. His other hand crept around her waist to pull her closer and he pressed a kiss to her forehead before leaning his own brow against hers. “Fucking hell, I love you, Buffy. You know I do,” he finally whispered.
She kissed him gently then, as the corners of her eyes began to prickle. She felt like a dam had broken somewhere deep inside of her. One whose holes she’d been diligently trying to plug up ever since that night in the basement. William had put a hell of a crack in it, but she’d held on. Plastered it over again. Kept it in. But now his words, that thing in his eyes, had blown the wall to tiny pieces and she’d felt the enormity of her feelings for him come rushing out. And so, it was done. There was nothing left to hide, nothing to confine, nothing to doubt. She felt herself at once elated and utterly emotionally spent. Something about the way he still leaned against her, his nose just barely brushing hers, told her that she was not alone in this.

She drew in a shaky breath. “Wanna have sex now?”

“Yeah, I do,” he replied, his voice soft and hoarse.

***

Angel knocked on the door of Eve’s room. It was late but, given their line of work, she was basically as nocturnal as the vast majority of her clients. The strip of light under the door told him that she was likely awake. And, true enough, the door opened only a moment later, revealing her standing there wrapped in a bathrobe. He hadn’t seen her this way before, barefaced and unpolished. It occurred to him how young she must be.

He narrowed his eyes. Young, but no less dangerous for it.

“Angel,” she said with mild surprise. “Was your trip a success?”

“It was—informative,” he said carefully.

She cocked a curious eyebrow in his direction. “Well, come in. I expect you’re here to elaborate on that statement.”

Angel stepped past her and into the room. It was a large suite, like his own down the hall, appointed in an elegant modern style. The firm certainly didn’t skimp on their travel budget.

“Did you know that Wolfram and Hart approached me back in 1880?” he asked, turning back to face her.

“That’s a little before my time.” He knew she was being evasive.

“That’s not a no,” he observed. “Sheds some new light on our current arrangement, too.”

“Yes?”

He didn’t know what he was hoping to get out of her, really. He’d known from the start that working with Wolfram and Hart meant making a deal with the devil. But these new memories—he assumed that’s what they must be, given that they’d appeared in his mind just like the memories of knowing a Buffy who had no sister. He struggled to wrap his mind around the implications. How could Buffy have been there, over a hundred years in the past? Time travel, surely—but that meant powerful magic. Did she know? Had she already done it? Or had he seen a future version of Buffy that did not yet exist? And then, of course, there was Spike—

“They told me I was supposed to use the Key to destroy the world. It would be quite the coincidence if my new stint as middle management had nothing to do with either that fact or everything that’s going on now,” he said coolly.

Eve considered him for a second then walked over and sat on the small couch at the center of the
room, picking up the glass of red wine she had apparently been sipping before his arrival.

“Fine,” she said finally, her tone unreadable. “You want me to be honest? The Senior Partners have a vested interest in you becoming the Champion described by the Aberjian prophesies. Or, even more accurately, they wish to prevent another candidate from taking on the role.”

“Spike.” Why was it always Spike these days, Angel thought.

“Yes,” Eve confirmed. “And who he brings with him. Buffy Summers. Willow Rosenberg. They pulled quite the disruptive bit of magic recently. The Senior Partners don’t want to see them do it again.”

“So, coming to me back then—was that part of the original plan or was that a cleanup job? Time magic is pretty disruptive too, from what I’ve heard.”

“A bit of both. We wanted to put you in the Key’s path, but we were also hoping you might go ahead and eliminate William Pratt before he ever became a problem.” Eve took a sip from her glass.

“And you’re telling me this now—why?” He looked at her warily. “You can’t think I’ll step in to help you end the world. I haven’t sold out that far.”

“And you’d rather hitch your wagon to whatever the Slayer and her friends have planned?”

“At least they’re the good guys, historically,” Angel countered.

Eve chuckled. “Are you sure you’re on the right side? You saw what happens when the good guys get their way. You remember Jasmine. You know what that was? That was the other side trying to take this prophesy into their own hands. And look where that got you.”

Angel considered her thoughtfully. “I’m still not seeing how bringing back demonic titans is gonna make the world a better place.”

“Don’t you?” The new voice came from behind him suddenly. Angel whirled around and his eyes widened in silent shock. There, in the middle of the bright mid-century modern suite, stood the Master. “You did once. How does it go? Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven?”

“You’re dead,” Angel said with disbelief.

“We’re all dead, my boy,” the ancient vampire replied in his reedy voice.

“But how—” Angel looked back at Eve questioningly. She continued to sip her wine, not at all perturbed by this turn of events.

“You remember how disappointed I was that you never took up my cause to bring the world back to its proper state,” the Master continued. “Every father hopes his son will take after him. I was pleased when you finally understood your destiny.”

“Well, sorry to disappoint you again, then,” Angel said. “I’m not that monster that you and Darla made me—not anymore—”

“No, I don’t suppose you are.” Another voice he had not heard in a very long time sounded from where Eve was seated on the couch. If Angel’s heart had been beating, it would have surely stopped now. His father sat a mere foot from Eve, his face set in a familiar look of disapproval. “There never was anyone capable of making you into anything of use.”
“What the hell is going on here?—” Angel ground out. He looked back to find the Master gone now. “I’m not here for your mind games.”

“Choose one or choose the other.” The thing that wore his father’s face was still speaking. “But by God, boy. Step up. Finally make something of yourself.”

Angel looked to Eve. She met his gaze. “You heard the man. Your friends are dangerous, Angel. They’re unpredictable and they have demonstrated a penchant for tampering with forces beyond their pay-grade.”

“And that’s why you want me as the Champion?” Angel said skeptically. “Forgive me if I don’t fully trust the impartiality of your endorsement. And anyway, it’s not all up to me, is it? Buffy—”

“You don’t need Buffy,” Eve said with a smile. “But you’re right, we can hardly expect you to take on this all alone. Would it help you if we pulled some strings and gave you back Cordelia Chase?”
Part III: The Fall of Hyperion

It was late by the time that Buffy untangled herself from Spike’s sleep-heavy limbs. She rolled over and peered, eyes bleary, at the clock on the nightstand. Almost noon. Crap. They had not gotten much sleep the previous night. There had been an edge of desperation in their lovemaking that reminded her of that final night in the basement—and then of that other final night a hundred years ago—the bottomless need to fit a lifetime’s worth into the few hours before sunrise. But then, the sun had risen, and they’d realized that nothing was forcing them to stop. The warm rays sneaked through the open curtains, licking at their skin, hardly noticed. She had kissed his sun-lit face and somehow every complication had ceased to matter. None of it could touch them. Not the fact that he was a beam of solid energy being emitted from a mystical stone. Not the fact that she didn’t know what she was at this point. Not the fact that both of them were embroiled in some cosmic soap opera, co-starring her ex, her high school frenemy, and the apocalypse.

She heard a discontented groan behind her and felt his arms tugging her back into the warm nest of blankets. Like iron to a magnet, her body responded, sliding to settle into the curve of his frame. She felt his lips on the back of her neck, still languid with sleep. His face burrowed into her hair as his arms and legs wrapped around her. She moaned, nestling her bottom into his pelvis. It was heaven.

Turning her head to kiss him, she almost missed the light knock on the door.

Dawn’s voice sounded from the other side, “Buffy—you up? Everyone’s in the library—”

Buffy groaned. “Just a second, Dawnie—I’ll be there in a—”

But Dawn was already opening the door. “Come on, you sleepmonster—” Then, she froze, her eyes wide. “Oh God— Shit. Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she stammered, her face rapidly taking on a bright shade of red. She slapped a hand over her eyes. “Uhh—take your time. Well, no, don’t take your time. I think Giles wants to talk to you—but, you know—okay, well, now you know. Okay, bye.”

With that, Dawn was out of the room. The door slammed behind her. Buffy turned to Spike, her mouth slightly open in surprise, but took one look at him and burst out laughing. He was quite the sight to behold—bare-chested, hair tousled, with a look of abject horror on his face as he stared at the now-closed bedroom door. She supposed she’d need to get better at remembering that door did actually have locks.

She put a gentle hand on his cheek, turned his head back towards her, and pressed a light kiss to the corner of his mouth. “She'll survive.”

With some effort, Spike relaxed. “I know she will,” he said sheepishly. “I guess it took me back to how you didn’t want her to know—how I didn’t really want her to know either—”

She kissed him again. “I’m pretty sure they all know. Someone will have noticed by now that you don’t exactly have your own room.”

“And you’re good with that?” he asked, reclining back onto the bed.

Buffy thought for a second. It seemed like an irrelevant question, at this point. She hadn’t liked how transparent her feelings must have seemed in the aftermath of Sunnydale. Xander had grieved Anya openly—something she couldn’t quite bring herself to do with Spike. Still, they all knew. But Spike hadn’t been there for that—to him, the idea that their relationship might be public knowledge was rather novel.
“Yeah, I’m good with that,” she told him firmly. Then added, “I mean, we’re doing this, right? — Us?”

Spike smiled a bit, as though almost in disbelief. “I guess we are.”

Buffy crawled out of the bed and padded into the bathroom to turn on the shower. “We’d better get going then. I’m sure imaginations will run wild, now that Dawn’s gone back to report why we’re not up yet with that look on her face.”

Spike chuckled. Rolling out of bed, he followed her into the bathroom. She gave him an amused glare as he climbed into the shower behind her.

“This isn’t what I meant by ‘get going.’”

He shrugged, grinning. “Like you said, yeah? Speculation already running amok. Might as well be accurate—”

Rivulets of water plastered his hair to his face. It made him look so boyish, somehow, she thought. She couldn’t help but wrap her arms around him and press her lips to his. Hands slid along wet, slippery flesh.

“None of this is gonna result in cleanliness,” she protested, furrowing her brow at him. “You don’t even need to shower. Nothing sticks to you and your fancy astral body, or whatever it is you have.”

Spike chuckled, kissed her one more time, then drew away reluctantly. “Oh, bollocks, fine—you’re right, you are. Won’t get downstairs ‘til evening at this rate. Couldn’t help myself—”

He ducked out of the shower, toweled off, and set about gathering his clothes from the floor. “Want me to find you something to eat, pet?” he called after her. His weird pseudo-body did have its peculiarities. It had turned out that not needing food was another of them.

Twenty minutes later, they walked into the library. Buffy, wet-haired, chewed on a croissant while Spike carried her mug of coffee. His own hair, despite apparently being made out of mystical soul energy, had responded to the water from the shower just the way that normal hair would—it was making good progress towards drying into a wild mess of short curls. As he held the door open for her, she reflected that this was probably as close as they’d ever get to domestic bliss. It was an odd feeling.

The room was more crowded than Buffy had expected. Giles and Wesley stood hunched over one of the circular tables, their attention fixed on a long roll of parchment, which was surrounded by several notebooks, and a voluminous number of loose pages. Dawn hovered near them and Willow and Fred stood chatting several feet away. All eyes turned to Buffy and Spike as they entered.

“Ah, Buffy,” Giles cleared his throat. “Sorry to rush you. Dawn said you were still resting.”

Dawn, for her part, was looking anywhere that was not the two of them. But the others seemed generally unperturbed. Or, at least, they were putting up a good appearance of it.

“No big,” Buffy said with all the casualness she could muster. “What’s up?”

“Well,” Giles replied, “I’d been rather hoping that you might remember something about how this monk you mentioned—Isaac, was it?—and, err,” he glanced at Spike, “Spike’s former self—how they landed on this particular interpretation of the text. Did Isaac have any idea as to how this might fit with the Order of Dagon’s mission regarding the Key?”
“Not so much, no,” Buffy said, scrunching up her face thoughtfully. “I think this was all kind of new to them. Why?”

“Well, Wesley and I have been going over the other parts of the manuscript and he was suggesting that there might be a different way of interpreting some of the sections.” Giles turned to Wesley.

“Yes,” the younger Watcher continued, pointing to a passage in the notes. “As I was saying—this looks abstract if one approaches it with a… shall we say, a Victorian lens—I suppose it is abstract, in a way—but translated differently, it’s also quite literal.” He retrieved a pen and paper and leaned over the desk, scribbling quickly, as his eyes darted between the translation and the original text. They all looked on. After a minute or two he put down the pen and handed the new page to Willow.

“What do you make of this?”

Willow scanned the page, and chuckled. “It’s—uhh—well, I guess you’d call it sex magic. The oldest kind of magic there is, really.”

Spike walked over to take the page from her. He scanned it, then approached the table to compare it to the original manuscript. “Well, I’ll be—” He snorted, shaking his head. “Of course the sodding Linear B never made sense—it’s basically a recipe, innit? Just written out all symbolic-like. And this other stuff—all that time we were puttering about, waxing poetic about signs and origins. Should’ve known the bloody thing was actually talking about naughty bits.”

Buffy sidled up to him, curious. “So, it’s what—a ritual?”

“Yes,” Willow said. “Or sort of a template for one, anyway.” She reached for the page and Spike handed it back to her. “I’d have to look at it more carefully—I can’t really say off the top of my head what it’s supposed to do. I guess this is why Whistler was insisting the whole Champion thing isn’t a single player game though. You definitely need two people for this.”

Spike looked at Buffy, eyebrows raised. She could see the beginning of a smirk tug at the corners of his mouth. Rolling her eyes, she turned to Willow. “You’re saying the Champion is supposed to—uhh—”

“Lay some pipe?” Spike supplied helpfully. “Make like the beast with two backs? A bit o’ the ol’ how’s-your-father?”

Giles cleared his throat forcefully. “And here I was, foolishly grateful that Xander isn’t present.”

Willow shrugged. “Well—yeah. I think so anyway.” Her expression was thoughtful, like the wheels in her head were turning. “Anything else stand out to you, Wesley?”

Spike mumbled something under his breath, earning him a playful jab in the ribs from Buffy. But Wesley, too, looked decidedly pensive as he returned his gaze back to the manuscript.

***

Willow gulped down the shot of whiskey, hesitated a bit, and placed the small glass gingerly onto the sticky wood of the bar. She missed a lot of things about California, but bars with decent wine and cocktails were probably near the top of the list. She’d gotten back to her room late that previous night to find Kennedy’s stuff gone. It had been a relief, until it hadn’t. She was alone again. Tonight, she hadn’t been quite ready to face the reality of it in that space.

The bartender, a beefy-looking man with a pockmarked face and some patchy remnants of short black hair, quirked an eyebrow in her direction. She scooted her glass towards him and nodded. He poured her another drink.
She supposed she looked a bit out of place in the pub at this particular moment, in her flowerchild skirt and her fuzzy sweater. She’d walked from the school, not actually intending to end up drinking alone. The walking itself had been her original goal. But then, suddenly, she couldn’t stand the fresh night air. It tore at her lungs. And so, she had ducked into the pub, grateful for its warm lighting and lived-in smell. They were in a nice part of town and, earlier in the day, the quaint establishment would have certainly been full of tourists and young professionals. But it was late. The people there now were not looking to unwind after work or to catch a bit of the local color. They were looking for the company of alcohol. Like she apparently was.

A younger man with wavy blond-ish hair caught her eye from the other end of the bar. Something in the fine-boned features of his face reminded her of Oz. She must have smiled at him a bit despite herself because he raised his beer glass in her direction and tilted his head, as if in invitation. She considered it briefly. He wasn’t bad looking. And she supposed that if she were to suddenly entertain the prospect of a one-night stand, she might prefer that it be with a man. Fewer complications that way, given her current state of mind.

But, no. This wasn’t really what she’d come here for. She shook her head lightly and the guy shrugged and went back to staring into his own drink. Not that she really knew what she’d come here for. She couldn’t think outside. Here, in the dim light, and the desperate quiet, her belly warmed by spirits—here it was easier. The wall behind the bar had a mural on it. It was clearly old, the paint dingy with decades of grime. The birth of Venus. Willow thought it was an odd choice for an English pub, but who was she to judge. And it seemed appropriate now—like the universe dropping her little breadcrumbs. Tearing her mind away from her almost-companion at the other end of the bar, she thought of Tara. Of that hymn to Aphrodite her subconscious mind had once shown her, painted in deep black and set in sharp relief against the milky white column of Tara’s back.

Buffy had told her later it was in Tara’s voice that the First Slayer had spoken to her that time. The first time they’d dipped their toes into Slayer magic. They’d come a long way since then. Herself not least of all. Willow tried to think through the day’s revelations. This could be exactly what they needed. She’d modeled the spell she’d used to activate the Slayers on the enjoining spell they’d performed all the way back then. In part, anyway. Maybe this sex magic stuff Wesley had uncovered was another piece of the puzzle. Catalyst. Medium. Ritual. Goal. They had their medium, the soul stone. She was sure of it. The intricate patterns of it, the way it had lit up with glimmering life down there below the hill, where the power of the Key had torn at the gossamer veil between dimensions. The catalyst was—love? Death? Both? Now, it seemed, they had their ritual. But the goal—what was the goal?

She drained her glass for the second time. She wasn’t drunk yet. She could still feel the liquor moving within her. There was a reason they’d first called it “spirits,” way back when. It pooled hot in her belly, ignited something in the deep cavity of her chest, and crept its way like a warm ghost up into her brain. It hit her then. Nutritive—vital—animal. Animal. Anima.—

—Soul.

***

Angel, too, was several pours deep into a shockingly bad bottle of scotch by the time that Wesley knocked on the door of his suite that evening.

“A bit early for that, no?” Wesley eyed him suspiciously as he crossed the threshold. “For you anyway.”

Angel shrugged. “It’s been a weird couple of days. Want one?”
Wesley gave a brisk nod and Angel searched the room for another tumbler. He poured the drink and handed it to Wesley before retrieving his own glass, refilling it, and collapsing back onto the sofa.

Wesley sniffed the amber liquid, took a tentative sip, and scrunched up his face in disgust. “Bloody hell, that’s horrendous.”

Angel shrugged again. “Like I said. Weird couple of days. Any news?” He asked as Wesley came over to sit next to him.

“Some,” Wesley replied. “Spike is more-or-less solid, but I expect you knew that. Sounds like you all had quite the adventure last night.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Angel replied darkly. He hadn’t spoken to Wesley or Fred since he had returned from Glastonbury. Or since he’s gone to confront Eve. “Anything I don’t know?”

Wesley took another reluctant sip from his glass. “We made some progress with the Aberjian translations. Looks like their group really did have the missing piece. It’s still a bit hazy, but we think we’ve found a new ritual embedded in the text.”

“A ritual?” Angel asked, mildly curious. Of course, it made sense. He remembered now how he’d felt when the bastard Wolfram and Hart had sent after him had dangled that scrap of old parchment in front of him—the scrap he had lost to Buffy. He’d bet his life it was why the fucker had done it. No other reason to go casually toting around an ancient prophesy. It was just the same feeling that had driven him to grab the scroll from the firm’s vaults all those years later. It was about him. Except, was it really?—

Wesley chuckled. “Sex magic, if you’d believe it. Ancient stuff. Interesting. They were working from an old translation—didn’t know what they were looking at—I doubt I would have either, mind you, if not for the last few years.”

“Sex magic,” Angel repeated. “To do what?”

“We don’t quite know yet,” Wesley answered, tapping his fingers on the thick glass of the tumbler thoughtfully. “Something to do with the Champion, from the looks of it. Or the two Champions, I guess it is?”

Angel snorted a bit at that. This just kept getting better and better. He drained his glass. “The Champion has to do sex magic. Of course he does.” He reached to pour himself another drink.

“What’s going on Angel?” Wesley asked cautiously.

Angel looked at him with an ironic smile. “Sex magic, Wes? You see anything wrong with that picture concerning yours truly?”

Wesley dropped his gaze. “You don’t know for sure that—that you can’t—” He trailed off. “Or is it Buffy? That she’s—”

Angel waved his hand dismissively. “Buffy’s always complicated. But no—it’s not that—” He looked at Wesley plaintively, willing him to understand the full import of what he was about to say. “Eve said they can bring back Cordy, Wes—”

Wesley swallowed, then leaned back into the couch and drained his own glass. “Why now?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Angel replied. “There’s more. I saw the Master—the Master, of the Order of Aurelius—him, and my father.”
“But how?” Wesley looked at him, alarmed.

“The First Evil?” Angel said. “It has to be. Giles said it appeared to them in the guise of the dead. I saw it too—back in Sunnydale—back when I first came back with my soul.”

Wesley rubbed his eyes. “It’s not surprising, I suppose, that the First Evil is entangled with Wolfram and Hart’s agenda. We suspected as much. What did it want?— And Eve?”

“Me as the Champion,” Angel said ruefully. “Enough to make you a bit skeptical, right? Their endorsement, coupled with this stuff about the sex magic—Cordy—I don’t like where it leads.”

Wesley sighed, then. “Skeptical, yes. But I know better at this point than to trust prophesies to the letter. And if they can really bring back Cordelia—well, we’ve already wagered our souls, what’s one more pound of flesh in the bargain. Do what you think is best, Angel,” he said, rising from the couch. “We’ll try to figure out more tomorrow, as far as the ritual is concerned. But we’ll support you—Fred and I—come what may.”

With that, he gave Angel a hearty pat on the shoulder, and left him alone with his thoughts. These thoughts were numerous, and none of them were particularly encouraging. Angel dropped his head against the back of the couch. Sex magic. Just brilliant. Someone up there—or down there—had a hell of a sense of humor. That’s why Eve had dangled Cordy in front of him. It had to be. Because of course it couldn’t be Buffy. The thought of convincing Buffy to help him save the world with sex magic seemed downright comical at this point. But Cordy—he’d have thought it could work, if not for the fact that it was precisely what Wolfram and Hart apparently wanted him to believe. He supposed he had found himself down there under the old hill of Avalon, and he didn’t like what he saw. The hunger for power—for validation—

He opened his eyes. Time for another drink. He reached for the bottle—

“You’ve had enough, don’t you think?” Her voice made him jump.

“Cordy—” his mouth gaped. It was like he had summoned her with his thoughts because, suddenly, there she stood. Her hair was a bit different but, judging by the critical quirk of her mouth and the set of her hips, she was the same Cordelia he’d known before—well, before it all. But it couldn’t be—it was another trick. He narrowed his eyes. “You’re not her.”

She scoffed. “Yeah, I missed you too.”

“You’re the First Evil,” Angel said resolutely, tipping more of the scotch into his glass. The room swam around him. Good. Maybe he’d be unconscious before this thing had the chance to get in his head.

But Cordelia strode over and took the bottle and the glass from his hands. “Never met the First Evil,” she said matter-of-factly as she deposited both onto the neighboring coffee table. “Different circles. But, as far as I know, it’s incorporeal. Though if you need more convincing, I’d be happy to give you a good slap on the face—you just let me know—”

Angel stared at her in disbelief. “But how—?”

“The Powers That Be owed me one. This is me calling in that favor, so you better listen.” Her voice was softer now as she sat beside him. “I don’t have much time, Angel. And you’re awfully close to being in big trouble.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, surrendering. Maybe she was a drunken hallucination, hell if he knew at this point.
“I’m not a drunken hallucination,” she said, as though she’d read his mind. Then she took his hand in hers. The touch of her skin was warm, reassuring. “You have to listen to me, Angel. You can’t lose sight of the big game now—you’ve gotta get back on track—”

He looked at her, eyes bleary. “The big game? I know you’ve been out of the loop, Cordy, but me trying to play the big game is what got us into this mess to begin with—prophesies and destinies—”

“Screw the prophesies,” she told him forcefully. “And the destinies. And this is coming from the girl who earned her wings by having visions.”

“But I can’t be the Champion,” Angel said, his tone defeated. “It’s what the bad guys want—I know I took this gig at Wolfram and Hart because I thought I could do some good from the inside, but they’re playing me—”

“So don’t let them,” Cordelia replied firmly. “Sometimes choosing means choosing not to do something. And the Champion gig? Vastly overrated.”

“But the Shanshu prophesy—Buffy and Spike—” His thoughts were growing scattered.

“Also overrated. You were never doing it for the prophesy, Angel. You weren’t doing it for destiny. And, good God, I hope you weren’t doing it for Buffy,” she said, her voice growing sharper as she uttered that last sentence.

“No, not for Buffy,” he said, squeezing her hand. “But—”

“No buts.”

“But they offered to bring you back—to wake you up—” Angel knew he must sound like he was nearly pleading. He didn’t much care. “How can I—”

“Why do you think I’m here?” she cut him off. Her eyes were glistening a bit. “I can’t stay, Angel. This isn’t my story anymore and I can’t let them pull me back into it. I made my choice a while ago. But you—you don’t do this for Buffy, and you don’t do it for me—you do it for the greater good. For whatever small part you can play in that—”

He looked at her desperately. “But how will I know? You were always there to tell me—first Doyle, then you. For so long, you. But now I’m flying blind, Cordy.”

“Not blind,” she smiled at him. “Trust yourself. Trust your friends. Hold on to that soul of yours—you wouldn’t believe how little the good guys up on high actually understand about human souls. It’s rough going up ahead, so don’t disappoint me.”

“You really have to go?” he asked, lacing his fingers through hers.

“I do,” she blinked at him, distinctly teary-eyed now. “I’m sorry we never got the timing right—and sorry that I can’t take on this one with you.” He only nodded, his jaw twitching a bit as he clenched his teeth to hold back his own tears. She smiled again. “But how about one last for the road?”

She kissed him then, and—in one mind-searing flash—he saw everything.

It wasn’t the kind of crown of thorns he’d been hoping for.

***

Wesley and Fred had arrived at the school late that morning, both pale faced. They’d gotten a call
from Los Angeles. Suddenly and inexplicably, Cordelia had passed. The coma had left little room for hope, of course, but some hope was better than none. Spike stayed on the periphery as the rest of the group—Buffy, Giles, Dawn, Willow, and especially Xander—absorbed this news. He hadn’t really known Cordelia, after all. He had come down that morning, intent on combing through the translation notes he now remembered producing, with bizarre clarity, over a hundred years ago. Then, of course, there was the rest of the scroll. And so, not knowing what else to contribute, he returned to this task.

His eyes raked over the tightly packed lettering of the manuscript. It felt like just yesterday that he and Isaac had been arguing over the details of it—yesterday, and a lifetime ago. He tried not to think too much about it. The whole bloody thing made his skull feel like it was about to collapse in on itself. They’d talked about it, he and Buffy. All in all, he was surprised she was dealing with the cognitive dissonance as well as she was—fourteen years’ worth of conflicting memories had to be a good and thorough mindfuck. But then, he supposed, it made sense that she preferred this revised version of herself. The version that wasn’t all alone in the world. Made sense that she’d want to hold on to that, even if it now felt like something of a hallucination.

His own extended memories of Dawn proved to be rather superficial—no more than a few amended moments here and there. He was glad of that. It reassured him to know that the tenuous relationship they had built was truly theirs, for whatever that was worth. No, his trouble lay elsewhere. Who’d have thought that two bloody weeks could have turned his entire world on its bloody head. He shuffled the pages of notes, eyes running over the neat rows of slanted script. He’d written this. It had nagged at him when he’d first found out—the not knowing—like the anxiety that came with a bad hangover. It hadn’t helped that the Slayer had been so damn poker faced over the whole thing. He supposed he got why she had been, now. Now that he remembered—

Dvijau. That was the line he’d used to try to distract her from clutching after that bit of sentimental dross he’d been scribbling. Right after they’d—he still didn’t quite know what to make of what had happened between the two of them. He’d been utterly besotted with her, of course, pathetic wanker that he’d been back then. He hadn’t really understood—Spike paused, tapping his pen against the page—he hadn’t understood until, in the end, he had. That was the most bizarre part of it all. The way his memories formed a perfect loop between that final night in 1880 and the moment he felt himself disintegrate into nothingness inside the Hellmouth a century and a quarter later.

Yes, that was the part he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around—the impossible place where his memories flowed in on themselves like a bloody möbius strip. Back then, the outward plane of it had allowed him to understand her by making him understand himself. Had shattered his romantic ideals of love and sacrifice and death and replaced them with something more jagged and more true. Now, his mind was gliding along the inward curve—right back to where he’d started.

He tore his eyes from the page, which had in any case grown blurry before his unfocused gaze, and looked towards the group of mourners gathered some ten feet away. The Scoobies didn’t seem quite as torn up about it as the other two, but he recognized in their downcast eyes that uncomplicated sorrow for the fall of a fellow soldier. He wondered if his own demise had elicited even that much. Buffy stood on the outer edge of the circle, arms crossed over her chest, chewing on her lip. She’d cared, he supposed. He was ready to admit that now. To take her at her word. Having seen her through William’s eyes, it was impossible not to. If the stakes weren’t so damn high, he supposed he might have had a proper giggle over the fact that his first impulse was to be jealous of his former self. Of course, back then, the jealousy had flowed the other way.

But bugger all, it was never that simple. Now, this fragile thing they’d found was all wrapped up in prophesies, and destinies, and the fate of the whole bloody world hung on their choosing—something. Each other? He’d been dead long enough to know that fate was a vindictive bitch. The
Shanshu business had sparked a small and fretful glimmer of hope within him. He could have a real place in this story. Back when he’d been William, he was sure he would have dived in head first—hungry for heroism, and destiny, and glory. He remembered the odd feeling this godforsaken manuscript had kindled within him. Like an amorphous sense of purpose. It was still there as he looked at the damned thing spread out in front of him now. But now, he hesitated. A bloke had to be realistic. He ached to crawl back into that bed with her. Bury himself between her thighs and drown out the world with the feel, the taste, the smell of her. There was a time when he surely would have, and sod the rest of it.

Now—well, now he’d do what was needed. He knew he must. For the world, for her, for the nagging pull of his own soul. He supposed that one bit of the damn prophesy had been right—he had found himself down there in the heart of that ancient hill. Found the part of him that finally, once and for all, allowed him to see himself the way she saw him, just as he’d found the part that was once more ready to lay his life down upon the altar of that vision. Angelus could pretend that there was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but he, Spike, knew better. He’d live until he died, sure enough. He’d been ready to die many times. But this was only the second time that a small, soft part of him regretted it. He hadn’t known of the first time—not until it flared up in his mind, almost sending him tumbling down those stairs under the hill. He’d watched her fall asleep in his arms, knowing that she wouldn’t be there when he woke. Knowing that he wouldn’t know to miss her. The wet trails of her kisses still burned on his flesh—like brands—like streams of living blood—

He lowered his gaze to the page again. *Dvijayos-mamsakara-prana-tejasi.* Of course, he wouldn’t have seen it back then—

***

Spike appeared to be in deep contemplation, eyes squinting and brow furrowed, when the others finally rejoined him. Buffy briefly thought he made quite the picture, sitting there, arms bare and hair lightly mussed from where he’d run his hand through it one too many times. He sat hunched over the loose pages, much like she’d seen his former self do—but the differences were notable too—Spike had none of William’s quiet composure. His knees were splayed wide, muscles rigid, if in protest of the quiet nature of his task. Long fingers toyed with a plastic ballpoint pen, tap-tap-tapping.

Actually, she found that the whole scene was much sexier than it had any right to be, especially given the mood. Buffy placed a gentle hand between his shoulder blades, causing him to blink and look up at her as though she’d just snapped him out of a trance.

She smiled at him affectionately, suddenly conscious that they were far from alone. “How’s it going?”

He blinked again. “Sorry ‘bout your friend,” he said a bit self-consciously. “I’d just been wondering—well, what Giles Jr. over there said about the translation being too Victorian got me thinking. Not terribly shocking, is it, that a monk wouldn’t think to look for sex magic. And I’d like to think I’ve learned a few things since then.” He nodded at Wesley then rifled through the scattered pages. “Like this bit here—*mamsakara*—we thought that meant made from the flesh. So, the Key is made body and soul, or some such. Makes sense. But that word’s got another meaning—blood. In fact, I’d bet whoever wrote this knew that. Not just body and soul, but blood and breath. It’s always got to be blood—remember I told you that once.”

Buffy shook her head, trying to piece it together. “So, is this just Glory 2.0? The First Evil wants to use Dawn to open a portal to some hell dimension?”

Wesley was leaning over the pages next to Spike now. His own eyes scanning the contents. “Actually,” he said thoughtfully, “in this case, I’d wager that it’s this Glory who was the copy-cat.
Though, preemptively, as it were. This is what the Key was meant to do. It’s why it exists in our world. You’re right, I think—” he looked at Spike. “Body and soul, blood and breath.”

“Fine,” Buffy said. “So, we’ve still dealt with this before. Dawn’s blood, my blood—whatever.”

“That’s the thing though,” Willow spoke up now, coming to sit beside Spike. “I’ve been thinking too—back then we just wanted to stop Glory from opening the dimensional portal. Like, I think that’s really our go-to plan, apocalypse wise.”

“Solid plan, though?” Xander added, his face still grim from the morning’s news. “I mean, aside from the fact that we’re always one step too late and people keep getting sent to hell or otherwise dying in the process.”

That was true enough, Buffy thought. Angel and Acathla, her and Dawn and Glory—always blood. Blood in, blood out. But—

“But not this last time,” she said suddenly. “Not with Spike or the scythe. That wasn’t blood—and it was our move—we took the first shot there—”

“Well, that’s exactly what I was thinking,” Willow said, visibly excited now. “We keep playing defense, but what if we went on the offensive like last time? Usually, we’re the ones trying to shut down the dimensional portal but what if this time we’re the ones who are supposed to open it?” The others stared at her, not quite comprehending, but Buffy was intrigued. Meeting her gaze and finding some reassurance there, Willow continued. “See, the bad guys want to use the Key to give the Old Ones a way back in, but something that Whistler said got me wondering. He said this is our chance to fix the scales for good. The good guys have kind of checked out, but they gave us this really important tool to manage things in our own—souls—real, responsible, hold-you-to-account free will.”

“Of course,” Giles said suddenly, realization dawning on his face. “Demons without souls don’t live on earth.”

“They don’t?” Buffy said, mildly taken aback. Somehow, this seemed like something she should have known.

“They don’t!” Willow confirmed energetically. “Remember your crazy demon roommate freshman year? How she needed your soul to stay here—”

“So, what have we been doing this whole time? I mean, demons are evil, right? That’s why I spend most of my time stabbing them with pointy things? Now you’re telling me they had souls this whole time?”

Even as she said it, Buffy knew she’d moved beyond such hard and fast distinctions a long time ago. How else did one justify leaving Dawn to hang out with Clem?

Willow bounced back and forth a bit, her momentum temporarily stymied. “Well, I mean, ‘soul’ is kind of a relative term. Maybe it’s more of a metaphysical distinction? Plants have souls, they’re just shaped a bit differently than human souls. Demon souls are too. And, well, there’s lots of soul-having humans walking around being all sorts of shitty.”

“It’s true.” Giles added, thoughtful now. “There’s only one kind of earth-dwelling demon that gets by without a soul—the vampire. Because vampires aren’t born, they’re made. They’re like a hole in the cosmic order.”

“Okay,” Buffy replied, not sure where this was going. “So—”
“So,” Willow said conclusively, “I think this is our chance to plug the hole. That’s why the First has been sniffing around Angel and Spike. That’s why the prophesy is about a vampire with a soul. The bad guys want to use the power of the Key to open the floodgates to the lower realms and let the Old Ones back in. But what if we used it to open a door to the higher realm? Then we could use the soul stone like we used the scythe, but for a different kind of ritual—not death, but life—restoration!”

Giles ran a hand through his hair, his expression shifting from confusion, to skepticism, to captivated interest. “You mean the Ritual of Restoration the Kalderash used to re-ensoul Angelus?

Willow beamed. “Well, sort of. Maybe more like a superpowered version—it would be brand new magic, but I think I can do it. I did it with the scythe, anyway. The pieces are mostly here already—”
She paused for a second, then continued. “And I really think this could work—guys, we could give every single vampire their soul back—”
But that ritual is temporary—” Buffy said slowly. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe in Willow. She’d come to her friend a year ago with a half-baked idea born out of the First’s taunting. She wasn’t alone—hadn’t been alone for a long time—and, if anything, it was the world’s insistence that she should be alone that had put her and Faith at constant odds with one another. Willow had taken that idea, muttered something about feminism—power over, power with—and spun it into an ingenious bit of magic that had literally changed the rules of the game. But this—Buffy had trouble wrapping her head around it. “It’s a curse, right? Wouldn’t it all go poof as soon as one vampire had a happy?”

Willow shook her head, her eyes dancing with excitement. “That’s what I’m saying. I think I can change that part of it. They’d still be vampires, but they’d be more like other earth demons, or humans, really. They’d be accountable—and free to choose. And, metaphysically, we could lock up this plane for good. It’d be real balance.”

Giles plopped himself down into a chair at the opposite side of the table. Buffy had half-expected him to argue immediately, just as she had the previous time, but it seemed that he too had re-evaluated what Willow was reasonably capable of—and, more importantly, what she could be trusted to attempt.

It was Dawn who spoke up. She had been silent up until this point, hanging back to the periphery of their circle. “So, what does this mean for me? I’m the Key, right? If there’s the door, I’m the one opening it—” Buffy moved to protest, but Dawn turned to her forcefully. “No, Buffy, this is my thing—you took on it for me once. This is my choice.”

Willow frowned a bit now. “Well, that’s where I’m not sure,” she said. “Opening a gate to the lower realms takes blood. But the higher realms—I think that’s where the soul comes in. If Spike’s right, then it’s the union of body and soul, blood and breath. So, I’m not sure that Buffy’s blood would even work—not on its own anyway—”

“Spike,” Buffy suddenly blurted out. The wheels in her head were turning, and Spike looked up at her, confused. She tried to pull it all together. If there was a way to keep Dawn out of it—“It was Spike’s soul that brought the Key into this dimension—the monks said that the Key needed something to pull it here, to give it form—what if?”—

“What if they’re still connected, you mean?” Willow caught on. “Like you and Dawn?”

“It’s possible,” Giles said thoughtfully. “It certainly helps explain how the monks were able to render the Key human. Though I don’t know how we would go about verifying it.”

“Wait,” Dawn interjected. “Are you saying my soul came from Spike, somehow? But what does that mean? How does he also have a soul?” She was looking at Spike with mild alarm.

“Well, souls aren’t a finite thing,” Willow explained. “They’re more like a quality or a kind of motion. I wasn’t there to do the magic, obviously, but if I understand it right, you piggy-backing on Spike’s soul didn’t diminish his—so then—” she scrunched her face thoughtfully, “him drawing out the Key aspect of it shouldn’t diminish yours. I guess if the Key was made from Buffy and Spike then, in a ritual sense, they are the Key. Substitutions are pretty standard in magic already, and here—”

Dawn wrinkled her nose, looking from Buffy to Spike. “So you guys are basically, like, my parents in this super weird magical way? Good thing this didn’t come up right off the bat—not sure I could
have handled it at fourteen—"

"S’alright, nibblet," Spike said, looking himself not quite certain what to do with this new take on the situation. "We’re all just blood and memories, with some metaphysical glue to hold it all together. Like I said before, way I figure, it doesn’t much matter how you start out."

Next to him, Wesley was riffling through the notes. "This would explain the inclusion of the ritual," he said, pensively. "You don’t need sex magic to open a dimensional portal. But for something like this—all this business about how ‘two become one’—if Buffy and Spike could essentially stand in for the Key—"

"Hey! Just like the Spice Girls always said—" Xander contributed.

But Buffy bit her lip. "So the prophesy’s not about Angel then—he doesn’t have a connection to Dawn—"

"No, he doesn’t—" Wesley replied. "Though I suppose, had Cordelia survived, he may not have needed to. There’s more than one way to knock on the door of the higher realms—involving a Higher Being is a shortcut, if anything."

"But Cordelia’s gone," Buffy added flatly.

Wesley thought for a bit then, his expression growing troubled. "Yes, and we ultimately have Wolfram and Hart to blame for that. I imagine we could still find a workaround for his lack of direct connection with the Key, but there’s another issue with Angel and this ritual—a much more basic one, given that it’s sex magic—and I suspect precisely why Wolfram and Hart threw their weight behind him as the Champion."

Spike snorted. "Sorry, ironic is all."

"He’d lose his soul," Buffy said gravely.

"If I had to guess, I’d say this is Wolfram and Hart’s contingency plan," Wesley went on. "Even if we do the ritual our way, putting Angel at the center of it leaves a loophole. He’d sacrifice his soul to return all the others but his very existence would then maintain the status quo."

"So, he can’t do it," Willow said. "Easy peasy."

"Yes," Wesley nodded. "The question is, will he accept that? And if he does, will Wolfram and Hart?"

***

They were all still gathered in the library when Angel and Eve arrived at the school just after dark. That was what Xander had shouted anyway, not deigning to leave his seat in the common room. The door had been propped open and Angel entered quietly, Eve trailing behind him. Fred stood, draped over Wesley’s shoulder, passively observing something that he was scribbling. Willow and Giles sat at the same table, heads craned over heavy books. They all stiffened a bit upon seeing him, but seemed to recover quickly.

Fred disengaged herself from Wesley and came over to Angel before he and Eve could approach the rest of the group.

"They’re just finishing something up," Fred said, looking at Angel a bit anxiously. It all felt a bit off, but he nodded, so she continued. "Just give them a couple more minutes and then we can all—uhh—"
go over what we’ve found.”

“Where’s Buffy and Spike?” Angel asked, with what he hoped passed for general indifference. “Xander said they were in here with you all.”

“Oh,” Fred said, looking around the large room. “They’re here somewhere. I think they got bored with looking at spells. I’m reaching a limit myself, but I think they’re almost done.”

Angel nodded and turned on his heel, inspecting the large stack-filled room. Whatever was happening over at that table, it was clear that Fred had been given the mission of preventing him from asking too many questions. So, he strolled slowly in the other direction, half-curious where Buffy and Spike had moved off to, half-dreading the answer.

He saw them from afar, tucked into a corner, heads bowed together almost conspiratorially. Spike leaned casually against a bookshelf, and Buffy stood between his splayed feet. God, they were actually holding hands. Spike had said something that caused her to hang her head and laugh self-consciously. But she didn’t pull away. Looking up at his sneering face, she smiled, her lips forming words that Angel couldn’t quite make out. Spike tugged on her hands, drawing her to him—and she went, wrapping her arms about his waist. He pulled that stupid coat around her, hiding their bodies from view, but there was nothing to conceal their faces. They looked so damn carefree—happy, even—Angel didn’t think he could stomach it. Spike tilted his head and kissed her. Once, then twice. It was the tender innocence of the gesture that made Angel finally avert his eyes.

He turned to find Eve watching him watching them. There was an interested look on her face that unnerved Angel. He hadn’t really wanted to include her in this meeting, but she had insisted. Intent on hedging his bets, as far as remaining in Wolfram and Hart’s good graces was concerned, he had relented. He wondered if it was himself or Eve that had earned them the distrustful welcome. He had to assume that the stakeholders of Wolfram and Hart were not wholly unaware of the bigger picture that his and Buffy’s teams had only just begun to uncover. The offer to return Cordy had been simply too strategically timed. And now that she was gone— Angel refused to indulge in the luxury of mourning. There was just too much at stake. Now that Cordy was gone, he would need to convince Wolfram and Hart that their investment in him had not been misplaced. His gaze flickered briefly back to Buffy and Spike.

He wished they wouldn’t make it so damn obvious. He’d known, of course. He’d known that last time back in Sunnydale, known when Buffy had shown up in LA afterwards all glassy-eyed, known as soon as he saw Spike standing behind her when they’d first arrived at the school. If there’d been any doubt left in his mind, it had been thoroughly erased when Buffy’s anger with Spike’s posturing was replaced with wide-eyed rapture as soon as she’d realized she could touch him. Spike’s words then had cut deeper than Angel would have liked to admit. The bastard had been right—he, Angel, could have been at the center of all of this. If only he’d insisted on staying, on being her Champion and wearing that damn amulet himself. But then again—the canker of doubt burned in his mind—would she really have let him? And where would that have left them now? On some level he knew, just as she did, that their time had passed. He just wished it didn’t have to mean that it was Spike’s time, petty as that made him.

“You still have feelings for her, don’t you?” Eve’s tone was quiet, barely above a whisper as she came up behind him, but leading.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” Angel told her, turning and meeting her gaze, challenging her to prod further.

“I’d say, given our current situation, it’s very much my business—actually, it’s very much everybody’s business,” she replied meaningfully. “Have you given my proposal any further thought?
I suppose part of it is moot now, but the rest—"

“I have.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Not yet.”

“You still have feelings for her,” Eve said, not asking this time. “Was Cordelia the wrong card to put on the table, then? Should we have a different conversation?” She turned her eyes back to Buffy and Spike.

Angel followed her gaze. They were still nestled together in that corner, blissfully oblivious. “And what would that conversation look like?” He asked impassively.

“We want you so succeed, Angel,” Eve said simply. “Is Buffy an asset to that success, or is she a liability?”

It clicked for him in that moment. He needed to act before it was too late. He turned to Eve coolly, “I think it’s time we find out.”

With that, he walked purposefully back toward the table where the others still sat working. Taking not a moment to look down at the contents of the table’s surface, he fixed Wesley and Fred with a stern gaze. “Pack up your stuff.”

They looked him aghast.

“Sorry?” Wesley finally said, blinking at him.

“I said pack up your stuff. We’re leaving.”

“There’s no need to rush their work,” Eve spoke up behind him, but he waved her off.

“I think this collaboration has reached the limit of its usefulness,” Angel said loudly.

That had the desired effect. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Buffy and Spike making their way back towards the group.

“What’s this, then?” Spike asked, eyeing Angel warily. Next to him, Buffy mirrored the look.

“I was just saying that it’s time we head back to LA,” Angel repeated, a bit more evenly now. “You all clearly have things handled here.”

“But Angel,” Fred began, her voice uncertain. “We said we’d help—”

“And you did help,” Angel cut her off. “Spike is solid, we’re swimming in prophesies—I’d say it’s time we handled our own business.”

“Now hang on here—” Spike began, but Buffy put a hand on his arm.

“What is this about, Angel?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

Angel turned to her, scoffing. “And here I thought I’d have your support on this. Weren’t you the one who sent me away last time? Made me the ‘second front’ guy? Well, you do things your way, and we’ll do it ours. We’ll see who ends up being the second front this time, but I’ll bet we’re both capable if that’s how you want to play it.”
Buffy was looking at him incredulously. “So, you’re just gonna—what?—save the world on your own? Take your ball and go home? That’s real heroic—”

That stung a little. Angel scowled at her. “Frankly, I’d rather do that than stay here and watch you and Spike making eyes at each other.” She winced at that. Behind her, Spike was looking increasingly murderous, but that was the least of Angel’s concerns. He continued more intentionally now. “You remember what Whistler said, Buffy. It won’t pan out, all of us working together. You’ll need to make a choice. Just don’t take too long. Wesley, Fred, plane leaves at midnight. I’d recommend that you plan to be on it.”

With that he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

“Angel—” Buffy called after him plaintively. But it was no use.

***

“So, anyone have a theory on what just happened?” Willow said as Eve disappeared through the door behind Angel.

Buffy chewed her lip. “I don’t know. But I don’t like it.”

Next to her, Spike let out a heavy sigh.

“Wolfram and Hart offered to bring back Cordelia,” Wesley said slowly, his tone dark.

“What?” Fred turned to him incredulously. “You didn’t tell me that—”

“They want him as the Champion,” Wesley continued, ignoring her. “He knows that. And he knows at least some of the problems involved—we talked about it after our initial discoveries yesterday. But he was considering it. Now that Cordelia’s gone, though—it’s all too well timed for my comfort—”

“Well, we should go back with him, then,” Fred supplied. “Tell him what we learned today. Keep him from doing anything stupid.”

Wesley nodded and set about collecting his notes. “I’ll leave this all with you—the notes, the Scrolls—” he was saying to Willow and Giles.

“You can’t have it both ways, Slayer,” Spike spoke quietly from behind Buffy’s shoulder. She shot him a questioning gaze and he continued. “Angel’s right—which makes me plenty nervous, mind you, as he’s most often right when he’s gearing up to do something evil—but you know there’s not room here for the both of us. Leastways, I hope you do.”

Buffy sighed tiredly. She supposed that she did know that. It was all just too damn complicated. It bothered her, too, that the universe, in its seemingly infinite quest to fuck with her head, had made her feelings for the two soul-having vampires in her life basically inextricable from the grand narrative of which of them got to play the hero and save the world. And apparently reap some kind of holy grail reward as a result. Though, she had to admit, to live until you die sounded like it was right up there with death being your gift as far as cryptic prophesies went. She looked at the door through which Angel had just disappeared. Was part of her still waiting on him, just as she supposed that part of him was still waiting on her? She’d told him last year that sometimes she did think that far ahead, but was that future anything other than a projection of her girlhood fantasies?

Spike was looking at her a bit expectantly now, uncertainty slowly creeping into his eyes. The appealing thing about their relationship had always been that it was never supposed to happen. Wasn’t supposed to go anywhere. That was the guilty pleasure of it and when, in spite of itself, the
whole thing suddenly had shed its masochistic wrongness, that same fact made it feel refreshingly open-ended and full of possibility. But that was before he spent a year haunting her dreams, prolonging her mourning. That was before they both knew that he’d first fallen in love with her over a century ago. That was before the next big apocalypse had turned into a tantric sex workshop.

She took his hand and pulled him some distance from the group. They didn’t seem to notice or care, being too pre-occupied with organizing their joint research. This wasn’t really the time for a private discussion, but she owed him some glimpse into the trashfire that represented her feelings on the current situation.

“Would you still want to be with me if the world wasn’t ending?” she said.

He seemed a bit taken off guard by this apparent shift of subject, but eventually let out his own sigh and looked at her ruefully. “I reckon I’d wanna be with you more if the world wasn’t ending, love. If that’s even possible. We’d hunt and we’d drink and we’d shag. You’d get to take that bloody poetry class you’ve apparently been hung up on. Then you’d realize what a God-awful poet I really was, and we’d shag some more. But we take what we can get, eh?” His gaze was somewhere far away now. “And that’s me—I’m not so sure about you.”

She was about to protest, but stopped herself. “You’re right. I meant what I said—I love you—but you’re right. I’m not sure I know how to function when the world isn’t ending. And this—me, you,—Angel. We could speculate wildly on what it would look like if the fate of the world didn’t depend on it. But it does.”

“Well, then, consider me a lucky bloke, Slayer,” he smiled at her reassuringly. “Cause it’s sounding like the way we stop the world from ending is you and I having a nice ritualized shag—and one outta three ain’t bad for me.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle at that. “Looking on the bright side, huh?”

“You know it,” he winked at her, then sobered. “I mean, let’s not beat around the bush, yeah? I figure there’s a damn good shot I’ll catch on fire again in the process—or just blink out of existence or some such—but what a way to go—”

This had occurred to her, of course. His whole state of being at the moment was just so tenuous. But she still wished he hadn’t actually said it.

She took his hand and squeezed it, looking back to watch Wesley and Fred gathering their belongings. “Let’s not worry about that now,” she said.

“Go be heroes?” he said a bit ironically.

“Something like that.”

***

They made love slowly and methodically that evening. The hunger simmered low now, sated somewhat by their constant contact but drawn out by the seemingly inevitable eventuality of separation. They were almost asleep when they heard his voice.

“It won’t save you, you know,” Angel said grimly.

Buffy nearly jumped out of her skin.

Beside her, Spike scowled. “What the bloody fuck, Angelus?”
The room was dark. The door still closed. Buffy’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I thought you were on a plane back to LA?”

Angel ignored her, strolling closer to them. “Never mind me. You should be worried about yourselves. From beneath you it devours and, trust me, it doesn’t care how many times you screw each other’s brains out along the way.”

Spike slid out of bed, seemingly unconscious of his nakedness as he stalked towards Angel. Something about this didn’t feel right. No, scratch that, Buffy thought—everything about this didn’t feel right. That’s when Spike took a swing at Angel. His fist sailed directly through the right side of Angel’s head, but Spike kept his balance—as though he’d seen it coming.

“Thought so,” he glared at the apparition. “Sorry, mate, not interested.”

“You should be,” the thing that looked like Angel retorted. “Not quite ready to let each other go, are you?”

“Save it,” Buffy ground out. “We’ll do what we have to do—we’ve shown you that. Now, if all you’ve got is more mind games, fuck off. I need my beauty sleep.”

“And you, Spike?” It was still looking at him. “Are you so confident?”

“It’s like the lady said,” he replied, turning back to the bed. “Bugger off.”

Buffy lifted the covers as Spike moved to slide back into bed beside her. She’d known the First Evil was bound to reappear eventually. But, now that the shock of seeing it wearing Angel’s face had worn off, all she could summon up was a mild annoyance. It always showed up to pick at old wounds—to spout off uncomfortable truths. This time was no different. And, for lack of other options, it seemed that the best they could do was ignore it.

But then, Angel’s image flickered before them and Spike froze. His tall and looming form was replaced by the considerably smaller figure of Halfrek. Not Halfrek as Buffy had known her, but rather as she’d glimpsed her that one time in the past—in London. Buffy rolled her eyes but one look at Spike beside her made her blood run cold. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

“I’m going to ask you a very personal question and I demand an honest answer, William,” Halfrek’s shape simpered.

“Fuck you,” Spike answered coldly.

The thing let out a tinkling laugh. “Yes, yes, that’s a rather stronger answer than you gave me last time—if only you’d gotten hold of your manhood earlier—just think of what could have been. But you’re still not quite there, are you? Still following women around like the sad puppy dog you are.”

Spike was looking up at the thing’s delicate features, jaw clenched. “Fuck. You.”

It laughed again. “You only wish.” It turned its head to Buffy now. “You can fuck her, of course. But where has that ever gotten you? You’re nothing to me.” It looked down its nose haughtily. “And no matter how many times you fuck her—even if it’s against her will—she knows it too.” Buffy blinked and found her own face looking back at her now. Oh God—that bathrobe. Her chest had seized up and she forced herself to breathe. Still, she could feel the bile rising in her throat. The thing smiled knowingly, then trained its gaze on Spike again. “You’re beneath me,” it spat, and was gone.

Buffy closed her eyes took another forceful breath, trying to calm her nerves. It sort of worked. She could feel her heart rate gradually slowing down, the wriggling thing in her gut quelling. Suddenly
she felt angry at herself for letting the First get under her skin like that. That’s all this was. And she wouldn’t—couldn’t—let it. Beside her, Spike was shaking. She swallowed the bitter lump in her throat and reached for him.

“No.” He didn’t look at her.

“Spike—”

“No,” he said again, then squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m sorry—give me a minute.”

They hadn’t ever really talked about that night, of course. Or maybe they had—indirectly—even before it had happened. How many times had they engaged in that push and pull? The noes that were really yeses—kisses that felt like punches and punches that felt like kisses. She shivered. It didn’t matter now. She thought she understood what had driven him to it, the same way she understood the thing that had driven her to beat his face to a bloody pulp just to erase any trace of affection from it. They had broken each other. But then again, she admitted, they’d both been broken already. She had climbed out of that dark hole—she’d hoped that he had started his own climb, but she supposed that his hole must have been quite a bit deeper than hers. She furrowed her brow then. But those words—they didn’t belong there—

“I said that to you,” Buffy said, remembering suddenly. “That was a long time ago, Spike—things were different back then—and they were different when—”

“She said it to me too,” Spike cut her off. “Cecily—the night I died—worst night of my life, until—”

“Do you really want to go back there right now?”

He still wouldn’t look at her. “I never really left.”

“I have,” she said softly. “And you have to, too. We both hurt each other—and I won’t excuse what you—I haven’t forgotten. But it made you who you are now, Spike. It’s not the way I would have chosen, but it taught me something about myself too. We were in a race to the bottom, you and I—but I had a soul, I had a real choice, still do, and now you do too.”

“It wasn’t the soul,” he said, continuing look off at something she couldn’t see, his jaw set in a grim line. “It was—but it wasn’t. Knew it was wrong before the soul—all of it, not just that night. Did it anyway.”

She sighed and chewed her lip. It would be so easy to blame it on the soul. To let it be that sharp dividing line. But Spike was Exhibit A in showing that, cosmic balances aside, equating souls with conscience wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. “You’re right,” she said finally. “We both chose.”

He scoffed at that. “You didn’t bloody choose that.”

“I chose you.” He looked at her in utter bewilderment, then. Lip curling in something like disgust. But she had to make him understand—“I’m not blaming myself for your actions. Like I had it coming or something—that’s some bullshit, I know. But I did choose you. And, in the beginning, it was for the right reasons. Back before I—back before the tower—the way you took care of Dawn. The way you tried.” She dropped her gaze. “But then I came back, and everything was hell, and it all went to shit. I dragged you back down with me.”

“Didn’t need to be dragged, pet. I’d been down in the muck for a good long while.”

“You’d started to climb out though. That summer that I was gone.”
He shrugged and looked away from her again. “Maybe I had—whatever that meant,” he chuckled a bit ironically then. “Was easier to love you in that good selfless way when you weren’t there.” She shifted a bit uncomfortably and his eyes returned to her. “I don’t mean it like that—’s nothing about you—it’s me. Me wanting you until it burned away every pure intention. God—I wanted you to see it so badly, that it was real—but every time I’d try to show you, it’d just blaze up and crumble. And there we’d be—”

She looked at him pensively, trying to make sense of it all. They’d been to hell and back, the both of them—separately, then together. Had they made it all the way back now? “Do you remember what you said?” she asked quietly. “That night? Real love burns and consumes—do you still believe that?”

He thought for a second. “Yes. And no—” He’d been sitting on the edge of the bed, both feet still firmly planted on the floor. Now he braced his elbows on his knees, running both hands through his disheveled hair. “Maybe that’s what the soul is. The thing that’s left over. I never really got it back then. Back when I was first turned. Didn’t really feel like there was anything missing. Still loved my mum—until—well, even after. Loved Dru. Loved you, too. Since before I met you, seems like. That makes more sense now, I s’ppose.— Just kind of forgot that there should be more to it. Something to hold it all down. Something beyond just satisfying a desire. Maybe love’s a bit like a soul, in the end. Or a placeholder, anyway.”

She was nodding now. “I know what you mean. I felt that—when I was—wherever I was. When I died. I didn’t want anything anymore—I just had it all. Nothing and everything. And when I came back—” she pulled at the fabric of the blanket absently, tracing its seams. “I didn’t think I could love. Not really. Not even Dawn. It all just seemed so… pale, in comparison. And then there was you—”

“Lots of burning and consuming there.” He was still speaking to the floor between his splayed knees.

She nodded again, smiling a bit now. “I sang that, I guess. Back then, with the crazy truth-telly musical demon. Wanting the fire back. But you’re right—I was right, when I said it to you that night—it would burn and then there was just nothing left. Maybe that is the difference. There’s fire and then there’s—light—”

He gave her a look of mild surprise. “That’s right poetic, Slayer.”

She reached for him again, and this time he let her touch him.

“You would know,” she said. “Let it go, Spike. Neither of us came out of that whole thing squeaky clean. I might’ve told you you were beneath me, but I got right down there in the dirt with you. I kept you there. I kept both of us there.”

“It’s not sodding right, you comforting me about this,” he said darkly.

“No, maybe it’s not right,” she replied. “But I’ve seen too much of the real you now to let this get between us. Also—” she eyed him curiously now, “you know this Cecily was a vengeance demon, right?”

He gave a hollow laugh. “I do. Memory still stings though. I know it’s bloody stupid—but back then—”

“It’s not stupid,” Buffy said. Her heart ached for that man he had been, full of ideals and good intentions. That wasn’t him anymore. Both of their worlds were much grayer now. But maybe gray wasn’t bad. Maybe it was where the light crept in. She pulled him towards her. “And, if you don’t come back to bed with me now, then the First Evil wins. Is that what you want?”
This time his smile was genuine. Rueful, but still. She placed her head on his chest as he wrapped his arm around her and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head.

“I don’t deserve you, Buffy.”

She snuggled farther into the crook of his arm. “Maybe. But there was a time when I didn’t really deserve you. You’ll have those memories now.”

He snorted somewhat ironically, but his arm pressed her closer in the darkness all the same.
They’d decided it was best to act as swiftly as possible. The First seemed to be aware of their plans—what was going on with Wolfram and Hart was anyone’s guess. Either way, there was no point in waiting for the bad guys to amass another army. Willow had spent as many days as they could spare working out the details of the ritual. Miss Harkness and the rest of the coven had been skeptical at first, but Giles’ endorsement had gone a long way. Willow had done original magic before. There was no reason to doubt that she could do it again. Even more, she herself was so sure. Cautious and circumspect, but confident. It was unlike anything the rest of them had ever seen in her.

And so, they moved forward at a breakneck pace. The prophesy was far from clear, but it seemed that this was their best shot. That, and, there were some ritual factors to consider. Magic could be timed by the lunar or solar calendar, but—as Miss Harkness had informed them matter-of-factly, once she had resigned herself to helping—for this, solar was better. They were lucky, then, that the anniversary of Spike’s death and the Key’s arrival in their dimension was fast approaching. There was another element that Willow mentioned to Buffy with some trepidation. It wasn’t just sex magic, it was blood magic, she had said significantly. Buffy stared for a second but, before the first syllable of “menstrual” could leave Willow’s mouth, she let out an ironic laugh and nodded. Of course her damn uterus would somehow end up synched to the apocalypse. The moon and the tides were for normal women, she supposed.

The moon, though, would be passing the meridian around eight o’clock in the evening on this year’s autumnal equinox. This didn’t leave them much time to prepare. The Deeper Well would have a Keeper, Giles told them—probably a small army protecting it, too. Whether the Keeper would be on their side was more or less a toss-up, but that was likely the least of their troubles. The First Evil would not let this go down without a fight. It was possible that time was still on their side, but not for much longer. The mystical energies of the equinox offered an opportunity—they had to take it—no time for reconnaissance.

So, about a week after they had first floated this plan, they set out, en masse, for the Cotswolds. All of the older Slayers, any Watchers fit enough to have been trained for combat—Buffy thought they made a much more impressive army than the one that had descended into the Hellmouth a little over a year ago. She just hoped it would be enough.

Of course, that wasn’t all she hoped. Willow had sat down with her and Spike to explain the ritual a couple of days prior. They would have to descend as far down as they could into the Deeper Well. Buffy remembered the place from her dream—assuming what she’d seen was accurate—and this part alone made her blood run cold. Willow would set up with Dawn, the scythe, and the soul stone right above them, just as she had in Sunnydale. She’d start by using the scythe to reunify the power that now lay distributed between the many Slayers to give Buffy a temporary boost. Fingers crossed, this along with Spike’s link to the soul stone would give them enough power to draw on the energy of the Key within Dawn and punch a hole into the higher realms.

They still had no idea what to make of Whistler’s declaration regarding Buffy’s apparent immortality. Amidst the chaos of the preceding week, the matter had been implicitly ruled a back-burner item. And they were all of them, the coven included, at a loss for how one would verify such a thing. Willow had done another close scan of Buffy’s energetic aura, which, as previously established, did seem brighter than might be expected—but what to make of this? Well, that was anyone’s guess. In the end it was concluded that, if true, such a possibility could only help their present plan. The more power, the better.
Buffy had shifted a bit uncomfortably at all this talk of drawing out energies. “So, this is like that time in the creepy house with the poltergeist kids? We’re basically a big sex battery?”

“Well, sort of,” Willow had said, sensing Buffy’s reservations. “But this is different. You’ll be in control.”

“And it’s safe?” She’d had to ask.

Willow had looked between her and Spike anxiously then. “It should be for you. And for Dawn,” she’d told Buffy. “But—well, I’m not sure about Spike. The soul stone is what’s keeping him here. I honestly can’t say what using it this way will mean as far as that goes—if we had more time—”

“But we don’t,” Spike had said resolutely. “It’s alright, Red. We’ve gotta do it. We always knew we were on borrowed time, love,” he had turned to Buffy, squeezing her hand. “Just wish I’d known back in the day that it was us shagging would save the world—bloody good pickup line.”

Buffy replayed that conversation in her head time after time. *We’ve gotta do it*, he had said. They did. She knew it. But her heart broke at the thought of it. A few weeks of borrowed time were better than no time at all, of course. And so, she steeled herself for it. For losing him yet again.

So, here they all were, on a misty late-September evening—rambling through the rolling hills of the Cotswolds. Willow led the way. She could sense the magic emanating from within the earth. They probably would have found it anyway, though. The giant hollow tree was hard to miss.

“Wanna bet that’s it?” Buffy nudged Spike.

“Well, it’s that or the door to hobbit land,” he replied warily.

As if on cue a small band of splotchy-looking armored demons emerged from the opening in the tree and charged in their direction.

“Those look more like orcs than hobbits to me,” Buffy quipped, brandishing the ancient scythe she’d brought in place of a more regular weapon. Willow would be using it for the first part of the ritual and, by then, Buffy herself was bound to be a bit too busy to worry about weaponry. At least that was the hope.

The other Slayers around her crouched defensively. The orc demons were decidedly outnumbered, but this fact did not appear to deter them in the slightest. Buffy swung her scythe to decapitate one of them before it could skewer her with its rusty looking sword. Beside her, Spike was ducking around a second demon and Kennedy was clashing swords with a third.

“That’s quite enough!” A shout came from the passage down into the Well. Another figure was strolling towards them now, also armored, but this one human and male. One of his hands brandished a sword, the other a large flaming torch. The demons seemed to obey him as they retreated, grunting deferentially.

“I am Drogyn, Keeper of the Deeper Well,” the man introduced himself. He appeared to be relatively young, with handsome features hidden beneath a long swath of unkempt dark hair.

“Drogyn the Battlebrand?” Giles called from behind Buffy in astonishment.

The man nodded sternly. “The same. And as you seem to know who I am, you’ll also appreciate that this is the last question I’ll permit you to ask.”

“You know this guy?” Buffy looked back at Giles, surprised.
“Drogyn the Battlebrand is a legendary warrior of the light, blessed with eternal youth,” Giles said. “I’d thought you were a myth.”

“As you can see, I am not,” Drogyn replied. “What is your business here?”

“We, uhh, we want to enter the Deeper Well,” Willow supplied cautiously. “We were hoping—well, it’s kind of a long story—see, there’s this prophesy—”

“The Prophesies of Aberjian,” Drogyn cut her off. “You all strike me as human. Can I assume that you are not here to bring about the return of the Old Ones, then?”

“Right you are, mate,” Spike said. “And since you seem to know so much, what say you let us go on our merry way. Being a warrior of light and all, I’ll wager we’re on the same side.”

Drogyn eyed Spike curiously. “You’re not human. A vampire?—But not Angel—”

“You know Angel?” Buffy asked with some suspicion.

“What did I tell you about questions?” Drogyn said menacingly. “Angel and I met some time ago, after the soul—I would have thought he’d be the one—”

Spike huffed with exasperation. “You and everyone bloody else. He’s not. Let’s move on right along, then.”

Drogyn put up a pacifying hand in acknowledgement. “You will not enter the Well uncontested,” he said darkly. “If you are here, then they will be coming. The forces of evil will fight back with their full strength—it is only a matter of time once they sense you here—minutes maybe.”

“Well, time’s a’ wasting, then,” Buffy pressed. “Are you gonna let us in, or am I gonna have to find out which of you is more mythical, you or my handy-dandy scythe here?”

Drogyn gave her something that almost bordered on a smirk. “A Slayer,” he said. “Of course. Come, then, I’ll show you the way. I just hope your friends are ready.”

Buffy thought she saw something ominous light up the sky as the ducked into the dark opening of the tree behind Drogyn. Like a thunderbolt, but silent. She shivered. Spike and Dawn were behind her. Willow, who was bringing up the rear, stopped about thirty feet into the passageway.

“Dawnie, you and I will set up here. It should be safe enough if things outside really go to hell in a handbasket, as long as we can keep the entrance secure.”

“I am the Keeper of the Well,” Drogyn said somewhere up ahead. “The entrance will be secure.”

Willow nodded to Dawn. “Good, why don’t you start getting things laid out here then. I’ll get Buffy and Spike set up down below.”

Buffy wedged past Spike towards her sister. She wrapped Dawn in a firm hug. “It’ll be alright Dawnie,” she reassured Dawn as much as herself. “And if this works, then maybe it’ll be alright for good.”

Dawn gave her a shaky smile. “I’d wish you luck down there, but that seems a little weird under the circumstances. Break a—leg?”

Buffy handed Dawn the scythe. “Hopefully no one will be breaking anything.”

They set off further down the cavernous passage, then, with Drogyn leading the way. Buffy had
been in her share of dark underground tunnels as of late, but this one filled her with a particular sense of dread. It was hard to say that she recognized it, exactly. It was more the feeling of being down there. She didn’t need to be a witch to feel the magic of the place. Behind her, Spike shivered involuntarily. Surely he felt it too. Deeper and deeper they went, with the light from Drogyn’s torch providing the only illumination. Finally, they reached the part Buffy had been dreading most of all. Ahead of her, she saw Drogyn step out onto the long bridge. He moved to the side and motioned the rest of them forward.

“I must return to the entrance. It won’t be long now,” he said.

Willow nodded and moved past Buffy. “The bridge will hold?” she asked Drogyn’s retreating form a bit anxiously.

“It is heavily enchanted,” he said. “It will hold.”

Willow took off her backpack and dug into the contents. Extracting a large container of sand mixed with who knows what else, she used it to pour a sizeable circle in the middle of the bridge.

“I got you guys a blanket,” she said a bit awkwardly, reaching into the bag again. “It’s not exactly the honeymoon suite, but, well—”

“Thanks, Will,” Buffy smiled. “We’ll manage. No one said saving the world would be a romantic getaway.”

“You’ll have candles, at least,” Willow added. “Though they’re ritual candles, so I suppose they might be a bit smelly. Sorry.”

Buffy lifted one of the candles out of the backpack and gave it a sniff. It reminded her vaguely of camphor. “Well, at least it’ll complement the dank cave smell.”

Willow lit the candles one by one, placing them around the periphery of the circle. When she was done, she slung the backpack over her shoulders again and turned towards them.

“So, uhh, it’ll take me a couple of minutes to get back up to where Dawn is. I think as long as everything is roughly synchronized, it should all work. But—you know—you guys do your thing. Good luck,” she finished sheepishly. “I don’t care what Dawn said. It’s weird, but you may need it.”

“Thanks, Red,” Spike said. “You keep Dawn safe up there, yeah?”

Willow nodded at him, then at Buffy, who gave her what she hoped passed for an encouraging smile.

“See you on the other side,” Buffy said.

***

Willow’s hands shook as she plodded back up the dark tunnel, making the beam of her flashlight dance fitfully along the ancient stone walls. She could do this, she told herself. She had to. She’d been elated when the idea had first sprung into her mind. And then sure. So sure that it would work. The theory was sound. But was she?

The coven had trusted her. So had Giles. Most importantly, so had Buffy. Buffy’s instincts had proven right the last time, even as they’d doubted them after the fact. Buffy, Dawn,—Spike. Willow never would have guessed that Spike’s endorsement of a means to avert the apocalypse should come to matter, but they really had all come a long way. And all of them trusted her. She swallowed and
tried to steady herself.

Dawn was waiting right where they’d left her. She’d gotten a good way into setting up the ritual circle, Willow noted.

“Did that Drogyn guy go up to the entrance?” Willow called to Dawn.

Dawn jumped a bit, nearly spilling the little pouch of quartz she’d been holding, but smiled shakily once she saw the witch approaching.

“Yeah,” she said. “But we’d better hurry. It’s getting kind of rumbly out there.”

Willow listened for a moment. She could hear faint yelling, like someone shouting commands. Then, an ominous kind of crackle. More importantly, she could feel the foreign magic in the air. Even through the haze of mystical energy emanating from the ground on which they stood, she sensed the whip-like snaps of a power that decidedly did not belong.

She helped Dawn light the last few remaining candles. “Alright, then. Here we go.”

Dawn gave her another nervous smile and they settled into the ritual circle. The scythe and the amulet lay between them. Willow closed her eyes and did her best to calm her breathing. Slowly, she brought her focus to bear on the scythe, allowing her fingertips to skim across its surface. She could feel its essence flowing outwards, tethered to the many women that now reflected its power. She carefully drew the threads inwards, collected them, wove them together, sent them downwards to where that one woman, her friend, was being called on to stand for all of them. Her lips moved silently in invocation. It was done.

She opened her eyes and reached for Dawn, but no sooner could she raise her hands than was she forced to drop them limply to the ground. The girl was looking at her anxiously. But it was the figure behind her that drew Willow’s gaze.

Tara.

Willow’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Dawn’s face swam in her peripheral vision, growing more alarmed by the second.

Tara—was it Tara?—looked at her gravely. She wore that cobalt blue top, hair tumbling down her shoulders. Just like when— “You have to stop, Willow.”

Willow tried to speak again, but something inside her had seized up.

Dawn whipped around, her eyes frantic now. “What’s wrong, Willow?—What do you see?”

“You’ll kill her.” Tara’s tone was steady and cold. “You’ll kill them all.”

“No,” Willow said. Her voice came out small—barely a squeak. “No. Tara—”

Dawn looked around again, still not comprehending.

“It’s too dangerous,” Tara continued, softer now, cajoling. “It’s always been too dangerous. You know better. You can’t let yourself—not alone—you won’t be able to control it.”

Willow closed her eyes, tried to steady her breath again. To steady her mind. Wouldn’t she have felt Tara? — Shouldn’t she?—

“I can help you,” Tara continued. “I’m here. Let me in—Just let me in, baby—”
Willow’s mind whirled. Was it possible? Wouldn’t it be fitting? That Tara would come now—to warn her—to protect her. To help her.

‘Tara—is it really you?’

She felt Dawn pulling at her hands.

‘Willow—of God, Willow—I don’t think this is right! Are you—it can’t be right—Willow, we’re running out of time!’

They were. Willow thought of Buffy down below. Buffy and Spike. He’d come back to her, despite all the odds. The universe had thrown him back into her arms to help her play her part in all of this. Why not Tara, too? Why couldn’t she—Willow—have the same kind of help? Here, when she needed it most?

‘Tara—baby—help me… We can do this together—we always did it together—’ This had to be it. Of course, Tara would come to save her. Willow’s mind reached out—

—and she knew, then, that she had made a terrible mistake. Cold. Deep, dark dread. But then—hot. Fiery… brutal… scorching anger. It flared within her suddenly and she understood that she’d lost. Felt herself slipping away into that black abyss. It was all fire and shadow and chaos. But there was a comfort in it, too.

She felt Dawn shaking her.

‘Willow—damn it, Willow—snap out of it! God, please, come back!—’

But it was no use. Willow felt the energy crackling around her. Drawing her down. Out. Then in. It was then that she felt it. Somewhere inside her, there was a push of resistance. Something refused to give. She grasped at it. Tried to focus. Dawn’s hands were in hers.

‘I’m sorry, Dawnie,’’ she groaned. ‘I’m sorry—I messed up—It’s too strong.’

Dawn’s fingers clutched hers desperately. But Dawn couldn’t reach her. There was no Xander this time, either, to pull her back from the brink.

‘It’s not,’’ Dawn pleaded, her voice ragged but firm. ‘Fight it, Willow. Fight it—let’s fight it together—we have to finish the ritual—’

The ritual. Dawn. Buffy. Xander, and Giles, and so, so, many others. They were flighting. They trusted her—depended on her to do this… but she couldn’t—could she?—

Willow screamed then. Pushed outwards with everything she had. She could. She had to let go. Let go and get her shit together. Tara wasn’t coming to save her. No one was. This was down to her. And she could do it. The First wouldn’t be bothering with her if she couldn’t. Because there was darkness, there had to be light. She could still feel that slithering downward tug—it would always be there, she realized, had been there even before the magic awoke within her—and it was time to make peace with it. This is who she was. She clenched her teeth and felt something ripple through her.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Dawn gazing at her, mouth open in astonishment.

‘Willow, you—your—’

Willow shuddered and shook herself. Pearly white hair had fallen across her face. She reached for Dawn’s hands.
“Let’s do this,” she said.

***

Buffy and Spike had stood there for a few moments, listening to Willow’s retreating footsteps reverberating up the dark tunnel. Buffy gave a light cough and began to strip silently. Spike followed suit. Her hands shook a bit and she tried to take full, deep breaths. Despite Willow’s endless theoretical explanations and ritual diagrams, she really had no idea what to expect. Was sex magic actually supposed to be sexy? Because sexy was just about last on the list of things that Buffy felt just then. She folded her clothes rather more neatly than usual and placed them delicately on the ground.

Naked, they turned to face each other, anxiety, fear, and the smallest bit of embarrassment playing on their faces.

“Well, I guess we should—uhh—start?” Buffy said awkwardly.

“You know just how to romance a bloke, Slayer.” Spike gave her a crooked smile. He stepped closer to her and held out his hand. “No reason to be nervous, I reckon. Nothing we haven’t done before.”

She returned his smile weakly, lacing her fingers through his. “Yeah, but usually there’s not an apocalypse on the line.”

“Bollocks. We’ve brought down buildings, this is just the next step.” He tugged her towards him and stepped back into the circle of white sand and onto the blanket that Willow had laid out within it. She followed him, toes stepping gingerly over the circle’s edge. “It’s just you and me, love,” he said as he pressed her to him.

Then he lowered his head to kiss her and, for a moment, she believed him. She returned his kiss, weaving her arms about his neck. His hands traveled down her back to cup the cheeks of her buttocks as he pulled her even closer, kneading gently. He wasn’t hard. Not yet. Buffy imagined that he too was more nervous than his words let on. He was the one whose chances of making it through the ritual were like a shot in the dark. This could be the last thing he’d ever do.

She kissed him harder, then. “I love you,” she said almost forcefully, her hand grasping the back of his neck. “You hear me? I love you.”

“And I’m grateful for it,” he replied. She could feel him stirring against her thigh. “Loving you is the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Then his lips were on hers again. His hands were on her hips, on her breasts, in her hair. Gradually, she lost herself in the feel of him. It felt almost natural when he pulled her down to the hard wooden surface of the bridge and onto his lap, his legs crossed underneath her. He dipped his hand between her thighs, his fingers probing, first feather-light then firmer as they slid against the sensitive skin to part its delicate folds.

“Ready?” he asked softly, his thumb drawing small circles around her clit.

Her eyes had fallen shut but she opened them now and looked at him. “Ready.”

His fingers came away slippery, tinged with red. He put them in his mouth and sucked, his eyes locked on hers. Then, placing both hands on her hips, he lifted her. It was her fingers that snaked down to guide him inside and she sank over him with a sigh. Wrapping her legs around his waist she kissed him fiercely and they began to move. She felt something indescribable blossom within her. Power. Her whole body hummed with it. She gave herself over to its endless pulse.
Buffy thought she heard sounds of battle above them, but that all seemed so far away now. She
couldn’t let herself think of it. All that was real was the feel of his warm skin on hers, the pressure of
his lips, the hard length of him deep in her belly. Their breath came quick and shallow. She wished
they could take their time, but knew that too much was on the line. Still, there were worse things
she’d done to save the world. He was dropping a line of butterfly kisses along her jawline. Deft
fingers worried at her nipple. She only wished that they were somewhere else, anywhere else—
anyone else—so that this could be about them and not about the whole world.

Her vision was hazy—blurred—like a watercolor, but she thought she saw a glow that seemed much
too bright to be coming from the candles on the periphery of the circle. She had to keep moving. He
was there with her, holding her to him, inside her. A warmth pooled deep down within her core. At
first she mistook it for the first simmers of orgasm—but no, this was different. Something prickled—
almost sizzled—right at the base of her spine. She felt the warmth rising. Growing. Creeping up her
spinal column, through her chest, up all the way through her skull, where it reverberated like the
rhythm of her heart. Thump. Thump. Thump. Spike’s mouth was on hers. His breath was her breath.
And she realized she could no longer tell where she ended and he began.

Her whole body was vibrating. It was beyond pleasure. Pure bliss. She was everything and nothing.
And still he was there with her. She opened her eyes and all she could see was him. He looked at
her, his eyes glassy with lust and love and a tiny spark of fear. She mouthed those three words to him
again. He smiled shakily, bit his lip, and then his body seized, pulsed, and released. It was like a jolt
of electricity. Then like white-hot surging fire flooding into her body through the place where they
were joined. But it didn’t burn. There was no pain. Only light and knowledge that in this moment
she—they—were whole, perfect, and complete.

The world roared around her. She thought she heard stone cracking—shattering—and she thought of
that deep dark hole with its heavy stone tombs. There was no darkness any more, only rushing light.

And then, just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore, it all began to recede. Like a
dissipating storm, the sound died down and the brightness began to fade until she could almost make
out little dim halos emanating from the circle of candles. Spike’s body was wrapped around hers, his
breath still coming fast, like a pant. She vaguely thought that maybe it had worked. She smiled at him
in the fading light, but he didn’t smile back. Her heart skipped a beat—something was wrong.—

—It was unlike anything Spike had ever experienced in his century and a half of existence. Not the
languid slip into the abyss that had been his death, not the fiery blaze of his soul casting little embers
of his being into everything that surrounded him, and certainly not sex. Not even with her. Perhaps if
one somehow combined all those things into a single experience, it might have come close. It was
more than a revelation. It was everything. She had flowed over him like liquid gold. Like the bloody
sun. Like life itself. His body had hummed like a stringed instrument. The vibration began as a
chorus thundering in his skull—it filled his chest, raced down his spine, through his cock. She’d been
one with him then and, in that one endless moment, he’d felt that he finally understood those words
she was mouthing to him now. So, there it was. Consummation. He was done.

It felt like it, too. He was utterly spent. A deathly cold was settling somewhere deep inside him. The
line came to him suddenly, incoherently, as if out of a dream—If thou canst not ascend these steps,
die on that marble where thou art.—and it seemed clear to him that he would die. His body was
much too heavy and impossibly light all at the same time. His breath, which he had grown
accustomed to over the previous weeks, felt as though it was blowing through him like a winter
wind. He knew, then, that he would not be walking back up those steps with her. He looked at her,
hoping to whatever God existed that she understood—

—She had thought it was only her eyes readjusting to the dimness, but now she saw. He looked like
he was—fading—fading right along with the light around them. There was no better word for it. His skin looked desaturated, almost gray. Eyes wide with desperate realization, he reached for her face, but the touch never came. It was as though his hand went right through her, even as her own arm was still resting solidly on his shoulder. Icy terror overtook her. Not again. She couldn’t lose him again. Not now—not like this. Not while he was literally inside her. There was a look of resignation in his features and her stomach turned at the thought of it. She’d known this would be a possibility, but faced with the reality of it now, she balked. This wasn’t right. She couldn’t—wouldn’t—accept it. This time, she wouldn’t leave him to sacrifice himself. And she wouldn’t let him leave her. So she did the only thing she could think of. Angling her neck, she pulled his head down to her carotid artery.

“Spike. Do it. Now.” She wasn’t sure why she knew it would work—she didn’t, really—but it was something. Blood and breath. It’s always got to be blood. That was his line. But he wasn’t listening now. “Now, William!” she almost yelled, pressing his face to her neck.

She felt it then. His features shifted and sharp fangs sank through her skin. It was time to see if she really was immortal. He was still in her, and she felt him harden again. The tingling in her spine was back, except now it was moving downwards, until it felt like she was being pulled in two directions. His fangs pierced her neck—sucking, tugging—and then there was his cock deep inside of her and it was all, somehow, the same.—

—He felt her blood surging inside him. He hadn’t wanted to—except of course he fucking had. Always had. Since before the first time he saw her. And yet, this had always been the line they’d drawn. It seemed fitting then, that this is what would happen now. At the end. Her warmth suffused him. It was like drinking sunlight. Bloody May Day. He felt a burning sensation somewhere deep in his chest, as though he’d just chugged a handle of moonshine. His brain looped nonsensically around the irony of his dying thoughts. Sun and moon. A sodding poet to the last.

Except—maybe this wasn’t the last. The cold had receded now. He felt a jolt somewhere deep inside and noticed that his face had changed. His connection to her—one of them anyway—abruptly severed. In place of the cold and the ponderous lightness, there was something like a tingling and a rhythmic vibration. It suddenly occurred to him that he felt perfectly fine, given the circumstances. Before he had time to process this, however, she slumped against him, her body limp in his arms—

—She was lightheaded now. Like she herself was about to dissolve. Somewhere, impossibly far away, she heard him gasp. His fangs retracted and blunt teeth pressed into her neck. Then she gasped too. It was as though she were a balloon that had just released its last bit of air. She felt completely empty. She knew her mouth must be open but, try as she might, she could draw in no air.


She knew he was yelling, but it was muffled. As though she were deep under water. His face, ashen white, swam before her. Still gasping, she tried to smile. To reassure him. This is okay. She was okay with this. His hands stroked her hair, her face, her neck and shoulders. She saw tears streaming from his eyes and knew that they were streaming from hers too.—

—No, no, no, no, no. This was not how it fucking ended. Bloody bitch. How could she let him—how could he—a roar tore through his chest. And then a sob. He grasped at her frantically. As though somehow his hands could mold her back into a semblance of life. He’d lost control—had given in to that need—to be with her, wanting her so badly that it didn’t matter if it killed them both. And she’d let him. Let herself. That was the worst part. She gasped for breath, like a fish out of water, her expression taking on that dreamy overlay that he knew preceded death. Fuuuuuuck. No. He held her against him, wanting nothing more than to pour himself back into her. What else could he
He pressed his lips to hers, but her mouth was still open, breathless. So he covered her mouth with his. Feeding her empty inhales. Breathing into her. Her head spun madly. She felt his breath filling her—it was euphoria—like she might float away. He was still hard inside her, his body wrapped around hers. He pulled her closer, feeling as if she were surely part of him now—an extension of his own form. And, suddenly, inexplicably, she felt herself begin to move. Her mouth wasn’t gasping anymore. Her lips molded themselves to his and she was kissing him just as he was kissing her. He felt as though he were being pulled inside her—like he would disappear into her completely—and he found that he was all too glad to lose himself. They rocked together, their bodies still joined. It was slow, now. His breath still flowed into her through their languidly moving lips. His arms were wrapped around her tightly and hers around him. The movement was hypnotic, and she felt herself disappearing into him for the third time. But this wasn’t the sizzling vibration of the first instance, nor the shrinking pull of the second—this time it was like a wave inside her, like a flowing rush of air that scattered the pieces of her until they were indistinguishable from pieces of him. He gave himself up to that ceaseless pull of her. Utterly and completely. It seemed to him that they could stay this way forever.

It occurred to her then that she could smell him. Could smell them. Blood and sweat and sex. And that male muskiness that she knew was him. Something—not quite a climax, or rather more than one—something more diffuse rippled through her. She felt her body contracting and releasing. His mouth was still on hers. Lower down, she felt him pulse and spill himself into her for the second time, his breath a long sigh that she swallowed. She could feel her own breath rising to meet his now. It was as though they had fallen out of time. If pressed, neither could say whether it had been minutes, hours, days, or months. But eventually, the world began to reassert itself around them. They sat there in the dim glow of the cave, wrapped in each other. And they breathed together to the sound of two heartbeats.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.
The sun was rising when they finally walked out of the cave. They must have been quite the sight, toppling over from exhaustion and stained with blood, and sweat, and tears. But, beneath it all, Buffy felt good. Strong. Though it was Spike’s state of being that warranted real note. He also felt good. And strong. And, as near as either of them could tell, alive.

Experimental attempts to summon up his vampiric self had proved unsuccessful. A careful examination by Willow indicated that Buffy appeared to be, more or less, still a Slayer. Spike, for lack of a better definition, appeared to be something similar. Willow’s best guess was that, since it was Buffy’s blood that had apparently reconstituted his body, he got the benefit of a Slayer-powered upgrade. That part had not been in the original game plan and Miss Harkness had looked at the younger witch sympathetically. Sex magic was notorious for taking on a life of its own, she’d said—internal logics that the most carefully designed ritual couldn’t hope to circumscribe. It was a cycle that would play out until its will was exhausted. In this case, that will, the balance of it, had angled towards life. Digging through the technicalities, it was anyone’s guess how mortal either Buffy or Spike was at this point. Willow vowed to come up with a non-lethal way to check.

The Slayers had talked about the battle that had taken place above ground for weeks. That portentous light Buffy had seen when they’d entered the cave had apparently blossomed into a full-on dimensional rift only moments later. It shouldn’t have happened, the coven had insisted—someone had broken the rules, but rules had hardly seemed to matter that day. Demons had come pouring out. One girl swore she had seen a dragon. They had lost a few people, of course. But, all in all, casualties had been minor. After the initial hiccup, Willow had done her job quickly and efficiently—the streaming light Buffy had thought she saw around them had not been a figment of her imagination. It had come blasting up through the trunk of the tree and blew the rift clean apart—or back together—they were all a little murky on the appropriate terminology. In any case, the dragon had never stood a chance.

The ritual had, by all accounts, worked as planned. There was no real way to confirm whether they had indeed succeeded in returning a soul to every vampire. Though Buffy did get the sense that the few vampires she had run into since then had seemed decidedly angrier. But the spell had destroyed the tombs of the Old Ones buried in the Deeper Well, and Dawn appeared to be happy, healthy, and totally devoid of mystical energy, so they had reasons to be optimistic on the first point as well. The coven concurred that, on the grand scale, not only had balance been restored but utter harmony reigned. Whatever Buffy and Spike ultimately did seemed to have effectively channeled the Key into the higher realms in exchange for who knew how many souls, and locked the door on its way out.

News from Los Angeles was less encouraging. They had not heard from Angel since he’d walked out of the library that evening. Fred had called once to check in, after the ritual. She’d sounded worried. Angel’s behavior had been erratic at best as he delved deeper and deeper into the inner circles of Wolfram and Hart. Isolated, his loyalties seemed increasingly uncertain.

Even still, Buffy found herself surprisingly and unqualifiedly happy—better than happy, even—content. She and Spike shared the role of training the younger Slayers. They fell into this arrangement easily, having laid the groundwork during those final months in Sunnydale. In no time at all, they had begun to talk about getting a flat somewhere by the school. Away from prying teenage eyes. It all felt blissfully normal, at least by Buffy’s standards.

And so, they all sat in the school’s common room one sunny Saturday afternoon. Spike, Xander, Andrew, and a couple of the Slayers were deeply engrossed in something that seemed to entail, as far
as Buffy could figure, every video game character she’d ever heard of and quite a few of whom she hadn’t clobbering each other with a dizzying array of objects.

“Oi! Not the ray gun, mate!” Spike yelled indignantly, jabbing his controller. “I thought you’d turned that bloody thing off!”

Andrew sank deeper into his chair, his eyes decidedly shifty as his fingers poked the buttons on his own controller with a maddened intensity.

It was at this precise moment that Giles and Willow walked into the room. Giles stood there for a moment, his face sporting a look of utter antipathy, before he sighed in resignation. Willow, though, pushed past him and plopped down on the floor excitedly.

“Ohhh! Lemme join the next one!” Her pearly hair bounced on her shoulders.

Buffy turned back to look at Giles and saw him smiling now, apparently rather despite himself. She left her spot on the floor next to Spike’s legs and came to stand by him between the open double doors.

“Anything new to report from the coven?”

Giles shook his head. “All clear.”

“You think it’ll last?”

“Not if history is any indication,” Giles said evenly. “But we’re in better shape that we’ve been in a long time, apparently. Centuries maybe.”

“Willow did good,” Buffy looked down at her friend fondly.

“She did,” Giles agreed. “As did you.”

Buffy looked at him with mild surprise now. Their relationship had become much smoother over the past couple of months, which was to be expected when there was no apocalypse-averting strategy to wrangle over, but they hadn’t really talked about it.

“You went out on a limb,” he continued. “You and Willow both. And perhaps it really is time for me to trust your instincts over my own. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Giles.” Buffy smiled at him. “Did you hear? Faith and Wood are coming next week.”

Giles let out something like a desperate moan. “And here I thought we’d finally achieved peace on the home front.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” Buffy waved a hand in mock dismissal. “As long as Faith doesn’t drunkenly hit on Xander again and Wood and Spike don’t come to blows, anyway.”

“What’s that then?” Spike called. He had just handed his controller over to Willow.

“Nothing, nothing,” Buffy said soothingly. “Giles is still scarred by my attempts to host the perfect English Thanksgiving.”

“Don’t know why,” Spike remarked. “Seemed about right to me. Very in the spirit of the holiday.”

“Yes, quite,” Giles said sourly, turning to leave. “I suppose I’d best go emotionally prepare myself for the second round, then. Enjoy your digital cacophony, all.”
Buffy snorted and returned to her seat on the floor, leaning back against the couch between Spike’s knees. He planted a kiss on the crown of her head.

“Sure you don’t fancy a go, love?” he said, referring to the mess of images on the screen. “You with those mature Slayer reflexes—could be a champ in the making.”

“Nah,” Buffy replied. “I know the slayage has been a bit light lately, but I’m not quite desperate enough to resort to smacking people with turtle-shells yet.”

“Well, I bloody well hope not. Everyone knows you go for the hammer. That or the warp star.” This earned him a pinch on the calf.

He squirmed, then settled back, hand tangling in her hair. It still shocked Buffy sometimes, on a number of levels, that they could sit and do this openly, in the full light of day. The other Slayers still whispered, of course—especially the younger ones. Spike, who’d become somehow immediately more plugged into the gossip mill at the school than she’d ever been, informed her that their relationship was quite the object of fascination. She’d joked about soundproofing their room, which was the thing that’d finally caused Spike to suggest they find their own place. They hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

Spike leaned his head down closer to hers. “Speaking of cacophony, you’ll never guess what I found the other day when you asked me to get you that change of clothes and I had to go rooting around in your delicates.” She looked at him curiously out of the corner of her eye. He leaned down further, whispering now. “She shines against the darkening skies, a ray of sun— didn’t realize you’d kept that dross. Had half a mind to toss it out, I did—”

“You didn’t!” Buffy swiveled her head to look at him, scandalized.

His face was hovering millimeters away from hers. “I didn’t,” he smiled.

She kissed him then, surrounded by friends and the sounds of epic music and cartoon explosions.

And they lived happily until the next apocalypse.

FIN

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!