Origins
by Niamh

Summary

Post- The Gift. Starting the summer after The Gift, using elements from canon, but taking off in a new and different (and hopefully better) direction.

Notes

This has been completely re-edited and gone over with as close to a fine-toothed comb as possible. Disclaimers: Everything but the plot belongs to someone other than me, namely Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox, and various and sundry other corporations that have loads of better lawyers than I have. . . . maybe. The chapter titles belong to the people who first coined them, and the quotes belong to whomever is quoted. Standard disclaimer to apply throughout. I gain nothing from this but the satisfaction of telling a tale. Hopefully, I’ll do it well.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Part One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue

She of the origin, she of the primal crack,
she of the boiling beginning,
she of the riddle,
she keeps me here, toiling and toiling
Anne Sexton

They had been watching, waiting, guarding for a millennia, hoping against hope that the Beast would not arise on this watch. Thousands of years they had been watching, guarding the Key from the ones that sought to destroy it, to use it for their own ends and destroy the balance between dimensions. Regimes came and went, countries and powers rose and fell, and still they waited; and as carefully and closely as they watched, the monks were still caught unaware.

The Beast had been consigned to this dimension, chained, restrained and subject to the limitations of humanity, captured within a frail form, unable to wield its powers upon and within the Terran dimension. And still, they knew it was not a fail-safe, that eventually the Beast could overpower and sublimate the human host.

So they had begun forming a plan, a way of safeguarding the Key from the clutches of the latest threat. Seeking out guardians for the Key proved difficult, made further impossible by the strength of the Beast. In their search for a guardian, a champion, the elders of the order had stumbled upon the legends of the Chosen One. In time, they had discovered more than legends; they had managed to locate the Chosen One. Unfortunately for them, before they could introduce this One to the Key, she was killed by one of her foes. Her executioner, for that was what the foe was, intrigued some of the elders, given the ferocity of their battle.

Intrigued as the elders were, they had decided to investigate this new warrior. His history, as it was recorded, listed numerous battles against other Chosen Ones, defeating and outright killing two, damaging others. Never once had this warrior shied from battling the Chosen Ones, seeking out one after another, forcing battles and confrontations, never once backing down from a fight. The elders had decided to follow the path of this warrior, while seeking out the newly Chosen One. The next few proved less than able, despite their chosen status.

Time was slipping past too quickly, and the Beast was getting stronger, breaking through the human form to exert its control. Events had fallen in that the dark warrior had been hampered, neutered by demon hunters intent on forcing their will onto demonkind and now worked, albeit reluctantly with the current Chosen One. Working rapidly, concentrating, the monks began weaving the web of protection to shield the Key from the Beast. Using material at hand, the monks forged a substance and form for the Key.

And, like a cuckoo in the nest, the Key took shape and was transplanted into the fabric of the life of the current Chosen One . . . the Vampire Slayer, Buffy Summers.
Spike was exhausted. Resting his head on the cold tile of the shower, he finally allowed the tight rein he kept on his emotions to drop. Emotions were a weakness right now, a liability he refused to allow himself. He couldn’t let the mask of – well it surely wasn’t indifference, the impassive face he showed in front of the Scoobies, to crack. There was no fucking way in hell he’d let his real emotions show – not in front of Harris anyway. The birds might be okay, but he’d decided against that, given how shattered they all looked. Even Rupert looked hollow most days.

Dawn was asleep, curled up in the Slayer’s bed, tears drying on the pillows. He’d found her there after patrol and while he knew he should make her sleep in her own bed, he’d not wanted to wake her. Sleep had been elusive for the teen for the last three weeks. Sleep was elusive for all of them. Twenty-two days and a couple of hours since she’d lost the last piece of her family, since the Slayer had flung herself off the tower in an effort to save Dawn and the world. Twenty-two fucking days.

For the first couple of days, she’d coped, held up fairly well, all things considered. They’d been so busy, keeping busy, planning a funeral none of them were prepared to hold, and just going through the motions. And then, one night, for no other reason than some stupid song on the radio, Dawn had collapsed. Giles and Willow had tried, but she’d been inconsolable, unable to stop the tears or the sobs. Tara had stepped in, recommending that they just be there, not trying to get her to stop, but even that hadn’t worked. Finally, the quiet witch had spoken, “Maybe we should get S . . .Spike.”

Well, that had not gone over well. Or so he’d imagined. When Dawn had still not stopped crying after about two hours, Giles had caved in and gone his crypt. Spike had been deep in the contemplation of another bottle of stolen scotch, when the Watcher came to call.

Spike had barely looked up at him when Giles clattered his way through the crypt door. Barely acknowledged his presence even after the older man began speaking to him. He only turned his attention to Giles when he’d heard the girl’s name. “ . . . been crying for a while, we can’t get her to stop.”

Tense jawed, Spike retorted, “And you ‘xpect me to help?”

“Well, Tara thought it might help if you were there.” Giles hadn’t wanted to admit it, hadn’t wanted to face it, but the girl had a valid point. Both Buffy and Dawn had come to trust the vampire in the final days, and it just might be his presence that would calm the girl. He knew it was
an admission of sorts, an admission of something he wasn’t really sure he wanted to face. That of all of them, the vampire was the one the last Summers woman wanted. What Giles didn’t want to face was the fact that had it been Dawn that died, Buffy would be in the same frame of mind. Rejecting all of them in favor of Spike.

“She’s cryin?” Despite his tone, Spike rose to his feet and reached for his duster. “'Spect she finally realized what’s happened. Is she talkin?”

“No,” Giles hesitated a moment, “well, she’s not talking to any of us. Tara thinks she might speak with you, or at least your presence will help.”

Spike looked over at him, one eyebrow raised. “Must make you warm all over to have to come to me.”

A soft inhalation and Giles said, “If we can get Dawn to calm herself, I don’t care if it’s Angel.”

A raised eyebrow was his only response. While Buffy might have fooled herself that her Watcher had forgiven the elder vampire, Spike had known that Giles would never forgive Angel for the destruction he’d caused three years ago. Hell, Spike didn’t know if Giles would ever get over what Angelus had done. There was nothing they could say to each other, Angelus had effectively taken both their women. But for Giles to admit that, Dawn must be in a bad way.

“Right then. Let’s go.”

The two made their way silently through the night to Revello Drive.

That had been over two weeks ago. Since then, Spike had nearly moved into the house. Well, almost everyone had. Willow and Tara were currently sound asleep in the room that used to belong to Joyce, and Dawn was tucked in tight. Sometimes the Watcher slept on the couch, some nights it was Harris and the bird, but every night since Giles had fetched him, Spike was back here at Revello, watching over the all girls, but mostly, he was watching over Dawn.

The poor kid was a mess. Her tears hadn’t stopped when he and Rupert had returned, but he’d managed to calm her enough so that she slept. The funeral had been a complete disaster, at least for Dawn. The others had outwardly managed to hold it together. Dawn had clutched him desperately, not wanting to let him go, even after the others had subtly tried to get her to let him go. At least it had served the purpose of angering the L.A. crew, specifically Angel. The Poofter had swooped into town three days after he’d effectively moved into Revello, the night before the funeral was scheduled.

He groaned as the soapy water infiltrated his wounds. Patrol tonight had been fine, just a few vamps, and no other demons. But one of those vamps had given him a bit of a tumble, using a razor sharp blade, which eventually Spike had taken and used to behead the vamp. Now sporting long, thin cuts up and down his arms and one across his belly, Spike regretted not taking the same patrol as the bot. A grimace crossed his features. While he’d had moments of gratification from the Buffy-bot, too soon he’d been discovered and now, now that the real girl was gone, he couldn’t stand to be in the same room as the thing. He hated patrolling with it, and it was only his reluctance to let the others know how much he . . . how much he missed her, how much he bled, how much of this whole mess was his fault.

Forcing his mind away from thoughts of Buffy, he focused instead on the things Angel had tried to do. At first, finding Dawn curled up in Spike’s arms he’d nearly growled the whole house down, then tried shouting at Spike. When Dawn, and then Giles, had come to his defense Angel had been forced to shut his mouth and momentarily keep his objections to himself. Thankfully, most of the
others had been too dumbstruck to even speak, which was a surprise considering Cordelia rarely kept her mouth or her opinions to herself.

They’d left, going to stay at the mansion, which was still owned by Angel, only to return the next day, armed with more arguments why Spike was such a horrible person, why he shouldn’t be allowed near Dawn. Giles, in his inimitable way, had merely taken off his glasses, looked once at Spike and Dawn, then spoke very quietly and very clearly, so that everyone who was present heard and even better, understood his position.

“Are you prepared to stay here in Sunnydale and take over everything that Spike has been doing for the past week?” He looked at the elder of the two vampires present and waited patiently for his answer. “Are you prepared to patrol nightly and do whatever it takes to keep the Hellmouth quiet? Will you guarantee that you won’t turn your back on Dawn?”

Giles waited, knowing Angel would refuse to leave Los Angeles, and that he couldn’t promise to stay with Dawn as long as necessary. Angel stared at the Watcher, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “The truth is Angel, I don’t trust you. Haven’t trusted you since your . . . since Angelus appeared.”

At that, Angel had sputtered, while Cordelia’s voice rang out, “And you can trust Spike?”

Without hesitation, without any bloody hesitation, Giles had said the one thing that forever ensured Spike’s loyalty to him. “Yes.”

No one else spoke. Not a word of recrimination from any of the Scoobies, neither a denial nor an indrawn breath nor a break in anyone’s features to indicate that any of them disagreed with Giles. Not even Harris. Spike had been floored. He’d never expected that. Not once.

“How can you possibly . . .”

“This is SPIKE, remember?” Came from both Cordelia and Angel, while Wesley hemmed and hawed out something unintelligible beneath their voices.

Giles spoke again, his voice strong and clear. “I trust him, Angel. Far more than I can trust you at this point. And Cordelia, I’m well aware of whom we are speaking.”

Growling deeply, Angel made a move to where Spike and Dawn stood next to the fireplace. Giles grabbed his forearm, his glasses hanging from his free hand. “Don’t. It’s neither the time nor the place, and it isn’t your place either.”

Xander had moved imperceptibly closer to the older men, knowing if Angel decided to strike out, Giles wouldn’t be able to defend himself. Spike stepped forward also, discretely pushing Dawn out of the way, toward the kitchen. Red, Glinda, and Anya moved out of the way, crowding closer to Dawn, just in case. But it hadn’t come to blows, it had just been Giles’ voice, delivering a home truth to Angel that Spike had never, in a hundred years, thought he’d overhear.

“I don’t trust you Angel, and I am only allowing you here for what you once meant to Buffy. Joyce wouldn’t want you here, and Dawn doesn’t either. You are here on the memory of Buffy’s possible wishes only. You gave up your rights, if you ever truly had any, two years ago. This, what goes on here in Sunnydale, is not your concern.” His voice took on a tone that none of them, save Spike had thought Giles capable of. “I do not trust you Angel.”

Taking a deep breath, and looking over at where Spike waited, Giles continued “I do, however, trust that Spike would not hurt Dawn, that Spike would do everything in his power to protect the girl, from everyone,” and throwing a look that was inscrutable to everyone but Spike and himself,
“including me.”

Giles was not surprised when Spike didn’t flinch. So, he thought, Buffy had told him about their last conversation. Somehow, that didn’t surprise Giles in the least. There was something . . . they were two of a kind, his slayer and the vampire, despite their vocalizations otherwise. It probably went a long way to explaining why neither could gain the upper hand on the other, despite numerous attempts on both their parts. It didn’t always sit well with him, but he knew, in the last days of the fight against Glory, Spike had earned Buffy’s trust, earned it to the point where the others had no choice but to accept it.

And because Spike had earned that trust, because Buffy had given it freely, Giles could do no less. It might give him moments when he doubted his sanity, or the sanity of his slayer, and it might keep him up nights, but it did not negate the reality of their situation. Dawn was safer with Spike around. That had been the last anyone had said about the matter. While the Scoobies might accept him on a trial basis, they would band together against outsiders to protect that right – and for all his thinking and protestations otherwise – Angel, and his group, was now an outsider.

Spike didn’t fool himself for one instant that there hadn’t been numerous discussions about that, and about his living in the Summers’ house. He knew the whelp was just waiting for him to screw up and make a mistake. That Red and Glinda walked warily around him, that Giles only trusted him conditionally, but all of that amounted to no more than a hill of beans, because of the one person that did trust him without hesitation. Dawn. They welcomed him because of Dawn.

He took another unneeded breath, idly noting the bruises forming around his torso. Black and dark blue showed up in stark contrast to his alabaster skin, blooming darkly, the only color in the nearly all white bathroom. He wasn’t overly hungry, but knew he should feed, if only to facilitate the healing. Dropping his head to rest against the tiles, Spike drew in another breath, then another, and, on the third indrawn breath, his composure broke.

Tears slid down his cheeks, mixing with the hot water. Buffy. . . was gone. Whenever his thoughts stilled, and his mind was clear, he saw again her too-still body on the ground that fateful early morning. In the quiet moments, he re-lived those last minutes on the tower, when he tried and failed . . . he blamed himself, every single time he went over it, could have been sooner, could have been faster, should have moved differently. He ran through different scenarios, trying to figure out where he made a mistake, how it could have turned out differently. So far, he’d come up with 13 different outcomes, none of which ended the same way, all of which had one single good outcome . . . The survival of both Summers girls.

He rocked forward on the balls of his feet, the tears falling faster and faster, soft sobs now hitching despite his need to breathe. Buffy. . . oh, Buffy . . . ran through his mind, counterpointed with thoughts of Dawn. Now almost doubled over, Spike pounded a fist against the tile, her name a litany on his lips, his tears scalding his cheeks. Her loss was a physical pain, centered just over his belly, an ache resembling hunger. It hurt. . . God above how it hurt.

Every night on patrol, he’d find himself turning, expecting her to be there, a smart-assed comment waiting on her lips, feet tapping and hands upon hips. Every time he walked into the Magic Box, he expected to smell her perfume, hear the cadence of her heartbeat, hear her voice. And every single breath he took that wasn’t necessary inside her house he did because there was always a trace of her in the air. Every second he slept on the floor of her room, he did because it was hers. And every single bleeding god-damned second, she was gone. . . She wasn’t there.

Buffy was gone.

And Spike cried.
Two – Tangled Webs

It may be possible to deceive men, but one cannot deceive the gods.
Chinese proverb

We are so used to dissembling with others
that in time we come to deceive and dissemble with ourselves.
Francois, Duc de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

Willow Rosenberg was thinking. Well, she knew she was always thinking, but at this moment she was thinking about how things were bad. Okay, so things weren’t so bad, but they weren’t good either. Willow looked around at the Magic Box, noting the new (and expensive) things Anya had placed on display. Shaking her head, Willow knew she was mentally babbling, while outwardly trying to keep calm and away from Giles’ knowing gaze. In fact, she was trying to be invisible to almost everyone.

Looking around quickly, she ducked her head back into the book. The litany of thoughts looped around her brain again, circling endlessly. She tried to hum something softly under her breath, but nothing would come to mind. Her thoughts were stuck. Giles is gonna kill me. Gotta hide this stuff. Can’t let anyone see. Tara won’t like this. Buffy’s dead. Where is she? Has to be something I can do. Giles is gonna kill me . . . And on until she couldn’t focus, until it was only names. Giles, Buffy, Tara, Dawn, Giles, Buffy, Tara, Dawn.

She never heard the bell ring, never heard the footsteps behind her, didn’t hear Xander call her name in greeting, in fact was so lost in her own thoughts of hiding what she was doing, that when Xander touched her shoulder, her terrified shriek echoed loudly against the walls. Xander flew back, as startled as Willow was. His answering shriek rivaled hers for volume and was, in fact, a higher pitch than hers.

Gasping for air, Willow turned to look at him. “Xander! Don’t do that. You scared me.”

At the same time he was saying, “Geez, Will, what the hell was that for?”

Using Xander’s presence as a distraction, she slammed the book closed and shoved it into her backpack, all the while mumbling about people that sneak up on other people wrecking their concentration and distracting them from research.

Their combined shrieks had disturbed everyone, drawing Giles out from his office and focusing Anya’s attentions away from the few customers to the two of them. Realizing that it was only the break in Willow’s concentration and nothing more dangerous than that, Giles muttered, “Really, you two, must you make such noise?’

Neither one responded, since it was obvious that it was merely one of Giles’ rhetorical questions, and to answer would only put the two of them at a disadvantage. Shaking his head, Giles retreated back
to his office, ignoring the group at the front of the store.

Willow, nerves inexplicably calmer, got herself back together, continuing to put books into her backpack. Dawn was scheduled to be home shortly and Spike would be pacing the floors if she didn’t arrive on time. They’d kept the girl in school, so that life would appear as normal as possible. So far, they’d managed to keep it hidden that Buffy was gone, using their connections within Sunnydale to ensure that none of the authorities governing Dawn’s life got wind of her being alone. Spike had put the screws to the morgue officials and Giles had rigged the death certificate, so no official report of her death existed. The caretaker of Restfield had graciously, freely given a plot, having been rescued by both Buffy and Spike on more than one occasion, and even gotten the headstone for them free of charge. And, if necessary, they had the bot to cover for them. Not that any of them really wanted the bot around, Spike in particular.

That struck Willow as odd. Spike didn’t want the bot around, in fact every time it was activated, Spike left the room, or made himself scarce. It was odd, since technically, the damn bot was his. In a moment of insight into the vampire, Willow figured it was because of his feelings for the real Buffy. Well, she thought, he might not have to worry about that too much longer. The thought was so strong that for a second, Willow thought she’d said it aloud. But no, glancing around, she realized she hadn’t said a word. Okay, that was it, she needed to get out of the Magic Box and do it now. Needed to stop thinking about what she was doing.

Everyone in the shop was busy doing their own things, and Willow took that opportunity to slip out and head toward Revello. The walk home should calm her nerves, should help her gather her scattered thoughts. For some reason, the need for secrecy seemed paramount. None of them would understand why she had this compulsion to fix the situation. And, she was suddenly sure, probably all of them would try to stop her. She couldn’t trust any of them with this, the idea she had swirling about in her head. I’m going to find a way. I’m going to do it. Can’t let her stay wherever she is, have to save her for all the times she’d saved me.

It was not going to be a walk in the park, and she’d probably have to do some oogly things, things she didn’t want to really think too hard about until it came time to do them, but she would do it. No matter what she had to do, she would do it. So far, all the methods of retrieval involved dark magics and blood. And eeww, she so didn’t want to do that, but it was beginning to look like she didn’t have any choice. There were Gods and Goddesses she could invoke, but every single deity required a sacrifice. Some required more than one. Another eewwww for that. Just the whole thing was eewww and oogly and not something she really wanted to think about, and hello, this was a retrieval, not a resurrection anyway. Coz Buffy really wasn’t de . . . gone, she was just trapped someplace else.

As long as she put it in those terms, she could deal with it. To think otherwise, just. . . Willow couldn’t do it. Buffy was only just on a vacation. So slayers never really took a vacation, it was still easier for her to deal with than the other. Because thinking that Buffy was gone, dead and never coming back was just not something she could do.

So she thought all the way back to the house on Revello, and thought more while helping Dawn with her homework, thought all through dinner, and continued that pattern for the next couple of days. Thinking and planning and researching everything she could find about retrievals, because, darn it, it wasn’t a resurrection she was doing.

Thankfully, neither Spike nor Tara caught onto what she was thinking about, which surprised her. Spike could sniff out any minute differences in body temperature and heart rate and a whole host of other weird things about humans, but for some reason, he wasn’t picking up anything different from her. She wondered about that, in the middle of the day, far away from the house, when she felt safest
to think about those things and let down her guard. Willow couldn’t imagine why Spike wasn’t figuring out her intentions and calling her on it, but she was grateful just the same. Maybe, just maybe, it was because he was so concerned about Dawn that he’d focused all his attention on her well-being. It was plausible. In fact, the more she contemplated that, she was sure she was right. He was so worried about Dawn, that Spike was bordering on excessively over-protective. It would be funny if it hadn’t been for something Dawn had overheard, something said between Spike and Buffy after Joyce had died, and had told the others about in secret. Those overheard remarks and promises had led to Giles’ open disavowal of Angel and the others standing solidly in the ‘Spike belongs to us’ camp. After, it surprised Willow that it was not only just a speech. It was true. Somehow, during the battle with Glory, Spike had become one of them.

So it wasn’t Spike she was really worried about anyway. Willow was more concerned with Tara, or Giles for that matter, figuring out what she was up too. It was getting harder and harder to keep her mouth shut around Tara. Up until now, there had been no secrets between them, they shared everything. But now Willow was holding back, keeping something from Tara and it wasn’t what she was getting her for her birthday.

This was big – potentially dangerous, world-saving big, and Willow wasn’t sharing. It was never-wracking. It was definitely not of the good, keeping secrets from her girlfriend, but Willow knew without ever having to even sort of broach the subject, that Tara would shoot her down in a heartbeat. Faster than a heartbeat if necessary. She was finding herself biting her own tongue, swallowing words before they were born, trying to bury – no, not bury – hide what she was doing from Tara. Because Tara would see, she would know, sense the differences in her girlfriend as she delved deeper and deeper into magics she had no business dabbling in.

It was dark.
It was blood magic.
It was dangerous.

It was everything Willow knew Tara was against. It went against the natural order. It was exactly, down to the letter, everything they had cautioned Dawn against doing after Joyce died. It was wrong then, and it was wrong now. But Willow no longer cared about wrong or right. She only cared about getting Buffy back.

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For a group of people who were, for the most part, gifted in ways other than normal, not one of those super-natural beings caught a whiff of what she was up to. Giles was wrapped up in trying to maintain to the Council and to the California authorities that Buffy was still alive, Spike was doing his best to take care of Dawn and patrol, Anya was wrapped up in controlling the store while Giles did his thing, and Tara was bogged down by trying to make up all the classes she’d missed while Glory had her brain, and play house-mom for the Revello Drive occupants.

It shouldn’t have been anything of a surprise then, when the one person who wasn’t other than normal picked up on her nervous habits and her stuttering and being avoidance girl. Shouldn’t have been a shock, when Xander, her oldest friend, confronted her one day when no one else was around. Shouldn’t have been, but it was.
“Wills, we need to talk.” He stood looking a bit more serious than he did years ago, like he seemed to look all the time now. Dark eyes held her gaze, not letting her avoid him, or push him away. “What’s going on?”

Okay, I can hide this from him, he won’t know. I can keep him occupied with lots of big words and terms he won’t understand. I can do this. Xander loves me, he won’t push this.

His next words blew all her thoughts of hiding from him out of the water. “What are you planning?”

She gaped up at him, her mouth opening and closing. Drat! was the only coherent thought in her head as she took in his expression. This was serious. He knew something was up. They stood outside the Magic Box, frozen in time by his words.

Xander’s hand on her forearm pulled her away from the door, into the alley off to the side. “C’mon, we need to talk,” was all he said.

He looked around, checking to see that the back door to the training room was closed, crossed his arms over his chest, lifted his chin, and said “Spill.”

And before she could stop the flow of words from her mouth, Willow spilled it all out in minute detail. How she’d been looking for resurrection . . . retrieval spells, incantations, Gods and Goddesses to invoke, dimensions to travel, anything and everything to get Buffy back. Until “. . . I think I can do it. I know I can. You have to trust me on this.”

“Truth is, I do trust you, Willow, but I don’t know if this is right. I can’t say that I understand everything you just said, but I know that some of that isn’t of the good. And how do you know Buffy’s lost in some other place and not really dead-gone? “

Good question. Not one she had any intention of really answering, because she was darn certain Xander wasn’t going to like her response.

Three – Can I be as my God am?

**Hail Swallower of shades who came forth from the cavern, I have not stolen.**
**Hail Lord of Truth who came forth from Maat, I have not stolen bread.**
**Hail Pale One who came forth from Heliopolis, I have not babbled.**
**Hail Demolisher who came forth from Xios, I have not transgressed.**
**Hail Youth who came forth from the Heliopolitan nome, I have not been deaf to words of truth.**
**Hail Nefertum who came forth from Memphis, I have done no wrong, I have seen no evil.**
*Egyptian Book of the Dead, excerpts from the Declaration of Innocence, Hymn to Osiris*

It was a lie, and she knew it. Long before the words came out of her mouth, Willow knew she was going to lie to her best friend and a part of her no longer cared. A smaller part gave her a twinge as the words were coming, but she squashed that and moved right into her explanation. “I’ve already
checked. The dimensional doors to Glory’s world were wide open and that’s the place she and Doc were aiming for. It was the first place I looked and . . . I didn’t think she’d go where Angel went, since it was a different time . . . but anyway, that’s where I looked.”

So she didn’t actually say Buffy was there, which made it okay. At least in her mind it did. It should have been harder to lie to him, and some sort of sign should have shown, but it wasn’t hard, and no scarlet letter appeared magically on her forehead. In fact, it was so simple, and made so much sense, that Xander didn’t even blink. “Okay, Willow, I buy that. But how are you going to get her free of this dimension?”

“Xander, were you listening? I just explained all that.” *Oooh, lie number two, just as easy as the first. Well, only sort of a lie, because she sort of did explain it, only just so that he wouldn’t really understand. “Look, I know you think I’m tilting windmills here, but I have to do something, I can’t just let her stay there. And I’m the only one that can do something.”*

That was the absolute truth. Giles could maybe do it, with help from outside sources, and Anya probably knew a few demons that could do it, but Willow was the only one of them that could do it without help. It would take lots of preparation and she’d have to gather all her supplies on the QT, but she could do it. And she was going to, whatever Xander thought about it.

“Right, I get that.” He was quiet for a moment, looking away from her, staring down the alleyway into the shadows around the back entrance to the Magic Box. “So,” he said taking a deep breath finally looking down at her, “what can I do?”

This was unexpected. “What?” she almost yelped, her face giving away her total surprise. “You want to help?”

“Gee, Will, you think so? Buffy was my friend, I loved her as much as you. I’d do anything to get her back, to have her here.” His hands rested on her shoulders, while his eyes looked deeply into hers. “I don’t think any of us wouldn’t help.”

“Um. Well, I don’t know. I don’t think Giles or Spike would.” How the heck was she going to tell him she didn’t want anyone else to know what she was doing? How was she going to get him to keep silent also? The less everyone knew the better, then she would be able to do everything she had to. Somehow, she didn’t think Giles was going to be happy about the sacrifices, and she knew Spike wasn’t going to let her use Dawn, as it was beginning to look like she was going to have to. But short of that, she figured Spike would do just about anything to get Buffy back. The problem was, so far everything she’d researched had indicated that something, probably blood, from Dawn was essential.

“I have no problem keeping things from evil dead, but why Giles?” At least his demonic prejudices were still in place. Xander didn’t really like Spike and he’d been the most vocal about keeping him away from the others, especially Dawn. He’d been over-ruled, but that didn’t stop him from voicing his dissension with the current “Spike is one of us” party-line.

“Because I don’t think he would agree to opening up the dimensions again.” *Ooh, lie number three. And the hits just kept coming. Willow figured that right now, she was up to as many lies today as she’d said in her whole life. The way she knew Giles, he’d probably be right there with Spike, bring Buffy back at any cost, and he might even be willing to use Dawn. If she was being honest with herself, and at this point she wasn’t sure if she was, she didn’t want Giles second-guessing and questioning everything she did. She doubted he would permit her to use dark magics, in fact, she knew he’d try to stop her. Given his past and the problems with Ethan and Eyghon, Willow was sure that Giles would have a whole lot to say about the sources she was preparing to use. And she soo didn’t need that. It was all weird enough without Giles giving her a hard time.*
Somehow that must have made sense to Xander, because he was suddenly agreeing with her. “So, no telling of plans to the English. What about the girls? Don’t you think Dawnie should know?”

“NO!” Her voice was overly loud, but Willow really, really didn’t want to let everyone in on this. “Do you really think Anya will keep her mouth quiet? And Tara, she’s just . . . Tara just got over being possessed by Glory, so not up to this much magic. No telling of Dawn either, what if it doesn’t work right away, I don’t want to get her hopes up and then . . . no, Xander, better we just keep it quiet.”

She watched his face, waiting for his argument about telling Anya. It never came. He couldn’t come up with any reason to contradict her, so he just let it go. Truth was, Xander knew Anya wouldn’t mean to, but she’d spill the beans and Tara was still shaky, even though it had been a couple of weeks.

It only took a moment for it all to sink in, but once it did, Xander was hooked. The look in his eyes underscored his complete trust in her, as misplaced as it currently was. With luck and hope, Xander would never find out just how badly she’d lied to him, manipulating his dislike of Spike, his trust in her, and his unrequited love for Buffy into believing everything she’d told him and not questioning what she’d omitted.

Goddess, wouldn’t it be nice if it all went like this?

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The sun was sinking down, the sky wrapped in shades of clear blue streaked with golden amber. Dawn looked up, staring up at the sky. Light wispy clouds floated above, almost close enough to reach. There were so few moments like this, where there was nothing but herself, no one hanging about wondering how she was. She didn’t mind so much when it was Spike, but the others were enervating. Spike let her be, knowing instinctively what she needed, when she needed it. He didn’t crowd her, didn’t promise her things would be okay, and didn’t treat her like a freak. At times she found Willow or Xander staring at her, strange looks on their faces and it just . . . made her want to shriek at them to stop it. But she didn’t shriek, she didn’t scream. She’d even stopped crying, except when she was alone. Well, that wasn’t entirely true, because she still curled up next to Spike and cried when they were alone, before everyone else came home for the night.

Home. Where no one was related to her anymore. Her family was either dead or didn’t want her, and the only one she really trusted was Spike. How weird was that? No one told her, but she knew that Buffy and Giles had a disagreement just before the showdown with Glory, because Giles was acting way too nice to her.

Spike wasn’t any different. He didn’t blame her for Buffy dying, he didn’t treat her differently. If anything, he was more careful of her feelings than the others, more worried about her. His feelings about Buffy were obvious, and she knew he cried when he was alone. Sometimes, she would look at him through her own tears and know he was crying right along with her. They never talked about it, their grief, but it was a third presence whenever they were alone. He hid it carefully from the others, not wanting to listen to their stupidity over it.

Walking along Revello toward the house, Dawn tried to figure out why the sky made her feel happy. And then it struck her – the colors of the sky right now were the colors of Spike’s eyes. Blue and amber. Her favorite colors ever.
Sighing deeply, Dawn climbed the steps. It just wasn’t the same. Spike was inside waiting for her, instead of Mom or Buffy. It was nice having him here, living in the house, but it just wasn’t the same. At least he made schoolwork easier. Not that she was doing much of it, but when she did muster up the wherewithal to do it, Spike always knew the answers. He managed to hide his intelligence from most of the others, but he couldn’t fool either her or Giles. There were nights she couldn’t sleep, and she found herself sitting on the stairs, listening to the two men talk. The deep cadences of their voices soothed her in ways she didn’t really want to examine, but it was just the sounds calmed her. They had a surprisingly wide range of subjects to talk about, everything from demonology to music to British politics and nearly everything in between. The one thing they’d never talked about, unless they did it when she was asleep, was her sister. Hardly any of them talked about Buffy, at least not around her. She hated that. Buffy was her sister and she needed to talk about her and Mom. About how she felt being alone. About Spike. About anything.

But none of them except Spike talked to her about it. And that just sucked.

Clattering noisily into the house, Dawn dumped her books on the floor next to the door and yelled out “Spike”, wondering where he was.

His voice was soft, coming from the living room. He was parked in front of the television, not really watching it. It sounded like he was just waking up. “‘Lo, Nib. How was your day?”

“It was a day.” Things were so domestic between them, just as if they were a family. It was nice, comforting even. Only two things were missing. Joyce and Buffy. Dawn looked at him, noting his disheveled appearance. Her giggle subsided into a sob. He was up, taking her into his arms before she even realized she was crying. “‘S alright, pet. Shhhh. C’mon, sit.”

It was a long time before her crying stopped, but he never moved, except to hold her closer. Dawn was practically in his lap, her head resting against his chest, her arms clutched around him tightly. There was no comforting thump of a heartbeat against her ear, but that didn’t matter. He still smelled like Spike, leather and tobacco and well, home. She wiped her runny nose, snuffling into his shirt. His harrumph made her softly chuckle, but she knew it was an act. Nothing fazed him, not demon guts or Dawn snot, well, nothing short of death anyway. “I’m such a baby.”

“Nah. You’ve just had a rough time of it. No worries, pet. Cry all you want. ‘M here to listen.” His hand rubbed her back, soothing the hiccups away.

Her arms tightened around him. Maybe it wasn’t so bad having Spike to come home to.

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**Four. Who’s that Girl?**

*If there is anything I really fear it is the mind of a young girl.*

*Jane Heap, as quoted in The Strange Necessity, part 1*

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Two more weeks. Two more weeks and she would have been home free for the whole damn summer. Two damned weeks. Damn. Damn. Damn. It was soo not fair.

Sitting in the principal’s office waiting for the lecture she knew was coming, Dawn was mentally kicking herself. *This just sucked.* She was busted. Skipping math class hadn’t exactly been the
smartest thing she’d done lately, but it wasn’t the only thing. At least it’s the only thing I got caught doing. Looking around at the stupid motivational posters on the walls, Dawn absentely twirled a finger in her hair. She wondered which one of her guardians was going to get the phone call and hoped that it was either Spike or Tara. Of the four constantly watching her, those were the two who wouldn’t give her the endless lectures and pep talks. They would probably understand. Wouldn’t give her as hard a time as the other two, at least she hoped so.

“Dawn Summers, follow me please.”

Grabbing her books, she made the long walk into the principal’s office.

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Distant chimes rang in his head, disturbing his sleep. Spike groaned and rolled over, trying to find a more comfortable spot in the cramped quarters of Dawn’s single bed. It was, as always, a futile quest. At least it was a bed. More than he had come to expect lately. He shifted his weight, easing a kink in his back that owed more to the injuries from last night’s patrol than his position. There it was again, that pounding. Who the hell was knocking on the door at this hour? Opening one eye, in an effort to find the clock, Spike realized how late in the day it was. After one. His mind registered the pounding on the door, grumbling about disturbed sleep patterns and what not.

Pulling on his jeans, he bellowed down the stairs, “Hold on. ‘M coming.”

Reluctantly opening the door, a shirtless disheveled Spike was confronted by a well dressed, dark haired, fairly attractive woman. She eyed him speculatively, noting his state of undress and his general all around grumpiness. He kept away from the sunlight, stepping back out of the open doorway. “Is this the Summers’ residence?”

Her voice was even, without an accent. She was about Willow’s height, little on the plump side, but nice curves in any case. Spike eyed her again, noting with interest the briefcase in her hand.

“Yah. Who’re you?” Scratching his bare chest, Spike realized his state of undress. “Um. . .Yeah, lemme get a shirt on.”

He moved toward the living room, where a relatively clean shirt was on the corner of the coffee table, where he’d left it yesterday after Dawn had sniveled all over him. His voice came out muffled as he pulled the shirt on. “So, who did you say you were?”

“I’m here from the school.” He looked up quickly at that, motioning her inside the door. No need to worry about this one. Purely human by the scent of her, not to mention the pounding heartbeat. Flashing her an assessing look, Spike motioned her inside to the living room. “What’s this about then?”

“We’ve noticed a, well, something of a pattern with Dawn over the past couple of weeks. And we know that her mother recently passed away. I understand her older sister has custody of her. “

“Oh, this is great, but who are you?” He sat down in the chair as she continued talking.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Ms. West, the school social worker. Dawn’s teachers have been concerned about her missing class and skipping whole days since her mother died. We thought perhaps it was time for a meeting with her guardian.” Spike just stared at her, unsure of what to do or say.
The insane thought ‘we’d all like a meeting with her guardian’ circled round his head, but he said nothing. He had no idea if this was routine or not. His only experience with formalized education had been well over a century ago, and he sincerely doubted any of his headmasters or prefects had engaged in meetings like this with parents. More likely, they’d have just caned the miscreant and have done with it. He couldn’t get up and call Giles, that would entail leaving this woman alone, able to snoop at will. No, better he get rid of her as quickly as possible and then deal with Dawn later.

He had no clue she was skipping school. It was not a good thing. Education was important, and she wasn’t helping things by skipping out of classes. They’d all agreed, as a group, that keeping quiet about Buffy being gone was the smart thing to do, especially if they wanted to keep Dawn close. Otherwise, if the authorities found out, Dawn would be shipped off to a home, and none of them would be likely to have any right to visit. And Dawn was supposed to go to school and try to stay out of trouble, keep under the radar.

“She’s not here right now.” Damn how that hurt to say. Thank god they put the bot in a locked closet in the basement. He didn’t think he could explain some of the responses they’d been unable to reprogram. Willow had been working on it, but a lot of the phrases were still inappropriate for everyday behavior, and nothing that would help him in this situation.

“Ah . . . Not sure when would be a good time. I’ll have to have her give you a call so she can suss that out with you.” He couldn’t see what it was she was writing, but she seemed rather intent on it. “Yes. That would be fine.”

Reaching out her hand, she held out a card to him. Spike looked at her sleepily, then realized what she was doing. “Right then. I’ll just give this to her.”

Quickly, the woman was on her feet again, putting all her paperwork back into her briefcase. He caught her looking at him from the corner of her eye, a slight blush covering her cheeks. He thought she might be like the wiccans, because she didn’t even blink, but the telltale sign of interest gave him an edge.

“Well then. I’ll let Buffy know you were here. I’m sure she’ll want to speak to you.”

He grinned, looking her up and down. She was pretty enough, but not worth either the time or trouble, even if his heart was in it. And it wasn’t. Didn’t matter looking, but anything more required an effort, and not one he was willing to expend, not unless something came up with Dawn that the bot couldn’t handle. Which it might, so the intense looking was good groundwork, but he wouldn’t do more than that. The woman colored further, this time looking him straight on, giving him her own once-over.

Making her way toward the door, she said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

Ushering her out the door, he considered using Spike, but he didn’t think that would help Dawn’s current situation. Spike didn’t sit well with authority-type figures. Deftly he opened the door and willed her to take the steps outside.

“Name’s William.” He didn’t elaborate further. Let her think what she wanted, but her next words threw him for a loop.

“I thought Dawn’s father’s name was listed as Hank.”

He stood there gaping at her, no answer crossing his mind. She was down the steps before he could
think of anything to say.

Hours later, he was still somewhat mystified over his encounter with the school social worker. There’d been no indication that Dawn was having a problem, no letters home, no phone calls from any of her teachers. Spike had decided first off that he was going to talk to Dawn before he brought this to Giles. The last thing the girl needed was a full blown lecture from the tweed one. And he doubted that the girls would be up for the kind of lecture Dawn needed, and forget about the whelp. He would be more of a hindrance than a help. So it was up to him. He hated doing this to her, hated being the one to put his foot down and make her toe the line, but this was important. Not just for all of the rest of them, but this was Dawn’s future at stake. The last thing he wanted was for her to end up in a foster home. The only good news about that was she would probably end up staying in Sunnydale, but if they managed to contact her father, she could end up anywhere. Not that he personally had any problem following her – in fact, he was the only one that probably could leave on a whim. And he would, if that wanker of a father took her away.

He was still lost in his own thoughts when Dawn came in through the back door. It took him a long moment to identify the rustling in the kitchen as her rooting about for a snack, but when he did, he was on his feet and approaching her before he could second guess himself. “Dawn. How was school today?”

_There, give the girl an out. Give her a chance to make good, a chance to come clean._ Her head in the refrigerator, back to him, she said, “It was mostly a day. Nothing big going on.”

“Really? Hmm.” He waited a beat, then “That’s good then, nothing big.”

Dawn froze in the act of moving around leftovers from last night’s dinner, then slowly backed up. “Yeah well. Nothing big is good.”

“Good then.” Spike knew his tone of voice signaled his total disbelief. He could spot bullshit a mile off, and this conversation reeked of it. But he said nothing more, just raised a brow at Dawn and tossed her an orange from the counter.

“Ah, Spike, how mad would Giles be if I had to go to summer school?”

“Is this a rhetorical question or one with some basis in reality, pidge?” Spike moved to stand in front of the sink, his arms crossed in front of his chest, watching her carefully.

Dawn looked up at him, a sad look in her eyes. “Spike, I think I screwed up. I’ve been skipping classes, and I got busted today.”

_Points for honesty, he thought, and knowing what she’d done was stupid._ “Can’t imagine that Rupert will appreciate this, Dawn. You know how he’s been going on about keeping Scoobie business away from prying eyes. Wanting to keep quiet about your sis.”

Dawn’s sigh was deep, ending in a quiet sob. “I know. I just couldn’t . . . I can’t explain it. I just, just . . .” Spike could take a lot of things, could be impassive at a lot of emotional outbursts, but Dawn’s tears stroked something inside that he’d thought long dead and buried. Compassion. He no more wanted the girl to cry than he wanted a dose of syphilis.
He watched, trying to maintain some distance, while the tears started sliding down her cheeks. Part of him knew she was manipulating him and was well aware she knew he was a soft touch where she was concerned. Another part of him knew she really was sorry, but sorry for being caught, not for her actions. “Niblet, you know we’re trying to keep the authorities from takin’ you away. If they find out, you’re good as gone.”

No reason to sugar coat it or play it nice with her. Someone had to stress it, play the heavy with her, make her understand what could happen, because so far, it seemed she wasn’t getting it. “Do you wanna go to a foster home? Or worse, go with your father, far away from the rest of us? That what you want? Foster family might not let any of us near you, specially me. What would you do then?”

Laid out like that, Dawn couldn’t argue with him. She knew there was no way she wanted far away from them, knew she didn’t want to go live with her father – who hadn’t been heard from even after they tried notifying him when Joyce died. They’d not bothered after Buffy, knowing that in order to keep her death quiet, they had to pretend. Staying out of trouble, not making any waves in school was all they’d asked Dawn to do. Thing was, he understood why she was acting out, but knowing didn’t make it any better. Rupert was going to have to be told. The school could make life difficult, especially if Dawn continued to act out. Slumping onto one of the stools, Dawn laid her head down on her folded arms.

“I goofed, didn’t I?” Not waiting for a confirmation from Spike, Dawn kept speaking, “Dunno why I did it, I just . . . it seemed like a good idea at the time. I just . . . what point is there in going?”

He waited her out, knowing that she wasn’t finished. “My life sucks. Mom’s dead . . . Buffy’s dead, and I’m left here all alone. Who cares if I don’t finish school? What is the point anyway? Why . . . I mean . . . just why?”

Voice hitching quietly, she continued “It’s just, who is gonna care? What, I mean . . . Spike, what the hell am I gonna do? Who is gonna take care of me . . . when this is all done? Who?”

Enough was enough. Spike moved over to where Dawn was hunched over, tears streaking down her face, pooling on her hands. “Sssshhh. Niblet, don’t cry. You know I’ll be here. Forever, if you need me, not gonna leave you anytime soon. Made a promise, gotta keep it.”

It was the first time since Buffy’s death that he spoke about the promise he’d made to her, to look after Dawn. First time he let it slip to the girl in question, anyway. He’d had it out with Giles, just before they buried Buffy, before the LA crew arrived, after the Watcher had come to get him while Dawn was hysterical. Spike had laid down the law to Giles, telling him in no uncertain terms that Dawn, and Dawn alone was his priority. He also had told him about his promise to Buffy. Somehow protecting Dawn had extended to doing patrols every night, and he had no idea how that had really started, but the truth was, he needed the physical release patrolling brought him.

Dawn lifted up her head, her big blue eyes full of tears, at his last words. “Spike, you made a promise about me?”

Fuck. He’d not wanted to tell her about it, at least not this way. “Yeah, did that. Made a promise to your sis, to keep you safe.”

“You promised Buffy you would take care of me?”

“Did. Would protect you always. Even without a promise. You’re m’niblet.”

She squeaked, throwing her arms around his torso, holding onto him. “Don’t leave me Spike, please don’t . . . please.”
“Not goin’ anywhere, gonna stay with you. Even if someone else tries to take you. Gotta protect you.”

His arms came round to hold her close, his hands running through her long brown hair, waiting out her tears.

Five – School’s out for Summer?

*No blessed leisure for love or hope, but only time for grief.*
* - Thomas Hood, *The Son of the Shirt*

Giles stood, arms crossed, watching while Spike paced back and forth across the floor of the training room. “Thing is Rupe, I understand why the girl is doing it. Doesn’t make it right, but she’s feeling lost.”

He whirled about, facing the older man. “Feels like she’s got no one to really care about her, what she does. ‘S’wrong, but that’s what she’s feeling. Tried telling her she’s not alone, but . . .” He shrugged, struggling for the words. This wasn’t easy for him, trying to be compassionate, but he cared for the girl. If he admitted it to himself, he loved her, worried about her like he would have for one of his own blood. Even without the promise he’d made to Buffy, he would have looked out for her. “Doesn’t help that she’s blaming herself for what her sis did.”

Waiting a beat, Spike continued, “She thinks everyone blames her. Feeling lost. Alone.”

There was no visible response beyond the tightening of Giles’ jaw. He couldn’t rightly refute anything the vampire was saying, because he was guilty of feeling that way about the girl. It should not have come down to a choice between them. It should have been clear-cut and simple. Destroy the key. Close the portals. Destroy Glory. Instead, it became a . . . situation akin to disaster. The key was a young girl, blood and flesh of the Slayer, and how do you destroy something you’ve come to love? Rupert knew it wasn’t within Buffy, even as he’d first suggested it. And even as he’d said it, he knew she wasn’t going to agree to destroy the key, knew he’d hurt her even by suggesting it. Despite the belief that it had to be said. Which was why, in the last hours before the battle, instead of turning to him, Buffy had turned to this vampire before him, made him promise to protect the key, even from himself.

“Spike. I know she blames herself. We’ve all blamed ourselves, including I think, you.” Gesturing over Spike’s words of “’M not the issue”, Giles continued, “But it wasn’t her fault. Buffy made a decision on her own about how to close the dimensional walls. We cannot second guess that. It does her memory no service.”

“Right then. Girl’s been skipping classes. Needs to make up for lost time and got to watch her. Can’t have them take her away. Won’t be able to protect her.” Spike lost no time in getting to the heart of the matter. “Niblet trusts me to tell her what’s what. No sugar on it. But she needs to know legalities and what not and what could happen if her good-for-naught father comes back.” He stopped pacing, facing away from the other man.

“Needs to hear from someone else wasn’t her fault.”

“All right, Spike. I’ll sit down and talk to her about it, though I’m not sure she’ll listen to me if she’s already ignoring what you tell her.”
“She listens, just needs to hear from someone else, not her fault.”

Without another word, Spike stalked out of the training room, voice trailing behind him. “Right then, I’ll leave you to it, ‘m off to kill the nasties.”

Rupert stood there long after he’d gone out, trying to get his thoughts together before speaking to Dawn. He understood the problems the vampire had in dealing with the girl, after all, it wasn’t everyday that a vampire undertook to protect a human child. That this one was not a normal child was immaterial, and he was beginning to believe the vampire wasn’t normal either. Dawn was human now and completely unprotected. They had no idea who or what might still be after the girl, what her ultimate purpose was, and how she could trigger her ‘gifts’. He and the others had talked it over, just before and again after they had buried Buffy, what to do. At the time, the last remaining Summers had been too distraught to be included in the conversation, and they’d only just informed her of what she needed to do to stay with them. Perhaps it had been something of a mistake in not including her.

Dawn was home, with Willow and Tara. Xander and Anya were elsewhere, no doubt planning the wedding they somehow thought was a secret from him. He would inform the girls of the situation, and hopefully enlist their help with Dawn, but, he realized it was up to him to convey the seriousness of her situation. Spike, much as he hated admitting it, was right. They couldn’t leave the girl to the mercies of the California social services, nor could they allow her father, if he could be located and forced to face responsibility, to remove the girl from their protection.

In for a long night, Giles locked up and made his way toward the house on Revello Drive.

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Hours later, Giles was sitting on the couch, a tumbler of 25-year old scotch in hand, waiting for Spike to come back. The talk with Dawn had gone surprisingly well, though he suspected she was more upset with herself for getting caught than she was for the acts that got her in trouble. Oddly enough, she was just as afraid of getting shipped off as the rest of them were. Tara had been horrified at the thought, and Willow had agreed to start tutoring Dawn. He’d laid it out for the girls, coming down especially hard on Dawn. He sat up, waiting for Spike to come home, as they’d begun the ritual of going over his patrols. There was more bad news, news he didn’t relish sharing with any of them, but he no longer had a choice.

Most of the lights were off as he waited, preferring to in the relative darkness. Giles left the fax he’d received as he was locking the shop doors earlier. Somehow, some way, they had been discovered. He sat, sphinx-like, while Spike quietly clattered in the front door, locked up and made his way around the house, making sure everything was locked up tight. It wasn’t until he made his circuit round the first floor, coming back around to the living room that Spike found Giles.

“Sitting drinkin’ by yourself isn’t good mate.” He’d stopped short, dropping the short axe down by his feet, wondering why Rupert was sitting so quietly. Not that he was ever really noisy, but something about his posture was stiffer than usual tonight. “Not go well with Dawn?”

“No, it went as expected. She did need to hear from me.” Giles shifted a bit, easing forward, placing his drink on the table next to the paper. His motion drew Spike’s attention to the paper laying there. “What’s this?”
“Sit down, Spike.” Giles managed to refrain from drawing off his glasses, but it was a near thing. He needed something to do with his hands, so instead he waited until Spike sat, then moved the paper across to him without lifting it in his hands.

It was just a short note. Just a small little communiqué. It should not have provoked the reaction Giles was giving it. Spike looked down at it, without reading the words, gauging the Watcher’s body language.

“Rupes, what is this?”

“Spike, read it.” He reluctantly looked down at the paper, suddenly not wanting to even touch it. “Rather you tell me first.”

“Spike. Just read it.” He couldn’t resist any longer. Rupert dragged his glasses off his face, placing them on the table with delicate slowness next to his scotch. His breath was soft in the air, sounding very loud in quiet room. Spike finally picked up the paper, scanned it quickly, drawing in a deep unneeded breath.

“Fucking hell.”

“Rather” was Giles’ one word response.

“What are you gonna do?” Spike tossed the paper back down on the table, almost loathe to touch it. “Bloody fucking buggering hell.”

The younger man slumped back on his tailbone, his legs spread wide and hands dropped down between his legs. His expression nearly exactly mirrored the other man’s emotions. Giles waited a moment, knowing he’d had a bit more time to come to terms what the fax said, but also knowing his hands were effectively tied. While he was still a British citizen, he had “resident alien” status with INS, and also was the owner of a thriving business. Truthfully, he no longer worked for the Council full time, but he did owe them allegiance, and not to mention he still did consulting from time to time. But that was just semantics.

“Evidently, the Council has independent sources of information here in Sunnydale.” Both men shifted in their seats, neither one liking the implications of that. Spike looked away, then back at Giles, opening his mouth to speak, then shutting it again.

“‘S’not good Rupert. Can’t have them spying about.”

“I know. This doesn’t bode well at all.” Giles picked up his scotch, sipping it a bit before he spoke again. “I’m going to have to return, at least for a little while.”

“Hell of a time to leave, Rupert. Girls won’t like this a bit.” Spike somehow knew Giles hadn’t yet said a word to the others, didn’t need the other man’s confirmation of his silence. “How’re we gonna survive without you, even for a little bit?”

While he was flattered, Giles had no illusions about how well they would all survive. The only one that really needed him avoided him at all costs unless forced to deal with him. Dawn was more comfortable with Spike and Tara, listening to the vampire as if he were the parental figure instead of himself, and Tara tried valiantly to fill Joyce’s shoes. “No doubt you will all be fine.”

The loud snort sounded like a gunshot in the quiet. “Doubt that very much. Don’t play games with me, Rupert. Doubt anyone but Dawn listens to me, and you know Harris would just as soon leave me in a puddle of holy water than not.” He shifted forward in his seat, hovering over the loaded missive, “Know the girls might not care to have me here if you’re long gone.”
“I think you’re wrong.” Shaking his head slightly, Rupert moved forward, so that they were nearly nose to nose. “I think the girls like having you around, at least they know nothing demonic can get past you. They feel safer with you here. There isn’t much I can do about Xander, I doubt anything will ever change his view. But,” and he waved a hand to dismiss what he’d just said, “that’s not something we can worry over. I’ve at least got to return to file my final diary.”

His voice wavered a bit, and Giles took a moment to compose himself. “I don’t know that I trust you completely, Spike. Don’t know that I ever will.” Lifting his eyes to meet Spike’s look head on, he continued, “Yet I can’t deny that you’ve proven you won’t do anything to hurt the girls. I have to trust that will continue.”

*Well. Another admission from the Watcher.* Spike was certain the hellmouth was going to open and swallow them all up. *Sitting here, this moment, was nothing short of a bloody miracle.* That racked up two in the plus column, both courtesy of the other Brit. *Who’d have ever thought?* Not himself, given the reaction only his presence had gotten right after his revelation to Buffy of his feelings. Looking away from Giles, Spike tried to mask how much this admission meant to him.

“Made a promise. Intend to keep it,” was all he said.

But it was enough. They both knew what it meant.

*****************************************************************

It took a few days, but Giles managed to break the news of his imminent return to Mother England and the Council to the girls. As expected, Dawn took the news silently, then pitched a fit later on, when it finally sunk in that another support was leaving. This time, she didn’t take it out on anyone but the culprit. There’d been a letter home from school, indicating that Dawn was required to attend summer school, since she had missed so much time for one reason or another. Despite being warned, and knowing that he’d already spoken to her once about this, Giles confronted the teenager again.

He’d caught her just before bedtime, on a night when Willow and Tara were both out, and while Spike was out patrolling. It quickly escalated into a shouting match, something neither one of them had expected. Giles felt he had to impress upon her just how important it was that she behave and keep out of sight of officials, especially since he was leaving for an unknown amount of time. Dawn had immediately jumped to into defensive mode, shrieking that he wasn’t her father, he didn’t even like her and why should she listen to him anyway?

Her voice had ridden higher and higher, until it hurt his ears. She was near hysterics again, only this time Giles knew exactly what had triggered this. Spike had warned him, knowing the girl would lose her cool during any discussion with Giles. Internally, Rupert cursed the vampire’s insight with one breath and with another he thanked him for it.

“Dawn. Settle down.” He caught her by the shoulders, lightly shaking her. “I’m not staying in England, I’m coming back, I just don’t know when.”

She crumpled. Dawn just slumped forward into his chest, his arms coming round to hold her up. Incoherent words, half sentences and muffled hiccups escaped her, while Giles held her close, trying to soothe her.

That was how Willow found them, Dawn curled up next to Giles, while he explained to her where
he was going, why, and who he had to report to. He also told her he was going to try and unearth the identity of their informants, and get some agreement from the Council to remove the surveillance.

Contemplating the two, the redheaded wiccan prayed that Giles would stay away for a very long time.

6. A Girl in Trouble (Is a temporary thing)

there’s a time when every girl learns to use her head;
tears will be saved ‘til they’re better spent;
there’s no time for her to be afraid, so instead,
she takes care of business, keeps a cool head
a girl in trouble is a temporary thing
Romeo Void, A Girl in Trouble (Is a temporary thing) 1984

It was so much easier for her now. Not that what she was searching for was easy to find, just that she had so much more freedom to search for it. Giles leaving had been a really really good thing. In fact, she hoped he stayed in England for the rest of the summer. Willow sat up in the restricted book section of the Magic Box, looking for references to underworld gods. She’d been looking, researching for a way around using blood, but so far, nothing seemed to work. There was a pile of grimoires to her left, a note pad perched precariously on her knee, and an enormous book at her right, hieroglyphics scrawled across its cover.

There was no way around it, she was going to have to use the rites from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, with adaptations from other sources. And blood. She was going to have use blood.

Every ritual came down to one thing, using blood. She was about to tread down a path that she once thought never to follow. Willow glanced up as a customer entered the shop, her attention caught by the bell. Stretching out her sore neck muscles, Willow tried to block out all the misgivings and doubts that kept flooding through her mind. There was no way she could falter. Firmly pushing aside the doubts, she turned her attention back to the books strewn about her.

Preparation was key, and the list of supplies she was going to need was long and esoteric. Nothing on it, except for the garlic and water, were things she could just buy anywhere. Some of the supplies were going to come from the Magic Box, and she was going to have to search out via the internet. Time and money were her only constraints, especially now since Giles was gone.

That had been a huge weight from her shoulders, Giles’ return to England came at a fortuitous time. He’d been gone now nearly three weeks, and it didn’t look like he was going to be able to return anytime soon. Xander had been sworn to secrecy, though she still hadn’t told him anything of real substance. Dawn and Tara were still distracted with school issues, both girls now mired in summer sessions, and Spike was oblivious to her scheming. Anya had been giving her weird looks every once in a while, but she had been able to divert her attention. So far, everything was falling into place.

She’d ordered some supplies just this morning, using the Magic Box sources, shipping them directly to her parents address. Now it was just a matter of putting the ritual itself together. This was going to be the time consuming part. Everything was going to have to be gone over more than once and she couldn’t afford to be careless. Buffy was depending on her, even if she didn’t know it.
So far, the Egyptian Book of the Dead was proving her best source, but there were more than a few of the Celtic gods and goddesses that walked in many worlds, and could be called upon during the ritual. She just had to make sure everything was in place. Willow let her mind drift, wondering how long exactly Angel had been lost in the hell dimension Buffy had sent him to, and what had triggered his release.

If she could figure that out, this would be so much easier. Unfortunately, Buffy had not kept any notes, nor had she confided in Willow when that whole situation was going on. She’d tried to go through Buffy’s journal, but Dawn had started keeping the door to Buffy’s room locked, while everyone was out. Probably because she doesn’t want anyone to move things around. At least that’s what she hoped it was. She didn’t want to think it might be something else.

The truth, if Willow knew it, might not have made her happy at all.

Spike rolled over, unable to get really comfortable. It wasn’t that the bed was uncomfortable, it was more the extent of his injuries. Lately, patrol had gotten a bit harder, with rumors of the Slayer being gone circulating about, though he’d been doing his best to dispel them. Being in the company of the Buffybot drove him round the bend, but he’d started taking the damned thing out on patrol every night since Rupert had left. So for the last nearly three weeks, he’d gone out, with the bot.

Two nights ago, he’d taken a hard blow to his side, breaking a couple of ribs. The cailleach-oidhiche they’d run across had been particularly difficult to kill, since it had both arms and talons. He’d finally managed to sever its head from its neck, but not before the she bitch had gotten her claws into his right side. The cuts and bruises were mostly gone, but the broken ribs were taking a bit more time to heal.

Groaning into the pillow, Spike shifted his back, stretching the sore muscles. Her scent hit him, making him reel with the loss. When she’d gotten a glimpse of his side, Dawn had insisted on wrapping him up, and then settled him, despite his angry protestations, into Buffy’s room. Arguing that her bed wasn’t going to be comfortable for him, Dawn over-rode his objections, pushing him into the room. She’d made him sleep there for the last two days.

He’d tried telling her that it wasn’t right, that he shouldn’t be sleeping in Buffy’s room, but Dawn just shut him up. “Buffy would want to keep an eye on you. She’d be worried about your injuries,” was what she’d said to him.

“Not this much, Nib, she’d’ve never let me sleep here. Probably would have put me in the cellar or some such.” Dawn had looked at him with her hip thrust out, and an eyebrow raised. She looked so much like Buffy in that moment, he’d almost laughed.

“No, Spike, she wouldn’t have done that. Not now, not since Glory.”

He kept his mouth shut then, mainly because she had tightened the bandage around his ribs so much that for a moment the pain blinded him, but also because he had a feeling he wouldn’t win that argument. Buffy had been nicer, since he’d taken that god-awful beating from the hell skank, and she had trusted him to have her back and to watch over Dawn, so who really knew what was in her head those last few days? He surely didn’t, at least not completely, and he doubted Buffy had told Dawn everything. Spike figured that the two girls had talked some, but not enough.
And yet, here he was, sleeping in her bed. He made a promise to himself that once his ribs were healed, he was going to set up something in the cellar, so that he’d be comfortable in the day and still close enough to hear everything going on over his head. It was hard enough, being in this house all the time, memories swirling around. Confronted daily with the effects of his failure, Spike sunk deeper and deeper into depression. He had failed to keep both Summers girls safe. He hadn’t been able to save Dawn, and his failure had caused Dawn to lose Buffy. It was a vicious cycle he was unable to see his way out of, although he tried each day to come up with another way he could have saved both of them.

So far his favorite fantasy was instead of Doc being able to slip behind him and slice open his back he managed to grab the knife and slice Doc, then pitch him over the side of the tower. Spike replayed that one over and over. Another one of his favorites was when he managed to grab a hold of Doc as he was sending him over the side and bring Doc tumbling down to the ground with him, crushing the spry demon beneath his broken body.

But nothing he did in his dreams consoled him. Because no matter how many different ways he came up with, no matter what scheme he thought of now, not one did what he most wanted. Nothing he could do would bring Buffy back.

Had he known someone was attempting just that, he might have been even more uncomfortable.

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Xander was finding it hard keeping his promise to Willow. For the first time since they’d started dating, he had a secret from Anya, and it was beginning to bother him. He knew Anya could help them, she had so much knowledge but he also knew Willow didn’t want her to know. What he couldn’t figure out was why she wanted to keep everyone else in the dark. It didn’t make much sense to him, since everyone else was nearly as smart as Willow, and Giles was probably smarter. Xander knew he couldn’t compete with any of them in the smarts department, he had no self delusions in that respect. At best he could do grunt work and he somehow thought this wasn’t exactly going to be needed.

It made no sense, Willow wanting no one else’s help on this. He found himself biting his tongue a lot lately, ever since Willow had told him, especially around Anya. Not that he liked admitting it, in fact he preferred to pretend that his girl was just like everyone else and not over a thousand years old, but Anya knew stuff. Lots of stuff. Stuff he was sure would help Willow.

What he didn’t want to admit was that Willow didn’t want Anya’s help, for more than just her issue with secrecy. He tried to fool himself, thinking that it was just Willow being paranoid, but deep down he knew the girls didn’t like each other. Although, he had to admit that Anya tried, while Willow didn’t. It was hard to face, but his best friend didn’t like his girlfriend - fiancé. And for the life of him, he couldn’t really figure out why.

Which was only one of the things that was bothering him. Why Willow didn’t like Anya, why Willow wasn’t trusting anyone but him with her plan, and why she wouldn’t ask anyone else for help. It made him feel like someone was always watching over him, like someone was following him. Xander didn’t like this. Something about this whole plan of Willow’s made him feel all . . . it was like drinking milk that wasn’t good. Every time he thought of it, it made him more and more uneasy.
Xander had not a clue that things were about to get worse.

7. Shadows taller than our souls.

Mind the three-fold laws you should three times bad and three times good.  
When misfortune is enow wear the star upon your brow.  
Be true in love this you must do unless your love is false to you.  
These eight words the rede fulfill:  
An ye harm none, do what ye will  
The Wiccan Rede, Lady Gwen Thompson, The Green Egg, 1948

Even if we did bring him back, it wouldn’t be Michael.  
It’d be something else. Something dark and unnatural.  
Aunt Frances, Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman

One last thing she was waiting for, the last of a long list of supplies that could be gathered beforehand. Everything else was ready. She’d gone over all the lists, eliminating one thing, adding another, but always mindful of the fact that every single one of her supplies had a purpose. All the herbs were packed carefully, wedged together inside the cauldron she was going to use. It had taken weeks, far longer than she had expected to find the pure white bullhide she was planning on using, but she’d finally located one. Searching on e-bay had been the key to finding all the supplies she’d not been able to locate via the Magic Box.

That had been surprisingly easy. Finding the suppliers, calling them directly and having the items shipped to her parent’s house had been deceptively easy. She’d hit a snag with the bullhide though. The rituals were specific and explicit. The only one that would work within the confines of the spell she picked was a pure white bullhide. And it had to be a complete bullhide, no stitching, nothing pieced together to look like it was complete. As a last ditch effort, Willow had logged onto e-bay, after searching forums and chatrooms and every source she could think of. It had taken a while, in fact almost a month and a half later, she still did not have the bullhide in hand, but it was being shipped to her.

Aside from the blood, the bullhide was the last component she needed. And the blood couldn’t be spilled until she was in the middle of the ritual anyway. Willow checked off the supplies on her list, as she packed all of it into the large canvas bag she was using as a carry-all for everything. The bullhide was going to be huge, but it could be stored rolled up and tied while she waited to perform the ritual.

Consulting the astrological aspects, she’d figured that the best time to perform the ritual was another three weeks away, during the full moon. So far nothing had contraindicated that it wasn’t the right time, but Willow was learning to be very wary of thinking things were going to be perfect. She hated that, that she couldn’t pin everything down, and convince herself that it was going to be perfect and go off without a hitch. She might be able to put on a brave and resolved face for Xander and fool him, but she was a mass of self-doubt. Thoughts of not being strong enough, not having energy enough, of outside forces unexpectedly popping up to distract her, or goddess forbid, someone finding out and stopping her swirled about in her head all the time.

Three more weeks. Willow suddenly didn’t know if she could make it that long. All the secrets and lies were just sitting on the tip of her tongue, hovering there every time she opened her mouth to
speak. She’d find herself humming mindlessly just to keep from blurring it all out. Xander was the only one that didn’t look at her with questions in his eyes. Instead he looked at her with something like pity or fear. Anya kept eyeing her, but had nothing to base her suspicions on, there was just a niggling feeling along her spine.

Thank the gods that Spike was still wrapped up in taking care of Dawn and patrolling. He was in near constant contact with Giles, phone calls going back and forth every couple of days. Dawn was in summer school, which was nearly over, and her focus was on boys and school.

The supplies were finally all packed away, and Willow turned her attention to the actual rituals.

The ritual itself was problematic. She’d pulled together various rites, rituals, invocations and incantations trying to come up with something specific to raise the slayer. Harnessing all the forces, without frying herself or someone else, was going to be nothing short of a miracle. She couldn’t rely on using anyone else’s magic, since she’d made the decision to shut everyone out, but she could pull energy from them. Tara and Dawn were both essential, at least their blood was. And since Dawn was made of energy, she should be able to tap into the power of the key and use its energy. At least that’s what she was hoping for.

Her biggest problem was how to fill the bullhide. Every ritual she found had called for the bullhide to be filled with water and the resurrected person, well, Buffy, should rematerialize and wake up inside the pool of water. At least, that was the way it was supposed to work. She had no idea if the ritual would work exactly that way, since every other ritual called for more than one person working the spell. There were variations in the numbers of people who should be present, and she supposed it all depended upon the amount of power generated and tapped into by the person conducting the ritual. Which was another problem. She was the only one doing the chanting, she was the only one calling on the powers, invoking the gods and goddesses, so there was a limit to the amount of power, unless she could figure out a way to channel some of the key’s energy into the ritual. She also had no idea how she was going to keep the water inside the bullhide.

Willow found her mind circling round and round and tried to focus her attention on something else.

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Dawn was home from school when he finally woke up. They’d agreed that she would come home before going off with her friends, just so he could keep tabs on her. Not that getting around during the day was a real hardship, it was just that Spike had found himself sleeping more since he’d taken an active role in patrol and slaying. Lying on his bed in the basement, Spike thought about the irony of his life. He was of the line of Aurelius, a master vampire in his own right, feared by many, and now, he was stuck playing family to an orphaned girl. That the orphaned girl was truly constructed of mystical energy and he’d sworn to protect her eased his chagrin somewhat; that the girl was the sister of the object of his affection made it disappear completely.

He rolled over, stretching his muscles, feeling the bones pop and crack. Lifting his head up, Spike sniffed out who was upstairs. Three heartbeats registered, only one in a pattern he readily recognized. Dawn had brought friends home. His deep sigh broke the silence of the cellar. Sitting up, Spike reached for his pants and in one smooth motion slid out of the bed and into his pants. Not bothering with shoes or a shirt, Spike padded silently to the basement door. Girlish voices sounded on the other side of the door, and Spike leaned his head against the door for a moment trying to hear who was there. Dawn was easy to identify, and he thought one of the others was Janice, but had no idea who
the third one was.

Opening the door, Spike was greeted with the sight of an array of various snack foods piled high on the counter, opened soda bottles and three teenaged girls gaping at him.

“‘Lo, niblet” was his rumbled greeting. She mumbled something around a mouthful of chips, and Janice just smiled at him, but it was the startled “eep” from the unknown that caught his attention. Her cute little face looked up at him, blue eyes nearly bugging out of her head and mouth open wide in surprise. Dawn and Janice shared a glance and then giggled a bit, while Spike just raised an eyebrow in question. Ambling over to the refrigerator, Spike passed Dawn and pulled on her hair.

“Who’s this then?”

“Spike, this is Kirsten.” A deep blush was the only response, while Spike nodded at the introduction. A softly mumbled hey came from the girl, while her eyes traveled the length of his bare torso. He hadn’t bothered to put on a shirt, nor button his pants up completely, and his hair was a mass of unruly curls. Dawn thought he couldn’t have looked any cuter, but decided to keep that thought to herself. Looking over at her friend, she continued “Kirsten, this is Spike, my sister’s boyfriend.”

He swung around to face her. His face was impassive, only his eyes showing what he was thinking. “Bit?”

Dawn raised an eyebrow, looking pointedly at the girls, silently communicating that this was the best cover she could come up with, waiting for him to understand. Spike stood there, staring at her, his mind not really registering what she had meant. He caught on, though her introduction didn’t please him, he partially understood why she’d done it. “Right. Where’s my stuff?”

Turning back to the refrigerator, Spike searched about for the blood he knew should be there. “Um, I put it in the freezer.”

His impatience with the whole conversation was evident when he slammed the door closed, then ripped open the freezer, looking for his blood supply. He started to rip it out, his temper inexplicably getting the better of him today, then abruptly realized who it was in the kitchen with him. Resting his head on the open freezer door, Spike sighed deeply.

“You ok?” A timid voice asked from beside him. The new girl looked up at him, concern etched on her features. Somehow she had managed to move past the other girls and sidle up to him, all without catching anyone else’s attention.

Spike cleared his features, “’M fine, just tired is all. Work nights.”

“My dad works nights, so I know how it is. Did we wake you up?” Her voice was sweet, not too girlishly shrill like some of the others Dawn had brought home a time or two, holding the promise of being husky and deep when she got older. She was a pretty little thing, all blue eyes and blondish hair, a slight golden tan dusting her features. Her small hand reached out to touch him and Spike automatically moved back out of her way. Wasn’t that he didn’t like to be touched, in fact if anything he enjoyed the touch of others, especially women, but this wasn’t a woman. This was a little girl, more importantly, Dawn’s friend, and he didn’t want to give any of them ideas. Oh, he knew they all thought he was cute, hard to disguise their increased heart rates and breathing whenever he was around, but he didn’t want any reason for the authorities to come around. So he kept his distance from the girls. Wasn’t always this difficult though.

He stepped back away from her and wasn’t really surprised when she followed. Disconcerted a bit, but entirely unsurprised. There was something about this one, he couldn’t put his finger on it, but she
caused his nerves to sing. Not entirely human was his first thought, which was cemented when she looked up at him again. A sparkle entered her eyes, making them appear purple. Spike stepped further away, into the patch of sunlight, and she pulled him away from it before he could react. Her whisper took him by surprise “Shouldn’t do that. You could get all crispy.”

An impish smile flashed across her features, rendering Spike speechless. Her next sentence would have stopped his heart, if it had been beating. “Have to keep the key’s protector safe. Can’t break your promise.”

A harsh breath escaped his throat, which somehow went unnoticed by the other two girls. “What do you know of that?”

His hackles rose, every instinct screaming at him to protect Dawn and get this one away from her. “Don’t worry. I’m not here to attack the key. I’m here to . . . “ she thought for a moment, then “Not help you, but to, I suppose the best way to put it would be to say, is that I’m here to give you hope.”

The look of disbelief on his face must have been comical, because the girl let peels of laughter echo through the room. “Relax, Spike. I’m not a threat. I promise.”

“Right, and how’m I supposed to trust that?” He didn’t trust her, didn’t know who sent her, and he’d learned over the last couple of years living over the hellmouth, not to trust even those that professed to be “white hats”. His experience at the hands of the Initiative had driven that point home quite clearly. “Dunno who you are pet, nor why you’re here.”

“I’m here to give you some hope.” Her eyes twinkled, almost whirling with color as he looked carefully at her.

“What makes you think I need hope?”

*Brilliant reply there mate,* he thought. He shook his head, more in denial of the idea of him needing hope than the fact someone thought he needed it. She giggled softly once more, catching his full attention. *That giggle . . .* his unnecessary breath caught in his throat. God, she sounded just like Buffy in that moment. Spike looked down at her again, this time really looking. She was tiny, barely coming up to the middle of his chest, her features small and delicate. She reminded him of Buffy a bit, nothing facially but more in just her impish side.

She raised her eyebrow, a wide smile crossing her features. His nerves were still singing, but for some reason his apprehension eased a bit. Must be the resemblance to Buffy, he thought, then dismissed it, but the idea remained. Her tiny hand was still wrapped around his forearm and Spike could feel his skin warming up from just her touch. This one burned warmer than others. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in her scent, listening to the cadence of her heartbeat. A wisp of some scent he never in all his years had come across wafted from her, and it somehow, even while it set his teeth on edge, somehow it soothed him at the same time. The absurd idea that this little girl was otherworldly surfaced, though Spike immediately discarded it.

Opening his eyes, he glanced down once at the creature before him, then over her head to focus on Dawn. She wasn’t human. Two of the girls in this room with him right now at this instant were other than human. Kirsten caught the direction of his gaze and a look he’d not expected cross her face. “My promise to William. I’m not here to hurt her.”

She’d said William. Not Spike, not William the Bloody . . . but William. Spike shook his head, negating her words. “I will swear if you want me to.”

Once more he met her gaze, searching for the truth she wanted him to find. Her small hand reached
up to touch his cheek. “I swear . . . on the soul of her sister, I’m not here to hurt the key.”

His mouth opened, but the words wouldn’t come. There wasn’t a single thought in his head, save the repetition of her words. She’d sworn on the soul of the slayer. On the soul of Buffy. To him, there was nothing to refute that.

Clearing his throat, Spike tried to get words past his teeth. “Why then d’you think I need hope?”

_Fuck._ Wasn’t what he’d wanted to say at all, but those were the words that popped out of his mouth. Somehow, their voices had dropped down to a bare whisper, neither one of the wanting to be overheard by the other two. “S’not hope I need, pet. Well, I’m not the one needing it.”

His _gaze_ fixed on Dawn, then unknown to him, softened as he watched her for a moment.

Kirsten smiled, watching him watch Dawn. She suppressed a giggle, all the while thinking, _and the vampire thinks he doesn’t need hope_. Speaking again, she said “You are a good man, Spike.”

He swung his eyes back down to her disbelief shining through. “M not a man, pet, vampire here.”

The little girl shook her head in defiance. “Still a man. Still good. It’s why I’ve been sent here.”

“So tell me, pet, why have you been sent? And who sent you?” Spike crossed his arms in front of his chest, waiting for her answer.

Again she looked up at him, her eyes almost whirling. A soft little sigh escaped from her mouth, and she settled in closer to him, not moving her hand from his arm. “I can’t tell you everything, so don’t get agitated with me.”

The girl he knew as Kirsten waited a beat, caught his imperceptible nod, then spoke, “I’m just here to give you a message and hope.” Once again he had that look on his face that said more about him disbelieving the idea that he needed hope, but he nodded, waiting for her to continue. “It’s gonna be okay, you know, despite what you think, and even, despite what you see.”

Once more she waited, this time for the message to sink in. There wasn’t much she could actually come out and say, there were not really rules she had to follow, more like guidelines, but she still had almost said too much. A muscle in his cheek twitched, but otherwise his face was impassive. Kirsten stepped back then quelled her fear, retaking the step she had relinquished. “Please trust this. Trust that the slayer would never hurt the key, trust that she wouldn’t allow anything to harm her. And trust, William, in the trust that she had for you.”

He didn’t want to, but some niggling sense made him stop judging what she said and just let it be. Spike smiled a little, nodding his head to give her a chance to go on. He thought perhaps, that if he didn’t speak, didn’t contradict her in anyway or cause an argument, she might be inclined to spill more than she was. He wasn’t stupid, not by a long shot, and he didn’t get to be this old or a master vampire without having some smarts. So he waited.

And like any woman, when faced with a man who is listening intently, especially a very good looking one, Kirsten did spill more. The room started to recede even more, and Spike had a brief flashback to when Drusilla used to have her visions. “Watch out for the red one, trust in the yellow. The key needs protecting, because harm will come to her. The seer will dance with the devil beneath the stars and the souled one will be lost. One who was will return and will need you. You, and no other.”

The lights in her eyes began to sparkle and he nearly lost himself in her gaze. He very nearly missed what she said next, “Someday, William, she will tell you.”
Now he knew something was up, because he had no idea what she meant. Spike stood there quietly, waiting patiently for more. It came, just a whisper and then her eyes changed back to the blue they were before. “Love, William, will come.”

She slumped forward, and he caught her before her head hit the counter. It broke the cloak of silence around them, and both Dawn and Janice jumped to their feet. “Oh, my god! What happened? Is she gonna be okay?” Both girls were talking over each other, as Spike lifted Kirsten into his arms.

“She’s gonna bring her inside, Nib. Hang on.” Suiting action to words, he carried her into the living room, setting her down on the couch. With a hand on Janice’s arm, Spike spoke to Dawn. “Get a wet cloth, need to just wipe her face.”

Dawn sped off in the direction of the bathroom, and Spike looked at Janice. “How long have you known this one?”

The answer kind of surprised him. “Kirsten? Geez, Spike, ever since I can remember. She’s always been here. We started kindergarten together.”

Well shit. That just blew his theory out of the water. It would have been easy to subscribe this to intervention if Kirsten was new to Sunnydale, but no, it had to be something else. Spike actually had no idea what she was, but she damn sure wasn’t completely human.

Dawn came back into the room, hearing their voices. “Kirsten is diabetic, Spike. She probably just didn’t eat enough today.”

He had no response for that. Diabetic was the least of what Kirsten was, but he knew enough to let it go.

Still, once the girls were gone, he was going to call Rupert.

8. Time is inches

_The stars are not wanted now; put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood._
_For nothing now can ever come to any good._
_W.H. Auden, “Stop all the clocks”_

_Heavens! Hinder, stop this fate; or grant a time
When good may have, as well as bad, their prime!_
_Francis T. Palgrave, 1875_
_”Doth then the world go thus, doth all thus move?”_

Had there ever been a moment when this wasn’t going to eventually be part of the “job”? That he would outlive his slayer, perhaps was a given. That he would feel the way he did in recounting her last days, he supposed somewhere it was not an absolute given. Watchers are supposed to maintain some sort of neutrality, some distance from the object of their job. Supposed to maintain a sense of decorum and dignity. Right. They were not supposed to find themselves in a hole in the wall pub,
sawdust and sufficient antiquities on the walls (if not in the bar stools) surrounded by those other than human, mourning the loss. Nor were they supposed to be nearly shouting into a cell phone at the time to a vampire.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Giles was aware that there was nothing normal about any of this. There had been nothing normal at all about his slayer. From the beginning she had been a wild card, an unknown. Defying him, defying everything and while not necessarily laughing in the face of fear or death, she’d been damn close to that on occasion. He knew from other accounts, that his slayer was a bit different, but then again, since the onset of the 20th century, most of the slayers had started becoming a bit different. They were beginning to realize that it was the slayer who held the power, not the watcher, and that knowledge was telling. He suspected the most recent of her predecessors had been somewhat of a conundrum for their watchers, but he didn’t imagine any of them had also had to deal with the presence of, and the temperament of, a master vampire bent on protecting what was left behind.

Said master vampire was now agitated beyond what Rupert thought was healthy. If Spike had a heartbeat and blood pressure, Giles was absolutely certain that he’d be hyperventilating and in danger of having a heart attack. As it was, he could see the man pacing back and forth as he relayed the events of the day before. He was going to wear a hole in the floor of the entryway of the Summers’ house, if he didn’t learn to keep still.

A disturbance behind him caught his attention, and Rupert missed whatever it was Spike had just ranted about. “Spike, hold . . . Spike, just a moment. Need to, right, can’t hear so well.”

Giles left his less than comfortable surroundings and wandered out into the early evening. England in July was usually nice, but lately the heat had been literally unbearable. He’d gotten so used to Southern California, where everyone had multiple, if not central, air conditioning and the lack was beginning to tell on him. Not to mention the constant repetition before the Council. Listening intently to the other Englishman on the phone, Giles stopped in his tracks.

“Say that again.” He was silent, waiting for Spike to repeat himself. Then, “Did you write all this down? Have you figured out what this girl really is?” Again he held his questions, his patience beginning to wane the more he heard what Spike was saying. “And the girls both . . . right. Neither one heard you.”

A passerby would have taken more than a double take at his next question, but thankfully, Rupert was alone on the street. “What about the hellmouth and the . . . . you think something’s going to happen to the Key?” A pause, “Spike, was she talking about people or demons?”

Simultaneously, an ocean and a continent apart, both men sighed and had nearly the same thought. It was Giles who broached the subject though, asking exactly what the other man was thinking. “Do you think someone or something is going to attack the Key? And why does this seem directed at news concerning Buffy?”

On the other end, Spike had finally stopped pacing. His eyes stared at the walls of the living room, bathed in early morning light. He’d waited until all the girls were gone for the day before calling Rupert, not wanting any of this conversation overheard. No reason to worry the girls, especially Dawn. Not until they had something a bit more concrete than cryptic warnings and messages from delicate little girls. Damn him, though, Spike thought. Damn Rupert for mentioning her name. His eyes clouded with unshed tears and Spike took another moment before he dared answer.

“Dunno, Rupert, just my sixth sense kickin’ in and tellin’ me something is up with that. Not sure what it is yet, but it’s something.”
“Right then. I don’t know . . . look, Spike, I’m coming home. Don’t tell the girls yet why though.”
Spike hunched a shoulder, unknowingly mimicking Rupert’s pose. “‘S that wise?”
“Probably not, but I think I can manage it. If the Council recalls me, then, I’ll return, but for now I think it best I come home.”

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She’d done it. Figured out how to keep the bullhide full of water, by rigging a small frame, kind of like a playpen frame with the bullhide strapped around the top and secured that way.

Actually, that was exactly what she was using. A playpen frame that she’d found in the dump. Coming up with a way to keep the bullhide around the metal pieces had proved just a bit more difficult, but finally Willow had settled on the idea of using clamps like her mother used on their picnic table to keep the tablecloth attached.

Everything was ready. It was all in place. She just needed the key and blood from a woman untouched by man. Tara’s blood and Dawn’s blood. Both girls had to be present.

She’d been wracking her brain, trying to come up with a way to get them both involved without revealing her intent. She expended so much time and energy into research and getting all the supplies that she hadn’t focused any attention onto how to get the girls involved. Until today.

During a trip to the Magic Box, looking for something completely unrelated to anything she was planning, Willow had watched while Anya unpacked the latest shipment of deadly and dangerous herbs, cataloguing everything as she went.

And there it was. The answer was there in front of her. An entire box of Lethe’s Bramble. Used for forgetting and obscuring spells.

It was perfect.

She could use the Lethe’s Bramble to cloud their minds, make them forget who and what they were, get them to the ritual and then, when all was over and done, remove the spell and everything would be fine. And Buffy would be back.

Neither girl would remember.

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Giles hated flying directly from London to Sunnydale. He much prefered a stop over in either New York or Chicago, with a couple of hours in between. Then he could stretch his legs and relax from the stress. But he couldn’t do that this time. The only flight he’d been able to book was London - Los Angeles direct.

Which gave him hours stuck in the same place, with nothing but his thoughts for company. The information he’d been given by Spike had done little more than confuse him. While not strictly a
prophecy, it had the air and feel of one, moreso than anything he’d run across. It was enough that Spike thought it so.

Despite early misgivings, and his own inherent distrust of vampires in general, Giles had come to trust and believe in Spike. It was not something that he’d ever, in all his life, have expected. They had discovered, in the time they’d shared living quarters, more commonalities than just being English.

They shared a love of the written word, a taste in music that ran from Mozart to General Public, and an understanding of the demonic world that none of the others could fathom.

And now, now that Buffy was gone, the two men had bonded and decided, albeit tacitly and not verbalized, to undertake the protection of the girls and the hellmouth. While he couldn’t contribute nearly as much physically as Spike did, Rupert was aware he was no slouch. They made a fine pair, both ex-patriot Englishmen in a sea of Americans, fish out of water in more than one way, and yet they were more at home here in California than in England. Rupert had a sneaky suspicion that it was because their hearts were engaged that made Sunnydale more home than either London or Bath.

Spike hadn’t been very forthcoming about life prior to his arrival in Sunnydale, but Rupert knew the last time he’d been in England had been a very very long time ago. So, in light of that, Giles had brought a selection of goodies, including Wheatabix and shortbread. Hopefully that would appease Spike’s hunger. Well, at least one of them.

The other hungers Giles could do nothing about. Spike had been bagging it now for over a year, nearly two, though he still yearned for human blood from the source, Giles was aware his bloodlust was more controllable. Whether it was because he was a master or because he had learned restraint because of the chip, Giles wasn’t certain. Or, on the other hand, it could just be Spike.

Whatever it was, something set Spike apart.

While it confused him, he was still eternally grateful for it. It had brought him to their side, fighting on the side of light.

Giles shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. His long legs ached, cramped by the lack of room and movement. He’d long since come to terms with the reasons behind Spike’s betrayal of all his blood ties.

Initially, he’d been appalled, outraged and disgusted by the revelation of Spike’s feelings. They’d all been. Horrified and disgusted. Somehow, some bizarre way, in the months following, battling with them against Glory, Spike had proven something. Proven his feelings, proven the trust they’d tentatively placed in him and done everything in his power to prove that his feelings were not misguided obsession.

Never once had he turned his back on them, even after the horrific beating he’d received from the Hell-God. And it had been a beating; had he been human, it would have been sufficient to kill him. Glory had inflicted damage the likes of which Giles had personally never seen on a living (or unliving) body. Both legs had been broken in multiple places, one forearm shattered, every single rib was broken, his jaw, skull and she’d nearly blinded him as well. It had taken him weeks to heal, even with the bagged human blood they’d supplied him with. What surprised them all, since they had absolutely no expectations otherwise, was that Spike had taken all that abuse, and not given up the name of the key. He’d kept the secret. Saved Dawn and, well, temporarily at least, saved Buffy. Made it harder for the Beast to find what she wanted.

And then, the little bugger had gone out, after getting healed up, gone right back into the fray. Stood
beside them, knowing intimately how much damage Glory could inflict, knowing exactly what they were facing, without any hesitation on his part. Pretty damned amazing considering he did it without any sort of encouragement, any sort of hope for remuneration or recognition. It had, in fact, surprised him no end. Later on, when he’d had a moment to sit and contemplate things, Giles had realized this was just another part of Spike, a characteristic of both man and demon. Spike was a protector, he’d done it for over a hundred years with Drusilla, and Giles was beginning to suspect it would have been more than natural for William prior to turning. A small snicker escaped his mouth, drawing the momentary attention of his seatmate. Giles smiled apologetically, turning his thoughts inward again. It might just be his Victorian upbringing, but Giles was beginning to discount that, or rather consider it only incidental as opposed to an ingrained character trait.

It had been entirely too natural for Spike to just step into the role of protector, to slip in and take on a role that almost literally had to have been thrust upon Angel. Giles was convinced that it was the height of idiocy to assume that every vampire was the same. No two people were the same, and even demons of the same species were different, why on earth had the Council ever tried to perpetuate the idea that vampires were all the same. Angel and Spike were so diametrically different from each other that the only things the two had in common was the fact they were Aurelian vampires, both masters, and, ironically, Drusilla and Buffy. It was the last two items that gave Giles pause.

Angel had driven poor Drusilla mad, killing her family, torturing the girl then turning her. Drusilla in turn had picked William, turning him. And then for the next hundred ten or so years, Spike had protected Drusilla as well as a female master vampire would allow. But he’d done it.

The hellmouth had drawn all of them, in one form or another, bringing them into Buffy’s orbit. Giles suspected that while Angel had desperately needed something to give him a reason to continue, and since his nature was already obsessive, his feelings for Buffy might have been real, but there was no . . . longevity in them. Obsessive love tends to disappear with time and distance, and that seemed to be the case with Angel. He was more in love with the ideal of Buffy than the girl herself. Angel had never wanted to see her flaws and faults, never wanted to know that her feet absolutely stank after a hard patrol. But Spike, on the other hand, knew all her faults, all her weaknesses, hell, he’d exploited them on more than one occasion.

And still he had deep feelings for her. She was gone and still Spike stayed.

William the Bloody was more trustworthy than Angel.

William the soulless demon was more trustworthy than souled Angel.

Giles sat dumbstruck in his cramped airplane seat, surrounded by a sea of travelers, amidst the most profound revelation of his life. A chill crept up his spine, shaking him from to the core. He had the sudden feeling that trust and love were all going to be sorely tested in the coming days.

9. Shall raise such artificial sprites.

Every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection.
Arthur Schopenhauer, Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851

I’m not dead yet.
Monty Python and the Holy Grail
Coming back hadn’t been a mistake. Hadn’t been altogether smart either, but upon hearing Spike’s concern’s when he’d relayed the prophecy and his unspoken ones, Giles had rushed back. Now, almost a month later, with absolutely nothing more on it, Giles was beginning to rethink the immediacy of the situation.

His arrival had been, as he’d requested, a surprise to the girls. Spike had kept his counsel, and while both Tara and Dawn had been overjoyed at his return, Willow’s reaction had been somewhat different.

Willow was not overly happy to see him. He’d tried drawing the girl out, but in the time he’d been back, Giles had been unable to breach the distance he’d felt.

Had he known that was the last thing Willow wanted, Giles would have been more worried than he already was.

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Willow was in a holding pattern. She didn’t dare perform the retrieval until Giles was gone, knowing he would do everything in his power to stop her. Or at least believing it. Forced to wait, forced to keep all thought of the ritual from her mind, lest someone find out, or she would inadvertently blurt it out in a mindless fit, Willow chafed at the restrictions. Resentment and anger had begun swirling, finding a focus on the two men. Spike, for calling Giles home and Giles for heeding the call.

She only hoped Giles would return to England and stay there.

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They were no closer to understanding the prophecy; well that wasn’t entirely true. Some of it was just way too obvious. The mention of the souled one could only mean Angel. Spike and Giles both agreed to that. What they couldn’t agree on was who the seer was and the yellow one. Spike had a theory the red one was Willow, but Giles wasn’t necessarily convinced. The unspoken hope they both carried but stoically refused to mention was the identity of the lost one that will return.

While it remained unspoken, both men hoped without hope that the lost one was Buffy.

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Tara was exhausted, mentally, physically and any other “ly” she couldn’t muster up the wherewithal to remember. Life with the Scoobies and Willow was like constantly being on the edge of a knife. Never knowing what would literally, pop up out of the woodwork. But she wouldn’t change it for all the money in the world. She was loved, for herself, accepted and part of something that was greater
than herself. The fact that she was currently so tired she couldn’t see or think straight was immaterial.

Yet that too was okay. Because summer session was over and she could finally get some much needed rest. Mr. Giles was back home, Spike was guarding over them like a rabid dog, doing the majority of the patrolling without complaint, Dawn was nearly done with her summer school, and Willow . . . Tara shook her head. Something was up with Willow. It could just be her own exhaustion worrying her girlfriend, which would only make sense, but Tara had this niggling little tickle in her back, just between her shoulders that said it was a little bit more than just a worried Willow. Maybe it was just the exhaustion, maybe it was just the paranoia that had set in after Glory had sucked her brain, she just couldn’t really tell. That in itself was something.

Willow’s aura was off just a tiny bit. . . swirling with a brownish-red color that Tara hadn’t seen before. Again, it could just be the worry about her, since it was something that had shown up during the Glory crisis, even though recently it seemed to be getting stronger.

Catching her image in the mirror, Tara suppressed a grimace. She looked exhausted. Her eyes looked bruised and the dark circles beneath highlighted just how gray her normally healthy skin looked. Lank mousy brown hair hung down past her face, and it was an effort to just stand there. Sighing deeply, Tara turned around and decided that today, she was going to do nothing. No books, no cooking, no anything. In fact, she was going to soak in the tub and then maybe, she’d get dressed.

Two hours later, when Willow got home, Tara was curled up on their bed, a towel still wrapped around her hair and a loose robe around her. She was sound asleep.

Willow felt like she had dodged a bullet.

It was beginning to feel like she’d been in school her whole life. That life consisted of long moments spent inside a building she’d come to hate, interspersed with brief moments spent elsewhere. Moments that used to be full of Mom and Buffy and home and pizza and other good things, like being with Buffy’s friends and sometimes stolen moments with Spike. Now . . . now there were no more Mom or Buffy moments, and bare moments with the others. The best lately had been when Spike babied her, letting her just be. Whatever mood she found herself in, he just let it go, didn’t try to cajole her out of the sulks, didn’t give in when she was wallowing; at the same time shielding her from the over-protective worrying of Giles and Xander. Sometimes it just drove her crazy, the way they treated her.

Summer was nearly gone and still she sat inside this building. It was, she had to admit, partially her own damn fault. But really, it was the hellmouth’s fault. When she thought about it, all the misery of the last couple of months could be laid directly at the gaping mouth of hell. Dawn sat at her desk, absentmindedly studying for the summer-school finals that were scheduled for next week. And oh, boy, sooo happy about that. Once that was all over and done with, she would have approximately fifteen whole days when she wouldn’t have to actively think about being in school. It so wasn’t enough time.

She wished there was some way she could have taken back some of the dumber things she’d done this past year, especially the skipping classes. Dumb ass, she thought about herself momentarily. A soft sigh escaped her, as she wrinkled her forehead. All right, enough woe is me, pity girl. Her lips thinned, determination suddenly bringing her back to the class. Looking around, Dawn realized she
didn’t want to do this at all next summer. Making a promise to herself, she resolved that no matter what happened around the hellmouth or the Scoobies, she was not spending another summer making up classes.

Aside from spending her days stuck inside, and that every blood relative she had was gone, things weren’t so bad. She had Spike, which made up for not having a dad, and she had Tara. So what neither was her blood, both were family. And since they were family, Dawn felt safe in admitting that she was a little bit worried about Tara. This morning, before she left for school, she had taken a good look at the older girl and realized that she didn’t look so good. In fact, Tara looked like hell. Dark bruised circles were under her eyes, her hair was all this way and that, and her coloring was just off. She didn’t know what was wrong, but she didn’t like it at all. Tara needed to take care of herself. Dawn made a decision that when she got home, she was going to clean up and take care of Tara, instead of the other way around.

Only one more class to go, and then she was free for the weekend. Making her way through the somewhat crowded hallway, Dawn was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she didn’t hear her name being called, until someone touched her arm. “Dawn?”

Ms. West had concern written all over her features. As far as the adults went, she wasn’t a bad sort, and Dawn got the feeling that her compassion was real and not faked like some of the other teachers. “Dawn, I wanted to ask you how you’re doing. Got a minute to talk?”

“Um, yeah. But I have another class.” Dawn answered while Ms. West pulled her aside.

“It’s ok, I just wanted to touch base with you and see how things are?”

“Oh you know, its just . . . hard sometimes. But my sister is, well, she’s doing the best she can.” Dawn shrugged, trying not to let on what was really going on at home. “We’re good.”

There was enough anxiety in the girl’s voice to let the social worker know that while she was telling her what she wanted to hear, Dawn Summers was still trying to come to grips with her grief. And that in itself was a good thing. Grief was something that only time could assuage, and even then, it never really truly disappeared. But moving on was completely natural, even though it was sometimes the hardest thing the ones left behind could do.

The smile Dawn got caught her off-guard, but the next words out of the woman’s mouth really threw her for a loop. “So, how long was your father in town?”

“Your father has such gorgeous eyes, but why on earth does a man his age bleach his hair?”

If she hadn’t been standing with her back against some lockers, Dawn would have fallen over. This woman thought Spike was her father.
It took a couple of days, but once the weekend arrived, Tara was looking and feeling much better. The dark circles had started disappearing and she was actually looking forward to cooking for everyone. Dawn had been wonderful over the past couple of days, really pitching in to help, and most especially not whining when things didn’t go her way. Which, truth be told, she’d been known to do. Poor Dawnie had grown up a lot this summer. Unfortunately that growing up had come at such an awful price.

But time was working in their favor and Dawn, well all of them, were working on getting over the double loss. Because as much as they each had their own mothers, Joyce had mothered all of them at some point. And they all missed her, almost as much as they missed Buffy.

For nearly a week, Dawn had focused on the brief conversation with Ms. West. How weird was it that she thought Spike is my father. What on earth was the woman thinking? Aside from the obvious, Spike being a vampire, he’s not nearly old enough to be my father and . . . eeewwww . . . the thought of her mother and Spike was just icky. Coz, like, he was much closer to Buffy’s age – he had to be. Well, he would most likely be if he wasn’t dead. . . or undead. Dawn remembered overhearing him tell Giles that he was turned by Drusilla in 1880, but not how old he was when that happened.

Spike was very forthcoming about life after turning, but didn’t say much about time beforehand. Although she suspected he might tell her if she asked the right way. Sometimes, Spike could get on a roll and not realize just how much he revealed, like when he talked with Giles late at night. Or when his guard was down, Spike could and would talk for hours. Dawn wasn’t sure if it was because he liked the sound of his own voice or that he was just looking for the attention. There were lots of things she had found by eavesdropping. She knew he loved to read, especially the classics, he could quote poetry at the drop of a hat, knew more about history and the demon world than Giles, and had an intense craving for really spicy foods. She knew that he’d liked and respected her mother, that he barely tolerated Xander, that he loved her sister and Dawn knew that Spike loved her also.

Really, that should be enough.

Why now, since Ms. West had talked to her, wasn’t it?

Rupert knew his time in Sunnydale was limited. He and Spike had spent the last month, since his abrupt departure from London, trying to formulate a plan and reasons why his presence was still essential in Sunnydale. So far, the best they’d been able to come up with was his familiarity with and knowledge of the hellmouth. The Council was well aware of Spike’s nightly patrols, another thing that the Council hadn’t mentioned or questioned Giles on until he’d appeared to file his report.

That had been a particularly unpleasant interview with Quentin Travers. It had almost appeared like a
tribunal, with three other senior Watchers present, aside from Travers, and a stenographer. Travers had asked a series of questions, grilling him for nearly a full day, and Rupert had not expected the relentless questioning, nor the tone in Travers’ voice. He’d been more condescending than normal, his tone indicating his contempt for the chipped vampire. When they’d asked him why Giles willingly trusted the Slayer of Slayers, he’d answered unhesitatingly, “My Slayer trusted him in the battle against Glory. Buffy trusted this vampire to protect her sister at all cost. Nothing he’s done in the past few months has led me to believe that will change.”

It had bought them some time, but Giles couldn’t afford to delude himself. He was going to have to return to London, justify his future stay in Sunnydale and get a reprieve for Spike. All in a day’s work. Rupert nearly snorted into his tea. *Irony abounds.*

His primary concerns were Spike and coming back. And of those two, he’d almost be willing to forego, at least for a time, returning to Sunnydale to ensure Spike’s safety. Yes, irony certainly abounded in his life.

Only now he had to go back to London, and Spike wouldn’t be happy. Unfortunately he couldn’t avoid it.

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Willow breathed a sigh of relief once Giles had boarded his plane. She wouldn’t truly relax until it was airborne, but he was gone, and she could now put the plan in motion. Nothing and no one was going to stop her. The potion she was going to feed the girls was ready and Spike would be out patrolling tonight.

The time was now.

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Feeding the girls the potion along with dinner, Willow was forced to wait until it started working. Everything was ready. The frame and other supplies were all stowed away near Glory’s tower, which Willow had decided was the most logical place. It was where Buffy had disappeared, the last place anyone had seen her alive. Basing her decision on what had happened with Angel’s return, it made perfect sense.

The girls forgot everything, even their names. Leading them out the door, Willow nearly laughed at the simplicity of it all. As long as the rest of the night followed this pattern, she was home free.

Assembling everything while the girls dumped water jugs into the bullhide, Willow stopped for a moment, thinking that they looked like a real-life variation of the Mickey Mouse scene from Fantasia. Giddy with success, Willow did laugh softly. *This is gonna be such a walk in the park.*

Sprinkling the necessary herbs on top of the water, Willow grasped Tara’s hand. Holding it over the side, she sliced the other girl’s palm open, letting the blood drip down. Chanting softly in Latin, Willow folded Tara’s hand closed, then grabbed Dawn, performing the same motions on the younger girl.
One drop she let fall.

The water began swirling, changing into a dark mist, like the color of caramel milk swirled with gold and silver, moving faster and faster.

Two drops she let fall.

And the words changed, flowing effortlessly from Latin to the original obscure tongue in which they were first spoken.

Swirling more rapidly, the waters lapped against the sides, glowing more silver than gold.

Again the words changed, becoming softer, despite the harsh consonants. The water, opaque now, was caramel gold shot with silver and green.

The portal Dawn’s blood had opened and Buffy’s death closed, flickered and pulsed above their heads, but no one noticed.

Three drops she let fall.

The waters boiled, mist rising and the portal flared on a particular phrase, then sparked, pulsing in time with the boiling water.

Willow’s chanting died out, but the waters and the portal pulsed on. Light flared, distant thunder roared, lightning flashed between the portal and the pool and everything went black.

Three miles away, in the depths of earth and wood, hazel eyes snapped open.

Chapter End Notes

[A/N: The title comes from a song by the Welsh band, The Alarm. And the quote? Well, that’s the Bard of Avon.]
Part Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10. That proves the hero born in better days.

The nobly born must nobly meet his fate.

   Euripides, Alcheme, fragment 100

The victories of right are born in strife

There were no day were there no night

Nor, without dying, life.

   Sir Lewis Morris, The ode of Evil

Wandering between two worlds, one dead

the other powerless to be born.

   Matthew Arnold, Stanzas from the grande Chartreuse

No air. No air. NO AIR. Need out. No air. Need out. NEED out. Out out out.

Panic set in.

No air, can’t breathe need to . . . scared. Out. Need . . . breathing . . . can’t . . . oh God, oh god.
Can’t . . . oh god.

She could feel a thundering in her ears, harsh gasps filling in the space between. Eyes darted around
trying to discover where she was. There no light. No relief from the black surrounding her.

No . . . nothing.
Too close. Walls too close. On her back, she brought her hands up to push away from the wall in front of her.


Gasping for air that wasn’t there, panic coursed through her. _God . . . oh god. Can’t breathe._

Her voice sounded so very small and scared in the tight place. “Help. Please help.”

Tears slipped down gaunt cheeks, sliding into strawlike brown and gold hair. Rapid, hard breaths filled the cabinet. Her fingers began scrabbling against the wall in front of her, seeking a way out. Scrabbling fingers scratching against the wall. Ragged nails caught on a soft surface, finally registering the softness of the wall in front of her. A litany escaped from her lips, repeatedly echoing around her. “No please. . . no, not this. Help me. Oh no, please. . . no, please. Help me.”

But they were just nonsense sounds.

Reaching down deep inside, somehow knowing she did have the strength to fight this she battled against the terror. Harsh breath faded, though the rapid gasping didn’t stop. Sounds subsided into a soft whispering while she tried thinking about what happened. _Wait . . . wait, why could wait. Air was more important. Breathing was good._ She was back to getting out, getting free.

That was . . . “Oh god, out – need to get out.”

Gripping the softness, she pulled as hard as she could, hearing the material rip, pulling away from the wall. Abruptly she realized what it was as it brushed against her dry skin. Satin. She once had a blanket edged in this stuff, when she was really little. _Little. Mommy gave it to her._ Another harsh sob escaped her, and the tears began anew, falling faster now. “Mommy . . . help me. Please help.”

Pushing harder, her fist broke through the wall in front of her.

Dirt rained down on her face, filling her eyes, nose and mouth. Choking a bit, she screamed.
Spike was having a hell of a night. Word must have gone out down through the demon grapevine that the slayer was gone. Six vampires, two Frelak demons and a single Fyarl, he was shocked to realize it wasn’t even midnight. *Bollocks.* Stopping in at Willie’s Spike looked at the clock on the wall. Nine forty three. That was the time.

Gulping down his whiskey, Spike glanced around. The place was quiet, almost unnaturally slow for a Friday night in August.

The hair on the back of his neck began to tingle, sensing the eye-of-the-storm calm. His unease began growing. *Oh yeah, something was up tonight, and it sure as hell wasn’t anything good.*

Before he could think twice, Spike slammed the glass down, calling “Willie.”

When the weaselly little bugger approached, Spike grabbed his arm before Willie could swipe his glass away. “What’s going on? Why’s it so quiet tonight?”

“What’s going on? Why’s it so quiet tonight?”

“Dunno, Spike, it’s weird. None of the regulars have been in at all.”

Spike raised a brow. “Too easy, Willie. Nice try that.” He gripped harder, risking a headache, but deciding the momentary twinge would be more than worth it. “Try again now. What . . . is . . . going . . . on?”

“Really, Spike. You know I wouldn’t lie to you.” Willie tried breaking Spike’s grip only succeeding in hurting his own self. “C’mon, Spike, lemme go. I don’t know anything. Really.”

Abruptly deciding to believe him this time, despite knowing the bugger was lying, Spike let go, dropping the little man down. Landing on his knees behind the bar, Willie cursed softly.
“Willie, Willie, you know that’s physically impossible. But feel free to work on that yourself.”

Slamming out into the night, Spike stalked into Restfield. He wasn’t happy about patrolling this place anymore, even though technically he still lived here. But that wasn’t the real reason why he usually put off patrolling Restfield. The real reason was off in a quiet corner, set really far back, in a part of the cemetery that was full and no longer had active burials.

Most nights he avoided it. That area. Most nights he avoided this whole damn place. But tonight, something was pulling him here. Some sixth sense told him to come here.

Circling around his crypt, Spike stalled a bit, hopefully putting off the inevitable. Leaning against the backside of the crypt, Spike took a deep breath, staring up at the stars. He didn’t want to be here at this moment.

Ever since he’d been confronted by that friend of Dawn’s, Buffy had been on his mind. She was never really far from his thoughts, but lately it had been more like he’d find himself trying not to think about her.

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She had no idea what the heck had just happened. Dawn opened her eyes after realizing whatever she was lying on was too damn hard to be her bed. On the ground, she was on the ground. Outside. She was outside laying on the ground. What the heck? She didn’t remember being outside, in fact, the last thing she did remember was eating dinner with Willow and Tara.

Where was she? For that matter, where were the others? Sitting up gingerly, Dawn absently brushed bits of dirt and gravel from her face and hands. Oh god. Every bone in her body ached and every hair on her head felt like it was aching also. Looking around, she finally got her bearings. She was at the foot of Glory’s tower. Now she really didn’t know what was going on and she was starting to get scared. Maybe the last couple of months had been a nightmare and she was the one who’d jumped, leaving Buffy and the others safe. Well that was not good. She didn’t want to be dead. Unbidden tears slid down her cheeks and Dawn stifled a sob. Her self pity was cut short when a groan sounded from somewhere behind her. “Who’s there?”

Gingerly getting to her feet, Dawn looked around for the source of the sound. Less than two feet
away, laying flat on her back, arms outstretched and looking just as battered as she felt, was Tara.

“Tara. Oh god, not you too. Tara, wake up.” Reaching out a hand to shake her back to consciousness, Dawn stopped short when an arc of energy crackled between them.

Tara rolled to her side, rubbing her eyes. “Dawnie, are you okay?”

Wiping away her tears, Dawn stuttered out “I think so. I’m achy . . . and I have no idea how we got here. But yeah, I’m better now.”

A loud cracking noise, like thunder wrapped around lightning echoed in the air around them, drawing their eyes upwards. Their simultaneous gasps were frightened.

“Tara. That’s . . . how did that happen? We didn’t dream everything did we?” Dawn voiced her worst fears.

Tara reached out a hand to Dawn, pulling the younger girl into her arms. “No, sweetie. This is a new opening.” Looking around, finally getting her bearings, Tara spied the athame and the containers that had been emptied into the . . . bullhide? She looked around wildly, wondering what in the name of Gaia was going on. “Oh, goddess above. What . . . shhhh, Dawnie, it’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.”

While directing her words at the weeping teenager in her arms, Tara kept her gaze focused on the open portal above them. She had no idea why the portal was open, but whatever had caused it couldn’t be anything good. While brushing Dawn’s hair, Tara felt a sharp pain in her hand. That was new. She didn’t remember hurting it at all – when she looked at it – Tara froze in horrified fear.

_Oh goddess, not this. I would not have done this. No reason for me to do this. Oh goddess, how on earth do I fix this? _Silent prayers went up into the heavens, beseeching the all-mother for an answer. _Please, Mother Gaia, this humble servant seeks your aid. Give me counsel, grant me knowledge to put this paid. Grant me this boon, set right the sun, the stars and the moon._”

Dropping her hand down to rest against Dawn’s, Tara waited on whether the goddess would send an answer. She continued praying, repeating over and over in her head. _Please Mother, grant me knowledge,_” all the while rocking Dawn in her arms.

She waited. Long moments passed. Thankfully nothing more dangerous than lightning emerged from
the portal. Tara held onto Dawn a bit tighter, bowing her head. “Please, grant me this.”

Soft light flashed behind her eyes, a low sweet voice filled her ears and Tara’s eyes snapped open. Dawn looked up at the same instant and both girls gasped. There before them, bathed in white light was an image they both loved.

He wasn’t any happier about being in Restfield. Throwing a punch that only made his opponent pause, Spike was thinking that he had to rethink his strategy. This hand to hand fighting wasn’t working. He started maneuvering the Scriog demon toward his crypt in order to get some weapons. He was covered in goop and bleeding from a couple of cuts on his forearms. This sure as hell wasn’t what he’d been looking for earlier when he’d been grilling Willie for information.

Growling low in his throat, Spike averted his face from a dripping and oozing paw. *Bloody fucking hell, this is disgusting* and he was so glad he’d left the duster back at the house. *This shit would never come off of it.*

Finally getting a jump on the slimeball, Spike dashed inside his crypt and snatched up a sword. Thanking his foresight in keeping an arsenal inside and at the ready, Spike took a deep breath and went back out into the night to behead the nasty.

It took longer than he expected, but eventually he managed to sever the head from the neck. Leaning heavily on the sword, gasping in sharp breaths, Spike was suddenly struck by the thought of how much Buffy would’ve complained about the slime, the odor, and the difficulty in killing this walking bucket of muck.

God he missed her. It wasn’t getting any better. Should have been fading from his mind, should have been able to let her scent go. Should’ve. Couldn’t seem to. . . couldn’t and wouldn’t. Truth was, he could admit to himself whenever he was alone, he didn’t want to let any tiny bit of her go. Wanted to hold on forever. To hold tight and never let go. Protect her, hold her and love her until everything else fell away.

He caught a breath on a sob and instead of letting it go and allowing a few tears to fall, Spike growled his frustration then roared it to the heavens. Letting it grow in intensity until it rolled off the
marble headstones and echoed into the distant thunder.

Spitting dirt and grit from her mouth was hard. She had no saliva to coat and protect her throat, so instead she ended up swallowing more of it than she knew was good. Her tears had dried up, mainly because there wasn’t enough moisture in her. Pushing through the wood hadn’t been smart, instead of freeing her, it had just trapped her further.

Desperate to escape, she scrabbled through the dirt, pulling at the pieces of wood blocking her way. The dirt kept raining down, covering her face, but she couldn’t stop, she had to keep trying to get out, try to get out of this box . . . oh god.

This . . . she was trapped in a coffin. . . Oh god . . . no, no, NO!

She was not here, this was not happening. She was not stuck in a coffin, in a grave. Breathing increased rapidly, inhaling dirt and dust she nearly choked again, whimperers sounded in her throat and the sound shocked her back into rational thought. Noise. I can make sounds. Taking a deep breath she brushed away some of the dirt from her face. For some reason noises were a good thing. It focused her, made her take stock of what was going on and where she was. Stuck, trapped and inside a small box. Her mind shied away from the other thing, unable and unwilling to admit where she was. Time enough for that later, when she was free of its confines.

Strengthening her determination, something she knew was formidable, she renewed her resolve to escape. Grabbing handfuls of dirt she shoved it down along her sides. Wiggling her hips, she managed to push it further away, down toward her feet. Working methodically, she narrowed her focus even more. If she kept her eyes closed it was easier to keep the panic at bay while she worked.

Her world narrowed down to handfuls of dirt, wiggling it down to her feet and breathing. Handful by handful, the dirt moved. Breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat the space around her grew. Counting each breath, each handful she realized memories were returning. She knew. . . things.

It was slow going but she was able to wiggle forward, almost able to raise her head a little. Stretching her arms, she had to lift up her shoulders now to clear more dirt. She tried, but couldn’t, she had to clear more dirt to get her shoulders up, otherwise she wouldn’t be able to escape.
And now she had to... had to get home.

Dawn wiped tears from her eyes, not believing the vision standing in front of her. “Mom?” Tara gripped her shoulders painfully, also not really believing her own eyes.

“Mom?”

“Hello, sweetheart.” The vision smiled at both girls, but didn’t move from its spot.

“Dawnie, I’m not sure that’s really your mother.”

There was no denial. “Well, this was easiest. It seemed best to pick a form you both know.” Bending down, the apparition caught their full attention. “Listen girls, this is important. The portal has to be closed. This is what you need to do.”

His night wasn’t getting any better. It fact, it was rapidly descending into utter chaos. Some group of veritable fledglings had decided to nest in his cemetery, which just pissed him off. What really set him off further, though, was the apparent lack of respect his presence didn’t invoke. He was still a bloody master vampire, despite his little hardware problem. He could, and still did, wreak hell upon bloody minions which was all these wankers were.

_Fifteen idiots._ None of whom could hold a candle to him in a fair fight, but by virtue of sheer numbers, just might overwhelm him. Spike growled, ripping the head off the idiot to his right, then focusing his attention on the closest ones. Using their own stupidity to his advantage, he pivoted
against one, then swung his left leg out to knock another two down. Twirling the sword in his left hand, he decapitated two others with a single stroke, then stooped down to stake the fallen one. Odds were looking bad for them.

Breathing deeply and now chuckling with the exhilaration, Spike waded back into the fray.

Tara didn’t believe it was this simple. She’d have never attempted it, though, without first getting the approval from the goddess. She had a feeling that Gaia had paved her way, making things easier for her to perform the closing of the portal.

Three drops each. Her blood and Dawn’s, mixed with earth and water. Then sealed with breath and fire.

Three words, three drops. Three by three by three. Nine times around the bullhide and the portal would close.

She felt like she’d been granted an enormous blessing. The visitation alone would have been enough. That the Mother had spoken, given her the strength and unconditional support to do what needed doing, she’d never dreamed nor expected such a response to her invocation. Tara was completely awed. Never, ever in her life. Silent tears slipped down her face, but they weren’t sad or uncertain. No, these were tears of overwhelmed emotions and profound gratitude.

Performing the ritual, Tara caught glimpses of Dawn’s face. She wondered if Dawn was able to get past the image of her mother to understand exactly what had just taken place. She wasn’t entirely sure she had it all internalized. Tara had a sneaking suspicion that it might take months for her to really understand what she’d seen, and the gift she’d been granted.

Each turn around the bullhide closed more of the portal, almost like stitching up a pocket and pulling it closed, like a drawstring. On the last circuit, there was an audible drawing in of the ends and on the final steps both Dawn and Tara could feel the portal closing. There was a sound between a zip and a ppphhhtt and then it was gone.
Unfortunately, neither of the girls was any closer to understanding why the portal had been opened in the first place, though Tara had a horrible suspicion. Nor did they know who or what had opened it. Gathering up the containers and the bullhide, they began making their way back to Revello Drive.

Tripping on what she thought was a misplaced cement block, Tara went down on her hands and knees, coming face to face with the unconscious form of her girlfriend.

And suddenly, Tara’s horrible suspicions took form and solidified.

11. Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

Our birth is nothing but our death begun.

Edward Young, Night, l. 718

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant,

then it’s night once more.

Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p. 57a

The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying.

T.S. Eliot, Ash-Wednesday, pt. 6

Pushing the dirt down was becoming harder. She kept kicking it down with her feet, and she thought there was more room, but she couldn’t get her feet to work properly. Her arms were stretched out as far as they would go, and still she was trapped. There was no choice though, she had to keep going, because staying put was not an option.

There was no air and she had no idea how far she had to go to break free. Trying desperately to keep the panic at bay, she managed to get her feet underneath her and struggled up into a crouched
It was easier to breathe, even though there still was no fresh air. At least there was no pressure on her chest and she didn’t have to strain as hard. It also gave her more room to work with, extending her reach.

Moving the dirt wasn’t any easier, though it was giving her a sense of accomplishment. At least she was doing something. Once she was free there would be time to figure out what had happened.

Spike was breathing heavily, something he really didn’t need to do, but after getting rid of the nest, he decided he deserved a breather. A low ironic chuckle sounded in the air around him.

_Bloody hell that was a good fight._

Once he’d recovered a bit, Spike finally looked around at his surroundings. _ Fucking hell. _He’d really wanted to avoid this part of Restfield tonight. Something kept drawing him closer, more than he’d wanted to admit before this. He might be able to hide from everyone, sometimes even Dawn, but whenever he was alone, with time to himself, he couldn’t hide from the pain. There was no release.

The loss of Buffy was as sharp today as it had been the moment she’d fallen. There was no space between, there was no time between. Her loss was a constant ache, an ongoing pain. Always half expecting her to pop up with a quip and a sharp comment, verbally sparring with him like no other person he’d ever known.

He’d been matched by that girl in more ways than one and her being gone only highlighted his isolation. Not even Drusilla had been able to keep up with him, her bouts of being less than lucid were always between them. Drusilla had opened doors for him, but he’d soon outstripped her tutelage, making a name for himself separate and apart from her.

But Buffy . . . Buffy was different. She kept him going, always surprising him, always in step with him. He missed her the way he missed his heartbeat. Knew it should be there, beneath his chest and
feeling somewhat lesser for its loss.

Such a tiny thing she’d been, yet her presence filled every room she’d ever entered. Only she’d been able to tap into his boundless energy, matching it with her own.

God almighty how he missed her.

He knew, staring up at the stars, that he’d never really get over her loss.

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Tara no longer knew what to think or feel. Bare seconds after falling beside an unconscious Willow, she’d known exactly what had happened. Memories flooded back, like a sick slide show, Willow’s actions and decisions laid bare. Tara’s first thought had been concern, but now, as she and Dawn half-walked, half-dragged the dazed girl home, her secondary reaction began to settle. She was angry. Angry beyond anything she could ever imagine feeling, or ever imagined that she might be capable of.

_How dare she? What on earth had she been thinking, what had she thought she could accomplish?_ On no, Tara knew what Willow had been trying, but couldn’t believe she’d had the arrogance to assume it would work. _And why on . . . _her train of thought was distracted by a groan from Willow.

There was no way Tara could ever tell Dawn what Willow had attempted. It would shatter the poor girl. On top of the goddess’ visit, that it had been Willow who played with their minds, trying to play god and bring Buffy . . . no, Tara wasn’t even going to think about that until they were all safe at home.

She felt weak as a kitten and she wished Spike would swoop in and save the day, like he usually did.

Tara suddenly thought it was the first time she’d actively wished for his help, almost praying for him to show up.
Spike was currently stuck fighting again. This night was turning out to be endless. Nights like this he really regretted being so strong and so . . . nah, that was such bullshit even he didn’t believe it. He lived for nights like this – or unlived – for this. When the battles were endless and time flew by.

Three more idiot vampires, but at least these wankers knew who he was. They’d still tried to fight and they still ended up deader.

Looking up, Spike realized he was only yards away from Buffy’s final resting place. Finally giving into the inevitable, Spike slowly began to make his way over.

At first she didn’t realize what had happened. Her fingers pushed through the earth, bringing fresh, clean air to her starved lungs. Working faster now that she had some hope, her fingers started cramping in her haste.

Scrabbling desperately for purchase and using her legs to help push her up, her head finally broke free.

Air . . . oh god . . . she took her first real deep breaths in forever. Great gulping gasps filled the still air, sounding harsh and small.

Breaking the rest of her body free, the girl finally pulled herself all the way out. Her strength was gone. Every nerve in her body hummed, every muscle screamed in agony. The relief was searing. Her stomach rolled and she panted heavily, her face resting on the earth she’d just escaped. Her eyes opened, blearily taking in her surroundings. She knew . . . oh god, she knew where she was . . . closing her eyes again she thought if I don’t look it won’t be real . . . won’t be real . . . Don’t look. Don’t.
Turning her head, she slowly opened her eyes and couldn’t deny what her heart was telling her. She’d just crawled from her own grave.

Pushing up on her hands and knees, she vomited up the meager contents of her belly.

They were home, relatively safe inside the walls of the little house on Revello Drive. Tara motioned Dawn toward the couch, where they nearly dumped Willow’s still mostly inert form. Tara’s skin crawled and she didn’t want to be any closer to Willow than was absolutely necessary.

Her mind was still reeling from all that had happened. She was numb, her entire body was on sensory overload. Dry mouth and crawling skin and her ears were still constantly ringing. Maybe that explained why she didn’t react when Dawn started speaking, “Tara, what happened? What was all this? Tara?”

She looked at Dawn, pulling her gently away from Willow. “Sweetie, I’m not really sure about everything that just . . .”

Interrupting her, Dawn spoke, “That wasn’t really Mom was it?” She was beginning to understand, but she still really didn’t believe all that she’d seen and experienced tonight. What she did know was that whatever or whoever had tried opening the portal wasn’t doing it with the best of intentions.

“No, sweetie, that wasn’t your mom.” The two girls were now standing in the kitchen, their heads close together while they whispered. “That was Gaia, the mother. Dawnie, I have to tell you something.”

Sensing this wasn’t going to be easy, Dawn slumped onto one of the stools. Tara didn’t want to be the one to bring it up, but for Dawn’s protection she had too. She owed it to the goddess, to the memory of Buffy, and most especially to the girl in front of her. “Dawn. It was Willow. She tried doing something she should never have attempted.”
Dawn slumped onto one of the stools, her head dropping. Before she spoke she took a deep breath, then said what she thought. “It was Buffy, right? She wanted to bring Buffy back. That’s why she hid everything from us.”

She wasn’t going to lie to the teenager. Not now and not ever. It was no way to keep someone’s trust. Something Willow had obviously forgotten – but Tara couldn’t focus on Willow and what she’d done right now. She had to focus on Dawn and what she needed.

Later, she would worry about Willow and her inexplicable actions later.

“That’s what I think. . . yes, Dawnie. She tried and she failed. I’m so sorry, sweetie.” Much sorrier than she would ever be able to express. Despair unlike any she’d felt before filled Tara, along with the growing anger at Willow’s hubris. How dare she toy with everyone like this? Tara could almost feel the pieces of her heart falling away, but again she couldn’t and wouldn’t focus on that.

Dawn’s tears caught her attention and Tara gathered her into her arms. “I’m so sorry, Dawnie. Soo sorry.”

What Willow had done hurt more than it helped, completely destroying any progress the last Summers had made in the grieving process. Just another nail in the coffin of her feelings for the redhead.

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She’d vomited up all the dirt she’d accidently swallowed during her crawl upwards. Trembling violently she could barely push herself up. She couldn’t control her muscles enough to get to her feet and even if she could, she still wasn’t sure where she was or where to go. She had no idea how long she’d been gone or who was left.

The inscription on the marble stone in front of her gave her some information, which in turn gave her more vague memories. Reaching out a hand to trace the letters, she remembered her name. Buffy . . . that’s what she was called.

Sudden tears coursed down her cheeks.
She had a name.

She was Buffy.

It was enough for now.

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Despite his heartfelt misgivings, Spike followed his feet toward the place he’d been on a collision course with all night.

Something had been drawing him here, no matter how hard he’d fought against it. But here he was, twenty feet from it. His eyes trained on the headstone, he stopped short. There was something at her grave. At first glance it looked like Dawn.

“Niblet . . . you shouldn’t be out here.” A cautious step forward and Spike caught a whiff of something . . . It was the scent of decay.

Whatever it was on top of Buffy’s grave wasn’t Dawn. The figure scrabbled away from him, almost curling in on itself, huddling down against the headstone. Spike halted his approach, realizing whatever it was, was more scared of him than anything else. “All right then. I won’t hurt you. My promise.”

A couple more cautious steps forward brought Spike to the foot of the grave. His senses went berserk, every nerve end screaming. The way this creature . . . looking down at his feet, Spike finally noticed the disturbed earth beneath his feet.

Oh fucking . . . no . . . fuck . . . fuck. Fuck. Crooning nonsense words now, Spike took a few more steps closer. Crouching down, resting on his haunches, he reached out a tentative hand.
“Pet. It’s me. It’s Spike, love. You’re safe now. C’mon, Buffy love, it’s me.”

Wild hazel eyes met his blue ones and Spike had to swallow his anger and despair. She needed him, not his emotional outburst.

Even so, he couldn’t stop the tears flooding his eyes, when he looked at her.

“‘Lo, love. Remember me? Remember Spike?”

Leaving his hand extended, Spike relaxed his muscles one by one, since his first, last and every instinct was to snatch her up into his arms, crushing her in his embrace, never to let go. She was scared, skittish and she didn’t know . . . Didn’t recognize him yet.

Too scared to move, too hurt not to, she couldn’t make her muscles respond. His hand was solid, steady in the air before her, and oh, how she wanted to reach out and touch him, make sure he was real and she was safe, but she couldn’t force herself to move. Not yet. She still wasn’t certain of who he was, but some memory triggered in her jumbled thoughts. *Spike. Safe. Protected.*

“C’mon, pet. My promise to keep you safe.”

To his absolute and utter surprise, he watched when understanding and memory returned to her frightened eyes.

Her lips formed his name, but no sound emerged. A tiny hand reached out, grasping his fingertips.

And Spike couldn’t fight the tears any longer.

12. *Pale despair and cold tranquility.*
Ill met by moonlight.

*Midsummer Night’s Dream, act 2, sc 1*

And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Princess*

Beside a dead person is a living ghost.

*Chinese proverb*

Inch by inch he moved closer, afraid to scare her by moving too fast. Spike could smell the fear rolling off her and the last thing he wanted to do was add to her trauma. Better than anyone else, he knew exactly what had happened, what she’d been forced to do. He remembered his own journey upwards. It had taken him years to get over his terror of small confined spaces. Wasn’t going to be any easier on Buffy.

Keeping his mind deliberately blank, Spike refocused all his considerable attention on the battered girl in front of him. For once in his undead life he was going to be patient and wait. Even so, keeping his mouth silent wasn’t part of the equation. He didn’t know if he would ever be capable of silence when he was nervous or excited – and this moment definitely qualified under both those categories. So he kept up his calm litany of words, trying to draw her closer.

Only their hands touched, now palm to palm, fingers meshed together. He could feel the tremors ripping through her muscles, could feel the shivering that was her response to bone and soul deep fright.

Her eyes never left his.

She knew him. Remembered his face, his strength. Knew she could trust him to protect her even . . . He would protect her at all costs, even if it killed him. She knew it. Just didn’t know why or how. Knew he’d help. So she tried. Soft words, bare hints of a whisper, more like thoughts on a breeze sounded from her. “Help me, Spike.”

His eyes closed in silent thanks, tears sliding down his cheeks. She might not be whole, but she

Abruptly her body gave out. Her last reserves had all been expended and even bravado couldn’t stop the collapse. Buffy crumpled into a heap, all sharp angles and bones, but before her head could hit the ground he was lifting her up into his arms.

Too stunned to move, Spike rocked back and forth, his arms tightening around his broken girl.

Tara hadn’t wasted any time getting things under control. Calming Dawn hadn’t proven nearly as difficult as she’d expected. Sensing how close the explosion of Tara’s normally placid temper was, Dawn made no issue of cleaning up and then fetching whatever Tara asked her.

Drawing on the words of Gaia, who’d praised her, Tara set about finding some way of binding Willow temporarily and extending her current state of insensibility. It was easier to focus on keeping her contained and keeping her quiet than it was to face what would happen when Willow woke up.

She couldn’t make any rational decisions about Willow right now. Actually she wasn’t sure when she would be able to make a rational decision. Still reeling from all the psychic upheaval, Tara was constantly fighting nausea. If she moved too fast her stomach rebelled. Every sense was buzzed and she doubted if sleep was ever gonna come tonight. At this rate she wouldn’t need caffeine for a week.

Hiding her smile, Tara caught Dawn’s equally goofy expression. “You too huh?” was Dawn’s comment adding, “I’m so buzzed.”

“I know, sweetie.” Growing serious, Tara figured now was as good a time as any. She and Dawn had worked quickly and all was in readiness for the sleep spell and the temporary binding. “Dawn, there’s something . . . I have to make sure Willow can’t . . .”

*Oh sweet mother* she didn’t want to explain this, explain what she was prepared to do to her girlfriend. She wasn’t sure herself. If what Gaia said was true, and she had no reason to believe that it
wasn’t anything but the unvarnished truth, they had to keep a close eye on Willow.

“It’s okay. I understand. It’s to protect all of us. Even Willow.”

Well. Sometimes people were just full of surprises, Tara thought, but if any night was gonna have more, it was gonna be this one.

Cradling her in his arms, Spike was horrified at the changes. She was literally nothing but skin and bones. He’d seen starved vampires and holocaust victims and right now his poor girl wouldn’t look out of place with either group.

He needed to get her home, cleaned up, and something in her system. “All right, pet. Gonna take care of you. Gonna get you home so we can see what’s what.” Little whimpers sounded against his chest and her hand tightened around one wrist. “S’ok love, it’s where we belong. Won’t leave you there alone.”

The death grip loosened, which Spike took as a positive signal. Getting to his feet with an armful of kitten weak slayer was a little problematic. He managed though, jostling her only enough to also scoop up the sword he’d dropped earlier.

He’d no idea how long he’d crouched down, figuring it had to be a good while, because his muscles were all stiff and sore. Then again it could have just been all the stress and tension of the whole night. His sense of unease from earlier hadn’t been wrong. There had been something going on – he’d just never have expected this.

Pausing to glance once more at his precious burden, Spike set off in measured steps toward the haven of Revello Drive.
The lights were all ablaze as he made his slow way up the walk. His first thought was that Buffy’s return wasn’t the only thing weird about tonight. Spike cursed a blue streak in his head, mindful of not startling the girl he carried. Whether it was exhaustion or the let down after the scare of a lifetime or the security he’d imparted or even some combination of the three, Buffy had relaxed enough to fall asleep somewhere between the cemetery and here.

He really didn’t want to wake her.

Nearly doing exactly that, Spike fumbled not to drop her when Tara opened the door before he got to the bottom of the steps. But it was her words that had his skin really crawling. “Spike, what . . . oh, dear gods. She did it.”

Spike stopped in his tracks while Tara froze in the doorway. A tear slid from her left eye, riveting his attention. Her whispered voice quavered then fell. “It was Willow.”

At first he didn’t believe it, but then it all made a sick sort of sense. She’d rushed him out the door tonight, had been happier than a clam once Rupert announced he was leaving. Bloody bitch. “Where is she?”

“Out cold. I’m keeping her that way. I didn’t know, Spike, I swear it.”

“Know that. Isn’t something you would do.” Spike took a deep breath. “Lemme get her inside and cleaned up a bit, then we’ll talk.” Another thought struck him. “Where’s Niblet?”

“I just got her settled into bed. She might still be awake – should I?” Tara was flustered, unsure of what she should do first.

He thought for a second, thinking of Dawn’s first reaction. It might not be pretty. “Let’s get her cleaned up, then we can get her in to see Dawn.”

That made sense. They were both covered in a mess of goop and dirt and gods knew what else. Had it been any other night and any other circumstances, Tara might have been tempted to hose them off outside before she’d even think about letting either of them in the door, but this wasn’t an ordinary night. “I’ll get the shower started.”
Dashing up the stairs ahead of them, Tara breezed into the bathroom, pulling out towels and robes. Unsure whether Spike would leave Buffy alone or expect her to help the slayer bathe, Tara turned on the water then went to find something clean for them to wear.

The Slayer was curled so tightly in on herself that Spike couldn’t imagine how terrified she might be. Her whimpers started up again when he started to put her down, her bony fingers pinching him where she clutched his wrist. “All right, pet, just need to get cleaned up. Not going anywhere.”

“All right, pet, just need to get cleaned up. Not going anywhere.”

“Spike, I’ve got clean clothes for her. Do you want me to get yours?” Tara’s voice was soft, as always, but Buffy still cringed against him.

Those heartbreaking whimpers increased, focusing Spike’s attention. “Just jeans is fine.”

Settling himself down on the side of the tub, he tried undoing the snaps and laces on his boots without jostling the girl in his arms too much. “Pet, gonna have to let go. Tara’s gonna get you cleaned up. Remember Glinda love? Red’s bird she is. Right lovely too. Been keeping house for all of us. Taking good care of the Niblet too.” He kept up his litany of sounds for Buffy hoping something might spark a response.

“Gonna get you all cleaned up. Lots of soapy bubbles. Then maybe some soup and after that we’ll get Dawn up and awake. How’s that pet? All that sound good?” waiting a beat for a reaction Spike kept right on talking. “Knew you’d like that. Lots of soap and water. All right, pet? In you go. Tara’s right here.”

He tried. He really did. But the slayer had other ideas. She wouldn’t let go of him, wouldn’t release his hand after he’d placed her in the shower, under the water’s spray. Instead her fingers tightened more, threatening to break his wrist, while the other hand fisted in his shirt. Renewed fear rolled off her in waves.

*All right then. Change of plans. “Okay, pet. Lemme loose so I can kick off m’boots. Then we’ll both get cleaned, yeah?”*

Tara watched from the doorway. “Maybe I should warm up some soup and tea?”

Throwing her a look over his shoulder, Spike nodded his agreement. Boots discarded, he climbed into the tub behind Buffy fully dressed. Adjusting the water temperature, he called out to Tara before
she left the bathroom. “Glinda, get something sweet. It’ll help with the shock.”

“Right. Soup, tea, and sugar.”

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving him alone with a terrified soaked Slayer.

Giles looked at his watch that still reflected California time. He’d promised Spike and Dawn he’d call as soon as he landed, which had just taken place. He’d promised. Knowing Spike he was just getting in from patrol, deliberately timing it so that he’d be home in time for his call, and waiting impatiently by the phone.

He glanced down at his watch again. No reason to put off the inevitable. Flipping open his cell phone, Giles hit his automatic dialer and waited while the bloody machine did all the work for him. Not surprisingly the phone was answered on its first ring. What did surprise him was who’d answered.

“Tara?”

“Hi, Mr. Giles. How was your flight?”

“It was uneventful.” Giles was unable to hide his utter confusion. “Tara, is everything all right?”

The hesitation was just a tad too long. Just long enough for him to start worrying, which wasn’t assuaged by her response. “Maybe.” Tara wanted to smack herself. How was she supposed to explain all this? Over the phone no less.

“What’s wrong? Where’s Spike?” Easiest way to get an answer he thought, was to ask Spike.
“He’s in the shower.”

Tara’s voice squeaked when a pale hand reached around to grab the phone from her. Giles heard the rumbled “Sorry, pet” from the other man, and prepared to listen to some truly disastrous news.

“Watcher” and “Spike, what’s wrong” sounded out at the same time, but Spike’s next words shut up the other man completely.

“Rupert. Listen carefully. ‘M not sure of all the details yet, so just hear me out and then get your arse back here next flight.” Not waiting for Giles to respond, Spike continued. “Dunno how she did it, but Red brought Buffy back.”

Breathing heavily, he went on, “She’s not good. Had to crawl out. She’s not speaking yet.”

“Oh, dear god.” Rupert was very still almost afraid to move in case this was a very sick twisted dream. “Oh, dear god in heaven.”

“Watcher,” Spike’s tone indicated it wasn’t the first time he’d tried to get his attention. “Right. Right. I’ll be back sometime later today.”

“Good. We’ll wait on answers until then.”

Spike disconnected the call, walking back into the bathroom, dripping water from soaked jeans as he went. In the time he’d been speaking to Rupert, Buffy had started crying, though Tara had managed to keep her mostly calm. Getting her out of the tub and into clean dry pajamas was difficult, since Buffy kept fighting her in her confused and dazed state. At the sound of Spike’s voice, her struggles stopped and Buffy shifted her face to look at him. “Giles is on his way back.”

13. Dearer than the natural bond of sisters.

Like the prodigal doth she return,

With over-weather’d ribs and ragged sails,
"Lean, rent and beggar’d by the strumpet wind!

The Merchant of Venice, act ii, sc. 6"

"It is only the dead who do not return

Bertrand Barere de Vieuzac, Speech, 1794"

"For life is but a dream whose shapes return,
Some frequently, some seldom, some by night,
And some by day

James Thomson, The City of Dreadful Night"

She was dressed in warm soft pajamas, sitting on a bed, with a mound of pillows behind her and a cup of warm tea in her hand. Her voice was returning slowly, the muscles in her throat now lubricated by the liquid she’d been swallowing. The trembling hadn’t ceased yet, it was still something she fought constantly. The other girl, the one Spike kept referring to as Tara stayed nearby, in case she needed anything. He wasn’t in the room though. She liked having him near. It was comforting. He was familiar. Memories were swirling and she was trying to make some sense of them all. Faces, voices, images and words triggered each other, jumbling and confusing and nothing made sense. Thinking she remembered the girl, she tested out her memories. “Tara?”

The taller girl turned away from her straightening up of the room to face her. “Yes, Buffy? Do you need something?”

A small shrug greeted her question, though Buffy whispered a question back. “Friends? We are friends . . . Willow?” Real confusion colored her face, until Tara sat down in front of her. “Yes, sweetie. We are friends, and Willow is your friend. Do you remember Xander? And Anya?”

A little nod of her head indicated that she did remember the names. The next question was more difficult. “Dawn and Mom?”

Biting her lower lip, Tara wasn’t sure how to answer that one. Instead of blurting things out, she reached for one of Buffy’s hands, but the other girl pulled away when she realized her intent. Thick tears rose in hazel eyes, and a soft sob broke in the air. “No Mom. She’s gone. Where’s Dawnie?” Wild fright looked out from her eyes, and Buffy couldn’t fight the pain. “Where is she?”
Laying a soft hand on her thin ankle, Tara said “Spike went to go get her. She’ll be right here soon. I promise.”

Both girls lapsed into silence that wasn’t completely uncomfortable.

After hanging the phone back upon the receiver, Spike stood in the hallway, his mind completely and totally blank. Coming back to himself with a start, he squished his way back to the shower. He’d given the girls enough time for Tara to help Buffy out of her rotted clothing, finish washing up and get Buffy into her own room.

He needed some time alone.

There was the strangest feeling riding his gut. Was like getting something you really deeply wanted handed to you, only just in a way that wasn’t right. Wasn’t that you still didn’t crave it, but more like it was tainted somehow. Despite being overjoyed about Buffy’s return, he couldn’t shake the feeling that some great horrible disaster was looming just beyond the horizon.

As he peeled off the wet jeans, he thought about the battered girl in the next room. He’d never seen her this way – not even when her mother died, not when Dawn had been taken by the hellbitch. *Well, so she wasn’t her best when little bit had been taken, going all Karen Quinlan,* but still, she’d felt . . . whole. Right now, it felt like pieces of her were missing. Hell, chunks were missing, not just pieces. *How the hell were they gonna help her get them back?*

Leaning back against the tiled wall behind him, Spike closed his eyes and surrendered to his emotions. Tears slid down his face as he lifted it toward the warm spray. *Bleeding Jesus. Fucking Red brought her back.* Buffy was back from beyond, back from the dead, breathing and heartbeat intact.

He’d held her in his arms, her skin delicate and paper-thin, her bones nearly poking through. It broke his heart, seeing what a state she was in, what having to dig her way out of her coffin had done to her. She was bruised and battered, her spirit nearly broken. It was also clear her memories were not intact, it had taken too long for her to recognize things for it not to be.
Angry tears surfaced. *That fucking arrogant* . . . yeah, he’d wanted Buffy back, would have given anything to be able to even see her again – *but not like this* – not this way. Wherever she’d been, and Spike had his suspicions, coming back had broken something with her. Broken something vital.

Maybe he was just over-reacting, maybe it was just his over-protectiveness and knowing what she’d had to do after coming back. It had been traumatic when he’d done it, crawled from his grave, enough so that he’d had nightmares for years – and he hadn’t needed to breathe. He could imagine what it had been like for the Slayer, on top of not knowing what had happened to her.

But still – seeing her sitting there – in the pale moonlight, had caught his heart in his throat – he’d gasped for air – and part of him had wanted to just lay down and thank god for her. And that moment, when she’d reached out to him, Spike would never ever forget it. Would carry that memory until he was dust.

He had not a clue, though, what to say to Dawn. Tara had told him bits of what had happened, enough so that he knew he didn’t have to explain everything to Dawn. Closing his eyes, Spike dipped his head under the water. *Another problem was Red.*

Not having the whole story was probably a good thing, at least at the moment. Torn between wanting to kiss Willow and throttling her, Spike was at a loss. What she’d done, though not exactly wrong, clearly hadn’t been entirely right either. While her motivation may have been pure, obviously Willow’s execution left a lot to be desired. In his mind, he had to wonder if Willow had known Buffy would have ended up trapped in her grave.

Stepping out of the shower, Spike quickly toweled off, then slipped into the clean black jeans Tara had found for him. Avoiding his non-reflection in the mirror, he ran a quick comb through his curls and realized he was stalling. *Bleeding wanker,* he thought about himself. *All this because I don’t want to face a teenager.* He snorted at the blank mirror, tossing aside his wet towel. *Best do it now mate, she’ll never forgive you if you make her wait.*

Without further procrastination Spike made his way to Dawn’s room. He stood outside the closed door listening intently to the heartbeat inside. He knocked once, then slipped into the dark room. Pale moonlight barely filtered through her curtains while the air conditioner hummed away. Unlike her sister, Dawn preferred artificial cool air over warm breezes. Dawn was on her side, facing away from the door, huddled under a light blanket.

Spike sat down on the bed just behind Dawn’s hip. Reaching out a hand to shake her, he softly called her name. “Dawn. Wake up, c’mon, Platelet, wake up.” She shifted a bit but didn’t respond. “C’mon, Bit, I need you awake. Need to see your pretty eyes. Wake up, Dawn.”
After about ten minutes of not always gentle prodding, Dawn rolled over a bit onto her back, and without opening an eye, said, “This better be good, otherwise I’ll sic Spike on you.”

His deep chuckle sounded very loud in the small room. “C’mon, Dawnie, wake up.” Nice to hear she put a lot of trust in him.

Dawn rolled over to face him, barely opening her eyes. “What?”

“Need you a bit more awake.” Shifting on the bed, she finally opened both eyes and waited. “Dawn, need you to listen carefully.” Her ears perked up. He rarely called her by her first name, only when something was serious. “Was out patrolling, ended up in Restfield.”

Oh god. Dawn’s sleepy attention was riveted on him now. The way he looked and his tone of voice indicated that something was indeed up. And not anything good by the sound of it.

“Red’s mojo – it worked.” Before the thought of bolting for the door was finished forming, Spike had a restraining hand on her. “No. Niblet, need to listen to me now. It’s important.”

“Spike I need to . . .”

“No. Dawn. You need to listen to me first.” As his tone got worse, she stopped moving, waiting for him to finish. “The mojo didn’t work the way Willow intended. Yeah, your sis is back, but – Niblet, I said wait.” Dawn was off the bed and nearly at the door when he caught her by the arm. “Dawn, sit down now.” He ground out the words, nearly growling, something he never did to her.

“Just tell me, Spike. I won’t move.” Dawn pushed his hands off her, then crossed her arms in front of her. God almighty, she looked just like her bloody sister, tapping foot and impatience personified.

His sigh indicated his acceptance of her defiance. “She had to dig herself out. She’s not the same – something . . .” At a loss for words, Spike just blurted it out. “Look, loud noise and bright lights are too much – took her a while to remember me. I found her, just after she’d crawled from her grave – she’s not good, Bit, might not know you. Just . . .” He ran a hand through his hair, struggling with what more to say. He couldn’t look at Dawn, afraid of the look on her face.

She touched him, her voice small and scared. Unlike Buffy, her bravado didn’t always carry her through. “But she’s Buffy, right? Not like what happened with Mom . . .”
“No, it’s her, just not one hundred percent, but it’s her.” She deserved the truth, no matter what anyone thought, Dawn wasn’t a baby and the trials of the last few months alone had made her grow up. He waited, while Dawn processed the information.

“Okay, Spike. I get it.” Dawn reached out a hand, all at once his little Bit again. Ageless and timeless the Key was, Dawn was still basically a kid. Times like this, when she was scared it was really evident. “But you’re sure she’s not like Mom – I mean we won’t have to send her back, right?” Her face told him everything he needed to know. She was scared and she had listened to him, and surprise, surprise, she’d listened to Tara also.

“Yeah. Yeah. It’s Buffy.” Spike tried to stop his voice from breaking but it didn’t exactly work. “Don’t think it’s anything like what you did.”

She needed his reassurance, needed to hear it from him. Her trust in him staggered him sometimes, this being one of them. Never ceased to make him wonder how she could trust someone like him, who’d done so many . . . cruel and brutal things. But she did. She trusted him almost as much as she trusted her mother or her sister. Another silent promise from him went out to her, to never violate that trust.

Taking her hand in his, he tugged her toward the door. “C’mon, Niblet, she’ll be wanting to see you.”

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Tara had no idea how long they’d been waiting, but it had been a while since Spike had hung up with Giles. The sky was lightening, the early morning birds chirping their happiness out to the new day, and Buffy sat quietly on her bed. Few words had been spoken between the two, neither one really sure what to say.

Buffy was really . . . no she wasn’t glad, but, it was just better that Tara was here. The girl had such a calm air that couldn’t help but soothe everyone around her. She didn’t chatter unnecessarily or feel the need to fill silence with any other kind of noise. No, this was better, much better.

Both of them looked up when the door creaked open.
Dawn had skipped ahead of Spike then slammed to a dead stop outside Buffy’s door. Only a couple of steps behind her, Spike nearly walked into her back. “Bloody hell, Niblet, why’d ya stop?”

“You’re sure it’s Buffy?”

Turning her toward him with a hand on her shoulder Spike looked down into scared blue eyes. “Yeah. I promise, it’s your sis.”

Not giving her another chance to chicken out, Spike opened the door. He stuck his head in, speaking softly to the girl on the bed. “Brought someone in to see you, pet. You up for a visit?”

A tentative smile was directed his way and as she cleared her throat to speak, her baby sister walked through the door. “Dawn.”

She’d heard him, earlier, even listened to him. But nothing had prepared her for the sight of her sister. A mere whisper of air spoke her name. “Buffy?”

Two tiny words. Just their names. And yet the emotion in those words nearly broke their hearts.

“Oh, Dawnie.”

Stifling a shriek, a noise broke from Dawn that ended in a sob. “You’re real. Really real. Oh god, Buffy, I missed you so much.”

Afraid she was lost in a dream, Dawn made for the bed. “You’re here, really here.” Sitting down on the bed next to Buffy, Dawn burst into tears. Gulp in huge amounts of air, she reached out to Buffy then stopped. The Slayer wasn’t happy with that. Clutching Dawn like she was lifeline, Buffy cried into her sister’s long brown hair.
Tara slipped from the room, leaving the girls alone with Spike.


*Factum est illud, fieri infectum non potest.*

*Done is done, it cannot be made undone.*

*Plautus*

*Whatever you do, do wisely, and think of the consequences.*

*Gesta Romanorum*

He sat and watched them, until utter exhaustion claimed him. The two girls were curled up together on the bed, long strands of brown and dark gold flung across the bedspread, Buffy’s arms wrapped around her sister. Tear tracks were visible on both their faces and neither girl’s face was content. Buffy’s features, though partially obscured by the fall of Dawn’s hair, reflected the ravages of her fate. Deep lines were etched there, indications of how long she’d been gone, and how difficult a journey coming back had been. He didn’t want to think of her being buried in the ground, hadn’t wanted to focus on that at all. Didn’t want to remember how hard it had been for himself. Dawn, on the other hand, had a look of relief on her features. Relief that Buffy was back. He had an inkling that she didn’t care, wouldn’t matter to her why Willow’d done what she did, or where Buffy had been, or how hard it had to be being here after so long. Dawn had the innocence of youth, not really understanding about the climb out of the grave. It was all so simple for her.

Hours he watched over them, noting the changes in their breathing, the twitches and spasms that were indications of deep fatigue. It hadn’t taken long for either girl to drift off into sleep, though neither one was sleeping peacefully. The sun had been up for a while when Spike had finally given into his own fatigue.

When he woke at first he had no idea where he was or why he was sleeping sitting up. Realization came quickly as his sense of smell returned. *Buffy’s room.* Looking around, he idly noted the time on
the clock. Two bloody hours of sleep. Sniffing the air he tried to figure out what had woken him, when a muffled cry from the bed caught his attention. Buffy was crying in her sleep, her limbs twitching and her hands clutching and scratching at Dawn. Her ragged nails caught on Dawn’s exposed skin, raising welts and in some spots blood. Spike reacted instantly.

Grabbing at her as gently as possible, Spike eased Buffy’s hands away from the sleeping girl, though at the rate she was going, Dawn wouldn’t be asleep much longer. In fact, as he moved to get a better hold on Buffy, Dawn rolled over and woke up. Soft tears and incoherent mutterings broke the silence of their breathing. Buffy’s words were too low for Dawn to hear and for that Spike was grateful. It was enough to break his heart, the things she was saying and muttering, and most likely it would send Dawn off the deep end. There were some things she just didn’t need to hear.

“All right, pet, it’s all right. You’re not there anymore, c’mon, love, open your eyes.” Spike kept his voice soft and low, yet still speaking over Buffy’s cries. “C’mon, open up your eyes.”

Dawn watched from her side of the bed, blue eyes wide with distress, unable to speak. Buffy’s fingers were frozen like claws, scratching at thin air, while Spike held her wrists in an unbreakable grip. His voice kept going, trying any way to reach her, his tone even and calm. He was beginning to think she was not ever going to respond to his voice when abruptly she broke down into a heap, crumpling and mewling his name. “Spike, help me. Please, please, Spike.”

Gulping sobs and hiccups sounded in the room, the only noise evident. Spike gathered her up in his arms, holding her close. “S’okay, pet, I’ve got you. It’s all right.” He just kept repeating the words over and over, hoping to calm her tears.

Dawn reached out a tentative hand, hoping to help soothe Buffy, but when she felt her touch, Buffy jumped and moved away. Dawn shot a hurt look at Spike, almost in blame, but at his arched brow, she relented, understanding that perhaps it wasn’t his fault, that it was the nightmare causing the problem.

“Sshhhh. It’s all right pet. Hush your tears. I’m right here.” Gently rocking her back and forth, Spike rubbed soothing circles on her back. Dawn leaned her head against his other shoulder, needing the comfort she’d come to rely upon while Buffy had been gone. It took some time, but finally Buffy had stopped crying, her breath still hitching and gasping. Brushing his hand down her tangled hair, Spike wished he could find a way to ease her through this, make it easier on her somehow.

Shifting slightly on the bed, Spike leaned back against the headboard, both girls within the reach of his arms. Buffy was still curled up in his lap and Dawn had slipped her head under his arm, her head resting on his upper shoulder. The girls were facing each other, their warm breaths wafting over his chest. He was deliciously warm, the heat they were generating seeping into his bones. Believing they both had drifted off back to sleep, Spike sighed, thinking about the two of them. Buffy’s head picked
up a little bit, the top of her head brushing against his chin. His hand drifted down her back, absently smoothing the cloth. Resting his head against the wall, Spike reveled in the moment. This was almost worth the pain of the last couple of months. Almost.

Her voice took him by surprise. “Thank you.”

“No worries, pet.”

Dawn hugged him tighter, conveying her thoughts without words.

It wasn’t long before they all fell back to sleep.

Giles was bleary-eyed and punchy. He’d been flying for nearly, looking down at his watch, he tried to calculate exactly how many hours he’d spent airborne in the last day, and couldn’t come up with an accurate number. His brain felt like mush. His legs were cramped, his posterior was numb, and he had a pounding headache from the forced air that blew constantly around his head. The solicitousness of the stewardesses was driving him insane. He’d made an instant turn around, not even bothering to clear customs after hanging up the phone with Spike. He’d managed to stop one of the ground personnel, conveying his urgent need to return to California. Citing a desperate family emergency, telling the ticket agent that his daughter had been in a fatal accident, they quickly bypassed all the necessary paperwork.

He’d boarded the twelve fifteen flight just as it was preparing to taxi down the runway, the flight attendants holding the plane for the clearly desperate man. And since then, they’d never left him alone. Giles was at his wit’s end.

The astounding news Spike had delivered bare hours ago still hadn’t truly registered in his brain. Willow had used magic to bring Buffy back. Just that alone was . . . Giles didn’t have the words to describe his current emotions. Like the rest of him, he imagined his emotions were, at the moment, numb and disconnected. Most likely, none of this would be real until he was back in Sunnydale, Buffy sitting next to him.

Still reeling from the news, Giles chafed at the delay. The plane was still somewhere over the
Atlantic, hours from his destination. Even with the time, Giles thought he wouldn’t be able to process any of this. This was just some bizarrely surreal dream, some wickedly accurate nightmare, from which he currently couldn’t wake.

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Tara had heard the cries from downstairs, heard Spike’s soft voice calming the terrified Slayer. The noises had only increased her own agitation, making sleep completely elusive. Willow was still on the couch out cold. It was, at the moment, the best place for her. The ethics of what Willow had done were just – wrong. In every single sense of the word. And then, to violate both her free will and Dawn’s was another big no-no. The words of the Wiccan Rede kept circling round her head, coupled with the rule of three. Great gods above, what had Willow done?

The oppressive heat and the fall-out from the night’s activities just . . . Tara was so completely at a loss, she just didn’t know what to do. She had no idea what was going to happen when Mr. Giles got back or when Spike recovered. And, oh no! No one had called Xander. Tara looked around, half expecting someone to come up with a decision about calling Xander and Anya. For a wild minute, Tara actually considered about waking Willow up to ask her what she thought, then realized what she’d just contemplated. Understanding there was no one but herself, she shook her head. Can’t ask Spike, won’t wake up Willow. Okay, girl, should you or shouldn’t you?

In the end, it came down to one thing really, would she want to know. And her answer was yes, she would. But not over the phone. She called the Magic Box, spoke briefly with Anya, requesting that they both come over for dinner after work.

That gave her enough time to do a couple of things. First and most important, was tell Spike about it and get his help in moving Willow up to their room. Second was filling him in about the specifics of the spell she’d currently woven about Willow. Lastly, she needed to shower and take a nap. With those ends in mind, Tara headed up the stairs to Buffy’s room.

The sight that greeted her re-ordered her priorities. Spike was sitting up, his head resting on the wall behind Buffy’s bed, the headboard flush against his back. Curled up practically on his lap, his left arm around her protectively, was Buffy. Lying on her side next to him, her head nestled somehow between Buffy and Spike, was Dawn. All three of them were asleep. Dawn looked to be the most comfortable, her legs splayed out, her breathing deep and even. Buffy’s breathing was more shallow, broken by uneven hitching and occasional sniffles. Tara imagined it was because of the crying earlier. She had little doubt that the tears were nightmare induced. As she watched, Buffy’s fingers scrabbled and clawed at Spike’s shirt, then stilled as his hand almost automatically soothed her. His breathing, while completely unnecessary, was slow and even. Well, slow in that for every count of a hundred or so, Spike inhaled or exhaled.
Tara stifled a completely inappropriate giggle, settling instead on a genuine smile. She decided perhaps, having the nap first was the best course of action. Closing the door softly behind her, Tara went back downstairs securing all the locks, before heading back to her room.

It was only ten in the morning. Tara did a double take at the alarm clock. *Was that right?* It felt like hours later. Setting the alarm for two, Tara climbed under the covers and tried to rest.

Her last coherent thought was to wonder who was going to get Mr. Giles from the airport.

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*There was no air. She couldn’t breathe. There was no escape. She had to get out. . . Had to escape. No air. Scrambling at the fabric covering her face, she tried punching through the wood. No air. No air. NO AIR. She screamed, pounding against the wood. No . . . it wouldn’t give. No air. Desperate now, she tried again to punch through the wood, scratching and clawing at it in her desperation to escape. Out. Need to get out. Please help me out. No air. No air. Whimpers and moans escaped from her clenched teeth. No air. No escape. No . . . she couldn’t stay here. To stay was to die. Swinging her fist, she pounded against the wood.*

The first indication he had that something was wrong again was the small fist battering his chest. Coming awake in a rush, Spike had barely enough time to bring up his hand to ward off a blow to his nose. His first and last instinct was to lash out in retaliation but when the hand was clasped in his struck hard, he woke fully. It was Buffy, in the throes of a doozy of a nightmare, still sound asleep.

This he could control. Untangling himself, Spike gently but firmly grasped her flailing arms. Thankfully, her feet were still tucked up underneath her, otherwise this would be a helluva lot harder. Momentarily distracted while he made certain her feet were trapped, he let slip one of her fists, which promptly caught the side of her sister’s head. Dawn came to with a start, all set to do battle and strike back, until the sleep cleared from her eyes and she realized what was happening.

*Poor Buffy* was her only thought. Deep in the grip of the nightmare, Buffy wasn’t responding to Spike’s voice at all. Curling up as far away from them that she could get, yet still remaining on the bed, Dawn finally realized just how bad it was. Buffy was wild, uncontrollable and absolutely bone-deep terrified.
She didn’t think anything could ever scare her sister. Didn’t think the monster existed that Buffy couldn’t beat. Until now. This was horrible. Dawn finally discovered that her sister wasn’t invulnerable, wasn’t super-hero girl and it shook her to the core.

What amazed her though, was Spike’s patience. He held Buffy, protected her from herself, captured her wild fists and never once lost his temper or let her get to him. It seemed to go on forever, the crying and trying to get out of the imaginary box her sister’s mind told her she was trapped inside. Her own tears slid unnoticed down her cheeks, her hand covering her mouth. Dawn didn’t know what, if anything she should try to do. And she didn’t dare ask Spike, because he needed to concentrate on calming Buffy.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Tara’s hand dropped down on her shoulder. Tara leaned down, whispering softly, “Come help me, sweetie.”

Silently she crawled off the bed, her eyes still focused on the two still there.

Spike was not having fun. Nothing he said or did seemed to reach through to Buffy. His voice never hesitated, never stopped, his hands constantly trying to soothe her. He’d run out of things to say, and for once at a loss, started humming some old lullabies. There was a split second hesitation, a mere hitch in her harsh breathing, but Spike sensed it. Figuring it had as good a chance of working as anything else he’d done, Spike started humming, even though he felt ridiculous for doing so.

And, miracle of miracles, Buffy’s sobs slowed down, her fists stopped trying to escape his hold and she eventually collapsed against his chest.

Long, long minutes they stayed like that.


*A ministering angel shall my sister be.*

*Hamlet, act v, sc. 1*

*However, there is a locked room up there*
With an iron door that can’t be opened.

It has all your bad dreams in it.

It is hell.

_Aanne Sexton, Locked Doors_

O, I have passed a miserable night,

So full of fearful dreams, of ugly sights

_Richard III, act 1, sc 4_

_Dreams pursue death as winds a flying fire,

Our dreams pursue our dead and do not find._

_A.C. Swinbourne, Ave atque Vale, l 94 - 95_

Tara and Dawn had crept out of Buffy’s room, then stumbled their way into the room Tara shared with Willow. It was only about noon or so, and Tara needed more sleep. Buffy appeared to be calm, and even if she wasn’t there wasn’t a thing either of them could do for her. Neither one was strong enough to control her if she swung her fists or kicked, given the Slayer’s strength. Better let Spike handle it, at least until Mr. Giles came home and they could figure out something. She looked over at the clock again. The last nightmare happened about two hours before this one. Just enough time for Buffy to sleep deeply and give over to the dream-state.

Mr. Giles was due to arrive around five, and thinking quickly, Tara made the decision to call the Magic Box for the second time that day and ask Anya if she and Xander would pick him up at the airport before coming back for dinner. Thankfully, the shop was very busy, so Anya didn’t have time to ask the questions Tara knew were forming. Right now it was easier to give her evasive answers, rather than slip up and inadvertently give Anya too much information. Settling down onto the bed, Tara tossed the sheet over Dawn, then tried to get comfortable.

There was too much to do and she couldn’t get her mind to settle down. There were soft noises coming from Buffy’s room, mostly Spike’s voice, and the occasional cry from Buffy. This was not good. In fact, none of this was good. Her mind kept circling back to what Willow had done and now, seeing the effects on Buffy, it only solidified the idea that what her girlfriend had done was wrong, even if she’d rescued Buffy from a hell dimension.

That was something else they needed to figure out, what exactly Willow had done, and how she’d managed to do it. Ignoring her tired body, Tara stopped fooling herself and got out of bed.
Rummaging through her drawers, she got out clean clothes, then headed for the bathroom to shower. Dawn’s sleepy voice stopped her.

“Tara? What’s going to happen now?”

“I’m not sure, sweetie. I know Spike talked to Mr. Giles and that he’s on his way back here now. Xander and Anya are going to pick him up at the airport, then head here for dinner.”

It was easy to slip into the care-taker role, easy to slide back into that than keep up the pretense that she was in control. “Do you want to help me get ready for dinner and everything?”

Thinking about it momentarily, Dawn shook her head “Yeah, just give me a couple of minutes to wake up. I’m all sore and achy.”

“I know. Me too.” Tara wrinkled her nose, then indicated the bundle of clothing in her hand, “I’m gonna head into the shower first.”

His headache was now full blown migraine of mammoth proportions, with expectations of expanding into a hemorrhage. The force air circulating through the cabin was absolutely vile and the forced smiles on the faces of the stewardesses was enough to make him want to inflict bodily harm on everyone in sight. Giles tried to unclench his jaw, but the effort was beyond him.

The thought of what might be waiting for him in Sunnydale was just too much to even contemplate. No idea what physical shape Buffy was in, or what her mental state might be like, Giles was forced to speculate and use his considerable imagination. It only made the pain in his head increase. Not to mention what it did to his heart.

He was beyond rage, beyond shock. This was quite simply the single most astounding event of his life. Willow had managed to retrieve Buffy, in effect bring her back from the dead. Putting aside his utter joy at having Buffy back, what remained was a completely dangerous ritual performed by a woman barely out of her teens. The power she’d called upon, generated and harnessed must have been staggering. Giles caught himself grinning like an idiot. Wait . . . you bugger. It had taken enormous amounts of power. Dear god in heaven. What had she done? What forces had Willow
called upon – and from where – Giles’ head was rapidly filling with numerous possible scenarios – and where she’d performed the ritual. None of his visuals was comforting.

Glancing down at his watch, Giles idly noted that it was only about half past noon in California. He had another five hours before debarking. Resting his head against the back of his seat, Giles willed away the extraneous distractions, instead focusing his attention on Buffy.

His Slayer was alive and seemingly safe. Abruptly, Giles realised that his conversation with Spike hadn’t been very informative. Merely just a few words ‘Red brought Buffy back’ and then ‘had to crawl out. She’s not speaking yet’. He had no other indication of how other than what damned little Spike had told him. Not nearly enough information. And good gods, how the hell was he going to explain this one to the Council? First she was dead and now she wasn’t. He couldn’t formulate a plan until he had all the information and he doubted even then he’d be able to come up with something a bit more rational than what he was thinking.

Right now though, what he needed was something to drink and some painkillers. Settling his nerves for the saccharine sweetness of the flight attendant, Giles hit the call button, prepared to do anything for a double scotch and panadol.

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Between the two of them, they’d managed to put together a decent meal, move Willow upstairs without Spike’s help, and get the house cleaned up long before Xander, Anya, and Giles were scheduled to arrive. The hardest part had been carrying Willow up the stairs, but they’d slung her out flat, with Tara holding up her head and Dawn at her feet, they’d carried her up that way. Willow hadn’t woken, which was good, because Tara had no idea if the binding would work if she wasn’t asleep. Given the amount of power Willow had been able to call upon, Tara sincerely doubted the binding spell would hold her very long. They’d managed though and now Willow was upstairs tucked away safely in their bed.

Which left the other two occupants of the house still upstairs. After the last nightmare, Buffy had calmed sufficiently and appeared to be sleeping quietly, if not deeply. Spike was also drifting in and out of sleep, aware every time there was a shift in Buffy’s breathing or her muscles twitched. Tara had been up to check on them twice and Dawn had snuck up once, an unspoken agreement between the two to alternate visits. Dawn just needed to know that they were both still there, still breathing and that he was watching out for her sister.

Last time she’d been up, Buffy had been curled up next to him, his right hand on her hip, just making sure she was there. It was cute, Dawn thought, how much he was watching over her. What wasn’t
cute were the tear tracks on her sister’s face or the harsh lines marking her features. What really really wasn’t cute were the nightmares that she’d had this morning. This wasn’t fair. None of this was right. Sudden anger with Willow ripped through Dawn. *Buffy shouldn’t be like this . . . this beaten, this bruised and this . . . scared. It just isn’t right.*

Once more she opened the door to her sister’s bedroom, peering her head just in the door. They’d shifted positions, Spike was now on his side, nearly laying down on the bed, facing her sister, who had her head against his chest, her hand fisted in his shirt. Now his left hand was curled over her hip and as Dawn watched Buffy softly cried out in her sleep, her entire body twitching. Without waking up, Spike ran his hand up and down her side, a low rumble coming from somewhere deep. Wasn’t really a soothing sound, but it seemed to work, because the twitching stopped within seconds. About to sneak the door closed, Spike’s voice caught her.

“’S all right, Nib, c’mon in if you want. Neither one of us is really asleep.”

Almost stumbling against the door, Dawn responded without looking back. “Nah, just checking. You guys should stay up here and rest.”

An ironic chuckle sounded in the still afternoon air. “Dunno how much rest we’re gettin’, Bit. Sis keeps keening and weeping. More like just laying about ‘coz it’s easier than being up.”

“I get that.” She thought a moment, then whispered, “How is she really?”

Spike waited a beat, trying to formulate a response, when Buffy’s voice sounded in the air. “Tired, Dawnie. Not so good.”

The surprise was clear on both their faces and they tried to apologize for disturbing her. “Sorry, pet” and “Oops, my bad” came at her from two directions.

Buffy just shook her head, whispering ‘It’s okay. Can’t really sleep much anyway.”

“Do you need anything?” Dawn figured if nothing else, she might be thirsty.

“Just water. That would be good.” Buffy’s voice was harsh from long disuse and excessive crying.
Without another word, Dawn left, leaving the two of them alone. Buffy cleared her throat, absently wiping her eyes on Spike’s already soaked tee-shirt. Neither one of them had slept much, not since the last nightmare. She actually didn’t know what to say to him, didn’t know how to explain. The only thing Buffy was sure of at the moment was that being here, right now, was so hard. She was tired, drained and just plain . . . it felt like every bone in her body was blasted hollow, her skin was brittle and hypersensitive, every noise and bright light confused and startled her. How the only thing that kept her from screaming and clawing and crying and huddling in a ball and hiding and trembling and the fear at bay was his presence and hearing Dawn’s voice. They were the only things keeping her sane right now.

“Thank you. I don’t . . . thanks.” Her whisper was a bare noise mostly just a soft sound spoken into his chest.

“Told you, pet, no worries. S’okay.” Spike rolled over onto his back, staring up at the ceiling.

Buffy left her fist in his shirt, needing the contact. The only light in the room was from the partially closed curtains, but it was still bright enough to cause her problems. Her eyes watered constantly, whether from actively crying or just because she still had so much sensitivity to the light. Wiping them again with the back of her hand, Buffy tried one more time. “Spike . . .”

Just the sound of his name coming from her was enough to cause a smile. “Pet, leave it be.”

He didn’t turn his head to look, feeling the reluctant nod of her head. The last thing he wanted her to do was worry about thanking him. She didn’t need to be worrying about him at all, just herself. Sooner she realized that, better off she’d be. Sitting up, he stretched accidently disengaging her hand from his shirt. Buffy whimpered a bit, drawing his attention. “Just need to get up. Not leaving.”

Curling herself up, Buffy watched him walk around her room, tracking his every movement. “How long was I gone?”

Staring down at the cross and stakes that had been left piled on her dresser, Spike quickly calculated the time. “Too bloody long.”

Not accepting the vague answer, she questioned him again. “How long?”

“Hundred or so days.” Still avoiding her gaze, Spike paced around a bit more. “Right, exactly hundred twenty nine and a half days, give or take an hour or two.”
“You counted the hours?” her tone indicated that she almost believed he would do something like that.

“Got bored some nights, figured the time out.” Was his utterly sheepish response.

His honesty was rewarded with a very soft giggle. Turning his head at the sound, his sharp gaze softened as he looked at her. “What about you, pet? How was it for you?”

Instantly tears sprang to her eyes but didn’t fall. “I don’t know. Felt like forever.” Her lower lip quivered a bit, then she got hold of herself. “It was quiet and . . . quiet.”

_Buggering hell._ His suspicions over her whereabouts were very nearly confirmed, and Spike wanted to rip something apart in his sudden rage. Not wanting her to see the fury he knew was flickering in his eyes, Spike lowered his gaze to the floor. “So sorry, pet.” he whispered.

“Not your fault at all, none of this.” She couldn’t understand why his mood changed so quickly.

“Should’ve moved faster, done something different, yeah?” He turned away, focusing a hard stare at the wall. “Shouldn’t have had to . . . do what you did.”

Her turn now to avoid his glance. “I had to. Couldn’t let Dawnie do it.”

He huffed out his response. “Yeah. Neither one of you should have. Should’ve been me,” he ran his hand through his hair, agitation clear in his stance. “Couldn’t protect her like I promised. Couldn’t save her,” he paused, inhaling needlessly, “or you.”

This time she did look at him. “No. You did your best, it’s all I wanted, all I could ask for.”

“Best. No, wasn’t good enough by half.” He’d never stop blaming himself for what happened that night, his complete and utter failure to protect both of Joyce’s girls.

“I knew one of us wouldn’t make it.” Her resolute tone shocked him into really looking at her.
There was almost nothing he could say to that. At the time, he’d thought that was what she was thinking, that if it came down to it, she’d willingly die to protect Dawn. Well, she had died to protect her sister. And now she was back, telling him exactly that.

“Looked after her while you were gone, looked after all of them.” It was the only thing he could think of to say.

She smiled the first real smile she’d given anyone since last night. “Had a feeling you would.”

Grinning back at her, he thought perhaps she might recover after all. “Yeah, well, made a promise to a lady. Had to keep it somehow.”

Her next comment took him completely by surprise and effectively shut his mouth. “I expected you’d do just that and do it well.”

*Bloody woman.*

16. *Beautiful girl, stay with me.*

*Suddenly everywhere*

*Clouds and waves are one,*

*The storm has cleared the air*

*The sea holds the sun*

*And the blue sky –*

*There is no under, no above*

*All is light, all is love*

*Is it like this when you die?*
Eva Gore-Booth

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the Sky,
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores,
I change, but I cannot die

Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Cloud

Xander was repeating himself, which was driving Anya to distraction. “I don’t know. The store was busy, Tara didn’t say much.”

“Okay. I get that. But you’re sure she said pick Giles up at the airport?” He just needed to hear it again.

Anya rolled her eyes, replying in an annoying monotone that she normally reserved for the terminally dense, “Yes, Xander, Tara called earlier and invited us for dinner. Then she called back and asked if we could pick Giles up at the airport.” Waiting a beat, she launched into her personal commentary, “I don’t know why he’s returning so soon. He must have forgotten something important, like his passport or his glasses and that would explain why he had to come right back, wouldn’t it?”

Half listening, half totally ignoring her, Xander scanned the crowd of departing passengers. Mumbling some sort of response to his girlfriend, Xander craned his neck.

“Oh, there he is.” Anya tugged at his arm, pulling him off to the right.

Giles looked like hell and his clothes were completely rumpled. Smiling weakly, he nodded his greetings.


“Thank you, Anya, for your keen observation.” Giles threw out his dry response, leaning down to
get his bags.

Not giving either of them another chance to speak, Giles headed for the exit. “Shall we?”

Shrugging and exchanging confused glances, the couple followed him out.

“He’s awfully grumpy.” Latching onto Xander’s arm again, Anya remarked, “Probably too much time cooped up with strange people.”

“Right, Ahn, coz there’s no strange people in Sunnydale.”

Giles ignored them and their banter out of the airport and all the way back to Revello Drive.

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She was alone, for the first time since her return. Dawn was showering while Tara and Spike were somewhere else in the house. She wasn’t sure she liked being alone because the memories were harder to fight. It was easier when someone else was nearby. Buffy liked having Tara around, it was comfortable. Having Dawn around was good too, but in a slightly different way, but having Spike around was . . . she didn’t have to be strong or pretend to be okay with him. Spike was comforting.

Buffy was pretty sure though that one of the last things he’d wanted to be called was comforting. It didn’t suit his image. Too bad because he was really good at it.

Nearly all her memories had returned, though some things were still hazy, she pretty much had it all back.

Especially those last months since her mother died. The last nights too, were very clear. Losing Dawn. The fight with Giles. That last conversation with Spike and facing Glory.
The jump wasn’t so clear, neither was what came after. It hurt too much to think about. She didn’t want to remember . . . suddenly tears filled her eyes and she couldn’t stop. Whimpers filled her ears and she clutched at the pillows. Can’t think about it. Don’t wanna think about it. Buffy pulled her feet onto the bed, new tears flooding her eyes.

Rocking back and forth she dragged a pillow to her face, heaving great gulping sobs into the fluffy depths. Suddenly, strong cool hands were at her arms, gently removing the pillow from her grip.

“‘S all right, Slayer. Sssshhh.” He figured this was gonna keep happening for a while least until she got a bit more used to being back.

Nonsense words kept flowing from his mouth and it wasn’t long before she calmed again. She felt like such a . . . “Gotta stop doing this.”

She wasn’t really speaking to him, more like just speaking out loud to herself, trying to reach some semblance of control. Being this weak wasn’t like her, but she couldn’t seem to stop. Buffy was very grateful for Spike’s presence, because he didn’t make her feel badly for her current state, didn’t comment or make snide remarks, just let her be until she got herself together. It was nice.

Listening to his voice was nice too.

“It’s gone five, Rupert will be landing about now. Xander and Anya are picking him up, then coming here. You gonna be okay for this?” Spike held her in a loose embrace, catching her up on what was about to happen.

“Giles is coming back? Where was he?” She was so confused.

Right. She didn’t know anything that had been going on, so he needed to fill her in on all that as well. “Ah, yeah. Watcher left yesterday, Council called him back. He called while you were still out of it, told him to come right back home. Harris and the bird don’t know about you ‘t all.”

“So everyone is coming here?” Buffy cringed a bit, not really wanting to face so many people all at once.
“Yeah well, seems like it’s best to get this over with, then suss out what to do next.” Releasing her, Spike sat back on his heels.

“Gotta tell them all sooner or later, might as well be now. You need to know some things also, pet.” Why he had to be the one to break this news to her he had no idea, but since he knew nearly as much as Tara did, might as well be him. And he would rather it come from him anyway. “Red worked some mojo to bring you back. Used a forgetting potion on Niblet and Glinda too, so they didn’t know what she was up to.”

Buffy sat there quietly, just listening to his explanation. He hesitated, waiting a moment to see if she was going to say something, but she kept her silence. “Tara thinks something went wrong with the magics, ‘s that’s why you had to climb out. Not really sure ‘bout that m’self.”

Spike started pacing back and forth in her room. “Dunno much, maybe we’ll know more when Red wakes up. Ah, Glinda put her under using her own mojo. Something about a goddess comin’ to speak with her. Said it best we wait until Rupes was back.”

He stopped talking, idly running a stake through his fingers, just waiting for her to say anything in response. Buffy was just processing it all. So it was Willow. That was something she hadn’t expected. She really didn’t know what to say. Looking up at him standing there, Buffy had the sudden realization that Spike didn’t have anything to do with whatever had happened. Some sense of intuition told her that whatever had been done, was done without his knowledge and that part of him was truly furious with everything. She didn’t know what that meant or what was going to happen, but it was clear in his stance that some sort of reckoning was going to occur when Willow woke up. And Buffy was okay with that.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him. Tell him what she remembered about where she had been. But the words were stuck there, unable to be voiced aloud. If she said them, that made it real. Made it a fact. Something she couldn’t avoid. She couldn’t hide from it. She knew Spike too well to say something like this to him and ask him to leave it alone. That wasn’t in his nature at all. He faced things head on, never once flinching from the truth. And if he knew, he wouldn’t let her hide from it, or hide it from her friends. Instead of telling him, she blurted out the other thing on her mind.

“You’re gonna stay, right? Not gonna leave?”

Oh god. She hated sounding so needy. Buffy almost cringed at the pleading tone in her voice, until she caught the look on his face.

“Made you a promise, pet. Not going anywhere, til you drive me away.” He gave her a half smile,
conveying nearly as much as his words.

There were new noises downstairs, voices speaking and doors opening and closing. Buffy could hear everything, since Spike had left the door open just a bit. He’d left her here, going downstairs for just a moment to get something to eat. Spike had promised her that he’d be up with more soup for her and to bring her downstairs to face the others.

Buffy heard the voices, knowing who was there, she strained hard to make out the words. Unknowingly she pulled away from the door, huddling back on the bed. She didn’t want to go down there. Didn’t want to face anyone. Fear set in and the shaking started. Buffy couldn’t control it or the tears.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, driving her further back on the bed. Almost cowering in the corner, Buffy raised her hands up to protect herself.

They knocked at the door, then walked right in, Xander’s voice calling out his hellos to everyone. Tara raised her eyes to Spike, as he turned to remove Buffy’s soup from the microwave. They hadn’t discussed how to handle this – hadn’t had the time to do more than make Dawn promise not to blurt things out.

She whispered, “I’ll get them settled into the living room, then we’ll wait for you to come down.”

He nodded once, his focus on not spilling the soup. Tara moved out into the hallway, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Hi Mr. Giles. You’re back?” She decided playing semi-stupid would work.

“It would appear so. Had some problems to take care of.” Picking up on her pretense, Giles played
No one paid any attention when Spike slipped down the hallway and up the stairs. Xander was moving around the living room, while Anya perched on the couch, thumbing through one of their old magazines.

“So where are the girls and dead boy?” Xander grabbed the remote, flicking on the television.

“Up . . upstairs getting ready.” Wasn’t completely untrue. The girls were upstairs getting ready, just not the girls Xander meant.

“Hey guys.” Dawn fairly slid down the stairs, stopping short at the bottom, when she spied Giles. Her shriek of surprise and big hug were fake, but neither Xander nor Anya noticed.

A rather uncomfortable silence settled on the room.

Spike pushed through the door, bowl of soup clutched in one hand and bread in the other. “Thought this might do you, pet.”

He stopped short, seeing Buffy huddled up on the bed, leaning heavily against the headboard. Her shaking was visible from where he stood. Spike swore softly under his breath, dropping the two items on her bedside table.

“Hey, pet, ‘s just me. Relax.” He approached her slowly, knowing she wasn’t quite okay.

“C’mon, luv, settle down. It’s only your mates.” Buffy shook harder, moving away from his voice. “Hey, hey, c’mon, kitten, it’s okay.”
This episode wasn’t as bad as the earlier ones, seemed like this was more a case of nerves than anything else. Spike had no doubt that she would snap out of it quickly and she proved his guess right when she wiped her eyes and drew in a deep breath. He knew it wasn’t going to be easy, in fact it was going to be very difficult, but she wasn’t all chosen-like because she gave up when things got hard. If anything she dug in her heels and got stubborn about it.

Raising her eyes to his, Buffy straightened her shoulders, stretched out her hand to clasp his. “Thanks, Spike.”

There was more she wanted to say, but couldn’t force the words past her lips. He would understand that she couldn’t talk right now. Was almost afraid to talk.

“Eat some soup before we go downstairs.” Handing her the bowl, Spike got up from the bed and paced around the room.

Watching him, Buffy idly noted that it was a rare thing that he just sat and did nothing. He was such a bundle of energy, it was fascinating to watch. Even when he was still, something was moving, whether it was his leg, or fiddling with some item in his hands or his mouth was working, Spike was never still. She used to find it annoying. She used to find everything about Spike annoying. From the tips of his bleached head to the bottoms of his clunky black boots, she had hated him. That was before.


Before she jumped.

Xander was still flicking through the channels and Giles was stretched out on the couch, resting his eyes. The three girls had moved to the kitchen, getting the dinner ready. Neither Dawn nor Tara spoke much, letting Anya chatter away about her day. It was easier, because neither one of them wanted to let anything about Buffy slip out before she was ready to come down the stairs.
Tara had decided on pasta, thinking that if Buffy were able to eat, this would be mild enough. Everything else was ready. They were only waiting on the two upstairs.

Thundering footsteps came flying down, startling everyone. Spike rounded the corner of the staircase, his voice carrying in the quiet. “Watcher. What the hell are you doing back here?”

The feigned confusion went unnoticed. Xander ignored him like always and the girls kept silent. Giles however, snorted his disbelief, then opened a single eye and replied “Had some unfinished business to take care of, got held over in New York and decided to return here instead.”

Spike was impressed. Nice cover there, mate. He nodded quickly in acknowledgment. Then asked the girls, “When’s that dinner ready?”

Dawn rolled her eyes at the silly pretending but went along with it. “Soon. Why, you gotta go somewhere?”

“Something like that.” He thought for a moment, mumbling what sounded like, “Gotta patrol this bloody place.”

Tara finally got really tired of the silly games. “Dinner is just about ready, Spike.”

He caught her look, turning right back around to go get Buffy. “Just be a mo’.”

Taking the stairs two at a time, he nearly flew up the stairs.

Anyawalked into the living room, getting the men’s attention. “Tara says dinner is ready.”

Wandering into the kitchen, everyone grabbed a plate, filling it and then moving into the dining room. They were all seated except Tara when they heard footsteps on the stairs. Thinking it was just Spike, neither Xander nor Anya looked up, but Giles had his gaze riveted to the open doorway.

Spike stood there, blocking everyone’s view of the slayer, his voice ringing out, “Didn’t wait for me, didya?”
“Why should we wait . . .”

Xander’s voice trailed off and everyone froze.

Spike moved to his left, giving everyone a clear view of what he’d been blocking.

Buffy.

17. A Sort of Homecoming

_Tonight we’ll build a bridge across the sea and land_

_See the sky, the burning rain_

_She will die and live again_

_Tonight_

_And your heart beats so slow_

_Through the rain and fallen snow_

_Across the fields of mourning_

_To a light that’s in the distance_

_Oh, don’t sorrow_

_No, don’t weep for tonight, at last_

_I am coming home_

_I am coming home_

_from the album The Unforgettable Fire._
There wasn’t a sound in the house. Xander, Anya and Giles all stared at Buffy, who stood quietly in
the dining room’s entrance, eyes wide and wary. Spike and Tara exchanged a look, both of them
worried about Buffy’s reaction. Giles’ face had such an indescribable look upon it, something Spike
was reluctant to witness. Xander’s features were a study in comical disbelief and staggering hope, so
much so that Tara was forced to suppress the little giggle that was burbling in her belly. Anya, on the
other hand, had her head cocked slightly to the side, intently studying the Slayer.

Buffy started fidgeting, wringing her hands together. Her eyes lowered, then she snuck a glance to
her side, noting Spike there, lounging against the wall, his arms crossed across his chest. Sweeping
her downcast gaze across the others, Buffy smiled slightly at the expressions on Tara’s and Dawn’s
faces. Dawn was practically bouncing in her seat, a Cheshire cat grin gracing her features. Buffy
smiled a little wider in response, which broke the silence.

“Oh, dear lord.” Giles breathed out the words, getting up from his chair.

He reached out to Buffy, hesitating just a bit when she flinched back from him. When she relaxed,
the Englishman moved to hug her. He couldn’t speak, not for lack of trying though. His emotions
just weren’t able to be put into words. Buffy seemed to be suffering from much the same, since all
she did was hold him close. Her face was turned to the side, where Spike was standing and he saw
the relief settle on her features.

Little tears slipped from beneath her closed lashes. There was a bit of peace on her face also, like she
had needed this comfort from her watcher. A tiny niggle of jealousy crept into his heart and he
quickly squashed it. He knew she didn’t think about Giles that way, was obvious long before this
that she had put him into a fatherly slot.

Xander was frozen in place. Unable to move or think and barely breathing. His entire system was in
shock. Buffy was standing there. In the flesh. Complete. How he knew it wasn’t the Buffybot he
wasn’t sure. At least not until Giles got up to hug her. That’s when his composure broke. Xander put
his food down, swallowing loudly. His mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, no sound
coming out.

Anya was the first one to speak. “Is that really you? How did you – what happened?”

Without letting Giles go, Buffy spoke. “Yes, it’s me.”

Pushing back his chair with a loud noise, Xander got to his feet.
“Buffy.” His voice broke and Xander stood still, gulping breaths heaving in his chest.

Breaking free from Giles’ embrace, Buffy moved around the older man to face one of her best friends. “Hey, Xan. You okay?”

It was obvious that he wasn’t, but the absurdity of her questioning how he was broke his silence. His nervous laugh ended in a catch, as he opened his arms to her. Again there was a moment of hesitation before she moved to hug him back.

This was hard, harder than she’d expected. It wasn’t comfortable being here right now. The lights hurt her eyes and every noise startled her. Sudden movements weren’t much better, because when Anya jumped up to join their hug, Buffy visibly jumped, breaking away from Xander.

“You okay?” Xander’s voice was full of concern.

Buffy shook her head, stepping back a bit. Unconsciously moving closer to Spike, she barely refrained from backing into his chest. At her movement backwards, he’d straightened away from the wall. Bare inches separated them and she could feel his supporting presence like a rock behind her.

Sensing her skittishness, Anya paused, waiting until Buffy composed herself. It took a moment, but when she smiled at the former demon, Anya stepped forward to hug her.

“Welcome back. Even though I don’t know where you were or how you got back. It’s good to see you, even if you do look like hell.”

Leave it to Anya to state the obvious. Spike snorted a laugh, while her disingenuous words broke the tension engulfing the room.

“Well then,” came from Giles, while Tara motioned her to a chair, “Here, Buffy, I fixed you some plain noodles.”

Somehow they all settled into seats, even Spike, who piled his plate with pasta garnished with hot sauce. There was silence for a little bit longer, when all at once the dam broke for once and all.
“What happened?”

“How did you get back?”

“When did this happen?”

And the one question Buffy had no intention of answering for a very long time, “Where were you?”

Looking up from her plate, Buffy said the only thing she could think of, “I don’t remember much of anything.”

There was more babbling, which she tried to tune out, but as the voices got louder, Buffy flinched more and more. Spike’s voice cut through the chatter. Despite the volume of his voice and the aggravated tone, Buffy visibly relaxed. Well visibly to the two people who were paying close attention to her. Both Tara and Spike had been watching her, each of them ready to jump in if things got too rough. That it was Spike that reacted first was of little surprise to the wiccan.

His protective instincts were always hyper, especially when his emotions were engaged and they were most definitely whenever Buffy was involved.

“Hold your water, all.” Cutting across all their questions, Spike drew everyone’s attention. “Leave off and let’s do this slow, yeah?”

Even Giles held back a comment. Waiting a beat to make sure he wasn’t going to be interrupted, Spike spoke again. “Don’t think the Slayer has many answers, but Glinda might.”

Never comfortable with being the center of attention, Tara nearly froze when everyone’s gaze riveted to her. A very nervous smile crossed her face and Tara shot Spike a glance that spoke volumes about payback.

Hesitant at first, but each moment gaining more confidence, Tara quickly went over the events of the previous night. She left nothing out, including her suspicions about Willow. When Xander gasped and dropped his hand back down to the table, she knew that he’d known something.
Giles let her finish without interrupting. Her voice trailed off after she told them about binding her girlfriend. That was when he spoke. “Where is she now?”

No one had noticed it until then, not even Spike. But all at once the fury Giles had been concealing was laid bare.

“Upstairs in our room,” was Tara’s softly worded response.

“Giles,” Xander cleared his throat, not really certain he wanted to draw the older man’s attention, but knowing he had too. “Couple of months ago, I thought Willow was acting strange. She told me she was planning this.”

The look Giles shot him was enough to freeze alcohol, but the tone of his voice could’ve drawn blood. “And you just decide to keep this to yourself?”

“She thought . . . she told me you’d try to stop her, that you wouldn’t let her do it. Said something about you thinking she couldn’t do it, that it would be dangerous.” He was flustered and confused, but they were almost all acting like they weren’t happy about Buffy being back, which he didn’t understand at all.

“Thing is, whelp, there’s always a price. Magic this strong always has consequences.” Spike’s tone was no less blood-freezing than Giles’ but Xander wasn’t afraid of him – he couldn’t act on his anger.

“Right. And you can’t tell me you’re not jumping for joy that she’s back.” Xander couldn’t resist.

“Oh, I’m happy, all right, that she’s here. Just not over the moon ‘bout how she got here is all.” No reason to lie to anyone. There was real fire in his eyes now, but Buffy’s hand on his tensed arm drew his focus.

“Spike’s right.” Tara’s voice sounded in the charged air. “Magic . . . the rule . . for every action, equal and opposite reaction.” Glancing once at Buffy in apology, Tara continued “But even more, she shouldn’t have had to come back that way.”
Now Xander was truly bewildered. “What way? What are you talking about?”

His eyes on the girl beside him, Spike ground out “Had to crawl her way out.” As he watched Buffy’s eyes closed. He waited until she was ready for him to continue. “Yeah, Red’s mojo worked, but only not so well. Found her just after she’d dug her way out of her own grave.”

This time there was no break of the silence.

There really hadn’t been much to say after that. A little more conversation, some food eaten, desultory conversation between those willing to engage in idle chatter and then suddenly, it was time for him to go out and patrol.

Warring with his desire to stay close and protect his humans, was Spike’s desperate need to thrash something – anything – to within an inch of its life, and then stomp it into hell. Giving into the bloodthirst, he’d waiting only long enough to make sure everyone was settled before heading away from Revello.

Time to battle the nasties.

Exerting a bit of pressure on the whelp earlier, Giles had gotten everything he knew out of him. Which hadn’t been much. It was enough, would serve as a starting point, but they wouldn’t have all the answers until they woke Red. Knowing Rupert, that would be sometime in the morning. The Watcher’s anger fueled adrenaline rush hadn’t lasted long and by the time Spike had been ready to go kill something, Rupert had been fighting sleep. Buffy wasn’t much better. So Xander and his girl had toddled off, while the others settled in for the night.

When he’d left, Giles’ snores could be heard at the front door and Dawn’s stereo hummed away. Buffy and Dawn had retreated upstairs for some sister time.

Making his way methodically and quickly through the cemeteries, Spike wasted no time hanging about waiting for any nasties too shy to come out and play.
The three vamps he’d dispatched already were just minor blips, not even worthy of his wasting a breath on. After last night, things were strangely quiet. He really hated nights like this, especially when he was craving some bloodsport.

Bypassing Willie’s and the Bronze, Spike headed for Glory’s tower. He’d promised the Watcher and the witch he’d take a look around, see if anything came through the portal before they’d managed to close it.

Long before he was in sight range, Spike’s other senses went haywire. The energy was pulsing and there was a stench lingering in the air that was a cross between dump waste and rotting horseflesh. It was so strong he could almost taste it. He slowed his approach, straining his ears for any sound. There was a note of fresh rich blood in the air as counterpoint and Spike had to shake himself to stay out of game face.

Oh yeah. That was the good stuff, and more than one by the strength of it. He’d never admit it, not to any of his humans and especially not the Slayer, but he loved the scent of teenaged-girls’ blood. It was better than the best scotch, better than . . . well, blood and sex still made his mouth water. He expected they always would.

And right now, that’s what he smelled, blood and sex, undercut with that foul stench. Following his nose, Spike veered to his left, where the blood was strongest.

Judging by the amount of blood in the air, whatever had killed hadn’t either been very hungry, which left out vamps, or was just incredibly messy which left the possibilities wide open. Almost tripping over the first body, Spike eliminated any thoughts of vamps at all.

The construction site that Glory had commandeered for her tower was riddled with closed off areas, ideal for nesting nasties or the kind that killed, dumped and ran.

Had to be at least six girls here. At first glance he saw enough body parts for that anyway. Stepping behind a pile of wood and cement, Spike found the hiding hole of something very large.

Blood and gore was splattered nearly ten feet above his head. Most of it was fairly fresh, sometime in the last twenty-four hours. Which gave him an indication that whatever it was had just arrived in Sunnyhell – further indicating again that this nasty just might have slipped through Red’s doorway.

Which just added to his anger. Bitch. Just blindly gone ahead – opening portals that had no business
being opened – bringing her back that way.

_Fucking hell._

_This is just . . . _wrenching his attention back to the matter at hand, Spike pushed all thoughts of Willow from his head. All this blood was just going to draw scavengers. _Unless, yeah, what the hell, why not._

Searching around, Spike found a couple of half full gas cans. Working quickly he piled the body parts together. Adding wood and dribbling a trail of gasoline all around, Spike light a fag, drawing in the scent of sex, blood, and tobacco. A sardonic smile crossed his features as he flicked the cigarette onto the pile, then turned his back.

There was a small crackling sound, then a whoosh followed by a loud whomp and then the night exploded into flame as he walked away.

_So it wasn’t violence. ‘twas enough, it would serve._

He headed home to watch over his girls.

18. _Reckoning._

__Goodness shall be repaid with goodness, and__

__Evil repaid with evil, never fear, the day of__

__Reckoning will come soon.__

__Chinese proverb__

_Truth is truth to the end of reckoning._
He didn’t think he’d ever been so tired in his life. The emotional turmoil alone would have been enough, couple that with nearly twenty-four hours in a plane, then adding in the considerable time changes, Rupert counted himself lucky he was out of bed at all.

It had been surreal. Giles woke up thinking he’d dreamt the whole thing, only to find himself staring not at his own bedroom ceiling, but at subflooring. Where in hell am I? Was quickly followed by the abrupt realization that he was in a basement. Right, then hadn’t been a dream at all.

He’d flown halfway round the globe just to make a bloody phone call and come right back.

Wincing a bit at the stiffness of his aching muscles, Giles wanted nothing more than to roll over and go back to sleep. But he had no idea of the time and no doubt Spike was in need of his bed.

Better he get up now anyway. He had to call London before too much time passed. Travers expected him yesterday, had known Giles had gotten on a plane and probably his welcoming committee had reported on his subsequent immediate turn around. He was a little surprised that Travers hadn’t already called him.

Finally getting up, Giles located his cell phone and harrumped at it when it flashed ‘you have six messages’ at him. No doubt every last one was from the Council. Giving in to the unavoidable, Giles hit play and listened while Travers ranted.

Sleep had been elusive. Truth was, she didn’t want to sleep. Sleep meant nightmares she couldn’t control. Sleep meant reliving it all over again. It was hard enough being awake with the memories, shouldn’t have to fight them off while sleeping.

She’d stayed awake for hours, just watching Dawn sleep. Listening while everyone in the house settled down for the night. It was nice, being able to do that. But being alone was hard too, because
those memories kept surfacing. They were hard to face. So she fought against sleeping, until in the late hours of the night, long past midnight, when everything was still and silent, after she heard the back door open then close, when she knew he was home did she close her eyes.

His footsteps had been nearly silent as he ascended the stairs, but she could hear them, could feel him coming closer.

Pretending to be asleep when he opened the door to check up on them hadn’t worked. She hadn’t really expected to fool him anyway. Hadn’t expected him to let it slide either.

“Know you’re awake. You okay, kitten?” His voice was low, full of concern laced with a tiny bit of humor.

“Can’t sleep.” Her voice was equally low, not wanting to disturb the teenager slumbering next to her.

“Can’t or won’t?” He countered, calling her on her avoidance of the truth.

“Okay, won’t. Don’t want to, I don’t want to hurt Dawn if I get caught in another bad dream.” Which was enough of the truth to satisfy him, despite the fact they both knew the other reasons.

“I’ll watch now, if you want.” She almost responded negatively, like before, but stopped herself in time.

“You’d do that for me?” Such a silly thing but it went a long way to making her feel safe and comfortable.

“Yeah. Don’t even have to ask really. Should know I’d do it.” God, he sounded so young and unsure. Buffy wondered for the first time if this was what he might have been like before Drusilla turned him.

Of their own volition, Buffy’s eyes closed again, this time she yawned before speaking, “I’d like it if you stayed.”

Spike settled into the chair they’d moved last night from the wiccans’ room kicking off his boots
before answering her. The last thing she heard before her brain shut down was “Sure thing, kitten. You just rest.”

He’d stayed awake like she’d asked, watching over both of them. There’d been more than a few of these – him guarding over Dawn night after night. Only thing different was . . . hell.

She’d asked him for a favor. Asked him to stay and watch over her. Trusted him to do it. Well. Didn’t expect that. He wondered if this was because of her time away or because she’d been leading up to this before she jumped. Didn’t matter. Either way was fine. But damned if it didn’t feel good.

Lacing his hands behind his head, Spike slouched down, prepared for a long night.

The first nightmare didn’t hit until the sun was rising, but it seemed to be the trigger. By the time Rupert was waking up two floors below them, Spike was stretched out in the middle of the bed, Dawn curled up with her knees in the middle of his back and Buffy clasped firmly in his arms.

Twice he’d had to pull her clawed fingers away from her sister’s flesh and once from his own. Both he and Buffy slept fitfully. Every time she twitched he moved to soothe her, humming low in his chest.

Dawn had no idea what woke her up, but before she opened her eyes she thought that the fact she was curled up next to a cool purring lion might be the reason she was now awake.

Opening her eyes didn’t help either, until she was awake enough to realize the big purring kitty cat in bed with her wore only black. Oooohhhkkkaaayyy. No kitty. Just Spike. Who purrs. Spike purrs. Dawn’s giggle nearly erupted into full blown laughter when she realized the blackmail potential of this information.
Holding onto her laughter, Dawn got up and started her day.

Tara had laid in bed for hours unable to sleep. It was weird sleeping next to Willow, who was unresponsive and totally out of it. What was strange was the idea currently gripping her. She didn’t want Willow awake and aware. The anger that had been simmering for almost a day was nearing the boiling point.

The eruption was not going to be pretty. Willow had stolen time from her, exactly what Glory had done. Not on the same scale, but still, the effect was the same. Her mind had been tampered with, her thoughts taken over by someone else. There was absolutely no comfort in the fact the person violating her was her girlfriend. If anything it made what Willow had done worse.

It made sleeping next to her difficult.

So it was kind of understandable that she snapped at Giles when he knocked on their bedroom door around eleven.

It was so out of character that Giles was taken aback. Tara had apologized through the door, asking Giles to give her a little bit more time.

Her request actually fell in with Giles’ natural inclination, so he’d agreed then suggested, after asking where Spike was, that they wait until the vampire woke.

After an hour or so of internal debate, Giles had gone back to his own apartment. He needed a shower and clean clothing. And since none of the inhabitants of the house were stirring, he figured it wouldn’t matter one way or another.

Every one of them was exhausted beyond measuring.
Spike finally woke up just before three. Dawn was long gone, but Buffy was still curled up next to him. Her head was tucked underneath his, hands between them. Warm breath wafted across his neck and Spike realized he hadn’t been this warm in . . . well, decades. It was just gorgeous, lovely . . . he’d give almost anything to be able to have this all the time. But that was a fantasy he wasn’t going to allow himself.

Rolling away from her, Spike ignored her sleepy whimpers of protest. *Oh yeah,* he wanted to go right back to her arms, but he wouldn’t. At least not yet.

Maybe soon.

Wasn’t long after five when Giles made a round of phone calls, telling everyone to gather at the Summers’ house, because he wanted to wake Willow.

His announcement was met with an astounding lack of enthusiasm.

Everyone was assembled, sitting in various placed in the living room. Willow’s still form was perched in the armchair, having been carried down earlier by Xander.

“Tara, undo the binding please.” Giles requested while noting the girl keeping her distance.

Getting up from her spot on the floor, Tara moved behind Willow. Chanting briefly in a soft
undertone, she then made a motion with her hands and immediately Willow slumped forward, a small noise escaping her.

They waited, watching the redhead come back to herself. It took no more than ten minutes by the clock, but to each one of them it was either far too long or far too short.

Opening her eyes the first person Willow saw was absolutely the last one she wanted to. Giles was standing with his back to the fireplace, his eyes intent on her. “Giles? Why are you . . . I thought you went back to England?”

“Apparently events transpired here that required my immediate attention.”

*Uhoh. Big words and frosty tone. Not of the good.* Her eyes flicked around, looking for some help. *Nope. None there.* Dawn’s face was grim, Xander looked confused, Anya was curious, and Spike looked pissed off. *Where’s Tara? “Tara?”*

“Right here, Willow.” Her girlfriend’s voice came from right behind her, sounding strong and steady.

“Hey, baby, what’s going on?” Willow was genuinely confused. *Giles should be in London, why was he back?*

No one answered her, until Spike shoved away from the wall he was leaning against. Sharing a look with Giles, he moved into the kitchen. He was back quickly, one arm behind him. And following him was . . . Willow’s eyes bugged out and her mouth dropped open.

“Buffy?” She cried out, moving to get up from her chair, when Tara’s hand on her shoulder stopped her. “Oh my gods, it worked! When? Where did you come from? Oh goddess, I did it!”

Her babbling died off when she realized she was the only one excited. “Guys, what’s wrong?”

Giles cleared his throat, preparing to speak when Tara’s voice broke the sudden silence. “We know what you did, Willow. All of it.”

“Tara? What do you mean you know?” A note of rising hysteria entered her voice, but Willow
couldn’t help it.

Giles finally spoke. “Yes, Willow, we know. “ he paused, gathering his thoughts. This wasn’t an inquisition, at least not yet. “Almost all of it. What were you thinking?”

“What was I thinking?” Willow couldn’t believe this. “What was I thinking? I was thinking that my best friend was trapped in a hell dimension and no one was worried about getting her back. I was thinking that I would rescue her, because no one else was.” Willow’s voice gained in anger and defensive outrage. How dare they do this, don’t they know I did it for Buffy? To help Buffy? “I was thinking I could rescue her.”

“Right, Red, an’ did you think about the bloody consequences?” Spike couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

“What consequences? Actually getting Buffy back? Yeah, I thought about them,” the sarcasm she flung at him was biting.

“No, Willow. The other ones. The consequences of opening a major portal. The consequences of going against the natural laws, Willow – those consequences.” Giles’ tone was no less biting than hers.

“Yeah. I thought it would be okay.”

“Did you? Did you have a plan on how to close the portal? Or a back-up in case something went wrong?”

Giles held up a hand for silence when it looked to become a free-for-all after Xander started to defend Willow.

Tara’s low voice was again the one to break the silence, “What about the Rede, Willow? You know, ‘do what you will, an’ it harm none’?”

The only one to remain completely silent was Buffy, because she couldn’t bring herself to talk. The urge to blurt out just where Willow had pulled her from was overwhelming, it was practically screaming itself in her head. Her unconscious hand fidgeting got so frantic Spike had to reach out to pull her hands apart. The look she shot him was half resentful and half thankful.
“Willow, the forces you invoked were extraordinarily powerful, but, and this is a big but, you were unable to control them. The portal was open and unprotected for an unknown amount of time. You were all knocked out by the force of the energies emanating from it.”

“Gee, Giles, you make it sound like I didn’t know what I was doing.” Willow almost snarled at him.

“I have to assume you really didn’t.” Giles the kindly Englishman was gone, replaced with a much scarier Ripper-in-tweed. “You attempted to harness powers you had no business dabbling with. Your execution of the spell, was, as most of your efforts, severely lacking. You have no regard for the laws of nature or of magic and frankly, I’m appalled that you tried something of this magnitude.” He snapped out every word like a whip across her back.

“Clearly, while you may be quite powerful, you are still a child and lack the required maturity to perform such magics.”

Willow rocketed to her feet. “I lack maturity? Well at least I haven’t lost my nerve to use my power coz one spell went wrong like some people!”

“You arrogant little girl. You have no idea what you’ve done. No idea at all.” Giles’ tone was both condescending and regretful. “Don’t think for one second I lost my nerve. I’ve at least got the sense to weigh my actions against the consequences. You haven’t even got that.”

“I’ll show you consequences.” Willow’s eyes flared black, but Giles countered with a flick of his wrist and Willow was surrounded by a soft bluish light.

“Don’t. You’ve no idea. You arrogant . . . you think because you can call up that much power it’s that simple to harness it – to control it. It’s no simple matter – it takes years of training and practice. Two things you clearly lack.” Giles flicked his wrist again freeing Willow. “Magic isn’t always about the raw power. It’s about knowing when and how to use it. And just because you can call up that much power doesn’t mean you should.”

“How can you say that? You don’t want Buffy back? You can’t stand here and tell me you aren’t happy she’s here.” Willow wasn’t listening to him at all.

“You have no idea how I feel about Buffy being back. How any of us feels. But you haven’t a clue about how she came back and I wouldn’t’ve wanted that ever.” Giles’ voice grew soft as he
continued, “Even at the cost of having her back.”

“Wasn’t right, what you did. Not to me or Tara or Buffy.” Dawn’s voice cut through the tension. “Buffy shouldn’t have had to dig her way out.”

It took a moment, but Dawn’s meaning finally penetrated Willow’s self-absorption “Oh gods, I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“Didn’t mean it? Too late for that now, isn’t it?” was Dawn’s response.

19. *Death’s pale flag is not advanced there.*

*Death cancels everything but truth,*

*And strips a man of everything but genius and virtue.*


*Death is a shadow that always follows the body.*

*14th century English proverb*

Absolutely nothing got resolved the other night. *Not one blessed thing.* Giles had the sinking sensation that he’d not reached Willow at all. That what he’d said had gone in one ear and out the other. Which offered no comfort at all.

After Spike had relayed his information about the bodies stashed at the foot of Glory’s tower, Giles had to admit that the very distinct possibility existed that something had made it through the portal. Another thing that didn’t make him overjoyed.
Still, it would be better if he had more information about what ritual or rituals Willow had actually used before he tried to narrow things down.

Right now, though, there appeared to be little chance of that happening.

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Spike had watched the interplay between Giles and Willow and held his tongue. Which had been an exercise in patience itself. Not a sign of remorse had crossed her features, even after Dawn had blurted out where Buffy had re-awakened.

Oddly enough the Slayer hadn’t spoken at all. And when he’d asked her about it later, after he’d returned from patrol, she’d just said, “There wasn’t anything I could say.”

That he didn’t believe, though for once he’d let it go. She wasn’t in a talking mood, at least not that moment. Sooner or later, he’d get the truth of her feelings from her.

Had he pressed the issue like Buffy had expected him too, Spike might’ve been even more perturbed with Willow.

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The truth was getting harder to avoid. It was getting harder and harder to bite her tongue and not tell them where she’d been. She had a feeling Spike might’ve guessed the partial truth, because he was making an extra effort to be nice to her.

When Giles had been lecturing Willow, she’d had to keep biting the inside of her cheek to keep her mouth shut.

She didn’t want them to know. Didn’t want Dawn to know. It would only hurt more.
After they’d shouted at each other, Willow, sullen, angry, and not in the least bit remorseful, had stomped up the steps to her room. None of them had known what to say, even Xander silent for once.

Tara and Spike had shared a look that spoke volumes about how neither one had expected any better. Buffy had drifted into the kitchen behind the other two just listening to their conversation. She’d had no objection when Spike said he was patrolling alone again and she just waved at the others when they left.

Buffy knew she should be making an effort to care more about . . . well, about everything, but she just didn’t have the energy. Not even enough to go through the motion of being okay.

And it hadn’t even been a week or at least she thought so.

Three days after they’d woken Willow, Giles cornered the redhead in the Magic Shop. “Willow, I’d like to ask you some questions, if I may.”

His voice startled her. The only reason she was here now was because she thought he was at his apartment. Damn. Guess I should talk to him.

“Would you mind going over exactly what you did, and what methods you used to bring Buffy back?” Giles figured that if he didn’t place a judgment on her actions or mood he’d get more information from her.

“What is it you want to know?” She was wary, eyeing him closely.

“Just start from the beginning.” He smiled, thinking that this wasn’t going to be any easier than the other night.

Still unsure of his motives, Willow launched into an account of her actions. Quickly forgetting her audience, she began babbling in her excitement over finding the right ritual during a search of Celtic gods. Giles thanks his foresight in using a hand-held recorder, because Willow was going on so fast
“... and so I thought invoking the power of Ceridwen’s Cauldron would work best. But whhhooooo, trying to find a pure white bullhide was a real pain in the butt, until I found a coven in Ireland that had no problem selling me one.”

“And Buffy was supposed to re-appear inside the bullhide, ssssoooo I’m not really sure what happened there . . .”

Giles closed his eyes. Great gods above. Of all the deities to invoke, she had to pick the Celts. The Celts, whose sense of whimsy and justice often didn’t quite mesh; the Celts, who reveled in blood play and revenge like no other set of deities. No doubt it was they that . . . his musings stopped short however, when he registered her next words.

“The blood of an untouched woman – which was fine, coz Tara’s never been, well, touched by a man, and the blood of the Key. So I had both of them drink a tea I made with Lethe’s Bramble.”

His blood was running cold now. Lethe’s Bramble, when ingested improperly, could lead to coma or death. If Willow had given either of the two girls too much they could’ve died. And blithely she sits in front of me, discussing this like it was all some bloody cute child’s game.

He had the chilling thought that he’d never really known this side of Willow and was equally certain that he didn’t want a further acquaintance with her either.

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They’d barely spoken for the last three days. Which was hard, since they were still sleeping in the same room, in the same bed. But Tara couldn’t get past the anger or the disappointment.

Willow had violated her - her trust, her love, her mind and her body. She felt cheap and used, like she didn’t matter. Like her thoughts and emotions didn’t count at all with her girlfriend. What kind of person did that make her – what kind of person did that make Willow?

Sooner or later, Tara knew the anger would need a voice, and she and Willow would have to talk.
Thing was, she had no idea how to bring any of this up without screaming. And that wasn’t like her, not at all.

Her other concern was Buffy. She was worried about the other girl. She kept finding Buffy in various rooms crying or just staring at nothing. She wasn’t eating much of anything and Buffy barely spoke. Maybe if she talked to Spike or Giles they’d have an idea or two about how to help Buffy.

She had a feeling neither man would have a suggestion about Willow.

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Spike too, had noticed Buffy’s distance and lack of eating. Girl burned calories like no one else, and could, when the mood struck her, out-eat a teamster. Yet she had no desire to do so lately, which concerned him.

Standing at the open fridge looking for blood he knew he’d left in there just last night, Spke’s temper got the best of him.

“Niblet!” He roared through the house. “What the bleeding hell have you done to m’blood?”

“Why are you yelling?” Dawn’s voice came from the living room. Spike’s shout had drawn the other three that were home into the kitchen.

Shirtless and agitated, Spike slammed shut the refrigerator door. “Where . . . is . . . my . . . blood?”

“I put it in the freezer.”

“What the fuck for?” was his snarled question.

“Because it’s hot as hell out and I thought it would be like having an ice pop or a slurpee,” was her completely unexpected reply.
Took the wind right out of his sails.

Both Tara and Buffy suppressed giggles, but at a shared look, they broke out into genuine laughter. Dawn flounced back into the living room, while Spike stood there speechless.

When he got over his aggravation, he realized it was the first real laughter Buffy had since she came back.

He could live with Dawn messing with him, if it made her smile, much less laugh.

Tara’s good mood only lasted a few minutes. She’d gone right back upstairs, while Buffy stayed with Dawn. Once up in her room, Tara was right back to thinking about the situation with Willow. Didn’t really matter, until she talked with Willow nothing would get near being resolved. Problem was, she wasn’t quite sure she wanted a resolution.

*Did she still love Willow?*

Not even sure of the answer to that question, Tara went through the motions of putting clean clothes away and getting the dirty ones ready for laundry.

*Did she love Willow?*

*Did she like Willow?*

*Did she trust Willow?*

Going around and around this wasn’t helping at all. Maybe she should stop thinking and just get through the rest of the day focused on something else. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything else on her mind.
Another night cleaning up after the really messy whatever-it-was had Spike frustrated. Having yet to even get a glimpse of this thing they had absolutely no information on it. He’d thought about asking Buffy if she wanted to come with him, but one look at her tired eyes and bony arms, he’d stopped that idea in its tracks.

Instead he’d watched while she went up the stairs to bed then he’d gone out on his own.

It was poker night anyway. Maybe one of the demons had some info.

Hours later he was no closer to finding out what it was, but he was richer by six hundred dollars, which he’d gotten in exchange for his kittens. Stuffing the money into the household expense jar Tara had going in the kitchen, Spike headed upstairs to check on the girls.

He’d tried to sleep in his own bed last night or yesterday morning, only to head back up to Buffy’s room when he heard her crying in her sleep. Dawn was sleeping in her own bed, while the two wiccans were up and talking, rather heatedly, he noticed as he walked past their door.

Which left Buffy wide awake, sitting on her bed, Mr. Gordo in her lap and pillows piled around her. He stuck his head in her door, a question on his lips, “Fancy some ice cream?”

She looked at him. “What kind?”

“Oh, got peanut butter cup and chocolate chip cookie dough, but if you want something else, I’ll get it.” Anything she wanted.

“Nope, those are fine. Got them with you or should we . . .” She squealed just a little bit when he produced two pints and spoons from behind the door. “Oh, Spike, you’re the best.”

“Ha, you’d say that to anyone who brought you chocolate.” Still, made him feel good to have her say something nice to him.
“Gimme, gimme.” Reaching out for one, she ignored his comment.

They ate in silence for a little bit, stealing spoonfuls from each other. They heard a door open, some harsh sounds in differing voices, then the door slammed shut. More angry words, but neither one could make out what was being said. Buffy winced and Spike observed, “Thought the birds were fighting when I came in.”

“They’ve been up for a while,” was her comment.

“Bound to happen sooner or later. Red hurt Tara . . . same as she did you, pet.” He hung the spoon on his lower lip, savoring the melting ice cream. Buffy watched fascinated despite herself.

“Yeah, well, Willow doesn’t always think things through.” There was real hurt in her voice now and Spike responded to it.

“M sorry, kitten. Had I known . . “ Her finger on his lips stopped his words and his entire thought processes. The cold ice cream and her hot fingers sent shockwaves through his system.

“I know. Just wish she would’ve thought this one over more before she pulled me out.” She looked away from him, unable to stop the tears.

His voice was a bare whisper as he asked her, “Pulled you from where, kitten?”

Taking a deep breath, Buffy swirled the melting ice cream with her spoon. Staring down into the depths of peanut butter cup goodness, she whispered back, “I think it was . . . I think maybe it was heaven.”

Willow had tried to get back into Tara’s good graces. She’d brought home flowers for her, a bunch of pretty pink Shasta daisies, offered her a massage and then tried getting her in the mood. Nothing worked, Tara kept giving her the cold shoulder, so finally she just asked, “Baby, are you mad at me?”
Tara had automatically started to respond with “no” when she stopped herself. “Yes . . . yes, Willow, I am angry.”

Genuinely surprised, Willow asked, “Why?”

At first Tara just looked at her, unable to believe this was coming from her. “What happened the other night, Willow?”

“The other night? Oh . . . you’re mad because of the other night?” Willow didn’t understand why bringing Buffy back got everyone upset. It was a good thing she’d done, rescuing Buffy from an unknown hell dimension.

“Yeah, Willow, the other night. When you drugged me and Dawnie, and then used both of us.” Tara’s patience was gone.

“I needed your blood for the ritual. Didn’t think it would hurt. And you weren’t supposed to remember.” Confusion laced her tone.

“You could have asked us, Willow, instead of drugging us and taking it.” The anger just got stronger the more she spoke. Tara started getting ready for bed, opening and closing drawers a bit more forcefully than she normally did.

“But, baby, I didn’t want to hurt you.” Willow got up from the bed, crossing the room to Tara’s side.


“C’mon, baby, this is just a misunderstanding, you know I wouldn’t really hurt you.” She tried cajoling her girlfriend in an effort to stop the fight.

“But you did, Willow. You did hurt me.” Tara gathered up her pajamas and some sheets and pillows. “I’m going to sleep on the couch.”
“Wait.” Willow sprinted across the room when Tara opened the door. “Baby, don’t you trust me?” Slamming into it, Willow smiled broadly at Tara. “C’mon, you know I love you.”

“That’s just it, I don’t know if I trust you anymore.” Tara watched while tears formed in Willow’s eyes.

“Please don’t leave, give me another chance. I swear I won’t ever hurt you again. Please, baby, don’t go.” Willow tugged on Tara’s arm, pulling her back toward their bed.

“All right. But this better be real, Willow.” Tara’s tone left the redhead with no illusions that if she screwed up once, Tara was gone.

Chapter End Notes

The title for Chapter 10 comes from the Iliad (book xxii, line 929), translated by Alexander Pope and the quotes throughout are as attributed. Title in Chapter 11 is from “Alastor, or, the Spirit of Solitude” (l. 727) by Percy Bysshe Shelley. I kind of thought that the man who’s wife wrote Frankenstein would appreciate being quoted in a vampire’s story. A repeat of the title source, Alastor, or, the Spirit of Solitude (l 725) by Percy Bysshe Shelley as the title for Chapter 12. For Chapter 13, the title belongs to the Bard of Avon, in “As You Like It, act 1, sc. 2. The title for Chapter 14 I came up all on my own. The title for Chapter 15 is from a poem by John Donne (1573 - 1631), English poet and sometime mystic. If you’ve never read his works, its always an interesting read. Chapter 16’s title is from an INXS song of the same name. Gotta love those Aussie boys. May Michael Hutchence rest in peace. Title of Chapter 17 is from that sort of famous Irish group, as is the quote. Chapter 18 is straight forward there are few immutable laws of nature – what goes up comes down – what goes round comes round – etc. One of the most important is for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Chapter 19?
The title comes from the bard, Romeo and Juliet, act 5, scene 3.
The quotes throughout are as attributed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

20. Hireath

*I think I’ll be homesick for you, even in heaven*

*Little Women screenplay, 1933 (Katharine Hepburn)*

*Comfort’s in heaven, and we are on the earth,*

*Where nothing lives but crosses, cares and grief.*

*Richard II, act 2, sc 2*

*Are not the days of my life few?*

*Let me alone, that I may find a little Comfort before I go,*

*never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness,*

*The land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness.*

*The Book of Job 10:20*

Salty tears slipped down her cheeks landing in the puddle of melting ice cream. Spike was a silent sentinel beside her, frozen in place by her admission. There were no words he could use to convey his thoughts or feelings at this moment. Nothing he could say that would console her. The tears formed a little pool, watering down the creamy substance and he watched helplessly as more and more fell. He wanted to cry along with her, wanted to roar his rage at heaven for letting her go, but mostly he wanted to reach into the next room and eviscerate Willow.

The room was deathly silent, neither one of them able to speak. She couldn’t believe she’d just blurted it out, telling him that way. She couldn’t look, dare not look at him, not wanting to see the pity in his eyes.

Moving very slowly, Spike put the ice cream down, then moved to take hers from her lax hand. The bed creaked as he moved, the noise very loud in the still air. He shifted his weight to rest against the headboard. Looking up at the ceiling, Spike made a visible effort to control his raging temper. Not good for her, to see him angry like this, she’d think that it was directed at her. Or worse, try to defend Willow. That he couldn’t handle right now.

Not when he wanted to kill her and hang her entrails from his DeSoto.

Gaining the upper hand on his emotions, Spike reached out a hand to brush down Buffy’s arm. At his touch, she crumpled. The tears gave way to soft hiccuping sobs and she buried her face in her hands.
Without a word, he lifted her up from her spot next to him, cradling her in his arms. Holding her to his chest, Spike hid his own tears from her.

Tara lay stiffly beside Willow all night, sleep elusive and, when it came, restless and dream filled. Sometime in the minutes before dawn, Tara grabbed her pillow and crept from the room.

She should’ve stuck to her guns earlier and slept on the couch. Every little noise Willow made grated on her nerves just adding to her tension. She figured if she tried to get some sleep on the couch she might not be in such a horrible mood come morning.

For the first time since she’d known Willow, Tara wasn’t happy. She’d thought they were a couple, partners. Partners didn’t keep huge secrets from each other, didn’t make decisions without the other – didn’t drug each other. Every time she thought about it, her stomach clenched and her throat got all tight and sore.

And Willow acted like nothing had happened.

Tara suddenly realized that not once had Willow apologized for any of her actions.

There was no comforting thump beneath her ear, no sound to indicate that someone held her. No sound but her own heartbeat and sniffles. Yet it didn’t matter. Strongly muscled arms held her close, shallow breaths wafted over her head. Tears slid down her cheeks only to be absorbed into the black cotton against her face.

Neither one of them spoke. She, because she’d exhausted all her words in one stark sentence and now her tears spoke more eloquently. Spike stayed silent because the words of rage were not for her ears.

He brushed a gentle hand down her back his thumb tracing circles endlessly. She leaned closer into his embrace almost as if she wanted to crawl into his skin. His tears of rage and sorrow fell on her hair unnoticed by her. Absently, he brushed them away with one hand, then, in a natural motion given their position, wiped his hand down her cheek to wipe her tears away.

His hand cupped her cheek and she sighed into it. Wrapping his arms around her again, Spike dropped his head to rest on hers, automatically kissing the top of her head. She shifted closer, her head now in the crook of his neck, her nose just under his chin. A soft shudder moved through her and he slowly shifted to get the throw blanket from the foot of the bed. She mewed a protest at his motion but quickly settled when he drew the blanket around them.

His hand went back to rubbing circles on her back. Buffy sighed against his neck.

Sometimes great revelations come in the middle of a hectic, noise filled day. Sometimes they come after long hours of thought and contemplation. Sometimes they come after taking apart a situation
and looking at it with fresh eyes. But sometimes, revelations come in the middle of the night, held tight in the embrace of someone you shouldn’t care about. Sometimes, great revelations sneak up and you don’t realize you’ve reached it until the moment is upon you.

Cuddled in Spike’s embrace, her tears drying on his shirt, Buffy came to a realization, a profound revelation. She was safe. Safer than she’d ever been. Possibly even safer than she’d been as a small child. Definitely the safest she’d ever been since becoming the slayer. *And the reason why?*

The reason why held her in his arms.

A second, no less profound realization struck her. This feeling had been building for years.

*For years.*

Since Angelus had tried to awaken Acathla and Spike had come to her seeking an alliance. There had been an instant feeling of relief knowing he had promised to watch her back.

Oh sure, there had been bumps and set-backs since – the Gem of Amarra fiasco the most notable – but really, they’d been building on that first initial moment ever since.

With Spike, when he was on her side, she was safe.

She remembered a phrase from a book she’d read before they had moved from Los Angeles. Couldn’t remember the title or the author, or even what the story was about, but she remembered this phrase: ‘where do the strong go when they need to be weak?’

For a very long time she hadn’t understood that. It wasn’t until after she’d been chosen that she started to understand even slightly. But now she understood it perfectly.

*Where do the strong go when they need to be weak?*  
For her, it was here, with Spike.

*****************************************************************************

Willow rolled over, expecting to find Tara and cuddle around her. Instead she got nothing but empty space. Thinking she’d only gotten up to use the bathroom, Willow settled back to sleep, completely oblivious to the fact her girlfriend couldn’t stand to be in the same bed.

Blissfully unaware that she was about to be persona-non-grata in the house at Revello Drive, Willow slipped easily back into sleep.

*****************************************************************************

Something woke Dawn from a sound sleep -- a noise that wasn’t normal. Lately, since Spike had started sleeping here, there were lots of unusual middle-of-the-night noises. But those she’d gotten used too, had even been able to identify some of them. Spike had a very distinctive walk, mostly because of the boots, but even barefoot she could figure out if it was he.
But now it wasn’t him. Wasn’t Buffy having a nightmare either. This sounded quieter, stealthier, like someone trying to sneak around unnoticed. She couldn’t really make out the footsteps either.

Concerned, Dawn got up to check it out. And got to her door in time to see Tara, with her pillow tucked up underneath her arm, head downstairs.

“Tara.” Dawn’s whisper startled the other girl, causing her to turn around, her hand covering her scream.

“Gods, Dawnie, you scared me. What are you doing up?”

“Dunno. Something woke me up.” With a glance at the pillow, Dawn made a decision. “C’mon, Tara, my bed is way more comfy than the couch.”

Starting to shake her head in denial, Tara said, “Go back to bed, sweetie, I’ll be fine,” but Dawn’s voice interrupted her.

“C’mon, I’ll take the floor. Don’t . . .” as Tara turned to go.

Dragging the other girl into her room, Dawn checked the hallway, then closed her door.

Before she knew it, Tara was in Dawn’s bed, the teen on the floor and the lights out.

Spike knew the moment she fell asleep. He’d been so focused on her breathing it would have been hard not to know. When he’d shifted earlier to pull the blanket up, she’d gripped his arm tight enough to bruise. And after, she hadn’t relaxed her grip at all, only wormed her way closer, which was almost impossible. Any closer and they’d be skin to skin.

Not that he’d object or mind. He was just finding this all a bit hard to believe.

Her revelation of where she’d been hadn’t come as a complete surprise. He’d suspected as much. Not likely that the All Mighty would consign the Chosen One to a nether region. **Bloody stupid assumption anyway.**

Buffy shifted in his arms, loosening her hold on him. Taking the opportunity Spike moved Buffy under the covers. He got up, going to keep watch in his chair, when her sleepy voice whispered, “Come back to bed, Spike.”

He was so startled by her statement that when he turned to look at her, he actually used her name. “Buffy?”

She smiled at him, a sleepy warm smile that he’d never actually seen before, and just repeated her words.

“You sure?” He just had to ask because he almost didn’t believe his ears.

“Yes, Spike, come back to bed.”
His boots hit the floor within seconds and his shirt quickly followed. He left the jeans, not willing to trust himself or believe her to think it was more than comfort she was looking for. Sliding under the covers, it was the most natural thing to gather her back into his arms.

She didn’t resist.

If anything, she moved into his embrace as easily as if they’d been doing this for years, not just for the first time. Kissing the top of her head, Spike said, “Go to sleep, I’ll be right here.”

He nearly scuttled away from her when she nuzzled his chest, a soft “mmmmm” vibrating against him.

His eyes closed in near bliss. She was so warm against him, her heat seeping into his bones. Nuzzling into her hair, Spike inhaled unnecessarily, just drawing in her scents.


Her heart thumped against his bare chest only her thin sleep shirt between them. Her hand snaked around his waist, her fingers hooking into the belt loops, anchoring them together. Unconsciously his left hand began drawing circles on her back, smoothing the shirt down.

A smile crept up over his face as his eyes drifted closed. _Oh yeah, this was just fucking great._ He could stay like this forever. Would trade anything for this to be real, for this to continue, for it to be more than just this moment. He’d give his soul, if he had one, _for this._

She brought her other hand up, resting it between them, her palm splayed across his chest. Her thumb moved in tandem with his hand, running up and down, just out of reach of his nipple. Her other thumb began moving against his back, dipping just under his waistband. His right arm circled around her head, which was where it had been resting since he’d pulled her close.

Pressing a light kiss on her forehead, Spike breathed out. “Go back to sleep, sunshine.”

He felt her smile against his chest.

So intent on listening to her heartbeat, Spike almost missed her words, “Comfy. Don’t wanna sleep. Wanna stay like this.”

_Oh, Jesus._

_Christ on a cross._

He couldn’t have heard her right. _There’s just no way in fucking hell she just admitted to wanting to be in my arms. No way. Had to be grief or something else talking._

Had to be.

Involuntarily he tightened his hold on her. Instead of backing away, Buffy molded herself closer, tightening her own hold on him.

_Bleeding Jesus._
He couldn’t hide his body’s reaction to her proximity any longer. And they were so tightly enmeshed in each other’s arms she couldn’t possibly mistake it for anything else. Bracing himself for her withdrawal, Spike pulled her closer with his hand at the small of her back. He couldn’t help himself, had to at least feel her this close once in his life.

She sighed, settling in, their bodies completely flush. He kissed her forehead one more time, because he couldn’t not and froze when she returned the kiss.

His chest burned where her lips had touched him.

If this was a dream, he never wanted to wake. He’d almost managed to convince himself he’d imagined it when she did it again.

He groaned, rocking his hips against hers. Lifting her up slightly, Spike tilted her head up.

“Kitten,” he breathed at her.

Her eyes focused on his face.

He smiled at her, a soft awed smile.

They moved together, meeting each other halfway. Her arms curled up around his head while both of his settled around her hips.

Mouths open, tongues met, clashed then gentled. She mewled softly, he growled in response.

Breaking apart when she needed air, he pressed gentle kisses to her forehead, whispering, “Sleep now, sunshine.”

Closing her eyes, her head once more tucked in the crook of his neck, Buffy sighed, once, twice, and on the third deep breath, slipped into slumber.

21. Crystalline knowledge of you

Do you always trust your first initial feeling?
Special knowledge holds true
Bears believing
    Lindsay Buckingham, Crystal

It gives me wonder great as my content
to see you here before me.
Anonymous

I have spread my dreams under your feet;
tread softly because you tread on my dreams
    William Butler Yeats, Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven
Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
    Langston Hughes, Dreams

They must have shifted in the early morning hours, curled together in sleep. Spike woke slowly, warmed by her body pressed tight against him. She was still sleeping softly, her breath slow and steady against his bare chest. Her mouth was open and a tiny bit of drool pooled beneath her cheek. Their arms were still wrapped around each other, hers resting up and around his neck, his tight across the small of her back. One of her legs was wedged between both of his, curled around the one that was closest to the mattress.

He’d never been this warm, not since turning. Trying to gauge the time, Spike looked toward the window. Judging by the color of the sky, it was still early yet. Enough time to go back to sleep. Sighing in complete and utter content, Spike closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

Dawn and Tara woke up at the same time, making their way down to the kitchen. Neither girl spoke about why Tara had been leaving her bedroom in the early morning hours. Dawn didn’t know what to make of it, so in her confusion said nothing, and Tara was just so very hurt by Willow’s actions that she wasn’t ready to talk to anyone. There wasn’t anyone that she was close enough to, to confide in. All the Scoobies were Willow’s friends first, so that left them out. Buffy wasn’t really in any position to help anyone. Poor girl had enough to deal with. And this wasn’t the kind of thing you just dumped on a fifteen year old’s shoulders. Dawn was great, but this was something she couldn’t talk about with her.

That left Anya or Xander. Neither one of whom she expected would be sympathetic to her problems. Unless. Tara thought maybe, if she could get him to sit still, Spike would listen to her, and actually have some sort of idea about what she should do. Tara realized she wasn’t really looking for advice, but more of a sounding board. Someone to just listen and let her talk without interrupting.

Going through the motions of getting breakfast ready, Tara came to a decision. Soon as she could, she was going to talk to Spike and then she was going to spend some time away from this house, doing stuff that she liked to do. Like sitting in the park and writing poetry. Or maybe, Dawn might want to go to the beach.

“Dawn? Have you got plans for today?” Tara asked quietly while searching the refrigerator for something to eat.

“Um, no, nothing really. Janice is away and Kirsten has to babysit her new brother. So, no, I’m footloose.” Snagging a banana and a bowl, Dawn sat down to cereal goodness. “Why? You got something in mind?”

“Yeah, you wanna head to the beach?”
“Ooooohhh, yeah. How we gonna get there?” Dawn asked around a mouthful of crunchy bananas and milk.

“Maybe I’ll ask Spike if we can use the DeSoto.” Tara giggled at the expression on Dawn’s face, knowing they would never ask the vampire for that. “I dunno, sweetie, maybe we should just take the bus.”

“Cool. Road trip.”

Not too long after Spike woke, Buffy shifted in her sleep, swimming toward wakefulness. This is comfy. Nice. She didn’t want to move. Her arms curled tighter around the pillow she had cradled under her head, snuggling in closer. When she met resistance, Buffy opened her eyes.

Oh. No pillow. The normally cool alabaster skin beneath her had absorbed her extra heat, drawing it down. She was curled almost on top of Spike. Buffy closed her eyes. Everything came flooding back, their quiet bonding over ice cream after he’d come back from patrol, and then his reaction when he’d told her about where she’d been.

She thought she should be uncomfortable, embarrassed and disgusted with herself. How stupid was it to curl up in the arms of the undead? Especially this particular undead. Backtracking a moment, Buffy thought about the things she’d been thinking about last night. How safe she felt, how comfortable being with Spike was, how easy it was when he wasn’t being a jerk.

Instead of moving away from him, Buffy settled in closer. ‘Where do the strong go when they need to be weak’ echoed in her head. Resting her head again on his chest, she thought that if she pretended to sleep, maybe he wouldn’t ever move. This is . . . she closed her eyes . . . this is nice. She didn’t have to think, didn’t have to worry about anything.

Abruptly she realized that she hadn’t woken up screaming – hadn’t even had a hint of a nightmare. Every time she’d gotten restless, he’d been there to soothe her, holding her close. Another revelation. At this rate, she huffed, she was going to have to completely re-think every thing about him.

She remembered the kiss. Oh boy, did she remember the kiss. Best goodnight kiss she’d ever gotten too. It was obvious too, that he’d wanted her. Hard to pretend something that big and hard wasn’t there. Giggling softly at her own really bad pun, Buffy hummed into his chest. This was the first morning she’d woken up since her return in a good mood.

It was all his fault. Him and his strong arms and his stupid hair and his . . . Buffy gave up. She couldn’t fight it. She actually, actively liked Spike. As in liked.

And, since she was in an introspective mood, Buffy was forced to admit to herself that this was another thing that had been building for a while. Maybe not so much years like the safety thing, but, at least since he’d taken the beating from Glory and protected her sister.

That moment, despite the idiocy of the Buffybot, had totally changed her view of him. He’d been so broken and battered that she’d had no choice but to reassess her thoughts. And to get up and face
Glory again, willingly, without complaint, just because she asked him to. Well. She didn’t think Angel would have done it – he probably would have cautioned her about something, then slunk off in a huff when she didn’t do as he wanted. And Riley never would have survived the beating Spike took, and even if he had, he wouldn’t have faced Glory again.

For all his lack of stature and his lean build, Spike was the toughest guy she’d ever met. He was like the energizer bunny, always going, never dying. Buffy raised her head away from his chest, looking down at his still features.

Oh yeah, not to mention his angelic face. Hah. What a front that was. She wondered just how many unsuspecting girls had followed him because he was cute and sexy and deceptively innocent looking, only to find that they’d unchained a demon. Well, thanks to Maggie Walsh and her not-so-merry band of soldiers, Spike could no longer use his face as a lure for unsuspecting girls. For once, Buffy was grateful for the deranged policies of that fanatical she-bitch. If it hadn’t been for The Initiative, Buffy would never have been able to jump and know that her sister would be safe.

Holding back a tear, she watched him sleep. He’d stayed. She was dead and he’d stayed to look after her sister. He’d done the one thing no other man in her life had ever done.

He hadn’t left.

Brushing a kiss against his chin, she laid her head back down on his chest and, hugging him tight, closed her eyes and said a silent thanks to him.

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When Willow woke up, the house was silent and still. Wandering down to the kitchen she found a note from Tara and Dawn taped to the refrigerator advising everyone else that they’d gone to the beach and would be back sometime later in the afternoon. It was barely eleven, and while she wasn’t really happy about where they’d gone, Willow had no desire to follow them to the beach.

She figured she could head over to UC Sunnydale and see what was on the course calendar for the next semester, since registration was only a couple of days away. At least she would be out doing something she liked to do.

Not wasting much time and not bothering to check if anyone else was still home, Willow got dressed and left for the college.

******************************************************************************

It was the slamming of the front door that woke them both up at the same time. Startled awake, Spike’s arms tightened painfully around Buffy and she yelped sleepily. Muttering a sheepish “Sorry,” under his breath, Spike moved to extract himself from her embrace before she woke up completely. Instead of adjusting to give him room to get away, Buffy found herself holding him closer, reluctant to let the vampire go.

“Morning,” was all she said, still holding him tight.
A raised brow greeted her statement and he mumbled a, “Morning, sunshine” right back at her.

“Did you get enough sleep?” Buffy smiled at him.

The absurdity of their conversation made him smile broadly. This was just so domestic of them. “Fine, love, how ’bout you?”

She giggled at him and his expression. Before she could answer him, he spoke again, “You sure you’re okay, kitten?”

“No bad dreams last night.” Her smile was real and bright.

_Ahh. . . so that was what it was. No nightmares. Well, that was a step in the right direction. “So it was a good night then.”_

“Ahuh. Thanks to you.” She couldn’t resist. Had to tell him somehow that last night had been important to her.

_Oh, she’s radiant._ Like sunshine, like starlight, like everything he’d missed for years. The words slipped from his mouth before he had time to censor his thoughts. “God, you are beautiful, pet. Sight to see.”

She tried to be flip, tried to make him smile, but the serious look that suddenly came over his face made it impossible. “Spike” was all she was able to say before his finger across her lips silenced her.

“Ssshhhh, don’t say anything. Don’t wanna spoil this.” Of their own volition, his fingers curled around her cheek, cupping the side of her face. She leaned into his hand, rubbing against his strong fingers.

“Just wanted to say thank you. For everything.” She stilled, holding herself close against him.

“Buffy, I . . . I’m so sorry, baby.” His heart was in his eyes, trying to convey to her what he meant.

“Sorry? Why?” Their voices were nothing more than whispers, carrying no further than the circle of their arms. She was perplexed by his statement, wondering what he was sorry for, since he’d done absolutely nothing wrong.

“For what happened, what Red did, pet. Pulling you from heaven.” His hand ran down her arm, from shoulder to elbow, absently stroking her.

“Wasn’t you. You don’t need to be sorry about that.” She rested her chin against his chest, completely comfortable. “Not your fault.”

“I know that, kitten, but it wasn’t right anyway. Should’ve left you alone.” His face reflected a flash of anger but Buffy realized it wasn’t directed at her at all.

All at once she grew serious. “Spike, promise me something?”

“What’s that?” He braced himself to hear, ‘Don’t let this happen again’ or ‘Don’t come to my room anymore’ or any number of things she could make him promise.

“Please don’t say anything to anyone about where I’ve been.” He hadn’t expected that at all. He
started to protest, but Buffy stalled him, “It would hurt too much. Dawnie and Tara. They . . . I don’t want either of them to know.”

“You should tell them.” He disagreed with her, but he had a feeling this was the first of many arguments he was going to lose to her. At least it wasn’t what he’d anticipated, her giving him the boot but good.

“No, I don’t want anyone to know.” Shaking her head, he could see that she was adamantly about this.
“You told me.” Was his only counter-argument.

At that, she thumped him. “You’re different. You . . . you’re just different.”

“Right, coz ’m me. C’mon, goldilocks, you know you should tell, at least tell the Niblet.” He didn’t want to let this go, something was telling him to push the issue.

“I’m serious. No telling.” Thumping him again, Buffy pinched his arm.

“Oi, woman, leave off. All right. Won’t say a bloody word.”

Once again she struck him speechless when she dropped a quick kiss on his chest, saying, “Thanks, Spike.”

Bloody hell. She was gonna kill him. Wrapping his arms around her, he exhaled deeply, trying hard to suppress feelings that she wasn’t really ready to face.

Sitting on the beach with Dawn, Tara came to the realization that she didn’t want to go back to the house and face Willow. In fact, she wasn’t sure she wanted to see Willow at all. She could maybe forgive one of the things that had been done, but all of it? Tara wasn’t so sure that would be possible. Maybe, if Willow had said she was sorry, or apologized or even acted like she was aware everyone was upset with her, she might be feeling a little more open to forgiving her, but there was none of that.

No remorse, no regret and absolutely no admittance that something was wrong.

On the other hand, Tara wasn’t really sure she was ready to just walk away from their relationship. She thought she still loved Willow, so she owed it to them to try and make things work.

Looking over at Dawn, who was absorbed in her book, Tara wondered what would happen to the girl if she had to move out.

Dawn felt Tara’s eyes on her. She wasn’t really reading, but she didn’t want anyone to know what she was doing, not even Tara, so she shifted away a bit, rolling over onto her back, the book up in the air in front of her.
It was a picture she was studying. Well, two pictures.

22. *Serenity is far away*

*Where did you come from, Baby dear?*  
*Out of the everywhere into the here.*  
*Where did you get your eyes so blue?*  
*Out of the sky as I came through.*  
*George MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind*

*Loneliness is not a phase*  
*Field of pain is where I graze*  
*Serenity is far away*  
*Saw my reflection and cried*  
*So little hope that I died*  
*Feed me your lies, open wide*  
*Weight of my heart, not the size*  
*Layne Staley – Alice in Chains, Angry Chair from the album Dirt*

She had that glare in her eyes. The kind when the sunlight was so bright that everything but the sunlight appears in a funny color. But she didn’t care.

Dawn was too intent on the images staring back at her that she ignored everything. Blocked from Tara’s sight by her book were two pictures. The first was a smaller version of the last picture of all the Summers women and the other was of Spike, taken just couple of weeks ago.

She really didn’t look like her mother and she wasn’t sure because she could barely remember what he looked like, but Dawn didn’t think she looked anything like Hank Summers either.

There were similarities though, with Buffy, like the shape of their mouths, their cheekbones and some other things.

Covering the images of Buffy and her mother with the picture of Spike, Dawn gulped. They had the exact same nose, and their eye color was almost identical. Jaw-lines were nearly the same, and, looking closely at him, she’d be willing to bet that their hair was the same color.

She’d taken biology. She knew how babies were made – but she hadn’t ever been a baby. Hadn’t come into the world naturally. Some crazy magical monks had made her.
But what had they used to make her?

She knew they’d taken something of Buffy to help create this body. Yet she wasn’t exactly like Buffy – which she should have been if they had only used Buffy. Then she would have been a clone of Buffy – a living, breathing Buffybot, but she wasn’t.

For one thing, she was taller than her sister, for another, she was too different from Buffy. Enough so that the monks had to have ‘borrowed’ something from another source.

Could that other source have been Spike?

As many similarities as there were with her sister, there were at least double that with Spike.

Were they really her parents?

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He’d gotten up first, needing to get away, to get some perspective on what had happened between them.

And also, because his hard-on was painful.

So with the lame excuse that he needed to shower, Spike slid from the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Stepping into the shower, Spike did the only thing he could, under the circumstances. Sliding his left hand around his erection, he re-lived their night with a few choice alterations.

Release was quick.

Forgetting how he’d spent the night would take lifetimes.

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Buffy felt better than she had in a very long time. Well, technically, it was only days, but her mind went back to before, before she jumped. Those last months had been horrible. Between her mom being sick and spending time worrying about her, and then Riley leaving after blaming all their problems on her without taking any responsibility for his own actions and Glory... God, it was a wonder that she’d been able to sleep or get any rest. It hadn’t gotten any better either, in fact it had just kept getting worse and worse. The last straw came, she remembered, after Glory had taken Dawn and Giles told her that her baby sister had to die in order to close the portal.

She’d barely slept those last weeks, hardly eaten anything either. She’d felt like the walls were closing in on her, and there was no possible escape. They hadn’t had any answers about how to beat Glory, and even when they had come up with a plan, there had been too many variables, anything could have gone wrong. And well, it actually did all go wrong.
She’d had to jump. It had come down to a choice between her and Dawn. Buffy was not going to allow that. She wasn’t willing to live in a world without Dawn.

Instead, she’d made Dawn live in a world without her.

At that moment, standing up on the tower, Buffy had to make a decision. She’d heard Spike clatter up the stairs while she battled Glory, heard him fall over the side, known instinctively that he’d done his best but in the end, it all came down to her. She was the Chosen One. Just like all the other times, it was all down to one person.

Only this time, it wasn’t some impersonal save the world thing – it was save her sister. So she’d done the only thing she could do.

She’d jumped.

In the back of her mind, she’d known somehow that Dawn would be safe. That the Scoobies and Giles would look after her. And she knew, too, that despite whatever else he might do, Spike would keep his last promise to her. To protect Dawn to the end of the world.

She’d played on his affections for the both of them, using his feelings to protect her sister. It wasn’t nice, not really, what she’d done, but he’d agreed. What’s more, he’d done it. Kept his promise.

Protected her sister.

How could she deny that his feelings weren’t real? She cringed, remembering how she’d told him vampires couldn’t love. Maybe not all vampires could love, maybe it was just . . . she didn’t want to go there, thinking about Angel and Darla and Drusilla. Dragging her thoughts to the vampire in the bathroom, Buffy had to admit that Spike was one of a kind. Unique.

He hid his real persona behind the façade of the Big Bad, shielding his true nature from the world, or at least that’s what she was beginning to suspect. Coming back had opened her eyes. Spike had changed since she’d been gone. Changed in ways that she was just discovering, or maybe, he’d been making those changes all along, and she’d only just started noticing.

Either way, it was time to give the vampire some credit.

Maybe it was time to give him those crumbs he’d been looking for from her.

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Willow had started out with every intention of going to the university library, either that or going to the registrar’s office to get the course catalog for the upcoming semester. What she actually ended up doing was something completely different. Her attention had been snagged by a flyer advertising a free aura picture with a psychic reading. Giggling softly, Willow figured what the heck, and went to see what it was all about.

Putting on her resolve face, Willow mentally steeled herself, blanketing her power. She was gonna have some fun. Would be nice to see if this psychic was the real deal or just another one of those make-believe fake witches. If she was the real deal, she’d be able to spot Willow right away. If not, Willow decided, she was gonna have some fun and show her what a real witch was.
He was downstairs watching television. She could hear it from her bedroom. Buffy thought about going down to join him, but really wasn’t sure she wanted to make the effort. It was just easier to do nothing. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she stared down at her hands. The day had started out so good. There’d been no nightmares and she’d finally told Spike about heaven.

So why did she feel like sitting here and crying?

God, she hated feeling this way, so weak and scared and just not wanting to move or do anything. But she just didn’t know how to break out of it. Didn’t know if she really wanted to break out of it. She wasn’t moving, it was okay just being here. No disruptions, no loud noises, no one looking for her attention.

So why were the tears falling?

Buffy wiped her eyes, trying to stem the flow, but it didn’t work. The tears kept falling. She was empty. So empty. There shouldn’t be any tears. A great gaping void of grayness filled her, pushing out from the inside against her skin. She felt so fragile, scared, like spun glass, brittle and breakable. She wasn’t the Slayer anymore, she wasn’t anything.

Heaven hadn’t wanted her.

Falling down with her head landing heavily on her pillows, Buffy sobbed into the downy softness. She wasn’t wanted. Why would heaven let Willow pull her out? Wasn’t she good enough to stay in heaven? Had she done something wrong? Heaven didn’t want her. No one wanted her. She couldn’t get in enough air. She was choking again, back in the grave, everything closed in on her.

Heaven didn’t want her.

The tears became a torrent, all the more painful because she couldn’t make a sound. Nothing came out. Her throat was closing, panic setting in. No air. She couldn’t get any air. Harsh gasps filled her sunlight room, but Buffy couldn’t see any of that. She was back in that dark place, surrounded by oppressive nothingness.

She felt like her skin would shatter if she moved the wrong way. Shatter like broken glass, spewing pieces all over the room, shards of herself strewn about her house, nothing substantial left. She was nothing. Because heaven had sent her back.

Buffy cried for what she remembered, cried for what she’d had – peace – and for what had been ripped from her. She was not worthy of heaven. But oh, how she wanted nothing better than to go back. Maybe if she did shatter she’d be allowed to return.

Some small sound caught his attention. Spike turned the volume down on the television, listening, straining his ears to hear it again. Lifting his eyes to the stairs, he thought he heard it again. The
debate with himself lasted about twenty seconds. If it wasn’t her, and she was fine, then he’d live with breaking in on her room. If it was her, then she needed him and nothing else mattered.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Spike was at her door instantly. Hearing nothing he almost went back down to the television when he heard something that set his nerves singing. Knocking once, he opened the door, finding his initial intuition had been correct.

Buffy was curled up on her bed, fist to her mouth, eyes shut tight and tears streaming down her face. She never heard him enter, didn’t react to him opening the door. Caught in the throes of pain and panic, Buffy was unreachable. Hesitating only a second, Spike swept her off the bed and into his arms.

“Ssshhh, sweetheart. It’s all right.” Words just spilled from his mouth, sounds just to reach the sobbing girl, something to calm her down.

Took a bit, but finally her breathing settled down, and she rested her head against his shoulder. Sniffling loudly, Buffy tried wiping away the tears. Her hand on his opposite shoulder, Buffy hugged him as his arms circled around her.

“Sorry,” she mumbled thickly. “Keep doing this.”

“No worries, pet. S’ok. I don’t mind.” He tugged her closer, wishing he could do more for her. Seemed like she needed something. “You need to cry, then cry.”

“Tired of crying. Wanna stop.” She pouted just a little, which always drove him mad. She had such a cute mouth, but when she pouted like that he just wanted to spend hours nibbling at her lips.

“Well then, what set you off this time?” He was curious what she had been thinking about, what triggered the crying jag this time.

“Heaven didn’t want me.” Fresh tears started flowing, dripping down her cheeks to pool on their arms.

“Oh, pet, heaven wanted you. Why wouldn’t it . . . Christ, love, you’re the bloody Chosen One, ‘f course heaven wanted you.” One hand held her head against his shoulder, while the other rubbed up and down her hip.

“No. No . . . heaven didn’t want me. Riley didn’t . . . no one wanted me. No one wants me.” Her voice was broken up with hiccuping breaths, but Spike understood what she was saying.

“Hey, s’not true. Git was just too bloody stupid to realize what a treasure he had.” He was afraid he was going to go too far, scare her off, but he couldn’t sit here and let her believe that she wasn’t wanted. “God, pet, do you have any idea? I want you. Want you all the time. Always.”

She half-sobbed, half-huffed her disbelief. “Can’t. I’m horrible. Bad. No good.”

“Oh fucking hell. Pet, you are the best person I’ve ever met. You . . . you’re a bloody star, you are. And yeah,” he said, laughing at himself, “Oh yeah, I want you, snotty nose and all.”

Buffy batted at his chest halfheartedly. “Stop. I’m all messy and . . .”

He reached up to brush the tears from her face, his hand cool against her flushed skin, stopping her
words. His touch was gentle, calming her even further. Whispering to her, his voice a low rumble in his chest vibrating against her arm, Spike said, “Want you so much.”

A bolt of electricity went through her hearing his words. Buffy stared at him, disbelief warring with some other emotion in her eyes. His thumb brushed across her mouth, soft as air, followed by his lips. Buffy shivered, which traveled from her body to his. Spike drew back, looking intently into her eyes. He started to speak then changed his mind, instead, settling his mouth on hers.

Growling low in his throat, Spike hauled her around, so that she was straddling him. Breaking off the kiss, he ground out, “Feel it? Can you feel how much . . .”

His voice got even deeper, resonating within her, “God, pet, ‘ve no idea. J’st the thought of you . . .”

Her eyes met his, wide and green and filled with water, unspoken questions pooling together with the unshed tears.

“God, sunshine, can’t you . . .” His voice was a harsh whisper between them, intense and low, filled with emotion. His want, his need, his craving for her was a physical presence between them, hard and pulsing beneath her. Spike held her tight, not hiding his response to her nearness. Running his hand down her hair, he pulled her toward his breast. “Can’t make m’heart beat, but it would be pounding right about now.”

Half expecting her to pull away from him in horror and disgust, Spike held on, unwilling to let her go if she did pull back. Instead, she shocked the hell out of him by twining her arms around his neck, breathing in his scent. His muscles twitched, tensing as he held her, as he tried to still his urge to lay her down on the bed and show her exactly how much he wanted her. Unable to control himself completely, Spike began placing little kisses from her shoulder to her neck, growling a little with each touch.

She shivered, his kisses raising gooseflesh all over. Buffy closed her eyes and just drowned in the sensations assaulting her. His strong arms around her, the softness of his lips on her neck, the depth of his murmurs reverberating in her chest and the tense hardness beneath her. This is good. This is better than good. Smiling just a little, Buffy breathed against his ear, “Crumbs”.

It took him a moment, focused as he was on the scent and taste of her skin, before her whisper registered in his brain. Crumbs? She said crumbs . . . What the bleeding hell was she on about? Crumbs . . . bloody silly . . . oh fucking hell. Their conversation from months ago finally replayed itself in his fuddled brain. Crumbs . . . crumbs! She’s giving me crumbs.

Absofuckinglutely unbelievable.

23. A harlot’s prerogative

Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate’er it touches.
   Percy Bysshe Shelley, Queen Mab, pt. 3

A power I have, but of what strength and nature
I am not yet instructed.
measure for measure, act 1, sc 1

Power without responsibility –
the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages.

Rudyard Kipling

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.
Great men are almost always bad men.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg, 1st Baron Acton

Grinning to herself, Willow nearly brushed her hands together in satisfaction of a job well done. She’d gone into the psychic’s shop, hoping for an interesting half hour or so. It had been interesting, just not for me. The woman hadn’t had one smidgeon of the power that Willow herself had, and so she’d played with her.

One minute the woman was reading her tarot cards and the next the cards were flying about the room, dancing around her head. Willow had gotten exasperated with her, losing patience when the woman told her ‘a dark man will come into your life and sweep you off your feet’. Her only thought had been ‘Duh, um, gay now. No man is gonna come into my life and sweep me anywhere’.

Having taken that as her cue that the gypsy-wanna be was a fake, Willow had let her have it. At first she’d just shifted the cards around, but then, when the woman didn’t notice, she’d made them fly around. Getting caught up in her play, Willow set the crystals rotating and made the crystal ball spin in the air. When that didn’t faze the other, she’d gotten slightly peeved and set all the bells and gongs clanging. That’s when the woman got frightened. Stupid woman.

So Willow had finished teaching the woman a lesson.

She’d played with her, pulling on her hair and lifting her skirts, poking and tickling her. The cards, bells, gongs and crystals had all been whirling about the air, adding to the confusion. Willow had only relented when the woman began crying, pleading with her to stop. Growing bored and a little disappointed that it hadn’t been much fun in the first place, Willow clapped her hands together and stopped everything in place.

The cards and crystals dropped to the floor, ripped and shattered.

Turning her back on the woman’s disheveled form and destroyed shop, Willow resumed her earlier plans and headed off toward UC Sunnydale’s campus.

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Rupert had been listening to his recording of Willow’s version of the events surrounding Buffy’s resurrection for the last two days. He was afraid he kept missing something integral, something that would strike him and give him the answers he was seeking.
Every night since Buffy’s return, Spike had encountered the aftermath of whatever-it-was’ nightly feasting. Thankfully, the numbers had gone down, leading both men to believe that the fear and change in location were what lead to the initial bloodbath. Other than that, they had absolutely nothing to go on. Spike hadn’t even been able to get a glimpse of whatever-it-was, merely what it ate. Giles had a theory that whatever-it-was had followed Buffy from whatever dimension Willow had released her from. But without knowing what dimension Buffy had been in, he had no way to identify whatever-it-was. Giles sighed, thinking, we really have to come up with a better name for this than whatever-it-was.

Too many variables. Too many unknowns. And, without grilling both of the girls, he wasn’t going to get many answers at all.

He was going to have to talk to Buffy about it. He’d like to avoid talking to Willow for the time being, until he had more to go on, this way his questioning would be a bit more specific. Either that or get Spike and the Buffybot and everyone else out on patrol tonight, hoping for a glimpse of whatever it was.

Pocketing the recorder, Giles said goodbye to Anya and headed for the door.

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Neither one of them breathed, frozen in stillness, locked together in an embrace. Spike was almost afraid to move, afraid to break the spell they were under. Buffy didn’t want to move because she didn’t want to give up the safety and comfort. Their heads were tucked against the other’s neck, and both of them were just breathing in the scent of each other.

For once in his life, Spike was stunned speechless. He had no words to say to explain, to contain the emotions he was feeling at this moment. ‘Crumbs’. He laughed because it was the only sound he could make at that moment. He laughed because this was so bloody perfect. Spike said it out loud, just because he wanted to hear it from her once more. “Crumbs?”

She giggled, catching onto his laughter. “Yeah, crumbs.”

Their laughter stopped, though, when he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her soundly. It stilled so abruptly that his ears rang with it.

Shifting them so that they lay face to face on her bed, Spike traced her features with a gentle hand. “Christ, woman, you are beautiful.”

Buffy’s blush crept across her features, but her words stopped his movements. “No, I’m not, not really.”

Spike huffed his disbelief. “Eye of the beholder, pet. If I say you are, you are.”

She wasn’t going to argue with him. Not at this moment anyway. This was too nice to give up. Her eyes drifted closed, as she felt his fingers resume their trek across her face.

His voice reached through her, warming her from the inside out, “Missed you, pet. So much. Wasn’t right without you, Niblet cried all the time. Rupert was at loose ends.”

Curling into his embrace, Buffy settled against his chest, letting his deep voice rumble against her
ear. "Patrolled for you every night, did what I could to make up for it—" his voice trailed off, unwilling to finish that train of thought.

He was quiet for too long. Buffy traced idle patterns on his arms, matching the ones he was tracing on her back. Her voice, when she spoke sounded content and languid. "Make up for what?"

Spike hesitated, unsure whether he wanted to bring this up, possibly spoiling the moment. "Make up for not saving you or Little Bit that night. Make up for failing you."

"No... no, Spike, you didn’t. You did the best you could. You didn’t fail me." Buffy hugged him close, tightening her grip almost painfully. She felt rather than saw his head shake in disagreement.

"I did. Didn’t move fast enough, or somethin’. Doc got the drop on me – underestimated the bleeding bastard – couldn’t save Dawn from gettin’ hurt, nor stop you from jumping. Kept going over it and over it in m’head, after. Always worked then. Every time – managed to save you both."

There was nothing she could say. What he just admitted was hard enough. Seemed like today was the day for giving up secrets between them. Not that they’d ever really had any, they had an eerie way of being able to read each other, naturally able to intuit what the other was feeling. Instead of answering, Buffy just shifted a bit, so their faces were even and kissed him softly.

He hadn’t expected that, but didn’t object. Their mouths met, lips parted naturally and tongues entwined about each other. The kiss deepened, their bodies shifting, closing the already small gap between them. Spike moved, half tucking her beneath him, wedging his hips between hers, letting her feel the hard length of him rubbing against her. Buffy clutched at him, her fingers wrapped around the nape of his neck. Almost of their own accord, his hips undulated against her and she unconsciously wrapped one of her legs around the outside of his, opening herself up so he could get closer. His hand snaked up under her night shirt, cupping her breast. Soft mewls and heavy breathing filled the room, both of them gasping for air.

His thumb flicked over her nipple and she arched up against him.

Neither one of them heard the doorbell, but they both heard the door slam, then the sound of their names being called by Rupert.

"Piss poor timing your Watcher has, pet." He nipped in for another kiss before pulling away. "I’ll go see what he wants. Come down when you’re ready."

She looked like an angel on the road to debauchery, so tempting as she lay there flustered from his kisses, that before he left the room Spike had to kiss her once more. Letting his lips settle on hers, then drift down to lay another kiss between her breasts, Spike grinned at her expression, adjusted himself and was gone, all before Buffy could even react.

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She got to campus, but nearly everything was closed. Only a few of the buildings were open, mostly the offices, and that was okay, because she was looking for the registrar’s office anyway. While she was there waiting for the woman behind the counter to get the course catalog she wanted, Willow looked at the flyers announcing all the groups meeting on campus. Three in particular caught her eye. The first was for the upcoming meeting of the witches group where she and Tara had met. The
second was for ROTC training, which immediately brought to mind The Initiative. She wondered if any of them were still left, and if so, whether or not they would be a visible presence or if they had gone completely covert. Willow didn’t think the government would leave the hellmouth completely unwatched, even if the Slayer was in residence.

The last one took her breath away. It was a flyer for a fraternity party, the first weekend of classes, which wasn’t anything unusual. What was unusual was the band playing. Dingoes Ate my Baby were scheduled to appear for the first time in 2 years. And the flyer said ‘original line-up’. Which meant Oz. Oz was back.

Completely flustered, Willow whirled out of the office, not waiting for the woman who had been helping her. Oh, great goddess. Oz was back. Where the heck had he been?

The last time she’d seen him, they’d agreed that he couldn’t be around her, that she made him feel too much. She didn’t even think he was playing anymore. Oh darn, oh darn. Wait... she had Tara. Taking a deep breath, Willow settled herself, then walked quickly toward the main quad, where the outdoor café was. She needed caffeine to calm herself.

Oz was back in Sunnydale, but that didn’t mean she had to see him, had to go out of her way to find him. Maybe they wouldn’t even see each other. If she didn’t go to the party and didn’t go looking for him, she’d be okay. Willow sat at a table, her mind whizzing from one subject to another, unaware that in her agitation, she’d set all the machines whirring and buzzing, starting the soda dispensers spewing sticky liquid all over the place.

It wasn’t until she heard a voice calling her name, that she snapped out of her confused musings.

“Hey, Willow? It is you, right?”

A dark haired girl perched on the seat in front of her, looking at her intently, like she expected Willow to remember her. “Oh hey, how are you?”

Willow covered up her confusion by playing along. “I haven’t seen you since you and that Tara girl hooked up after our meetings. I wasn’t even sure you were still here at Sunnydale.”

“Um, yeah, I grew up here. So, how you been?” Willow tried, but couldn’t remember her name at all, it was just a complete blank.

Shifting her attention from the girl in front of her, Willow noticed the mess that was still being cleaned up the counter and in a moment of pity for the kids working there, concentrated, took a deep breath, opened her eyes as they flashed black for an instant, then flicked her fingers in the general direction of the kiosk. The chaos stopped and everything was clean. And in typical Sunnydale fashion, the workers shrugged, then went about what they were doing before the chaos ensued. It all happened inside a couple of minutes, though when Willow looked back at the girl, she was still talking, unaware of what Willow had just done. Thinking to herself, Willow stared hard at the girl, her eyes flickering dark, then clearing again.

“So, Jess that sounds interesting. Are you going to be running the wiccan group again?” Willow had just probed into the other girl’s mind, getting her name and all sorts of other information. Jessica, the other girl, shifted, feeling something different but unable to pinpoint what it was. A bit flustered, the girl talked to Willow for a little bit longer, then made her excuses to leave. Willow breathed deeply, realizing she was able to walk through the other girl’s mind without any expenditure of real effort.

Smiling to herself, Willow got up from the table, intent on finding out what else she could do with
this sudden surge of power.

Rupert had been waiting in the kitchen, looking about for something to drink, when Spike finally made his way downstairs. Spike had stopped momentarily in the hallway, in an almost futile effort to will his erection away. Wouldn’t do for her Watcher, well, the man she considered a father to notice something. Not that he expected Rupert to be eyeing his crotch, but you never knew what that man paid attention to. He didn’t want anything to cause a problem with what was happening between him and Buffy.

“Watcher,” he called from the kitchen doorway. “What brings you here?”

“Spike. We need more information on this whatever-it-was that you’ve been cleaning up after for the last few nights. I was thinking perhaps I’d ask Buffy a few more questions, to narrow down my research.” Giles settled on grabbing a soda from the refrigerator, gesturing with his free hand to the other man.

Thinking quickly, Spike wasn’t sure if Buffy was going to be any help in the research, especially if she stuck to her guns and kept quiet about where she’d been. “Dunno what else I can tell you. Never seen the bastard, only smelled it.” He wrinkled his forehead, adding “Smells rank though, nasty.”

“Yes, I believe you have mentioned that once or twice.” In fact, the vampire had complained long and loudly the other night after finding the second kill, about the stench the whatever-it-was emitted.

Before he could respond, Buffy appeared, looking flushed and smiling a little. Shooting Spike a heated glance, she asked “Hey, Giles, what’s the what?”

Heading right for the refrigerator, Buffy listened while Giles outlined his ideas for the whatever-it-was and shrugged while she searched for a yogurt. “I don’t remember being around anything like that. It wasn’t like that. It was...” she hesitated, trying to think of something to tell him that wouldn’t set off his internal alarms, “It was different. I don’t remember much.”

Spike raised an eyebrow at her, knowing full well she was lying to the older man, but Buffy just stared back. She wasn’t going to tell anyone. While it warmed him to know that she trusted him with the information of where she was, it bothered him more than a little that she wasn’t even going to tell Rupert.

Leaning against the island, standing next to Spike, Buffy avoided Giles’ eye. Didn’t help that Spike had pushed his leg against hers, unable to resist touching her now that she was within touching distance.

Giles blinked once, then continued, “I had thought as much. It’s understandable that you haven’t remembered everything yet. It only has just been a week since you’ve returned. I shall have to ask Willow.” Grimacing unintentionally at the thought, he went on to say, “Have you given any thought about resuming patrol?”

Sharing a look with Spike, Buffy shook her head in denial. “Not really sure I’m ready. Still feeling out of sorts.”
“You do know you are going to have to, sooner or later. Can’t leave it all up to Spike or the Buffybot. You might want to think about training again.” He was afraid she’d lost her nerve, gotten skittish in her time away, and Giles knew that while having Spike around was a godsend (and the irony of that never ceased to amaze him) but it was Buffy’s responsibility, not Spike’s to patrol the hellmouth.

“Might help, pet, if you did start. Give you something to focus on.” Spike was all for it, getting her out of the house and doing anything that gave her the motivation to do something other than dwell on her situation. “Need to do it myself.”

He knew if he pushed hard enough, Buffy would balk, so Giles let it go, leaving the options open for her to resume training when she was ready. This current mood was so unlike her that it was beginning to concern him. Buffy wasn’t the sort to sit still and brood, preferring action over introspection. Maybe Spike could get her motivated.

“I think perhaps it’s time for a full out patrol.” Giles let the suggestion sit in the air, knowing the ultimate decision was ironically, up to the vampire.

“Yeah, what the hell. Get the whelp out of his easy chair and out chasing nasties.”

Grinning at each other in expectation of some violence, Giles and Spike agreed, setting the time to meet at seven that night.

Chapter 24. The fuel of evil is raining from the sky.

_The gates of Hell are open night and day; smooth the descent, and easy is the way; but, to return, and view the cheerful skies; in this, the task and mighty labour lies._

_—Virgil, the Sibyl of Cumae, the Aeneid, bk 6_

_The corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst._

_—David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, section 10_

_Hell isn’t merely paved with good intentions; Its walled and roofed with them._

_Yes, and furnished too._

_—Aldous Huxley, Time Must Have a Stop, chapter 12_

By the time they were ready to patrol, with nearly everyone assembled at the Magic Box, Spike was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He was in a singularly good mood, unable to contain his excitement. Between the two of them, he and Giles had managed to get Buffy out of the house, and while she wasn’t quite up for patrol, she had agreed to do some research and look for whatever-it-was based on Spike’s meager description.
Giles had nearly fallen over when Buffy had said she would hit the books, knowing full well his Slayer hated research with nearly the same amount of passion that Xander did. But at least she was out, which was in his mind, a step in the right direction. It was good to see her dressed and relatively ready to go.

She was still too thin, her bones still pronounced beneath her skin, but she was looking better. Her skin was pale and her eyes were too big, but she was almost back to being herself and that was a good thing.

It was hard to look at her with the Buffybot standing nearby, but Spike would rather have the real girl than the one he’d commissioned from that Warren geek. He stood across the room from her, leaning against the glass display, just watching her. She was still, sitting beside her sister, just watching everyone around her. There was no way any of them could admit she wasn’t changed by what had happened, he could see it plain and clear. But then, the scoobies weren’t exactly adept at reading each other’s emotions. In fact, as a whole, they were incredibly dense about each other. Not a one of them, with the possible exception of Buffy, was attuned to anyone other than their own self, and even she was fairly oblivious most times. He wondered, looking at her now as she moved away from Xander, if her time away would change that for the better.

To be sure, he hadn’t expected her to change her views about him. Although he’d done his damnedest to make sure that she noticed, he’d not expected much in the way of pay-off. He’d always been one to reach for the impossible, his heart knowing no limits. The unattainable was always more attractive than what he could have. And in his whole existence, there’d been no one more unattainable than Buffy.

Until this morning.

Suddenly, everything he ever wanted was almost within reach. And now, he was forced to admit to himself, he was scared out of his mind. This girl, this golden beautiful girl, his own, no, he wasn’t going to call her an angel, but, this sprite, had giggled in his ear this morning and told him he had a crumb. He smiled, looking at her, his heart in his eyes. She must have felt his gaze on her, because she glanced up at him, and literally, the fear that had been building melted away at his stare. They stared at each other for a good few minutes, the rest of the room receding as their eyes met and held.

Their exchange hadn’t gone unnoticed. Dawn had felt the intensity of Spike’s look, and, glancing up in time to see her sister respond to his silent call, suppressed her own smile. Tara too, had seen them, and smiling a bit from her spot by the bookshelf, she caught Dawn’s grin with her own.

Then suddenly, in a flurry of weapons and instructions, it was time for those that were going to hit the cemeteries and patrol. Buffy and Dawn were the only two remaining in the Magic Box, while the others went off to find whatever-it-was or at least something to lead them to it. Willow hadn’t shown up at all, no one had seen her all day, and she hadn’t left a note for anyone back at the house either. Spike wasn’t in the mood to face her, in any case, he didn’t want anything to disturb his current good mood. And he knew that no matter what, Buffy’s admission that Willow had pulled her out of heaven would light a flash to his temper the first time he laid eyes on the redhead.

Giles was the first out the door, admonishing Anya as she idly swung the short sword she was carrying in a wide arc, followed by the others, with Spike bringing up the rear.

“Stay inside, Bit,” were his words to Dawn, while staring long and hard at the slayer. It was hard to resist the instant urge to sweep her up in his arms and give her a goodbye kiss, but he resisted when
she rolled her eyes in her sister’s direction. Dawn was staring at the two of them, as they stood there awkwardly, both wanting to give some gesture, but afraid of the reaction they’d get from an audience. Mindful of that, Spike tilted his head to the side, whispered something softly to Buffy, touched her face and strode out the door, without looking back.

It took all her will power not to say something cute to her sister, but Dawn managed to curb that, just barely. It was so sweet. Adorable really. *It would be nice,* the teenager thought, *if they actually did get together.* Would give her hope for herself, that maybe she could have a family, a real family, for the first time.

**********************************************************************

It didn’t feel right anymore, patrolling without her. Giles thought it was the strangest thing to be out here, in the cemeteries while Buffy stayed behind, even though he and Spike had patrolled together without her often the past few months. Knowing she was back made the difference, he supposed, but even when they’d taken out the Buffybot, it hadn’t been the same.

They were going out in pairs, each pair taking a third of each cemetery, hoping to catch a glimpse of, he sighed, whatever-it-was; he was really going to have to talk to Spike about naming the unidentified nasties a bit better. He and Spike were teamed up, taking the largest area, though Spike was going to range about more widely, since his speed far outmatched any of the others, including the Buffybot. The vampire was yards ahead of him, hopping over headstones instead of walking around them like any sane person would, his boundless energy needing a release. Spike had been in an uncommonly good mood all day, something Giles had noted, which was a nice change. He was even humming as he’d caught up with him on their way into Restfield, something the vampire rarely did.

Deciding he’d rather not know what had put him in such a good mood, Giles questioned him, “Any idea where we might find this?”

“Nary a one,” was the vampire’s off-hand response. “Only place it seems to like is by the tower. But” he paused as he jumped over a small cherub, “That fire destroyed enough to make it hard for it to hide.”

Which was true. Spike hadn’t admitted it outright, but Giles had more than a firm suspicion that he’d been the one to start it.

“And no further idea about whatever it might be?” Giles’ gaze was drawn to his left, where Tara was patrolling with the Buffybot.

“‘Nother dead end.” Spike was striding forward, his voice carrying behind him.

A yell sounded off to the right, and Spike took off at a flat out run, Giles not too far behind him.

**********************************************************************

Xander had been trying to make sense of some things for the past couple of days. When they’d gone to the house for dinner that night, the absolute last thing he’d expected was to find Buffy there. That had been just amazing. On top of that, it was his best friend who could make with the magic and
actually, well, he’d always felt a little intimidated by Buffy, even as he’d sort of had a crush on her, but Willow, who’d ever have thought little Willow could do all that?

What he really didn’t understand was why everyone was so unhappy. Seemed like to him, that the open portal was a good enough trade off for Buffy’s return. He didn’t get why Giles was so worried about it. Wasn’t like some Hell god had followed Buffy back.

But what really confused Xander was Anya’s reaction to all this. She had stood there, looking at him a couple of nights ago, after he’d ranted about his confusion over the whole situation, and when he’d finished, she’d said, with typical bluntness “It’s dark magic, Xander, something Willow knows nothing about and she messed with the natural order of things. She tried for something really dangerous, so the stakes are higher. The dimensional rules require the payment to be of equal value. It’s quite similar to the capitalist system, really, if you think about it.”

At which point, Xander stopped listening.

He stopped listening because it was something he didn’t want to hear and didn’t really understand. To him it was all so very simple, or it should be. Buffy was back and that was good. Everything else could be dealt with and dismissed.

Another thing he’d wanted to dismiss from their lives was Spike. Now that Buffy was back, he thought the vampire should just be given his walking papers and sent back to his crypt, far away from all of them. What he didn’t know, and what no one had cared to enlighten him about was the frequency and intensity of Buffy’s nightmares, which was a well kept secret between the inhabitants of Revello Drive, and anyone’s, but Spike’s, inability to subdue the Slayer when she was thrashing about and crying.

Xander thought about complaining to Anya again, but having gotten zero sympathy the first time around, figured he should just keep his mouth shut. Instead, he brought up one of the other things on his mind. “Do you think Buffy looked okay?”

Anya stopped walking to gaze at him. “She looks better than she did that first day. At least she’s starting to. I don’t think there was much food wherever she was.” She paused, obviously thinking hard, then said “She could go into modeling, she’s thin enough now. Might be too short though.”

“Not exactly what I meant, Ahn,” he replied.

“Oh. Well, she’d probably hate it anyway,” was her pragmatic response.

Shaking his head, Xander continued walking, his eyes trained on the ground.

“This is a stupid idea. We don’t even know what we’re looking for.” Anya continued grousing.

Picking his head up, Xander held up a hand to silence her. “Did you hear that?”

She started to say no, when a low deep growl came from somewhere to their right.

“Ahn, come here.” Xander didn’t like the sound of that at all.

Following his instructions, the former demon started to do just that, until the growl sounded again, this time much closer. “Okay, change of plans,” he spoke very calmly. “Gonna come closer to you.”
As he did, the growling just increased. Anya turned around, shrieking out loud.

They weren’t very big, not compared to some of the demons they’d battled over the years, but they were intimidating anyway. At first count, Xander thought there were at least a dozen or so, but then the lead dog growled again as Anya moved and he realized there were only nine. Nine wild dogs in Sunnydale. Nine growling, snarling wild dogs.

Some of them were white, with red splotches and red ears while a couple were red with black, sort of like deranged Dalmatians, but the big one in front, though, was all black with blood red eyes.

“Nice doggies. Nice calm quiet doggies. Ahn, stop shrieking now, you’re making the dogs howl.” Xander tried talking very calmly, hoping that he and Anya could back away from the dogs.

“C’mon, honey, one step at a time.”

The dogs snapped, the lead one inching closer, his jaws dripping with slobber. “Ahn, shush.”

Her shrieks stopped, but she was frozen in place, mesmerized by the snarls. Slowly she started backing away, one step at a time, stopping between each movement. The sword she was holding dropped to her side as she tried hard to relax. “Xander. These aren’t normal dogs.”

“I know,” was his response. Every time he moved, one of the pack shifted to move with him, growling and snarling.

“What the bleeding . . .” Spike’s voice cut through the air, drawing their attention momentarily away from the pack.

All business now, Spike stepped in front of Anya, speaking quietly, “Pet, when I tell you, start backing away and don’t stop until you get to Rupert.”

His movement caught and held the attention of the dogs, and while they snarled and growled, they moved no closer and didn’t snap their jaws.

“Harris. You get Glinda and send the damned bot this way.” Spike moved closer to the dogs, still blocking the other two. Taking the short sword from Anya’s hand, he continued speaking, “Anya, tell Rupert that I’ve found our baddies. Ready?”

Swinging the sword in a wide arc, Spike yelled “GO!” and charged at the dogs, giving the two humans a chance to escape.

Minutes later, realizing he had only six of the dogs to fend off, Spike was starting to re-think his prior nobility. “Dunno why I saved the whelp. Useless boy probably tripped over his own feet and is now kibbles for the poochies.”

Jumping straight up onto a mausoleum, Spike watched as the hounds circled, baying for his blood. Snarling and growling back at them, he realized, wasn’t really helping matters, but it did make him feel better.

He could barely make out other, more distant noises over the din surrounding him, but Spike thought he heard the cavalry arriving. “Right then, you lot of Baskerville, let’s see who can growl the loudest.”
Flipping down behind the dogs, Spike swung the sword around, hoping to take down a few of them before Rupert arrived and he had to protect the Watcher.

Two of the dogs had chased after him, practically nipping at his shins as he raced through the headstones. He could see the Bot and Tara up ahead and tried calling out to them, but he was running too fast to swallow enough air.

“Ta . . . Tara!” He finally managed, catching her attention.

“Xander!” The bot exclaimed, clotheslining the first dog and absently flipping the second one over.

“What . . . what happened?” Tara stuttered out, picking up on the fear in Xander’s eyes.

“Dogs. Pack. Spike saved.” His breathe was returning, but Xander was still too out of breath to speak coherently. “Go help,” he gestured at the Buffybot, who, following the line of his outstretched finger, took off in that direction.

“Xander,” Tara touched his shoulder as he hunched over.


“Oh no.” Tara’s soft voice rang with sincere emotion. “Oh no, we should go back.”

“Uh, Tara, did you see the dogs chasing me? All like that.” Xander was shaking his head in denial of her suggestion, but his feet started heading back toward where he’d left Spike.

She just smiled and kept walking, speeding up to an almost run.

Anya reached Rupert, breathlessly informing him of what was going on, when the dog caught up with the both. Pushing the girl behind him, Giles muttered an incantation, which temporarily froze the dog in mid-snap.

“Let’s go, Anya. Spike’s going to need some help.”

“Oh no, I’m not going back to fight crazy rabid hell dogs.” Anya shook her head, moving away from Giles, back toward the exit.

“Very well, I’ll go myself.” Not giving her a chance to argue with him further, Giles headed toward where Spike was fighting.
“Bloody stupid idea. Where the hell is my backup? Damn whelp can’t tie his own shoes. How can I expect him to find two birds in a cemetery?” Spike was getting pissed. Bloody fucking dogs were all around, circling, snarling and nipping at his legs and arms. Trying harder to keep them away, Spike got his hand caught in the jaws of one, ripping at his flesh.

He faltered, the dog tugging at his right hand, pulling him off balance. “Don’t go down, Spike, otherwise you’ll be dog meat,” he growled to himself. Trying to right himself and disengage his hand, Spike punched the dog’s jaw, then pivoted, bringing up his left leg to kick another one hard.

A third dog came at him, closing its teeth around his shin and Spike yelled his frustration. Sensing their prey’s weakened state, the dogs began closing in.

Just before they brought him down for good, Spike thought he heard someone call his name, then it all went blurry.

25. Live to fight another day.

He lives not long who battles with the immortals.
   Homer, the Iliad, bk vi, 407

We fight, get beat, rise and fight again.
   Nathanael Greene, US Revolutionary General

There is an ancient saying, which is a true one –
“To fight against two opponents is a difficult thing.”
   Plato, Protagoras

He’d certainly seen worse injuries in his time, some of them inflicted upon the vampire, no, man, laying on the ground before him. That wasn’t to say that the beating he’d taken tonight wasn’t a bad one. Giles leaned down, wincing a bit. The Buffybot stood silent at his side, waiting for his next set of instructions. Spike’s left side had a few bites, but his right side had taken the brunt of his beating.

Rolling over the unconscious form of Spike, Giles winced again. Spike’s hand was mangled, beyond repair if he was merely human, and there were several chunks missing from his legs. Both arms sported bite marks and there was a huge welt across his forehead. Spike groaned as Rupert nudged him.

That was a good sign. “All right, Spike, wake up.”

He and the Buffybot had arrived on the scene just as one of the dogs closed its jaws around Spike’s leg, bringing him down. Directing the bot to start fighting, Rupert had muttered a quick protection spell, then waded into the fight. His priority was getting Spike away from the dogs, then, and only then, getting out of Restfield.

The two of them had fought off the dogs for a few minutes, unable to reach Spike, when first one, then all of the dogs broke off the attack, their attention drawn elsewhere. Acting quickly, lest their
attention shift again, Giles gripped Spike by his closest appendage and pulled him from underneath the slobbering jaws.

As one, the dogs had howled then ran from the scene.

Tara had emerged from the shadows then, Xander and Anya behind her. “Is he okay?”

“He’s out, but he will recover.” Trying again to wake him, Giles slapped his fellow Englishman a bit too hard. It did, however, wake him up, though it was a bit too much.

“Tryin to kill me again?” snarled the younger man. “Sweet Jesus, that hurts.”

Rubbing his face, Spike tried to get up, but Giles held him down. “Let me help.”

Bracing himself on Spike’s good side, Giles half lifted him up. Spike’s litany of curses filled the air, making both Xander and Tara blush.

“What the bloody hell happened?” He asked, while they waited so he could get his feet under him.

“Something or someone called the dogs off.” Giles was at a loss because he’d been certain they would’ve finished off Spike otherwise.

“Get a clear look at them?” Spike shifted his weight onto his injured right leg, then faltered when it gave out.

“Yes, I did. Rather larger for just dogs, wouldn’t you say?” Steadying Spike, Giles continued, “In fact, I would venture a guess and call them hounds rather than dogs.”

Spike snorted a half-laugh at his tone, “Oh right, and the Baskerville pooch didn’t give it away at all now, Rupert.”

“Baskerville? You know these dogs?” Xander’s voice rang through the night air.

“No, Xander. He means the hound of the Baskervilles. A demon hound that haunts the moors of England.” Anya’s answer was laced with sarcasm, almost as if questioning why he didn’t know this. “It’s a bit far from home, don’t you think?”

Anya directed this question at the struggling pair of Englishmen, who, while they didn’t verbally answer, both shook their heads in agreement.

“Let’s get Spike back to the Magic Box, then we’ll discuss our canine friends.” Giles gestured everyone to move along, practically dragging Spike along with him.

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It was official. She still hated research. One thing that hadn’t changed at all. Dawn, however, was a different story. Her sister was immersed in a book, so focused on what she was reading she never noticed Buffy’s distraction.

They’d locked the doors at eight thirty, closing up the shop for the night, and now, at nine, Buffy was bored. Really, really bored. Like getting up and finding anything else to do bored. Anything
Muttering a “I’ll be right back, Dawnie,” which was completely ignored, Buffy got up and wandered around for a bit.

Her feet carried her to the back room and she stood in the doorway staring at the tools of her trade. The last time she’d been in this room, she and Giles had, well, not exactly fought, but their words were harsh nonetheless.

Walking into the room fully, Buffy had the weirdest feeling of deja vu. She’d stayed back from a fight, letting others go out and battle for her. That wasn’t right. She should be the one out there looking for answers, patrolling, not the scoobies – and certainly not Spike.

So why was she still here, safe inside these walls?

Because as much as she knew she should be the one out there, Buffy also knew she really wasn’t ready. Her mind wasn’t ready for the constant battling to fight the good fight and just maybe her body wasn’t ready either. For sure her soul wasn’t.

One of the last things she’d said to Giles crossed her mind. “If Dawn dies, I’m done with it. I’m quitting.” But it wasn’t Dawn that died, it was herself.

Could she do it? Could she just walk away from it all? Stop being the Slayer – stop being the strong one? Could she?

The weight of the world was still on her shoulders, she was the only one capable . . . no, that wasn’t true, at least not any more.

Someone else had picked up the slack in her absence, someone had done her job, in her name, while she’d been gone. The really weird part of that, aside from his willingness to do so, was that it was Spike, the vampire, who was doing her job.

*And tonight, folks, the part of Buffy the Vampire Slayer is going to be played by William the Bloody, former Slayer of Slayers.*

*Irony much?*

Without much conscious thought, Buffy began to tape up her hands, loosening up her muscles in preparation for a work-out. Not only hadn’t he left, that damned vampire had fought the good fight for months, for her memory.

*Oh yeah, he deserved cookies, not just crumbs.*

Swinging her fist, the first connection with the punching bag went right through her, but the second was easier, the third moreso. By the time she’d hit her rhythm, Buffy wasn’t thinking at all anymore, just moving.

Even if her mind and soul didn’t remember and mostly wanted to forget, her body knew this, found comfort in the physical release.

So lost in the sensations, Buffy didn’t hear the bell at the front of the shop when the door flew open,
but Dawn’s shriek caught her attention.

By the time they got to the Magic Shop, Spike was wishing the pain was enough to make him pass out, but unfortunately, he wasn’t that lucky. The upside was, the bleeding had mostly stopped, and slow healing had started, but he needed blood, otherwise he wasn’t going to heal anytime soon. Needed human blood too, and someone was going to have to set his hand and soon, because he could feel the bones setting.

“Watcher,” he spoke quietly as they neared the front door, “Need to set m’hand first.”

Looking down at the currently useless hand dangling at his side, Giles nodded his head. “Right, let’s get inside and I’ll see to it.”

Gesturing the others to hold open the door, they gingerly maneuvered through the door. Dawn looked up, seeing everyone file in, took one look at Spike and shrieked.

“Niblet, I’m fine.” Spike grimaced as they eased him down into one of the chairs, wincing even more as he put his hand up on the table. Dawn covered her mouth, unable to look away, while the others just stared. His hand was nearly severed from his wrist, the bones of three of his fingers mangled, and his thumb was also nearly torn off. “Need blood. There any here?”

Giles shook his head, motioning to Xander, “Go to the hospital, see if you can liberate some from the bloodbank, if not get to the butcher’s immediately.”

The boy started to object, but Anya’s shaking head stopped him. “C’mon, Xander. We’ll be right back.”

Buffy had come at a rush from the training room, hearing Dawn’s shriek, tearing the tape from her fingers. “What happened?”

Answering her over his shoulder, Giles said “We ran into the beasts Spike has been tracking. They managed to get him down and he’s lost some blood.” As Buffy came to his side, he continued, “And we need to set his hand as well.”

Her indrawn breath was deep, catching Spike’s attention. The look on her face was, to him, indescribable. Anger, fear and a hundred other things played across her features, but the one that warmed his heart was the concern in her eyes for him.

“That doesn’t look good. Can we do it here or should we bring him to the hospital?” The two men shared a look. If Buffy was suggesting a hospital visit, it had to be pretty bad. Normally someone had to be more than half dead for her to even think of it.

“No, hospital wouldn’t help. Probably mistake me for a dead man, wouldn’t bother setting it,” was Spike’s pragmatic response. “Better we do it right here.”

Tara’s voice popped up. “I think I can help. As long as his fingers are in the right place, I can try.”

“Might as well do it.” Spike would rather get this over and done with, since the pain wasn’t getting
any easier to deal with.

“Right. Buffy, you’re going to have to hold him down while I set these fingers. Tara, let me know as soon as you are ready.” Sharing a look with Spike, Giles motioned to Dawn, then raised his eyebrow.

“Dawnie, why don’t you go catch up with Xander and Anya.” Buffy spoke before either of the other two could think of something for the teen to do. Each of them had their own reasons for not wanting her to witness what was about to happen. She started to balk, then when Spike just raised a brow in her direction, Dawn relented and raced out the door.

Tara was bustling about, gathering herbs and a few bandages that they kept in case of emergencies, and glancing once at the grimacing vampire, she grabbed the bottle of Drambuie that Giles kept in his small office. They didn’t have anything stronger, well they did, but Spike would have to swallow down the herbs, and there was no telling if they would even work on a vampire, so the scotch was the surer bet. Handing the nearly full bottle to him, Tara said firmly, “Drink.”

Though it wasn’t his best stash, it was still the good stuff, Giles merely raised an eyebrow at the girl. Her only response was, “It’s the quickest and safest for him right now.”

Her hand unconsciously running up and down his lesser injured arm, Buffy waited with Giles while Spike downed the scotch. Didn’t take very long before he was feeling the effects, since he had lost some blood, and once his eyes closed for longer than a moment, Giles nodded to the two girls.

Eyeing him, Buffy decided the easiest way to control his movements would be to sit on his lap, facing him, with her arms wrapped around him and the back of the chair. This way, if he did go into game face and jump up, she’d be able to hold him down. Straddling him, hooking her ankles behind him, Buffy looked down to his face. The pain he was trying to hide was etched across his features and she knew it had to be bad because he never even commented on her position.

Taking his hand, Giles worked rapidly to push the fingers into the correct positions. Spike jumped with the first, then roared his pain into Buffy’s shoulder. When Giles paused, he ground out against her, “Just bloody do it.”

He struggled against her grip, fighting to get free from the pain at the end of his arm, but she held on tighter, whispering words into his ear, trying to get him to focus on something else, but it wasn’t working. Spike growled, roared and bucked against her hold. Buffy nearly fell off his lap, when Giles moved his ring finger into position. She was shaking from the effort of holding him still, her muscles contracting and tightening each time he flinched away from the pain. Tara laid a hand on his shoulder, calming him a little, but when Giles tried setting his middle finger, Spike vamped and snapped at her hand. Not moving it away, she sent soothing energies into him, murmuring softly in counterpoint to Buffy’s mumblings.

The two girls tried surrounding him, but he continued to buck against them both. Buffy held on, his face now tucked hard against her neck. His middle finger was the worst, broken in at least three spots, and twisted nearly around, the nail facing his palm, and Giles was having a hell of a time trying to get it straight. He moved the finger, Spike roared and vamped, his fangs clamping down on Buffy’s shoulder, through her shirt, drawing blood. No one spoke and Buffy just held him closer. Drawing her closer, Spike growled, only two things, pain and her, in his arms, her blood sliding down his throat. He growled, this time possessively, his free arm coming round to hold her to him. Spike stopped bucking against her, instead quieting, her blood doing more to calm him than anything. Tara rubbed her hand down his back, murmuring a sleep spell under her breath.
His fangs still embedded in her upper shoulder, Buffy clutched him tighter, her hands tensing around his upper arms. She’d almost expected this to happen and wasn’t at all surprised when it did. He was in enormous pain and hadn’t passed out, not even when Giles had to twist his fingers back to where they were supposed to be. She didn’t care that he’d bit her.

She didn’t care that he’d bit her. Buffy nearly let him go in that moment, when it struck her what she’d allowed him to do.

26. Red rain is falling down all over me.

Sensations sweet,
felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.

William Wordsworth, lines completed a few miles above Tintern Abbey

Your hand found mine.
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.
Oh, my carpenter,
the fingers are rebuilt.

Anne Sexton, The Touch

By the time Xander, Anya, and Dawn returned to the Magic Shop, four bags of O negative and additional supplies in hand, Spike was laid out on the couch in the training room, Buffy was sitting on the floor next to him while Giles and Tara were cleaning up the mess in the main area. The trail of blood that had dried up was easy to flake off the floor, though the wet stuff pooled under the chair was a bit harder to clean up. Spike was out cold, Buffy not much better and strangely enough, Giles wasn’t in the least bit upset with what had happened. Wasn’t like he planned it, wasn’t like he’d been trying to bite her, it was a reflex action, done in the throes of pain and given the amount of pain he already was in, Giles wasn’t surprised when the chip’s reaction was masked. It had been, however, despite Tara’s best efforts to put the vampire to sleep, the last straw that knocked him out.

They’d moved him, checking his injuries after he ingested Slayer’s blood. The leg wounds and the minor bites on his legs were closed up, disappearing as they watched, and the gaping wounds on his hand had stopped bleeding finally. He’d not taken a lot of blood from Buffy, as near as Giles could tell, but she was still reeling from the after-effects. On wobbly knees, she’d followed him into the training room, slumping down next to the couch.

Giles and Tara worked in silence, both of them wrapped up in their own thoughts. Tara had never seen Spike awake and in so much pain, she’d not seen him after Glory’s beating until almost a week later and he’d already been on the road to recovery. This was the first time she’d ever seen him badly injured. His hand looked like it had been fed through a meat grinder improperly, and only then because the fingers were still discernable. She’d nearly thrown up just looking at it.

But she’d helped him, as best she could, with her poor magics, hoping that the healing spell she’d woven around him would work, aided by Buffy’s blood.
She should be really upset with him, with herself. And yet, she almost couldn’t bring herself to care. *Oh, not true, not really.* He’d needed the healing – needed it like the rest of them needed air – and instinctively, he’d moved to take it without thinking. But she’d heard him whimper in pain when he’d sunk his teeth into her skin, felt his tears on her shoulder and something inside her couldn’t blame him. So it wasn’t life threatening. *But what good was a vampire warrior with one hand? What good would it be to further hamper an already handicapped warrior? None at all.*

A damaged Spike was a Spike that couldn’t help her, couldn’t fight. And she knew, as well as she knew herself that him losing the use of one of his hands would be damaging to his spirit beyond repair. He needed the fight, needed something to feel useful.

So she’d just held on tighter. Held him close to her chest, let his tears drip down her shoulder, mixing with the blood he couldn’t swallow. And never realized her own tears had slid down her face.

Despite her best efforts not to, she compared his bite to that of the other vampires who’d come close enough to her to get a taste. Only one of them had she offered herself to willingly, until now. While it had started out as an accident, Buffy wasn’t sorry he’d done it. Angel, in the midst of his own life-threatening crisis had bitten hard, nearly draining her, and causing no little amount of pain. The others didn’t really count, the Master and Dracula, because they’d gotten no more than just a little taste. But Spike, injured and out of it, hadn’t drained her at all, instead had cried when he realized what he’d done. That he’d slipped into unconsciousness almost immediately after clamping down was immaterial. She’d felt his tears, felt his remorse.

*Huh.*

Spike hadn’t wanted to bite her.

A vampire that didn’t want slayer’s blood. The Slayer of Slayers, William the Bloody, didn’t want her blood. Part of her was just a little miffed, but far more of her understood why he’d reacted the way he did. They’d come too far in the past couple of years to make this really simple. Despite all his attempts to kill her, despite their many close calls, this was the first time Spike had gotten a taste of her.

But the weirdest thing of all wasn’t that she understood his involuntary reaction to the pain, but that she was upset when he’d cried.

So was she angry? The answer was no.

Was she upset that he’d bitten her? Again no.

Was this as bad as what had happened to Angel?

*Nearly so. In this time, in this place. Yeah it was just about the same.* So, was she going to threaten him with further pain just to satisfy a non-existent need for revenge?

Not anytime soon.

Did she trust him? *Yeah.*
Did she trust him enough? *Oh, yeah.*

He’d bitten her, on her shoulder, not her neck, which was just as close and had more blood available. Hell, her jugular veins and carotid arteries were there, all within striking reach, and as a vampire he knew that better than anyone else. And what had he gone for? Her shoulder.

So yeah, she trusted him. Trusted him enough to offer more. Because if he wanted to use that hand any time in the next couple of weeks, she was going to have to donate. And she didn’t feel like bleeding drip by drip into a cup for him either.

She leaned against his chest, watching him. The clean white of the bandages was a stark contrast to his black tee shirt. They’d elevated his badly damaged right hand, propping it against the back of the couch. His left hand was across his chest, and as she watched him, it twitched a couple of times, then was still.

“Spike,” she whispered, “Can you hear me?” His hand twitched again, almost in agitation and she tried again to reach him. “It’s okay. Well, I mean it’s not really okay, but it’s not bad. I understand why you did it and I’m not gonna dust you, not even gonna get mad. I could, but, no point. So you can wake up now and I’m babbling,” Buffy huffed, exasperated with herself. “Really. I’m not gonna stake you. Giles isn’t either. So it’s all good. C’mon, Spike, wake up and talk to me.”

“Would, but you’re natterin’ on well enough for both of us,” he spoke without opening his eyes, afraid to look at her and see disgust and anger in her hazel green depths.

“Hah” *Oh that’s just brilliant babble-girl . . . Can’t you come up with something a little more intelligent?* Buffy grew serious seeing that he wouldn’t face her. “Hey, it’s really okay. You were in pain and just couldn’t control it so much,” she paused, running a hand over his forearm. “How’s your head now?”

“Throbbing in thirds to the hand,” was his sardonic reply.

They were silent for a moment, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. When he spoke, Buffy was surprised. “I’ll leave soon as I’m healed up. Get away so you don’t have to take care of it.”

Took her more than a minute to catch on, but when she did, her hand clenched around his forearm, digging into his skin.


“Bit you, sunshine, didn’t mean to, but did it all the same.” Still with his eyes closed, Spike turned his face away, into the back of the couch.

Thinking to herself very deeply for a moment, Buffy came to a very swift decision. She was the only one who could change his mind and she knew he was doing this out of some misguided sense of nobility.

Reaching for his injured hand, Buffy began to undo the gauze wrappings, revealing his mangled flesh. Her blood had worked miracles, because the wounds didn’t look nearly as bad as they had earlier, but there was still a long way to go before he could use it again, the damage was just too extensive for the little bit of her blood he’d managed to swallow down.
His fingers twitched as the air hit them and Spike finally opened his eyes to see what she was doing. Buffy had sat up on the couch, next to his hips, his injured hand now cradled in both of hers.

“You know, Slayer blood is the best healing agent for vampires,” she began conversationally, “Giles never mentioned it, not until Faith poisoned Angel and then hid the antidote.”

“If you drink enough of it,” she continued, “It will heal almost fatal injuries.” She paused long enough for him to glance at her face. “And it works really well on not-so-fatal ones.”

Spike just continued to watch her, not really sure where she was going with this, but unable to turn away.

“Thing is, I was planning on offering you some anyway.”

“Slayer,” he growled. “What are you sayin?’

“I think it’s pretty plain. This hand wouldn’t heal for weeks, even with regular human blood.” She stared straight into his eyes, willing him to understand. “I can’t let you go. I need you… need your help. Not ready to do this on my own yet.”

It was as much of an admission as she was willing to give. But he got it, like he always did. He always knew her, sometimes better than she knew herself. Without a word, Spike pulled her down, her head resting against his still chest.

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He must have passed out again, because when he came to Tara was re-bandaging his hand. Seeing he was awake again, she spoke. “Dawn brought back some splints, so I figured it was best to do that while you were out. Do you feel any better?”

Snorting a “No” at her, Spike tried to sit up.

“Don’t get up yet. I’ve got some blood for you. You want it now?”

“How’s Buffy?” was her only answer.

“If I tell you she’s fine will you believe me and drink?”

There was a twinkle in his eye, as he said, “You gonna answer me with questions until I say yes?”

Tara’s eyes glinted back with equal mischief. “Probably. You gonna believe me?”

He couldn’t help but respond, smiling back at her. “All right pet, gimme the goods.”

Holding the cup for him, Tara started speaking again. “She’s worried about you. Otherwise she’s fine. She changed her shirt for one of yours that got left here.”

At his raised eyebrows, Tara smiled a bit. “She didn’t want Xander getting stupid about it. They brought back four bags of O Negative.” Looking down at the drained cup, she asked, “Want another one?”
“Please, pet,” as she got up to leave, he touched her hand, “Thanks, Tara.”

“When you’re feeling better, I have a problem that I’d like your advice on, if it’s okay?” She looked away afraid he would reject her.

“Anything. Anytime.” Spike settled back against the couch, trying to will away the pain.

He opened his eyes when he heard footsteps nearing, knowing who it was before she spoke.

“‘Lo, Niblet. Come to check on me?”

“How do you feel?” There was real concern in her voice and a trace of tears as well.

“‘Ve been better. Also been worse.” He shifted, trying to get comfortable.

Dawn put down the cup of blood, moving to help him. “Okay now?”

“Yeah much better.” Catching her face in his hand, Spike looked into her eyes. “Hey, Bit, I’ll be right as rain soon enough.”

“Promise?” She sniffed a bit.

“Promise,” pausing a moment, he mock pouted, “Where’s m’treat?”

“Oh. Oh. Right here.”

Handing it to him, she unintentionally eased his current biggest fear. “Buffy wanted to bring it in, but I whined enough to get my way. She’s worried about you,” pausing barely long enough to breathe, she went on, “Giles is making with the books, he’s narrowed it down, well he’s pretty sure he has, but he’s been like wanting your opinion and Buffy’s like ‘no, he needs to rest it can wait until later’ and Giles was like ‘but Buffy this is important’ and Xander popped up with something like ‘he’s a demon, he’ll be fine with what rest he’s gotten’ and then Buffy got mad at Xander and what’s with you and my sister?”

It took Spike more than a minute to catch up with everything she’d said and longer than that to come up with an answer to her question.

“Why do you ask?” Spike figured he could buy himself a little more time, but catching sight of the look on her face, he had to re-think that.

“Spike. I saw you earlier, before you guys all left. You wanted to kiss her goodbye and she wanted to let you.”

“Brat. Spyin isn’t nice.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Spying? Duh. You guys were like in plain sight.” She poked his chest playfully. “As in not behind closed doors. Fair game for peeking. So?”

_Christ she was like a dog with a bone. Not giving up at all._ “What of it?”

“Just wanna know. Did you? Wanna kiss my sister?” Her face was, for the moment, unreadable.
Bringing the cup to his lips, Spike muttered, “Yeah. Did. Do.”

“Good. She needs it.”

And with that she left him alone.

_Bloody brat._

He didn’t realize that the sister in question had been standing in the doorway until her voice broke through his confused musings.

“She did nearly the same thing to me just now in the bathroom.”

“Did she now?”

“Yeah. Cept she asked me if I wanted to kiss you back.” Buffy sat down on the couch, her butt up against his legs.

“And you told her?”

“My answer was a little different from yours.”

“Oh.”

She could hear the disappointment, didn’t need to see it. “Yeah. I told her that I needed to kiss you back.”

“Wha?” His pleasure was sweet to hear.

“Yeah. Just like I _need_ to right now.” And she did.

Pulling back, Buffy said, “I actually came in to ask if you’re up to heading home. Giles has found out what it was – the dogs – and he’s going to do a bit more research at home, and,” she sighed, “I’m babbling again.”

“Yeah, you are, sunshine, but it’s precious. Go on, and?”

“I thought you’d be more comfy at home.”

“Yeah, would work. Couch is good but a bed would be nicer.”

Spike moved to get up and Buffy’s arms were there to help him. Her next words were spoken so softly he thought he imagined them until he caught the look on her face.

“Wanna do this in private anyway.”

27. _Softly to swim inside your veins_
Do you hunger for this  
The bliss of a sweet kiss  
*Shanghai’ed on a locust flight*  
The thirst of a vampire bite  
*Fills the emptiness inside*  
*Consuming everything green-eyed*  
*We Hunger*  
  _Siouxsie and the Banshees, We Hunger, from the album Hyaena_

He thought about what she’d said on the short ride home. They’d piled into Xander’s car, Spike stretched out in the back with Buffy and Tara, while Dawn was up front with the other two. He didn’t have much else to think about, other than pain. He refused to think about the information Giles had given him – ‘*hellhounds indeed*’ and so focused on Buffy’s somewhat cryptic words.

She couldn’t possibly mean what he was hoping she meant.

The house they all thought of as home was dark, no lights on at all. Tara murmured something about no one being home and looked away. Spike suddenly wondered if what she wanted to talk to him about had to do with Willow and was glad she’d said she would wait until he was a bit better. He had a sneaking suspicion he wouldn’t be able to give her much positive help in any case.

They piled out of the car, trying not to jar his already throbbing hand. Didn’t matter that healing had already started, the damned thing hurt like bloody hell. Every motion of the car set it off, even as Buffy held it for him.

He made it up the steps under his own power, just barely. Absently he headed for the basement, when Buffy’s voice and hands directed him upwards. “C’mon upstairs.”

Like it was natural. Like this was normal.

Neither one of the other two even flinched, Dawn already on her way up the stairs and Tara moving toward the kitchen, saying, “I’m just gonna put these in the fridge.”

And up they went, Spike trailing behind Buffy like a wounded puppy.

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Tara waited downstairs until the sound of their footsteps retreated. She didn’t want to go upstairs and find Willow in their bed like nothing was wrong between them.

She’d had a really good day with Dawn, had even enjoyed patrolling with the Buffybot, at least until Spike had gotten hurt.

And she hadn’t said anything about the deer scent she’d created, lasting long enough and strong enough to get the hounds away from Spike. Even though both Anya and Giles had looked at her kind of funny. She didn’t need to brag, she was just trying to help.

Tara suppressed a sudden chill. That’s what Willow kept saying – she was just trying to help. *Was it*
the same thing?  Was this how it all got started for Willow?  How things started to go bad?  Just wanting to help?

An image of Gaia entered her mind, of how the mother had looked at her. The echoed murmur of her blessing still rang in her ears and that doubt within her was eased. Tara wasn’t ever going to doubt that connection, that faith. It was unshakeable.

What she had done tonight for Spike wasn’t something that was going to start her on a slippery slide to badness. Heck, she hadn’t even been sure it was going to work, not until first one dog, then all of them had lifted their heads and howled. As it was, all she’d done was send a quick prayer to Artemis and picture a deer in her head.

Apparently, that had been more than enough.

Tara really didn’t want to think that the same trick might not work twice.

Sighing again, Tara made sure all the doors were locked and then went to fetch a pair of Spike’s much hated sweat pants.

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Dawn had gotten ready for bed in record time, then sped to Buffy’s room. Knocking on the door, she slipped inside just as her sister was moving to take off Spike’s boots.

He was laying cross-wise on the bed, his head closest to the windows. “Do you need anything before I go to sleep?”

Buffy had stopped unlacing his boots when she entered, then continued when it was clear Dawn was just trying to be helpful.

“I’m good.” Buffy got the first boot off, then had trouble with the knot on the second. “Oh, Spike, you want anything?”

“Painkillers. Whiskey. Nuthin else,” was his terse reply from behind clenched teeth.

“I’ll be right back.” And Dawn was gone in a flash of long brown hair.

Finally getting the knot undone and both boots off, Buffy sat on the edge of the bed near him. “Shirt or jeans first?”

“Shirt. Nuthin’ on under m’jeans,” he slurred.

There was no comment she could make to that statement that wasn’t going to sound like a come on. Actually, there wasn’t anything she could think that wasn’t one either.

“Okay. Sit up,” and suiting action to words, Buffy helped him up.

It wasn’t much of a struggle, since he was awake and helping, but it was difficult getting him out of the tee shirt. Grunting just a little, Buffy muttered, “You might want to think about expanding your wardrobe when we have time to shop.”
If he wasn’t in the grip of enormous pain, he might’ve made a comment about how very coupley that sounded, but instead he let it go and just grunted and groaned.

Laying back on the bed, Spike panted out, “Gimme a minute before we tackle the rest, yeah?”

“Whenever you’re ready. I’m gonna get changed.”

Just barely turning her back on him, Buffy abruptly decided to leave his tee shirt on and slid out of her shoes and jeans. She waited for a comment from him and when none was forthcoming, she turned to look at him.

He was watching her, a look on his face somewhere between pleasure and pain across his features. *His shirt.* She was wearing his shirt and damned little else.

“You are beautiful,” he breathed out, unable to think of something more profound to say.

It seemed to be enough, because she blushed, making her even more beautiful.

A knock on the door broke their silence and Tara’s voice on the other side caught their attention “Buffy?”

“Yeah?” She stood there silent, her mind blank. “Um, yeah?”

Opening the door a bit, Tara peeked in, “I brought some sweats for Spike.”

At Buffy’s questioning gaze, Tara blushingly confessed, “Been doing his wash for months.”

Which was more than enough explanation.

Before anyone had a chance to comment, Dawn’s voice came from the hallway. “Coming in. Got extra-strength Tylenol and um . . . a bottle of Jack Daniels and a bottle of Glen something or other. Looks like a demon language.”

“It’s Scots Gaelic, pet, not demonic.” Spike laughed a bit, despite his pain. Dawn was cute when she wanted to be.

Lifting up, Spike found himself surrounded by three concerned females. Buffy was immediately on the bed behind him, bracing his back, while Tara reached for his left arm. Dawn, not knowing what to do, stood there, juggling bottles of whiskey and painkillers.

“’M dead and gone to heaven, right?” His voice was strained and tired from the pain.

“You are dead, but heaven?” There was real amusement in Tara’s voice.

“Surrounded by beautiful girls. Must’ve done somethin’ right.”

Tara giggled, catching sight of the look on Buffy’s face. “Beautiful?”

“Yup. Beautiful. All three of you.”

Dawn rolled her eyes, then winked at the other two, “And who’s the prettiest one of all?”
“Ah, Niblet, not gonna play Paris for you.” Spike leaned back against Buffy, his head resting on her shoulder. “You are all beautiful, m’girls.”

Holding out the whiskey, Dawn asked again, “Who’s prettiest?”

“Dawnie, don’t tease him.” Tara’s voice sounded so motherly that they all looked at her.

Giving in, Dawn handed him the Jack Daniels then popped open the Tylenol to give him a handful. Moving quickly, Tara got the teenager out of the room. Murmuring “Goodnights” the pair closed the door behind them and burst into giggles.

They were alone. Finally.

Buffy climbed off the bed, holding Spike steady with one hand. Stopping her, he said, “I’ll manage alone. Go brush your teeth or somethin’.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You can’t do this one handed.” She stood in front of him now, her hands on her hips, just surveying his state.

He couldn’t really say anything. She was determined on this. Way he felt right now, wouldn’t matter if she was trussed up and waiting for him, he wouldn’t be able to act on his desires anyway.

Getting to his feet, Spike undid his buttons and started sliding the jeans down his hips. At the first sign of resistance, Buffy’s hands were there helping him. Her eyes strayed below his waistband once, sneaking a peek at his butt. *Oh. . . oh . . . yum,* she thought, then had to refocus on helping him because he stumbled a bit getting his feet untangled from his pooled up jeans.

She tried not to look, tried to keep her eyes from dipping below his belly button. She really, really did. But when he turned around to take the sweats from her hand, Buffy couldn’t help it.

He wasn’t a big guy. Wasn’t tall like Riley or broad like Angel. In fact he was the shortest guy she’d ever been with since high school.

But his stature and physique were . . . *Yeah* . . . all sculpted lines and ripped abs and . . . *oh, yeah.* . . . and for a guy who was in a boatload of pain, he was *impressive.* . . .

She caught herself staring and blushed furiously. Tearing her eyes away, Buffy wasn’t able to look at his face either, afraid he would mock her. But when his hand reached out to touch her chin, she tilted her eyes to his.

Dark smoldering blue stared back at her, without shame or remorse in their depths. “Your fault, kitten.”

And then he dropped the issue. He was in too much pain to pursue it in any case. Spike sighed his regret, then whispered, “Soon, pet,” so softly Buffy wasn’t sure she hadn’t imagined it.

Wordlessly, they got the sweats on him, working together, then Buffy climbed into bed. Spike laid
down with his back facing her, facing the door.

“Spike. This isn’t going to work,” she half-whined at him.

“Just go to sleep, kitten.” His hand was throbbing and despite his knowing timing was off, Spike’s libido wasn’t listening much.

“You can’t bite me from there.”

He sat straight up, turning his head to look at her. “What?”

“You heard me.” Playing with the hem of his tee shirt, she looked away. “I meant what I said before. You need to heal.”

“Buffy. You sure?” He almost believed he was passed out and dreaming until she laid her hand on his back.

“Sure as I can be.”

“Right then.” Surveying first her, then the bed, Spike said, “Sit up, sweetheart.”

He began one-handedly re-arranging the pillows until he was satisfied. Sliding one under her hips, he said, “Roll over, love.”

Not sure what he was doing since she couldn’t figure out what he was thinking Buffy complied without too much complaining. Sliding in behind her, Spike wormed his good arm underneath her, cupping her close.

His breath was cool against the back of her neck, his lips brushing against her skin. Goosebumps flared all over as his voice sounded just below her ear. “Close your eyes, kitten.”

His left hand snaked underneath the tee shirt, resting just outside her panties. His damaged hand rested over her, just holding her in place without any pressure.

Spike ran light kisses from the nape of her neck to her collarbone, pushing aside the gaping fabric. Buffy moved closer, her butt cradling his erection. The kisses became nibbles, open mouthed sucking, while his left hand stole inside her panties, circling and seeking entrance. Her hips moved toward his hand, tilting forward to give him better access, and as his fangs nicked her, Spike found her clit.

She gasped, soft panting breaths hitching and sighing as he played her body. He lapped at the blood, running his rough tongue across her now hyper skin, his fingers circling her achingly empty pussy, but not entering.

His name breathed from her lips, a long drawn out sigh, begging him for more. Spike growled into the spot behind her nape, smiling when she keened and writhed against his hand. Cupping her mound while his mouth closed over her scored shoulder, Spike sunk his fangs into her neck and slid a finger inside her as Buffy shuddered in climax, gasping his name.
28. A charmed slumber

I watch thy grace: and in its place
my heart a charmed slumber keeps
while I muse upon thy face;
and a languid fire creeps
through my veins to all my frame,
dissolvery and slowly: soon
from thy rose-red lips my name
floweth; and then, as in a swoon
with dinning sound my ears are rife,
my tremulous tongue faltereth,
I lose my colour, I lose my breath,
I drink the cup of costly death
brimmed with delicious draughts of warmest life
I die with my delight, before
I hear what I would hear from thee

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Eleanore, 1832

Buffy felt him all around her, his strength enveloping her, gently holding her in place. His injured forearm tightened around her, pulling her even closer. She gasped as he fell back against the mattress, pulling her with him.

There were goosebumps all over her skin, her throat dry and her breathing uneven. Soft whimpers and gasps escaped her, mostly just long exhalations of his name, all the more moving for their near silence.

There was no coherence to her thoughts, the sensations bombarding her from every direction. His skin made her burn, his touch on her, inside her put torch to the flame, his growls set off an answering hum within her throat and she could feel his tongue and teeth caressing and nibbling as he drank.

Every time she sighed, gasped, or whimpered his name, Spike growled low in his throat in response. His hips bucked up against her nearly bare ass and Buffy’s convulsive shudders signaling another climax began again.

There was no beginning or end to the climax, just one continuous shudder moving through her each time his fingers pumped inside her.

Her skin felt like glass again, only this time it was like hot melty glass that can be molded and shaped, instead of brittle and breakable. He was forming her, forging a brand new Buffy, pliable and made for his hands only, smoothing away the brittle edges, softening her lines. Heat surged through her, flooding, surging toward his questing fingers.

She convulsed again, his name a constant litany interspersed with soft whimpers of nothing more than unintelligible moans of “Oh”.

Body taught like a fine Stradivarius, Buffy kept climaxing, every muscle in her contracting, centering
on his fingers thrusting in and out of her, on his mouth sucking on her skin.

Spent, replete, thoroughly exhausted and satisfied beyond thinking, Buffy curled in on herself, rolling back onto her side, bringing him along with her. Sighing into her pillow, Buffy settled back into her skin, her mind blissfully blank.

Spike could feel the aftershocks of her orgasms chase themselves through her muscles, though his own body was still aching for release.

It had been a calculated risk and worth every second of it. Prolonging the actual bite as long as possible and giving Buffy an orgasm or two had been enough to not trigger the chip.

Or if it had fired, Spike was too involved to even notice it.

Buffy was sound asleep, still curled in his arms, still in the same position, her body still next to his.

He hadn’t taken a lot from her, not near to draining her at all. He’d made a silent promise to her, to only take the bare minimum of what he needed which was exactly what he did. Didn’t take much anyway, a little bit went a long way, and Buffy’s was the strongest, sweetest, and most potent slayer blood he’d ever tasted.

So now he couldn’t sleep. Didn’t want too. His hand was itching crazily as her blood did its job, healing the cuts and breaks, knitting flesh and bone back together. And as much as he wanted to crawl between her legs, slide into her warm wetness, Spike knew now wasn’t . . . as much as he wanted too, he couldn’t fulfill the promises his body wanted to deliver.

His hand wasn’t healed for one, for another, he didn’t want this to be once and then for Buffy to have second thoughts and dump his sorry ass when she faced reality.

And reality would hit, sooner or later. More than likely in the form of the whelp’s disapproval or worse, in the realization that he was just a substitute for Angel.

He’d lived through that once, didn’t need a repeat, thank you very much. The spectre of Drusilla’s feelings for her sire was always a ghost he fought, and while he’d won the battle many a time, that war was a lost cause. Drusilla loved Angel in a way that she’d never loved Spike, and now, with this woman still in his arms, Spike faced the same fight all over again.

Unattainable women.

He nearly got up from the bed, exasperation and self-pity flooding him. Somehow his body’s tension communicated itself to her, because Buffy rolled over, reaching for him, whispering his name. Wrapping his healing arm around her, Spike kissed her forehead and smiled despite his prior thoughts.

She had reached for him. Called out for him. Said she wanted – needed him here – couldn’t do it without him. Allowed him . . . oh yeah . . . to drink . . . to touch her.

A feeling he’d never experienced before in his life surfaced, a hope, that maybe, just maybe, this time
around the battle would be worth it, and the outcome was not already a foregone conclusion.

Settling himself closer, Spike breathed in her scent, closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

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Giles wasn’t thrilled with the information he’d found. Once he’d seen them, he’d known immediately what they were. He figured Spike must’ve also, because his calling the lead one Baskerville was a dead give-away.

What he didn’t understand was why here and why now – Anya’s comment about them being far from home striking a chord.

There was still the question of the huntsman controlling the pack of hell hounds, and since he usually wasn’t far behind them, Giles was forced, again, to wonder why here and now.

The how was becoming abundantly clearer with each reference he consulted.

He really was going to have to keep a closer eye on Willow.

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Tara hadn’t gone back to her room after she and Dawn left Buffy alone with Spike.

Despite the late hour, by unspoken agreement, perhaps knowing what might occur between the two, both girls headed down the stairs to watch movies.

That’s where they both fell asleep, never knowing if Willow was home or not.

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After leaving the quad, Willow had tried to calm down, but her mind was too confused to settle long enough to even focus on one thing, much less calm enough to meditate.

She walked. Walked for hours and hours without thought or care to direction, to wherever it was she was going, until she found herself in a playground. Sitting on a swing, Willow waited a few moments, wondering if her mind was going to follow her feet and just settle down for a bit.

Clearing her head, Willow finally registered her surroundings. She remembered this playground. It was halfway between her house and Xander’s parent’s. They’d spent a lot of time here as little kids, nothing more important than deciding what area to play in weighing on their minds.

Before life got complicated, before they found out about the monsters, before she knew the monsters had different names, and that she could fight them.

Looking up at the moon, Willow thought, that maybe, she could fix things, go back to before she
knew about the monsters, she could fix it all, change things so she didn’t know Xander or Buffy and . . . she gave a half huff. Well that won’t do, because then I wouldn’t have all this power. Silly wish. I like this me much better, way better than old scaredy, dorky Willow.

Firmly on board with the self-liking, she thought.

And the power . . . yeah. Oh, yeah.

The power was worth changing everything for, but not if it changed the power itself. She’d sooner give up her arms than this feeling.

Willow stood up, taking three steps away from the swing set. Stretching her neck side to side, Willow inhaled deeply, extending a hand toward the swing set, setting it in motion.

Directing her gaze around the playground, Willow set in motion all the movable pieces. The swings were going, the see-saws bouncing up and down, the circle thingy was whirling like a demented top, everything was in motion. Grinning to herself, she decided to test the boundaries, see what else she could do. Focusing on the slide and jungle gym, Willow wiggled her fingers.

At first, nothing happened. Nothing moved and there was no indication she’d even looked in that direction. Screwing her features tighter, Willow re-focused.

And the slide began walking, goose-stepping, almost hopping around the field, while the jungle gym began re-constructing and creating new shapes and forms, as it slowly moved from its stationery position, even the monkey bars were moving, rolling over each other back and forth between the longer bars. Willow clapped her hands together, laughing out loud in absolute glee, throwing her head back.

Looking up at the sky, Willow wondered what the limits were – if she even had any. It was a clear, late summer night, warm and sultry. The sky was dark blue velvet with silver stars and a nice fat, still nearly full moon in the sky. Staring up at the moon, Willow thought, at first dismissing the notion, but as she stood there, the thought became more irresistible. Stretching her hand up, Willow focused all her energy on the moon, willing it to dance in the sky.

It took a while, forcing her to concentrate all her energy, but, just as she was about to give up for good, the moon began wavering and shifting in the night sky. Shaking and laughing out loud, Willow spun around and around, watching while the moon dipped and spun in company with her.

Drunk on her power, Willow spun round and round and round, laughing until tears sprang from her eyes.

This was wonderful.

This was amazing.

This was what she was born to do.

Falling down onto the grass, Willow rolled over, once more facing the night sky.
Buffy shifted in her sleep, nuzzling closer. Muscles twitched, in response to her brain’s stimuli. She was back in the box, unable to escape, her balled fists pushing against the walls holding her in. The air getting... no air. Whimpers fought with a scream. No air. Help. My feet are caught. No air, no escape. Cool air brushed past her face and strong hands... Hands. Spike. Where is he? I need him. He’ll save me. Buffy reached to grasp those hands, calling his name. “Spike, help me. Don’t leave me here. Help me.”

Her voice grew as the fear did. Panic set in, her only lifeline the thought of him. “Spike, please, please don’t leave me. Help me... Spike... Spike... help!”

A voice, deep and sleepy, sounded in her ear. “Right here, love, I’m right here. Not leaving. Never leave you, kitten.”

Buffy collapsed against him, harsh yet soft noises rasping from her throat. Clutching at him in need, she sobbed against his chest. Cradling her in his good arm, Spike pulled her closer.

“S all right, kitten. ‘M right here. Just a dream. Nuthin more ‘en that. Shush, now.” Low and deep, Spike just held her close, his voice echoing in the otherwise quiet room.

Buffy held onto him as if he was the only solid thing in her world, that he alone could chase away the fears and help her. Everything crashed within her, the stress and strain of being the slayer, countless impossible decisions on her shoulders knowing, at times, one wrong step, one failure could end the world. She’d been dead, done, at peace. Thought it was all over. But no. Willow had dragged her back, into pain and hard decisions. Buffy was suddenly afraid she had nothing left inside her, no well of strength left for any battle, not even a little one. And the only person who appeared to understand was the man holding her in his arms.

She was hollow, a bare husk of that crazy brave fifteen year old she’d been when she found out she was chosen. Now she was barely in her twenties and everything she had, every dream, every hope had been stripped and torn away. She had nothing left. She needed this man, needed his support, his strength, his protection to help her through. Because he was the only one that stayed. And she didn’t know how, anymore, to ask for his help. Help she knew she desperately needed.

His eyes barely opened, he could still see the fear in her scrunched up features. Her words, when they came, roused his protective nature. “Scared. Been scared. Can’t do this anymore. So tired being strong.”

She clung to him, her arms burrowing themselves around him tighter. “So tired of always being the strong one. Can’t show emotion, can’t... have to make tough decisions... always comes down to me. But I’m scared, Spike... I can’t do this alone anymore.”

He didn’t know what to say, how to respond. He’d had a feeling this was a problem for her, even before she’d jumped. Too much responsibility dumped on the shoulders of a young, fragile girl, who’s only defense was to erect walls around herself, yes, in protection – but also in isolation, which was not good. Before he could respond, she started speaking again.

“Was dreaming I was trapped again, in that place... and you couldn’t... I needed your help. Needed you to help me out.” Her tears started falling again, pooling onto his chest.

“‘M right here, kitten. Not going anywhere.” He could only re-assure her of his presence, his
willingness to stay. Spike didn’t think pointing out he’d stuck by Drusilla for a hundred plus years would be a good thing at the moment, but it was on the tip of his tongue to remind the woman in his arms that he wasn’t the leaving type. Instead he just held her tighter, pressing her against his side.

“Promise me you won’t leave.”

Dumping her flat on her back, Spike raised himself up on his elbow, so he could look down at her. A thousand thoughts were racing through his head, none of which made any coherent sense. Too much for his poor brain to process. Spike stared down at her, his injured hand just dead weight against her side.

“Buffy,” he started, then stopped when her eyes focused on his lips.

“Buffy,” he tried again. She looked back into his eyes, hers filled with unshed tears.

Before he could speak again, she reached up to touch his face, her thumbs across his lips.

“Promise me, like you did before, like that night . . . promise me you won’t leave me.”

He couldn’t talk. His own unshed tears pooled and his throat was dry and tight with emotion. Clearing his throat, Spike brushed her hair away from her face with his left hand. “For as long as you want me, kitten, I’m yours.”

Pulling his face down to hers, Buffy kissed him.

29. To watch the night in storms

Out of this nettle danger we pluck this flower safety.
   Henry IV, pt 1, act 2, sc 4

The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.
In the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies
the world is full of enemies
there is no safe place.
   Anne Sexton, Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn

They’d all over slept, curled around each other in different poses, but each one of them feeling pretty much the same thing, this is safe, this is comfortable, this is home. Spike was curled around Buffy, his front to her back, arms tight around her, as she clung to him even in the depths of her sleep, his injured hand cradled between her breasts. She’d not let him go, not once during the night, afraid the dreams would come again to haunt her hard-won peace. Downstairs, on the couch in the living room, Dawn and Tara were curled up together like puppies, long legs and hair wrapped around each other, the television still on.

The house was still, undisturbed by any living or non-living thing, its walls shielding the inhabitants
from the outside world.

But peace, especially in Sunnydale, is a fragile thing. Doesn’t always last long, sometimes it doesn’t last at all. And this morning was going to be no exception.

For now, though, those calling Revello Drive home and meaning it, were all safe and sound.

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It was Saturday, which meant lazing about in bed usually, or sometimes, it meant getting up and bringing donuts and goodies to Buffy’s house. Admittedly, he hadn’t done it in a while, not for a couple of weeks, but Xander figured he might as well start doing it again, since Buffy was now back. So, poking Anya awake, he mumbled something to her about getting donuts and heading over there.

She grumbled her own response, then moved toward the bathroom and the shower to wake herself up.

Before long, they were dressed and on their way, after having called Giles to see if he was up for some bonding and information sharing at Buffy’s. His response was even more garbled than Anya’s had been, though Xander got the gist of it, understanding that the older man would be there before the hour was out.

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She didn’t have a key, had forgotten to bring one yesterday, was it only yesterday? When she’d left the house to go to the registrar’s office. No... that was Friday when she’d done that. So it couldn’t be... Willow shrugged her shoulders, then touched the back door’s handle. A little arc of electricity sparked from her fingertips to the door, snaking around the metal. A distinctive click sounded and Willow opened the door and walked inside.

The house was quiet and she figured everyone was either out or asleep. Humming under her breath, she surveyed the contents of the refrigerator and the cabinets. Ahhh, pancakes and bacon and all sorts of breakfasty goodness, she thought. Standing in the middle of the kitchen next to the island, Willow raised her fingers and emptied the cabinets of all the supplies she would need.

Still humming, she got out the bowls and pans and all sorts of things, setting everything down. Mixing and chopping and frying bacon and getting everything together, Willow sat at the island, her eyes moving this way and that.

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The noise in the kitchen woke her and Tara gently nudged Dawn off her so that she could get up and see what was going on. She didn’t think it was a burglar, for one thing, it sounded like cooking noises, for another it was far too noisy for someone trying to be quiet. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, Tara stretched and the smell of cooking bacon and pancakes reached her nose.
Dawn stretched awake beside her, and her sleepy voice sounded in the air. “If you are here, who is the cooking fairy in the kitchen? It can’t be Buffy . . . she burns pancakes.”

Smiling down at the teen, Tara said, “I’m not sure, but whoever it is, is welcome to do this all the time.”

“Well, I’m hungry, so let’s go eat.” Getting to her feet, Dawn pulled the older girl after her and they headed toward the breakfast smells in the kitchen.

And stopped short at the sight that greeted them.

Willow was sitting on the island countertop, her back to the hallway, humming under her breath, while all around her the kitchen utensils and appliances did all the work. The pancakes were flipping themselves, while a knife was slicing fruit and the coffeepot was perking away, and orange juice was dancing out of the refrigerator. It looked like some hellmouth version of those weird cartoon movies, where everything has a human face and a personality . . . especially those way-too-cute Disney movies.

She looked like a weird Sunnydale version of Mrs. Weasley – a Mrs. Weasley on crack.

It was creeping Dawn out.

The two in the doorway shared a look, the situation bothering both of them. Afraid of saying anything, for fear of everything landing on the floor in a heap, they backed away from the kitchen, then sat down together on the couch. Neither one knew what to say.

Tara was floored. This was just . . . what Willow was doing was just a blatant and completely unnecessary use of power, it just . . . why use magic for such a simple task?

For Dawn, while it looked cool, something about it smelled of nothing good.

The two were still sitting there stunned when Xander and Anya came in through the front door.

“Hey, you two, what’s cooking?”

Dawn nearly fell over in completely inappropriate laughter.

“Good morning, strangely laughing teenager,” was Anya’s greeting, which just sent the two further over the edge, both girls now laughing hysterically. It wasn’t good laughter either, but the other two didn’t know that.

Willow’s voice chimed in from the kitchen, “Hey, got pancakes and stuff ready. Anyone hungry?”

Xander was first in the kitchen and everything must have been normal, because he never said a word about it and the two girls thought maybe they were imagining things, until Anya walked into the kitchen, saying, “This room reeks of magic. What did you do, Willow?”

“Nothing. Just fixed breakfast.” But there was a defensive note in her voice that wasn’t there before, and both Dawn and Tara noticed it.

There was so much food, Xander didn’t know where to start. “Will, you’ve out done yourself. This
is awesome. Puts my donuts to shame.”

He dug in, his plate piled high with pancakes and syrup. Anya also had a couple of pancakes and fruit on her plate, but the other two just picked, almost as if they were afraid of eating what Willow had prepared. They ate in relative silence, neither Dawn nor Tara willing to bring up what they’d seen, while Xander was too busy eating to even notice their unease.

Taking a breather, he looked up, suddenly realizing that Buffy wasn’t awake yet. Getting to his feet, he headed for the stairs, telling the girls, “Just gonna hit the bathroom, be right back.”

He bounded up the stairs, heading for the bathroom, then veering off to knock on Buffy’s door. “Hey, Buffster, you’re missing out on pancakey goodness that Willow fixed up for everyone.”

When he got no response, Xander did what he always did – he opened the door to her room.

And got an eyeful.

Gaping at the picture on the bed, Xander gobbled something in his throat.

Neither figure on the bed even registered his presence.

So much for predatory and slayer senses.

Rubbing his eyes, hoping to clear the vision, Xander was disappointed when the scene didn’t change. *Nope. They’re still there.*

Buffy was tucked up in Spike’s arms, his curled around her protectively, both of them sound asleep. The odd thing was, they both looked so peaceful. None of those harsh lines he’d noticed before were on her face and Spike looked like a little boy clutching his favorite toy. Xander didn’t know what to think.

Reacting without thinking, he slammed the door behind him and yelled down the stairs, “Willow! What the hell have you done??!”

Almost yelling at the top of his voice, he continued, “No amount of cookies is gonna make up for this!”

Xander practically ran down the stairs, nearly barreling into Giles, who was coming in the front door, meeting the girls who were coming in from the kitchen, everyone talking all at once. The noise in the hallway started getting louder, until finally a very sleepy and rather annoyed voice sounded from the top of the stairs. “Can you all just keep it down a bit?”

Dawn and Tara exchanged a glance, catching sight of the look on Xander’s face, while Giles just looked about completely confused. Willow was still trying to say something to Xander while Anya looked around at all their expressions, quickly coming to a conclusion.

Giles was the first to speak, herding everyone away from the hallway into the kitchen. “Come now everyone, let’s get out of the hallway. Buffy, when you’re ready, please join us.”

Xander wouldn’t speak, a scowl on his features that made Giles pause, wondering just what new fiasco he’d stepped into. The girls wore equal looks of knowledge and wariness, except for Willow, who’s face was defensively schooled. Stepping into the kitchen, Giles noted the breakfast dishes
arrayed on the counter, and asked, “Did you make any tea?”

At a shake of Tara’s head, Giles put the kettle on to boil and settled down for explanations.

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Her bedroom door slamming startled them both awake, and she caught his chin with the top of her head, jarring the both of them to full wakefulness. Buffy groaned into the pillow, then rolled over to face him. Kissing his bruised chin, she asked, “You okay?”

He nodded once, curling back around her, pulling her towards him. “‘M fine. Just startled is all.”

The loud voices in the hallway penetrated the calm of the room, and Spike sighed, believing this was all at an end. Reluctant to let her go, he held on tighter, rubbing himself against her. She settled in closer, hugging him back with equal fervor. Listening to the rising note of hysteria outside their door, Buffy groaned again. “Can we get them to all go away?”

“They’re your mates, sweetheart. Only you can send them packing.” He didn’t want to move, didn’t want to let her go, almost certain now all this would come to an end.

Smiling up at him, Buffy ran her fingers down his face. “Don’t wanna get up. Wanna stay here.”

_Ooh_, she thought, _there it is, that smirk that drives me batty_, that half the time aggravated her no end and the other half set her back to being thirteen faced with her first crush. Nuzzling into her neck, Spike softly growled against her skin. “Don’t wanna let you go, pet, wanna keep you here.”

But the noise in the hallway got louder, words crashing against each other, nothing making any sense, because no one was listening to anyone but their own self. Spike sighed, able to pick out the most strident of the voices, which just happened to be Xander. Brushing kisses against her skin, he whispered, “Harris found us.”

Her voice was equally low, laced with regret. “Thought it was him.” Her sigh was deep. “Didn’t want him to find out this way.”

“Find out what?” He was playing confused, hope beating fragile wings against his dead heart.

“About us.” Buffy pulled him closer, rubbing her cheek against his. “There is an us, right?”

Stunned, he just looked down at her. How in all the hells was he supposed to answer that? Never thought she would be the one pushing the issue between them, always thought it would have to have been him to keep pushing the envelope, making _her_ accept _him_, not the other way round. Damn girl just kept him off balance.

“Spike?”

“Yeah?” He looked completely bewildered. Utterly fuddled and unsure, Spike just looked down at her. “Yeah, kitten?”

“There is an us . . .” Buffy let her voice trail off, for once uncertain as to his reaction. He was quiet, too quiet. This was so unlike him that she wasn’t sure what was happening.
“Buffy.” He started to speak, thought better of what he was going to say, then opened his mouth again. “You better go calm them down.”

She looked at him strangely, then got up and made her request, noting that everyone was in the hall at the bottom of the stairs, even Giles. Looking down at everyone, really wanting nothing more than to go back to bed, she said, “Can you all just keep it down a bit?”

Without waiting for a response, she went back to her bed. Giles’ voice came up at her, “Come now everyone, let’s get out of the hallway. Buffy, when you’re ready, please join us.”

Spike was sitting up, his back against the headboard, watching her come back into the room. He’d half expected her to just leave him there, especially after his rather eloquent non-response to her statement. He could tell she was confused and a bit annoyed with him, since she just stood at the side of her dresser, studiously not looking at him. Getting up, he pulled her into his embrace.

“Already told you, ‘m yours for as long as you want. All yours, kitten. Not going anywhere.”

“I know you did, but . . .” she couldn’t look at him, afraid he would tell her it would be like it was with Dawn, he would just watch over her and not hold her every night like he’d been doing. Afraid that he wasn’t hers anymore. Afraid that maybe he’d never really been hers at all.

“Told you once, how I felt. Hasn’t changed, love, still feel the same way.” Spike turned her round to face him. Abruptly, he realized he wasn’t dealing with the slayer part of her, hadn’t been dealing with her for days, since her resurrection. This was Buffy, the little girl who had her heart stomped on again and again by the men in her life, from her piss-poor excuse for a father to Angelus to Riley and all the idiots in-between, including the two men downstairs. Well, he wasn’t gonna be another one in a long list of disappointing men.

Those walls she’d erected around herself were, at least for the moment, down. She was allowing her vulnerability to show – something he’d never expected. But this had been starting to happen before she’d jumped, when it all started to become too much. And she’d actually come to him, asked for his help.

Hoping that those defensive walls were down for good, throwing caution to the wind, letting his heart go for it, Spike repeated what he’d said to her those long months ago, when he’d had her chained up. “I love you, pet. Not gonna leave you until you throw me out on my ear. So, yeah,” he lifted her up, ignoring the twinge of pain in his right hand, “Yeah, there is an us.”

And he kissed her so thoroughly that Buffy’s whole body responded.

Breaking away from each other, she wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight. He grunted, teasing her. “Ya know, pet, you do that to someone else it’ll break their ribs.”

Laughing softly, she said, “Found that out the hard way.”

“C’mon, goldilocks, let’s go face the wolves.” Tugging on her hand, Spike pulled her to the door.

30. Walk through the Fire
Given the number of people in such a small area, the noise level should have been fairly high. Oddly enough, it was eerily silent. Tara and Dawn had been the last back into the kitchen by unspoken agreement, and while the others sat around the island, they remained standing by the hallway entrance. Anya had sat down directing her gaze back at the other two. There was no doubt in her mind what secret they were hiding, and she figured, rightly, that Xander had just stumbled upon something he truly didn’t like. And judging by the looks on their faces, Dawn and Tara knew what or more specifically, who Xander had discovered. His reaction was all too obvious to Anya’s mind.

Stealing a quick look at her boyfriend, she knew he was just about to blow his top. His face, since he’d come down the stairs, was devoid of color, except for two bright spots on his cheeks, and a muscle was twitching along his mouth. It heralded an explosion of epic proportions. Willow was still decidedly in the dark about whatever was about to happen, too intent on proclaiming innocence for a sin she wasn’t even sure she’d committed.

Giles was happily munching on a stack of pancakes, waiting for his cup of tea to steep, also unaware that things were about to come to a rather heated point. Swiveling around in her chair, Anya got up and started to clean, something she always did when she was nervous. It was the only release she had at the moment.

And thus, it was when the two missing members of the household arrived, her back was to the doorway.

Buffy had made some noise to him about putting on a shirt before they went downstairs to face everyone, and Spike had quickly over-ruled that. “No, m’not getting dressed so’s not to offend the whelp. He barged in on us. Too bad for him.”

And so they went, her in his tee shirt and him in the sweat pants and both of them wearing damn little else. He stopped, halfway down the staircase, two steps below where she stood, then turned to look at her. They were almost the same height, faces barely inches apart and she could clearly see the look in his eyes. Before she had a chance to brace herself, Spike had her pinned against the wall, his mouth on hers and one hand up underneath the shirt. Kissing her breathless, he wormed two fingers past her panties, sliding inside her, his thumb pressing on her clit as he held her.
Gasping for air, her arms reached up to pull him closer and soft groans filled the hallway. Breaking away from her, his fingers still thrusting in and out, Spike smiled evilly, his teeth pulling on her lower lip. Oh yeah, she looks thoroughly debauched. Too bad if the whelp objects. Her small hand wrapped around his wrist, holding his hand there, as he tried to slide away from her. Little whimpers gusted against his face as he leaned in for another searing kiss. This time, when he pulled back, he stepped away, dragging his fingers slowly from her aching pussy. His grin was pure devilment, as he tugged her down the steps, and she shuddered at the loss of his touch, then hissed his name softly as he licked his fingers clean.

“Now we go.”

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The anger was building, boiling and burbling inside him, swirling and looking for a focal point. He didn’t believe Willow hadn’t had anything to do with the situation he’d seen upstairs in Buffy’s room. *It had to be another wonky spell. Something.* He refused to believe that it wasn’t anything but. There was no other way Buffy would allow Spike to get close. *No way.* Xander refused to think beyond the idea of a spell gone awry.

He couldn’t look at any of the girls, wouldn’t look Giles in the eye. Instead he just tapped the fork against his discarded plate, pinging it with growing force each time it hit the edge of the plate. There was a noise on the stairs, and Xander looked up, waiting for Buffy to come into the kitchen. And waited.

Expecting her to walk in the kitchen alone, Xander nearly fell off the stool when Spike preceded Buffy into the room. Their clasped hands weren’t immediately visible, but for once, Xander actually picked up on their body language, noting how close they were standing, how Buffy didn’t leave his side. Spike nudged Dawn as he walked past her, then smiled nicely at Tara, which made Xander see red. And like the proverbial bull and red flag, he went charging into it.

“Why is he still here?” Xander asked no one in particular.

“Pretty much because he lives here.” Dawn’s voice piped up, answering when it looked like everyone else was going to stay silent.

“He lives here? I thought he lived in a crypt like all the other dead things.” There was growing belligerence in Xander’s tone.

“Yeah, Xander. You know he’s pretty much been here since Buffy . . .” Tara looked over at Buffy, an apology in her eyes.

“It’s okay, Tara, you can say it. Since I was gone.” Buffy tightened her hold on Spike’s hand and they shared a brief look.

Giles got up, moving toward the stove, subtly moving away from Xander and closer to Spike. While he had no clue what set the younger man off, Giles had a very bad feeling about what was going on.

“Well, don’t you think it’s time he went back to the crypt and stayed there?” The anger started to really surface in his tone, and it was hard for anyone to miss it.
“Xander, what’s your damage?” Was Dawn’s half-innocent query.

“My damage? I’m not damaged. I’m not the one sleeping with the undead demon.”

Everyone stopped. No one moved and hardly anyone breathed. Giles glanced over his teacup to the blond pair, his face devoid of any real shock. Anya froze at the kitchen sink, and of all of them, only Willow was truly surprised.

“You’re out of line, Harris.” For the first time since entering the kitchen, Spike spoke. “No need to speak like that to Buffy.”

“Don’t you speak, you demon scumbag.” Xander’s anger took over completely.

Gasps filled the room, not the least of which came from his own girlfriend. Giles put the cup down, saying, “That was a bit uncalled for, Xander.”

Rounding on the older man, Xander’s mouth just spewed forth more hatred. “Don’t you tell me what to do – tell her,” and he pointed at Buffy, “That what she’s doing is wrong and disgusting and she’s just degrading herself.”

“Xander. Shut up.” Dawn’s voice sounded from Spike’s right, while Buffy clung tighter to his good hand.

The younger man groaned. “Don’t tell me you think this is a great idea, Dawnie, coz there’s nothing right about your sister sleeping with a vampire – especially Spike.”

He said his name with such contempt that Buffy couldn’t stomach it anymore.

“Xander, stop it.” Spike’s temper was getting the better of him.

“Don’t you tell me what to do. You are so in the wrong here that you don’t get to speak.” Xander waved his hands at Spike, emphasizing each word.

Buffy saw red, finally finding her voice, “Excuse me? Last time I checked this was my house and my life.” Coming to stand next to Spike, their fingers still entwined, she continued, “And Spike has as much right to say what he wants as you do.”

“How can you defend him? How can you hold his hand?” In his desperate anger, Xander’s voice rose to a near shout. “How can you let him touch you?”

Unconsciously, Giles and the girls moved closer, while Buffy tried to formulate an answer that wouldn’t escalate tempers further. “Xander, can’t you see how he’s changed?”

“He’s evil Buffy, he’s tried to kill us all – kidnaped me and Willow – god, Buff, how many times has he tried to kill you? How can you defend him?” He tried a different tact with her, hoping his arguments would make her see reason.

“That was a long time ago, Xander, he’s changed – remember how he helped with Glory? And what about how much he did while I was gone? He took care of Dawn,” the tears started falling and she squeezed his hand so tightly, Spike thought he’d have to worry about both hands. Without waiting for Xander to reply, Buffy spoke through her tears. “God, Xander, don’t you see how much
he’s done?"

But Xander wasn’t willing to listen. Falling back on his major objection, he just repeated himself. “Evil, Buffy, he’s only helping because the chip won’t let him hurt people. Once it stops working, he’s gonna kill us all – he’s got no soul to stop him. He’s just evil.”

Shaking her head, Buffy started to disagree with him, but Xander cut her off. “It’s disgusting. He’s dead – how could you let him touch you?” Sneering at the vampire, Xander crossed a line he didn’t even know he was teetering on. “You are disgusting for letting him near you. You’re just jonesing for some undead dick – an Angel substitute.”

Finally losing his temper, Spike didn’t even wait for the words to finish coming out of Xander’s mouth. Throwing a left hook, Spike caught the boy right across his mouth, breaking skin on teeth, as Giles said, “that’s more than enough, Xander.”

But Xander wasn’t done. Wiping the blood from his mouth, Xander watched as Spike clutched his head. Not caring that the vampire couldn’t retaliate or even defend himself, Xander went after him.

Throwing punches, he drove the vampire backwards, against the wall, even as the girls and Giles tried pulling him away. Buffy stepped between them, while Tara and Giles tried to subdue Xander, though he managed to get a right cross in that hit both Buffy and Spike, and hearing Buffy’s yelp of surprise, Spike lost it.

No longer caring about the chip or pain, Spike threw a succession of punches at Xander that nearly put him on his knees, his mouth running constantly, “Don’t hit what’s mine, you stupid fucking git!” interspersed with grunts of pain and then, “Don’t talk about her like that, you fucking wanker.”

Dawn and Buffy tried stepping between them again, as Xander regained his feet, breaking free of Giles’ hold as anger drove him forward.

Anyà’s and Willow’s cries of “Stop it!” and “Xander!” fell on deaf ears and finally, Tara held up both hands, murmuring a barrier spell, separated both men.

Spike sagged back against the wall, succumbing to the pain in his head and right hand while Buffy and Dawn both reached for him. Xander beat against the barrier, cursing and threatening to stake Spike since he was now dangerous. Giles thumped him, speaking through a tense jaw, “He’s no more dangerous than I am. You idiot boy, you attacked him, what did you possibly expect?”

Xander sputtered something about Spike throwing the first punch, to which Giles just raised his eyebrow and said nothing. There was nothing to say, everyone present knew just how much Xander had provoked the vampire.

Tara watched as Buffy frantically checked Spike for injuries, trying to get the bandages off his right hand. Closing her eyes, Tara knew this was not the end of this, was barely just the beginning of things.

“’M all right, pet. Just a bit winded, m’head aches.” Spike was reassuring both Summers girls, pulling Buffy into his embrace “You okay, sunshine?”

“I’m fine.” Buffy shrugged off his question, reaching for his hand again, “Let me see, okay?”

Anya finally moved, roughly checking Xander for injuries. Getting ice from the freezer, Willow
handed it to him, with the admonition to “Hold this on your lip.”

Waiting for relative calm, Giles cleared his throat, “Are you quite done, Xander?” Waiting for a response, Giles raised an eyebrow at the boy when none was forthcoming.

“Xander, are you finished?” Pausing a beat, Giles went on, “I believe you owe Buffy an apology” and lowering the boom again, “And I also believe you owe one to Spike as well.”

“Not apologizing to that scum.” Xander’s tone was pure poison, though he was totally unprepared for the comments from everyone else.

“Apolo...
Part Four

Chapter Summary

Quotes throughout are as attributed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

31. Dangerous conceits

An imprudent enemy is less dangerous than an imprudent friend.
   Mason Cooley, City Aphorisms

There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.
   Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.
   Friedrich Nietzsche, Samtliche Werke:
   Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 2

There is nothing more dangerous than the conscience of a bigot.
   George Bernard Shaw, Election speech, 1904

Once again silence reigned in the Summers kitchen, this one with a deflated, almost defeated quality to it. Buffy was staring at Giles trying to figure out how he was reacting to this, but his face was blank, while Dawn unwrapped Spike’s bandages. Tara watched Xander, hoping somehow that her words had managed to reach him, but fearing the worst.

Anya wrung her hands, uncharacteristically silent. She didn’t know what to say. She knew Xander didn’t like Spike, but had no idea his dislike went so deep. It was almost as if Spike was the representative of all demons, something she’d been not that long ago. She wondered if Xander felt this way about all demons, or maybe it was just vampires that had an interest in Buffy.

Xander hung his head, for once thinking hard. He wasn’t quick like most of the girls, it took him a while to make up his mind about things or change it once he’d made up his mind. Xander screwed up his courage and choked on his pride and any other cliches he could remember that signified what he was feeling at this moment. The last thing he wanted to do was leave this house, leave the girls. Hell, they were the only real family he had, but he really didn’t want to apologize to Spike. It was possibly the last thing he ever wanted to do. It wasn’t that he deep down hated Spike, because sometimes they could connect, it was just... how in the world could Buffy prefer the dead to the living? That he couldn’t understand.
Weighing the cost, Xander came up with the only compromise his mind and his heart would allow. “I’m sorry for what I said, Buffy,” and taking a deep breath, “and Spike.”

Tara breathed a deep sigh of relief, as did Giles. Buffy looked at him and realized Xander had deliberately worded his apology to only encompass his words, not his actions or what he was thinking. For now, though, it was enough. She didn’t have the energy to get into a full blown discussion with anyone right now – especially not over Spike, the one person she could rely upon. Nodding her acceptance, Buffy turned her attention back to Spike.

Giles, ever practical, drew everyone’s attention away from what had just happened. “If we are all calmed down, I’ve some information to share about those hounds.”

Hissing at the pain as the last of the splints was removed, Spike growled a response to Giles. Tara had already moved to warm up some blood and when the microwave pinged, she handed the mug off and waited for Giles to continue.

“You weren’t far off, Spike, when you mentioned the Baskerville hound,” he paused, waiting for his audience’s full attention. “The Baskerville hound is just one of a pack, known as the Cwn Annwn,” he pronounced it coon annoon, “literally the hounds of hell.”

“It’s very unusual for all of them to appear at once. The white ones normally hunt down traitors, while the others claim souls destined for hell – sinners or wrongdoers, if you follow me.”

Curious despite her reluctance to jump back into slaying, Buffy asked, “So why is the pack all together in Sunnydale?”

“The why I’ve yet to discover, but how is fairly clear.” Looking down at the remains of breakfast, he said “It appears that when Willow opened the dimensional doors, the Cwn Annwn came through.”

He didn’t look at the redhead, though his disappointment and disapproval were clearly evident. Willow stiffened but remained silent for once wanting to avoid a conflict. Apparently the fracas between Xander and Spike was enough for one morning. “I’m also not positive they were the only entities to come through. We’ve no real knowledge of how long the portal was open and left untended. Nor do we know how many dimensions were linked to that particular portal.”

“Not good, Watcher.” Spike spoke through tight lips, willing away the pain. “What else don’t we know?”

“The Cwn Annwn have a . . . well, they have a ‘handler’ for lack of a better term. I’ve found no evidence that he’s come with them, but also none that he hasn’t.”

Tara stared down at her hands. Willow did this, she let the hounds of hell loose in Sunnydale. No wonder Gaia had warned her about Willow, opening the portal and now, with what she’d blithely done this morning, this is so far from good. . . . Tara tried to find her voice, but was discovering it difficult. “How . . . how are these hounds . . . what are they here for?”

“That is undetermined. But I believe that the pack is responsible for the dead girls Spike has found the past three nights.”

“Didn’t find any last night, Rupert, they found us first.”
“True, but I’ve no idea what happened after we got you away from them.”

Buffy’s inquiry cut to the heart of things. “So, how do we get rid of them?”

“I’m still working on that. We also need to know where they hide during the time they aren’t hunting.”

“Anyone up for daytime patrol?” Buffy asked, almost hoping Xander would volunteer.

Instead, Dawn piped up, “Can I? Please?” Looking from Buffy to Giles to Spike, Dawn knew if she could convince one, the others would agree. “I’ll be totally careful. Bring a cell phone and everything. C’mon, lemme go.”

Buffy looked at Spike, who shrugged, then Giles who gave her no help either. “I don’t know Dawnie.”

Willow’s voice broke in, saying, “I’ll go with, Buffy, we should be okay.”

Xander, despite not wanting to have anything to do with the rest of them, couldn’t let the girls go on their own. Somewhat reluctantly, he said, “Count me in.”

“Okay, so you guys . . . Xander you know what you’re looking for and you can keep an eye on the girls. Don’t take any crazy risks and be back here – before nightfall.”

Buffy was suddenly all business, something both Giles and Spike were happy to see.

Anyá stopped cleaning up and rinsed off her hands, saying to Xander, “You can drop me off at the shop so I can open.”

As they all moved to get ready, Buffy pulled Dawn aside, saying, “Be careful, don’t take any crazy chances and stick close to the others. I’m trusting you to be smart about this.”

Practically dancing about in her excitement, Dawn hugged her. “I sooo promise. No stupid moves. This is soooo cool. You’re the best.”

Spike’s voice came from over her shoulder, “Niblet, be careful.” He started to say something else, then changed his mind. Handing her a wickedly sharp knife, Spike said, “Just in case. Keep it close.”

And in less than fifteen minutes, they were gone, leaving only Giles and Tara behind with Buffy and Spike.

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Spike was harboring no illusions about what had happened or what was about to. While he’d earned the grudging trust of the other Englishman, he didn’t for one instant think it would extend to sleeping with his slayer. Nor did he expect Buffy’s affections to last under the weight of everyone’s disapproval. Steeling himself for the coming ordeal and figuring he’d have at least a reprieve until dark, Spike prepared himself for the worst.

“How’s the hand?” Was the first thing out of the older man’s mouth which caught him a bit by
Holding it up for inspection, Spike flexed his fingers. “Not too bad considering damned near lost it last night.”

Tara took it in both her hands, turning it over so she could look at it. “Healing pretty well.”

Neither Giles nor Tara mentioned it, but they both figured Buffy had to have given more blood to Spike, because the bite marks had all healed. The scars around his hands were fresh looking and his fingers, at least two of them, were fine. His thumb and middle finger were still swollen and battered, though the bruises looked more like they’d been there for a couple of days, instead of being very fresh.

Giles took off his glasses, resting them on the counter. Without much of a preamble, he spoke. “I expect you both know what you’re doing.” Pausing momentarily, he went on, “I can’t say I approve wholeheartedly, but,” he raised his eyes to look at both of them, “I can’t say I don’t . . . you’re both adults. Neither of you is my child, but Buffy, you’re the closest I’ll ever come to having my own daughter.”

Gathering steam, Giles took a deep breath. “I trust you enough to believe you know what you’re doing. Understand this, you,” and he looked pointedly at Spike, “will never be good enough. I had hoped for more, for Buffy’s sake. If you make her happy, then fine. But hurt her in any way, any way,” he emphasized the point by wagging a finger at Spike, “I will make your existence miserable.”

Putting his glasses back on, Giles continued, “That being said, you do realize I’m not the one you have to worry about.”

Buffy sniffled, wiping her eyes. “Yeah. Xander was pretty vocal about his thoughts.”

“Bloody fucking wanker,” was Spike’s comment.

Half-heartedly swatting at him, Buffy went on to say, “I didn’t know he . . . what he said . . .”

“What he said Buffy, was way overboard.” Tara replied. “But Xander’s got a lot of issues he has to work on.”

Spike snorted his comment, placing a small kiss on her forehead. “’M sorry kitten. Shouldn’t have done any of that.”

“Not your fault, Spike.” Buffy leaned into his chest, needing some comfort. She didn’t say it, but Xander’s words had hurt, bringing up things she didn’t want to think about. Buffy was okay with being avoid-o girl right now. It was too hard to fight. Too hard living up to everyone’s expectations. One of the reasons it was easy being around Spike was because he didn’t expect anything, didn’t expect her to do anything more than just be. No pressure to go out and pretend everything was okay. And him being around protected her from a lot of the other things, like having to deal with stuff she just wasn’t ready to deal with.

“So, Rupert, what didn’t you tell us about the hounds?” Wrapping his right arm around Buffy, Spike turned his attention away from Xander and his vitriol.

Giles’ sigh was almost a laugh. “Not much gets past you, does it?”
“Not likely, you people always underestimate me. C’mon, Watcher, tell us the rest of it.” This was an old teasing argument between them that started when Spike had been held captive at Giles’ flat, and over the summer it had escalated as Giles had discovered Spike’s ability to speak several demon languages and his previously undiscovered classical education. Spike never skipped an opportunity it rub it in Rupert’s nose that he was as educated and as knowledgeable as he was, if not more so.

“I believe the hounds are hunting, what, I’m not sure, but it doesn’t appear they are looking for Buffy. I’m rather worried what else may have come through.”

Glancing at Tara, who was finishing the clean up Anya had started, he added, “I’m afraid what Willow did, bringing Buffy back from an unknown dimension may have dire consequences for the hellmouth. Right now there’s no way of telling what the effects are going to be. I don’t believe Willow did enough research.”

Tara shifted by the sink, knowing she should speak up, but almost afraid to – it might be disloyal to her girlfriend – but how much of a girlfriend was she anymore? Realizing she had to say something, Tara turned to face the other three and told them what she and Dawn had walked in on earlier this morning.

Nothing but silence greeted her words, each of them thinking how innocuous the information sounded, how innocent the entire moment seemed to be, until it was weighed against Willow’s other actions.

The words of the not-prophecy flashed through Spike’s head and he suddenly realized part of what the girl had been telling him. The red one had to be Willow and he was coming to believe that the yellow one did mean Tara.

He was going to have to bring this up to Rupert later, sometime before he patrolled again, without Buffy. Which might be sooner than he thought, since it didn’t look like she was ready to go hunting ordinary vamps, much less a pack of mystical hounds.

Spike picked at a cold pancake. “We need to watch Red, Rupes, girl isn’t thinking right. No telling what she’ll do next.”

32. Like a dream in the night.

The sky is burning
a sea of flame
though your world is changing
I will be the same
The storm is breaking
or so it seems
we’re too young to reason
too grown up to dream
   Bryan Ferry, Slave to Love,
   from the album of the same name
They’d talked for a little longer, none of them unfortunately able to come to any new conclusions. It all came back to Willow and what she’d done. There was no way to tell what else may have come through the portal, and without knowing where Buffy had been, Giles could come up with no other new theories. And despite Spike’s raised eyebrow and pointed looks, Buffy had no intention of telling anyone but him where Willow had ripped her from. Indicating his desire to continue searching, Giles got up to say his goodbyes and Tara went upstairs to shower, saying, “I’ve got some errands to run, but I’ll be back before the others get home.”

Spike sat in front of the television, his mind not really on the drivel, he was thinking about Buffy and what had just happened with Xander. Rupert had surprised him, giving a conditional approval to their burgeoning relationship. The girls had been very silent, only Willow exhibiting surprise at their closeness. Flicking channels, he thought about the girl currently outside talking to the man who was, for all intents, her parental figure.

She’d not moved away from him once during Xander’s tirade, instead clinging to him, and when Giles had said his piece, Buffy hadn’t backed away. It was not what he’d expected, not at all. Buffy relied on her friends to help give her strength and their approval or disapproval was important to her. He didn’t fool himself, they didn’t like him and he knew it. Or at least he’d thought so. Seemed only Xander had a problem with it.

He figured that Dawn wouldn’t object at all and Tara was just so sweet that even if she had a problem with it, she wouldn’t ever say so. The other big impediment could be Willow. But he couldn’t say for certain anymore, because Red was so off lately. He used to be able to figure her out, but not for awhile, not since Glory had messed with Tara’s mind.

Waiting for her to come back in the house, Spike couldn’t sit still. Getting up, he paced about a bit, picking up and putting down various knickknacks. He refused to peek out the window, instead Spike whirled about and headed for his room in the basement.

Before he hit the kitchen, the front door opened and Buffy came back inside the house.

Turning around, Spike just stared at her.
Not caring about her current attire, Buffy had followed Giles out the door when he got up to leave. She didn’t fool herself about what he’d said earlier, Giles was far too okay with this, there had to be something else.

“Giles?”

“Yes?” He heard the underlying uneasiness in her voice and knew also the cause of it.

“Um . . .” She didn’t know how to bring this up, but she had to know. “This thing – you’re really okay with it?”

Pretending to not understand was just going to prolong this awkward discussion and Giles had no wish to upset her anymore than she already was.

“You mean with Spike?”

“Yeah. You did mean what you said just now, right?” The uncertainty was enough to tell him how fragile she still was.

“I did mean it. A relationship with a vampire – with any vampire is not what I would have wanted for you.” Looking at her over his glasses, Giles reached out to touch her hand, “But I don’t know if normal is what you’re destined for. I do know that I trust him.”

At her half surprised look, Giles continued, “I’ve never forgotten what he did when Angelus had me, nor will I ever forget what he’s done these last couple of months.”

“So you aren’t just telling me what you think I want to hear?”

“No, Buffy. That I wouldn’t do.” Squeezing her hand, Giles stepped down and looked at her. “I don’t think Spike would hurt you now, with or without the chip.”

Then he was gone, leaving Buffy standing there, only a little bit stunned. Going back inside the house, she saw Spike heading for the kitchen.

He turned and all she could do was stare at him.

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Dawn wasn’t sure she wanted to be near Xander at all when he was like this. He’d done nothing but spout nasty things about Spike since they started looking for the hounds’ hiding place.

Her temper had been pretty short anyway since he’d gotten all stupid back at the house. She was thinking about how to get him to shut up when Willow inadvertently did it for her. Grabbing her oldest friend Willow pulled him out of Dawn’s hearing range and told him quickly about the flyer she’d seen. Could the pair of them be any more self involved?

Watching the two of them whisper, Dawn was suddenly very glad she shared no genetic material or similarities with either of them. Because Xander was just . . . narrow minded and for someone who’d grown up on the hellmouth, he should have been just a bit more tolerant. And Willow – Willow was downright off. For the last couple of months, something was just . . . not right with the
older girl and it made the hair on the back of her neck rise.

Or that could be the really creepy guy and the scary dogs that were about twenty feet away from her.

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He thought, afterwards, that she made the first move, holding out her hand and taking a tentative step forward. Hardly mattered, because in the next instant, she was in his arms, her face pressed hard against his bare chest, his hands tight around her waist.

To his own ears, his voice sounded shaky, so filled with emotion that it caught him by surprise. “Love you, kitten, so much. So bloody much.”

Buffy curled into his embrace, her own words muffled against his skin. He could barely make them out, barely understand she was speaking. His good hand snuck underneath her shirt, stripping away her panties, gripping her bare ass tightly. The fingers of his right hand flexed around her waist and he leaned down to capture her lips with his.

One of her hands crawled up his back, digging hard into the muscles where his shoulder and neck joined. With her other hand, Buffy pulled him closer, wiggling her hips, trying to find some friction.

His tongue swept inside her mouth, battling hers. Banging his back against the wall, Spike tried lifting her up, but his right hand wouldn’t cooperate. Growling and rumbling low in his chest, Spike reversed their positions, pinning Buffy against the wall. Lifting her up with his thigh against her exposed sex, he could feel the heat pulsing against his muscles.

Mewling into his mouth, Buffy clutched at him frantically, trying to angle her hips so she could ride his thigh. Both her hands were on his ass, squeezing and she couldn’t stand it any longer.

He’d managed to get the tee shirt up over her breasts and his mouth latched on a hardened nipple. Somehow she crawled upwards, her feet braced against the back of his legs. Gasping for air, she hissed his name, as she pushed his sweats down. Skin to skin now, Buffy tried lifting herself up as Spike’s left hand hooked underneath her leg, lifting her further.

His cock was hard against the outside of her soaking wet pussy, pulsing against her. Unable to move, Spike rumbled low in his throat, “Let me in, kitten, oh god, let me in.”

Gulping through her dry mouth, her breasts heaving against his chest, Buffy whispered, “Now please, now, Spike.”

Sliding her up the wall, Spike wedged his hips between her legs and nudged his straining cock against her opening. “Guide me in, sweetheart. Oh god, lemme in.”

No sooner had the first gasped words left his lips than Buffy’s hand enclosed his cock, angling him inside her.

Their frantic movements stilled as he slid all the way up inside her.

“Oh” came breathless from her mouth.

“Uhh” was echoed back.
He was hard and large and so solidly there within her that tears sprang to her eyes. Buffy shuddered around him, a hand cupping his cheek as she stared down wide-eyed at him.

She was wet and hot and he could feel every muscle tense around him. He stopped moving, just staring at her wonder and utter disbelief in his eyes. She clenched around him, shuddering as she encompassed his size.

They gasped for air at the same instant.

She squirmed in his arms, squeezing him hard. He flexed, sliding out just a little, then slid back in.

“Oh, god.”

She hissed, unable to move at all, pinned between his hard chest and the wall, impaled on his hard length. Hooking his hands under her legs, spreading her open, Spike pumped his hips, sliding out then in again.

“God, kitten . . . so wet . . . hot . . . never felt . . . heat.” Dipping his head in for a kiss, Spike bit her lower lip, tugging on it as he moved back.

Buffy was overwhelmed. His cock throbbed and slid in and out of her, his grunts and barely audible words sounding in her ears. Her hands reached for him, trying to hold him close, frantic to get him to hit that spot. Tugging on his hair, Buffy felt him brush against it, once, twice. “Oh god . . . Spike . . . oh.”

Her whole world narrowed to the feeling of him pistoning in and out of her, the feel of his hard length sliding in and out of her aching pussy. “Need . . . Spike.”

His tongue flicked across her nipple and Buffy’s inner muscles contracted.

“Ohhh.”

Her orgasm rushed through her, his name a hissed litany in the air around them and as she clamped down on him, Spike growled, pumped up into her hard and let loose his own orgasm.

33. I’ll make your heart smile

Out of all those kinds of people
you got a face with a view
I’m just an animal looking for a home
share the same space for a minute or two
and you love me till my heart stops
love me till I’m dead
eyes that light up, eyes look through you
Talking Heads, This must be the place,
from the album Speaking in Tongues

Your burning eyes cause flames to arise
Will you let the fire die down soon 
or will I always be here 
your favorite passion 
your favorite game 
your favorite mirror 
your favorite slave 
I’m hanging on your words 
living on your breath 
feeling with your skin

Depeche Mode, In your room, 
from the album Songs of Faith and Devotion

Her whole body felt like rubber. Slumped against Spike’s chest, Buffy felt like oozy cheese, spread against the hard planes of Spike’s body. Her nipples ached. In a good way, but they did.

She felt slippery inside, warm and wet and well used. Nuzzling against his chest, Buffy mewed a protest when his hands slipped from under her hips, dropping them to around his waist. Locking her ankles, Buffy felt the aftershocks race through her.

Tiny little almost electrical shock waves pulsed inside her pussy, contracting it around the semi-hard cock still embedded in her body. Spike thrust again inside her, during the next one, setting off another series of leg trembles.

His laugh was breathlessly wicked.

Easing her down further, Spike reluctantly slid from between her legs. Buffy whimpered another protest, and instead of turning from her, Spike leaned down, his hands braced on either side of her and kissed her senseless.

Pulling away, he smiled down at her, then with a wicked wiggle of his eyebrows, he ducked low and put her up over his left shoulder. Hiking up his sweat pants, he headed up the stairs to her bedroom.

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They stared at each other, the Key and the Huntsman, neither one speaking. The hounds were quiet, not making a sound, just waiting patiently for a signal from their master.

He’s huge, Dawn noted idly. Taller than Riley and broader than Angel. Kind of looked like Hagrid’s smaller brother – with horns. Yup, those are definitely horns sprouting from his head, like deer horns, sort of. He’s wearing some sort of leather and . . . is that a wreath? He smells kind of funny too, like a wet dog and fallen leaves and some other indefinable smell, like old bodies and metal . . . sulfur. Dawn realized she was mentally babbling and stopped it, letting her mind go blank.

Have to remember all this for Giles, she thought, listing everything about this guy in her head. These are the hounds that attacked Spike. So how come they aren’t coming after me?

The Huntsman made a motion with his hands, and as one, the pack sat back on their haunches without so much as a whimper of protest. He started to speak, but Dawn understood none of it.
Sounded like a bunch of weird consonants all jumbled together. Then he said something which sounded like what Giles had called the pack, just this morning. That she understood. “Cwn Annwn.”

She said it back to him, and he stopped speaking, nodding once at her, then began again. This time he spoke slower, as if expecting her to understand what he said.

“Bainne cong’bhaighim clisneach suthainn riamh. N’bhos chionn uait ah’lhiats sinn dh’iarradh leagh chionn na bh’air an goid bhuainn nall neamh.”

Pointing a finger at Willow, he continued speaking “Earail bhuainn mo tighearna, ruadh Seileach eil gaueagh.”

He waited a moment, expecting her to respond, and when she repeated his words back at him, never even knowing she did it, he nodded once, then, in a whirl of leather and dogs, the Huntsman and pack were gone.

She stood there blinking, not sure she’d just lived through their encounter. Was Buffy going to be madder that she talked to him or that she hadn’t tried to kill him? Or was she just going to act like a mom and get all worried like?

Dawn came back to herself to find the wonder twins babbling like idiots. Raising her hands, Dawn turned around to face them both. “I have to go see Giles now. Before I forget.”

Brushing past the two of them, she headed for Xander’s car. Realizing they weren’t following, Dawn turned back to face them and, with a patented Summers look, said, “Are you two coming? Or are you gonna stand there and gawk?”

She was too spent to object to the upside down position she was in. Instead, Buffy decided she should take full advantage and let her hand slip inside his sweats, cupping around his very nicely shaped butt cheek. And just because she could, she pinched him.

He retaliated by leaning his head closer and nipping her hip. “Two can play that game, missy.”

A delicious little breathless giggle reached his ears and Spike smiled broadly. Swinging open the door to her room and taking two steps in, suddenly he was at the side of her bed. Sliding his hand along her torso, Spike lifted the tee shirt off as he playfully dumped her on the bed. His sweats hit the floor seconds later and they just stared at each other.

Now that she knew – how he felt, what it was like to hold him within her, Buffy was wanting it again. He filled her, warmed her up in ways that Riley had tried but never really managed. And oh, how unfair of her to think of him in this moment.

Lifting her eyes to Spike’s, Buffy nearly drowned at the awe in his gaze. Flushing slightly she moved to cover up. Reaching out a tentative hand to her, he rumbled softly, “No, kitten, don’t . . . want to see you . . . waitin’ for me . . . wantin’ me.”
He stepped closer to the bed and Buffy raised herself up to her knees. His skin, alabaster pale and subtly hewn, begged to be touched. He was . . . in Cordelia’s words, lickable salty goodness. Reaching out a warm hand, she hovered it over his skin, running her fingers over the hard planes of his abs, the lines of his hips, the defined biceps. “Strong . . . so strong.”

She wasn’t even aware of her words, but he heard. Her fingers burned like fire, sending electrical shocks down through his muscles. His entire body hummed beneath her touch, responding to her unconscious call. “Gorgeous . . . just . . . sculpture.”

Her breath caressed his skin, as her fingers closed over his nipples. Spike leaned into her touch, rumbling low in his throat, “Need you, kitten.”

Looking up at him, Buffy closed the gap between them. Sliding her fingers down the middle of his chest, her hand closed around his erection. Pumping up and down, she licked her lips and he was lost. Diving down for her mouth, Spike pushed her back down on the bed, laying himself beside her.

His left hand skimmed over her skin, but not touching, raising gooseflesh. Barely touching her nipples, Spike breathed heavily against her shoulder. Dipping lower, his fingers mimicked what hers had done to him just moments ago. Hovering over her damp curls, Spike whispered against her skin, “Let me in, love, let me in.”

Arching up her hips to capture his teasing hand, Buffy slid her legs open and in the same motion, grasped his cock. “Yes” hissed in the air simultaneously as she clenched her hand and pussy around him.

“Spike . . .please.”

Sliding down to latch onto her nipple, Spike pulled her up on top of him. Catching on, Buffy slowly lowered herself on his rock hard length.

Hissing again, Buffy shuddered around him, as Spike bucked his hips up against her. “That’s it, baby, ride me hard.”

Throwing back her head, Buffy did just that.

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She slammed through the door, almost as if the hounds were behind her, not caring if the shop was full of customers. Looking up from her spot by the books, Anya called out a cheery hello, to which Dawn only smiled at. “Where’s Giles?”

His voice drifted down from the restricted section and before he could make his way down the ladder, Dawn was climbing up. “Giles, I found them. Well, sort of they found me, but like nothing happened. Okay, that’s not true but like they didn’t attack and what the heck does this mean?” And Dawn repeated the Huntsman’s words nearly perfectly.

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“Dawn. Slow down.” He tried calming her, but she was so on edge, from both the encounter with the Cwn Annwn and having to put up with the moaning myrtles that she couldn’t keep still.
“Tell me what happened.” Sitting her down on the floor, Giles leaned back against the bookshelf.

“Okay. So we left the house and the whole time Xander was bitching about Spike so I kinda started walking apart from him and,” she dropped her voice so that the other two couldn’t hear her, “can I tell you how much I’m not loving the complaining? Oh! And Giles, Willow’s acting way weird.”

He smiled a bit, despite his eagerness to get to the heart of the story. He’d wondered how she was going to fare with those two. “Focus, please.”

“Right. Okay. Remind me to tell you and Buffy later what Willow did this morning.”

“Tara already told us, and I’d like your impression of things, though for now, the hounds please.”

“Yeah, Giles he was way big, like Hagrid and all leathery and he had horns kind of like deer horns but not quite like, you know, all pointy, coz there was just one point.”

Flipping through the pages of the book he grabbed off the shelf behind him, Giles found the drawing he was looking for. “Like this?”

“Yup. That’s him.”

Quickly growing serious, Giles grabbed his pocket recorder and told Dawn to repeat what he’d said to her, as best she could.

Closing her eyes, Dawn did her best.

It was not a language he immediately recognized, but between himself, Spike and Anya, they might be able to pinpoint it and possibly decipher it.

Looking down at the teen, Giles was struck by an odd thought. If Buffy was like his daughter, as he told her earlier this morning, Dawn was also. A year ago that thought would have bothered him. But now, smiling down at her, Giles realized he’d come to love her nearly as much as her sister, increasing his guilt over what he’d counseled Buffy to do during the fight with Glory. Trying to make up for it in a small way, Giles said, “You did very well, Dawn. Kept your wits about yourself and didn’t panic. I’m proud of you. How would you like to help me research this a bit more?”

Her eyes lit up and Dawn stared at him. “Giles, are you okay? Xander didn’t hit you on the head did he?”

Laughing for the first time in days, Giles patted her shoulder and said, “Not bloody likely.”

“This is soo cool. First patrolling and now research.”

Gathering up the books he’d been pulling off the shelves, he and Dawn made their way to the research table.

Xander and Willow had entered the shop as Dawn hit the top step of the ladder, neither one of them in a good mood. They’d done nothing but commiserate over the calamities in their lives, Willow’s
fears about Oz and Xander’s inability to understand Buffy’s attraction to Spike.

He’d absently kissed Anya hello while listening to Willow’s almost incoherent ramblings.

“Xander. I need you to go get me some lunch.” Anya’s voice broke through his musings and he halfway turned his attention to her.

“Sure, Ahn, what do you want?”

Giving him a list, Anya shooed him and the still babbling Willow out the door.

“Giles?”

“Yes, Anya?” He answered her without looking up.

“Willow’s using too much magic,” was her matter of fact assessment. She quickly launched into her take on what happened in the kitchen before everyone had arrived, which then prompted Dawn to chime in with her corroboration of Tara’s account.

Then Anya said something that really made the hair on Giles’ neck stand up. “It’s like I told Xander before, she brought Buffy from an unknown dimension, the laws require some sort of payment of equal value. And Willow didn’t provide that. There’s got to be some sort of shift going on . . .”

She looked up from logging in some of the sales to find Giles staring at her open-mouthed.

“What? What did I do? Have I got something on my face? Why are you staring at me?” Anya’s voice rose as her consternation did.

“Good god, Anya – that’s it. That has to be why the hounds are here.”

Flipping through the books frantically now, Giles directed Dawn to look for any reference to Gwyn ap Nudd or Arawn, and he wrote down the names for her.

Buffy collapsed face down on his chest, her hair splayed all over both of them. She was worse off than she’d been before, now every single muscle felt woozy, none of them willing to respond to her brain’s sluggish commands. Spike inhaled deeply beneath her, then sputtered a bit as her hair worked its way into his mouth. She giggled softly, while he grumbled teasingly about long hair getting everywhere, saying, “I could cut it off it if bothers you so much.”

“Nah, then I couldn’t do this,” he said as he worked a hand underneath it to splay across her back. Grabbing a bit of it with his other hand, he tickled her nose, “or this” then shifting, creating space between them, he took that same little bit and teased it over her nipple, “or this.”

That was all it took. That tiny little movement while he sucked in unneeded air and she was aching for him all over again.
Armed with Dawn’s description and Anya’s dead on assessment, Giles made more inroads in the research than he’d expected. So by the time he realized how late it was, the sun was down and no one had bothered to call Buffy to let her know Dawn was back safe and sound.

Glancing at his watch, he also realized no one had heard from her either – which was odd considering she’d been concerned about Dawn going on patrol. Abruptly realizing that everyone was in the Magic Box except for Buffy and Spike, he grimaced slightly, then hid a grin. Undoubtedly Spike wasted no time once everyone was gone.

As he was about to get up and call, the phone rang. Anya answered, still chipper after working all day and she smiled brightly as she handed the phone to Giles.

“Rupert, it’s Wesley Wyndham-Price.”

Well, that was a surprise. “Hello, Wesley. What can I do for you?”

“Actually, it’s what I can do for you. I’ve discovered something that may be of importance regarding information transmission.”

It took him a moment to decipher what Wesley was alluding too, but when he realized it, Giles looked around, noting everyone’s attention focused on him, moving into the back office, Giles closed the door and said, “Go ahead.”

“Our mutual friends have been sending out feelers regarding obtaining information about commodities under your control.”

Before the other man could go any further, Giles said, “Wesley, stop right there.”

The former watcher did, catching onto the apprehension in Giles’ voice.

“Are you still in the same location?”

“Yes.”

“How soon can you make arrangements to leave?”

Understanding dawned in Wesley’s voice. “Not until tomorrow night at the earliest.”

“Right then. I’ll have the kettle on.”
And both men hung up at the same time.

Giles stared at nothing, wondering what else could possibly go wrong, then mentally kicking himself for the thought. He needed to speak to both Buffy and Spike.

Dialing the number, Giles waited for one of them to pick up.

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At some point, they’d fallen back to sleep, her leg up over his hip, their groins touching, arms entwined around each other. There was a ringing in his ears, dragging him from a particularly good dream where he was shagging the Slayer senseless.

Spike woke up to the phone ringing and Buffy naked in his arms. Right, not a dream then.

Reaching over her, he lifted up the phone, grousing, “This better be good.”

“I’m sure it’s not anything approaching what you would consider good,” Giles’ voice was dry.

“Out with it then,” Spike’s sigh ruffled Buffy’s hair and he idly moved it off her face.

“Not so dire that you need to rush out.” Giles quickly caught him up on what had happened during the day, only omitting for the time being Wesley’s phone call, because he didn’t want to alarm them any more than necessary.

“You want us to come there or you gonna cart everyone over here?” Buffy raised her eyes, shaking her head no at the second part of that question. “Never mind, Watcher, Buffy wants to meet there.”

“Right. Give us an hour or so.” No need to tell Rupert they were currently in no state to be anywhere but exactly where they were until they showered.

Just before hanging up, Spike said, “Chinese and make it spicy.”

Buffy flopped over onto her back, really not wanting to move any further than the other side of the bed. Perhaps back on top of Spike or underneath him, but no where else. She smiled up at nothing, wondering what he would say if she could say that out loud. “So what’s up?”

Leaning over her, up on one elbow, Spike ran his hand over her breasts, flicking her nipples.

“And that’s all you’re going to tell me, isn’t it?” Buffy narrowed her eyes a bit, knowing there was far more to either story than two sentences, but figuring he’d only avoid her questions about anything until he was ready to talk.

“Yeah. No point in goin’ over it and stealin’ Rupert’s thunder. He’s gonna ‘xplain it all later in any case. Might as well hear it from him. ‘Sides,” he continued, “rather spend my time doin’ this,” as his voice dropped and he slid his fingers down to cup her mound.

“Spike. . . shouldn’t we . . . mmmmmm. . .” Buffy arched her hips, opening up for him. He leaned closer, laying open mouthed kisses along her collarbone, trailing down toward her breast. Sliding
over her, leaning heavily on his elbows, Spike framed her head and shoulders with his arms, wiggling his hips against her. “Spike, shouldn’t . . . you told him . . . an hour.”

“I did.” His mouth captured hers and she could feel his erection growing between their bodies. “But, this,” he proceeded as he nuzzled the side of her neck, “is what I want to do.” Teasing her by thrusting against her clit, Spike nipped his bite marks then said, “But, kitten, if you wanna go, we will.”

Wrapping her legs around him, her hands pulling his hips down hard against hers, Buffy tried wiggling around so she could slip him inside her. “No,” she breathed heavily as he lifted his hips away from her “No, no . . . don’t go . . .” Then whispered his name in a kind of half whine, “Spiiike.”

Lifting himself up away from her body, he grinned down at her. “You sure this is what you want? Don’t wanna disappoint the Watcher do you?”


Teasing her again, he shifted once more to avoid entering her. “Positive, love?”

She growled up at him, using both her legs to pull him down against her. “Yes. . . now.”

_Ooh, he thought, got the Slayer wanting this also._ Staring into her eyes, daring her to not look away, Spike shifted again, sliding against her heat. Buffy’s eyes grew impossibly wider as he teased against her then thrust out her lip in an unconscious pout. _Oh, bloody fucking hell, that did it. That damn pout._ Spike honed in on her lip, and as he nibbled on it, maneuvered himself inside her. “God . . . fucking hot . . . so wet . . .”

He groaned into her mouth, rocking hard inside her, his hips pumping a constant rhythm, sliding in and out and back in again. It was hard and fast and Spike had to control the urge to go into game face and bite her, it was such a near thing, everything in him urging him to claim her, mark her permanently as his, but he wouldn’t do that to her, not without . . . his mind went blank as their orgasms wrenched through them simultaneously.

Panting for air, Spike laid his head between her breasts and held back the tears.

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Giles gave them an hour and fifteen minutes before he even called the Chinese take-away, knowing they wouldn’t make the hour time limit Spike had quoted at him. He and Dawn had slacked off the research, not because they’d discovered everything, but mainly because after Wesley’s phone call, he’d been focused on other things. The cryptic information the other Englishman had imparted had struck Giles as a bit of unusual timing and also there had been an odd note in his voice. Something was not right in Los Angeles.

Just like something was not right in Sunnydale. With any luck, the two weren’t connected. But Giles didn’t like leaving anything to luck, especially not when it came to the hellmouth – or, as Wesley put it _‘commodities under his control’._

What made Wesley’s statement all the more troubling was that he’d used the plural. Meaning more than one. And the only ‘commodities’ Giles had seemingly under his control were the girls and
Spike. Not that any of them would admit to being under his control, either.

Wiping his glasses, Giles surveyed the pile of books laid out on the table before him. It was now an hour and a half and knowing Spike’s timing, he and Buffy would arrive just as the Chinese did. Directing Dawn to help him pile up the books, Giles sent a plea heaven-ward that Xander wouldn’t react the same way he’d done this morning. Another confrontation he didn’t look forward to.

Taking Tara’s, Dawn’s, and Anya’s cautions about Willow to heart, Giles had spent part of the afternoon watching her. And unfortunately, he was beginning to agree with their assessment. She was... tainted was the first word that came to mind. Somehow, the innocent insecure Willow had been replaced with this creature he was sure he didn’t know. Oh, he was certain it wasn’t a demonic possession, not even a ghostly one. It was more like a shadow of Willow, or rather, the darkest part of Willow’s personality was coming to the fore, overtaking the sweet over-achiever he’d first met in the high school library. Giles didn’t think this was a normal part of growing up, of gaining maturity. It was almost a bit like what he’d gone through when he’d rebelled against parental control and dabbled with magic beyond his control, though not beyond his reach. Hopefully, Willow wouldn’t start conjuring demons.

Abruptly, Giles realized what Willow had done, opening an untold number of dimensions at the hellmouth couldn’t possibly be any better. In fact, was most likely worse.

He was still sitting there stunned when the bell over the door rang, and Spike walked in, followed by Buffy and the Chinese delivery. Glad he’d only made a mental wager with himself, Giles hid a smile when Tara handed Dawn five dollars.

Grinning up at him in a moment of unspoken solidarity, Dawn danced the bill in the air, and he had to laugh.

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Dinner was a quiet affair for once. Giles had no desire to divulge his information with everyone present, and the others, at least Xander and Willow, had no idea the direction of his research. He had no intention of telling either of them in any case. He would disclose everything to the blond pair, though something held him back from bringing it up while they were eating. He suddenly had no desire to talk about anything important in the shop.

Besides, both Buffy and Spike were in uncommonly good moods, and he didn’t want to break it, at least not just yet. So keeping the talk general and not slayer related, Giles watched the relationships unfolding around his table.

It was obvious to anyone watching that Willow and Tara’s relationship was about to implode. Tara barely spoke to her girlfriend, directing playful banter at Spike, listening carefully to Buffy and mothering Dawn, and Willow was patently unaware of the shift. Spike had barely spoken to the redhead and Buffy almost completely ignored her. Fallout from the retrieval, no doubt.

Xander sat as far away from Spike as possible, which, unfortunately for Xander, brought him face to face with him, albeit the table width between them. Both men were sporting new bruises, but it looked like Xander had borne the brunt of the fighting. Watching the half-hearted interaction between Xander and Anya, Giles had the sinking feeling that they were also headed for an upset. Really, a girl like Anya could probably do much better.
That left Buffy and Spike. They were funny, already stealing food from the other’s plates, Spike subtly feeding Buffy by making her taste this and that, all slipping by unnoticed. And the really remarkable thing was that neither one of them left Dawn out, she was included in their circle without any extra effort. She stole equally from the pair, and they treated her like the playful child she was. Giles was suddenly reminded of that night, when Willow’s ‘will be done’ spell had backfired. Had it really? When it came to these two, Giles wasn’t so sure. Perhaps it just allowed unacknowledged feelings to surface. He hadn’t seen them that night, but his hearing had been fine, and they sounded, to the best of his recollection, almost exactly the same. Maybe this was how it was supposed to be. Maybe there was more to Buffy’s inexplicable attraction to vampires than the Council was willing to admit. Maybe – he needed to look into this also, after he figured out what was happening on the hellmouth.

As he’d sat there musing, dinner had winded down, and seizing upon a perfect opportunity to get Buffy and Spike alone, away from eavesdropping friends and nosey little sisters, Giles asked, “Since neither of you is up for solitary patrol, how about I accompany you both?”

Knowing a ploy for a secret meeting when he heard it, Spike glanced once at Buffy, and in the silent communication some couples have, got her agreement and said, “Sure, Watcher, if you think you can keep up with the walking wounded.”

Xander hadn’t even offered and while Dawn whined a bit, for once Spike was unbending. “Not tonight, Niblet, not up for protecting non-combatants. Need you to stay indoors, safe and sound.”

When she started to protest, Spike just dug in his heels. He wasn’t normally so forceful with her, but she was pushing his buttons, and Spike wasn’t entirely sure how Buffy was going to be on patrol.

Gritting his teeth, Spike looked at her, pointedly saying, “Dawn, not tonight. Don’t ask again.”

Unspoken was – otherwise I won’t ever let you patrol again – whether or not Buffy agreed.

Grumpy, she flounced back into her chair, unappeased by Tara’s offer to sit up and watch movies together.

However, the additional offer of ice cream was grudgingly accepted.

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“She’ll get over it. Trust me.” Spike tried again, after Buffy’s third repetition of, “Dawn’s pissed at you.”

“Believe me, kitten, ‘s not the first time and nowhere near the last, but your sis needs to be told no once in a while. And she needs to know I’m not the pushover she thinks I am.”

Buffy stopped short, causing both men to turn around.

“What?”

“Do you realize how parental that sounds?” There was real amusement in her voice as she realized how Spike felt about her sister.
Scratching the back of his neck, Spike looked down at his feet. Without looking at Giles, he mumbled, “‘S how I feel sometimes.”

Which came as no real surprise to Rupert. But it obviously was to Buffy because she gaped at him, unable to find any words that wouldn’t upset him.

“Dunno if it’s right, but she’s had it rough. Your dad disappearing, your mum going all sickly round about the time Niblet discovered who she is, then first Joyce dying . . . and that Glory bint . . . and you.” Spike stood there, trying to explain how he felt, while the other two just waited him out.

“She was lost, feeling alone and that no one was there to protect her or help her . . . no offense, Rupert,” realizing he might be insulting the other man, Spike tried to make unnecessary amends.

“None taken. You are right.” Giles gestured for him to continue.

“Jus’ felt like she needed me. And, she’s not my blood, but,” and he paused, searching for the right words, “in a way, she’s mine.”

He’d no idea how his halting speech affected Buffy until he looked up to see her wiping away tears. If there were any doubts in her about continuing this relationship, Buffy felt more of them crumble to dust.

Before they’d discovered the memories were a plant, Riley had treated Dawn like a necessary evil, had to be nice to her because she was Buffy’s sister, and the way Angel had treated her didn’t really count, but it did, because Dawn mattered. And now, here was Spike, standing here, telling her that he loved her not because Dawn was her sister, but because she was Dawn. And he loved her. Really. It was plainly, painfully clear that Spike loved Dawn like his own blood family.

Suddenly she knew she’d made the right decision all those months ago, entrusting her own flesh and blood to this man. Knew it like she knew her own name.

Wordlessly she closed the short distance between them, her arms opening to gather him close.

“Oh, Spike. You know she loves you too.”

“Yeah.” Looking helplessly down at the woman in his arms, Spike laughed at himself. “I do know.”

Giles turned away, giving them a moment of privacy.

35. Breeding unnatural troubles.

The troubles which have come upon us
always seem more serious than those which are only threatening.

Titus Livius (Livy), Histories, III

Fortune does not arrive in pairs, and troubles do not come singly.

Chinese proverb
Foul whisperings are abroad. Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. More needs she the divine than the physician.  
  Macbeth, act 5, sc 1

They found him sitting on a bench, not too far away and only a few minutes after he’d left them alone, cell phone at his ear focused intently on the conversation. Gesturing them closer, Giles stood up, then flipped the phone closed.

“That was part of what I wanted to talk to you both about.”

Senses now alert, they waited for him to continue. “That was Wesley.”

“Huh?” Buffy looked from one Englishman to another, clearly not understanding.

“Not sure, pet, first I’m hearing it.” Spike was curious also, but had a feeling that they were about to discover the purpose behind the not so subtle secret meeting.

“He called me earlier. Led me to understand he had some information about how the Council is obtaining information from Sunnydale.”

“What?”

“We knew someone was sending information to London that wasn’t sent by us. They knew ‘bout me patrolling alone.” Spike gestured for Giles to continue.

“They questioned me about it when they recalled me after, well, before Willow brought you back,” he paused, clearing his throat. “In any case, Wesley said he had some information regarding that, and, just now he said we’ve been under video surveillance for months.”

Spike swore, kicking the bench while Buffy stood there stunned.

“How extensive?”

“He’s not certain. But he should be arriving sometime tomorrow with some ideas and some other things he believes might be of importance.”

“This is so not good, Giles.” Buffy whirled around, sitting down on the bench. “This is so very not good.”

“Agreed. I would suggest we not discuss anything of importance within the shop until we know how intrusive and extensive the surveillance is.” Giles scanned the area again. “And I would suggest you be aware of the possibility of being followed at all times.”

Spike had paced a bit, sniffing out the air, then came back. Leaning in close, he softly said, “Nothin’s out there now, but I would imagine it’s not a huge operation, probably a local. Knows all of us on sight.”
“I would agree with that. And probably not a demon, although we shouldn’t rule that out.”

Buffy let their conversation wash over her. This was just so much more than she was ready to face. Hellhounds and spies, what else could possibly happen?

Her sudden apprehension communicated itself to him, via her increased and erratic heartbeat. Spike immediately re-directed his attention to her. “Sunshine?”

Turning tear-filled eyes up to meet his gaze, Buffy’s lower lip quivered and he was instantly by her side.

“’S all gonna be all right. We’ll suss out this whole thing, the hounds will be sent back home and we’ll get the wankers spyin’. No need to fret.” Rubbing her back, he pulled her close and she naturally laid her head on his shoulder.

Sharing a pointed look with Giles, Spike said, “C’mon, sunshine, let’s go home.”

They were only steps from the cemetery, when Buffy was struck by a thought. Stopping dead in her tracks, she looked between the two men flanking her and wondered if either of them had thought of the implications of Wesley’s visit – or rather, who might be traveling with him. Figuring that she needed to say something, at least to let them know she was thinking about it, she tightened her grip on Spike’s hand and asked, “Giles, is Wes coming alone?”

“He hadn’t said he . . .” Catching onto her meaning, Giles said, “No, he didn’t say anything about anyone coming with him. I’m not even sure they know yet.”

Thinking back over his conversation, Giles was certain he hadn’t mentioned anything about Buffy being returned from beyond, nor had Wesley made a mention of anyone taking the trip from Los Angeles with him. Though judging by the look on Buffy’s face and Spike’s sudden withdrawal from her, Giles knew he had to make certain Wesley came alone.

“Hold on a moment.” Flipping open his phone, Giles hit re-dial and waited for the phone to connect.

“Wesley, it’s Rupert again.” A pause, then, “Fine. Need to make arrangements for your accommodations, is it just you coming or will you have company?”

He paused for so long that Spike started fidgeting, pulling away from Buffy. He’d been strangely silent while she and Giles had spoken about the possibility of Wesley having a companion or two along for the ride, his own apprehension about that situation more than enough to set his teeth on edge. This, with Buffy was too new, too fragile to withstand an assault from Angel on the heels of Xander’s outburst. Spike moved away from Buffy, his face set and brows drawn together.

“Spike?” She followed him, aware that his pulling away from her had more to do with Wesley than anything else. He lit up a cigarette, blowing the smoke away from her, avoiding her gaze while he tried to get his temper and hurt under control.

“’M all right.”

“No, you’re not.” Buffy stood in front of him, staring up at his features. It was so easy to read him
sometimes, especially at moments like this one. “Spike. Look at me.”

A muscle in his jaw flexed, transfixing her attention. And there was her confirmation that this was bothering him. Oh, he could try and play it cool, which wasn’t working, pretend that none of it mattered, but she knew. Knew how much this meant to him, because it meant just as much to her. She had to tell him why she was asking, not so much for herself, but for him too. She didn’t want any confrontations with Angel any more than he did. How could she say that without him thinking she was just catering to his pride? She wasn’t sure what she was about to say would work, but it was the best she could do at this moment. “I don’t want him here.”

That brought his gaze round fast. Dropping the cigarette butt on the ground, Spike ducked his head. “Sure ‘bout that, are you?”

“Absolutely.” There was enough conviction in her voice to assure him she meant what she was saying.

He couldn’t respond, at least not with words. Very slowly, very gently, Spike reached out a hand to cup her face. Her eyes closed as he brought them together, his lips to her forehead and his body close to hers. They stayed like that, until Rupert’s throat clearing broke them apart.

Giles had watched their whole exchange, unwilling to disturb the moment. Luckily for all of them, Wesley had confirmed that he was traveling alone and he would be staying for a couple of days. “He’s coming alone,” was all Giles needed to say. Buffy curled her arms around Spike’s waist, leaning into his embrace. He felt the strain ease from her body as she breathed heavily against his chest, which released his own tension.

Giles had seen her with other boyfriends, but he’d never witnessed such a moment.

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They’d walked the rest of the way home in near silence, hands clasped together and Giles beside them. It was a comfortable feeling, this unstated companionship. Buffy hadn’t quite made her peace with Giles over the events of last spring, at least not yet, but she was starting to think that, with him at least, the time apart had led to a bit of mutual understanding. It was unlike the emotions she was feeling toward Willow and Xander, though somewhat closer to what she was feeling for Spike. Eventually the words would have to be spoken between them, laying the ghosts of harsh words and even harsher actions to rest. But not tonight.

Tonight she needed this feeling. Tonight she needed to rest, safe within the circle of Spike’s arms, protected from all the outside forces.

Saying a quick goodbye to Giles, even with a small kiss on the cheek, Buffy waited at the bottom of the stairs for Spike to lock up the doors. Still quiet and subdued, she undressed then climbed into the bed snuggling into his waiting arms. Breathing against his skin, she closed her eyes and that’s when the tears started.

Holding her close, Spike just let her cry it out, unsure what it was she was crying over. He thought maybe she wasn’t even certain. Whatever it was ended just as suddenly as it started, and Buffy wiped her eyes, whispering a soft apology to him, which he just shrugged off, with a, “No worries, sweetheart, happens.”
Their kisses started off slow, building beat by beat, breath by breath, until neither one of them could stand being separated one second longer. Spike slid inside her, her legs wrapped around his hips, slowly grinding into her warmth. Their joining was as slow as their kisses, languorous and deep, the pace not changing but building, intensifying with every thrust they shared. Instead of slamming against each other, he slid excruciatingly slowly and hard into her welcoming depths. Buffy convulsed around him, the internal flutters signaling her orgasm beginning. Her inner muscles contracted around him hard, squeezing him.

She gasped, trying to find air, choking out, “Spike please, please come inside me now.”

Grunting he looked down at her “Kitten . . . need . . .”

Thrusting again, Spike exploded within her. Pressing his cool body against her overheated one, Spike gathered her in his arms, holding on for the rest of the night.

There probably existed a good number of reasons why he should be trying to separate Buffy from Spike, but every time he thought of that, images of the pair of them tonight surfaced in his head. From the earliest moment this morning, facing down Xander and then how they were tonight just reinforced the thought that he wouldn’t, couldn’t do anything to hurt either of them. And, knowing how Buffy had reacted over Dawn, Giles knew if he tried, she would shut him out completely.

But the real truth was, and here was the kicker, Giles had lied to Spike this morning. He’d told him he would never be good enough. The truth was, of all Buffy’s significant others, Spike was the one he liked best. Though he’d never ever admit to that.

His life was just one big serving of irony of late.

So not only was he going to not undermine their relationship, Giles was going to support them in any way possible. And if that included neutralizing Xander, well so be it.

Satisfied, Giles settled in for a long night of interesting reading.

It felt like they had waited the whole day for Wesley to arrive. It had been a decidedly normal day, filled with loads of laundry and television watching and hours just waiting.

Buffy had only told Tara that Wesley was coming, since she’d taken to avoiding Wilow. No one at Revello heard from Xander, but given the events of the previous morning, there wasn’t one of them that missed him.

Dinner was long over with and Spike was making noises about heading out for patrol, trying to get
Buffy to go with him, when the call finally came. As Spike reached for the phone, Buffy stole a throw pillow and the remote from Dawn, while Tara watched.

“Right,” was all Spike said.

“C’mon, goldilocks, we’re summoned.”

Dawn looked up, catching the look on her sister’s face and then noting Spike’s determined air. “Can I come?”

“Don’t even know where we’re goin’, Nib, why would you wanna come?”

“Duh, Spike, only one person summons either of you. So it’s either the shop or his apartment. Please?”

Not seeing the harm, Spike just shrugged. Buffy’s only answer was to sigh and say, “Might as well,” and as they headed for the door, she looked at Tara, asking, “Aren’t you coming?”

Taken aback, Tara looked behind her, wondering who Buffy was talking to. “Me?”

“Yeah, you. Glinda, let’s go.”

Grabbing the DeSoto keys, Spike was out the door.

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Wesley and Giles were sharing a bottle of scotch when they all trooped in the door, Spike trailing behind the girls. The younger Englishman had stood up when Buffy came in the door, a look of complete bafflement on his face. Giles had opted not to say anything, instead letting the younger man discover her miraculous return.

Looking around wild-eyed, Wesley nearly dropped his drink. “Buffy?”

“Hey, Wes. Long time.” Buffy smiled at him, then perched on the couch arm, waiting for Spike to sit down. Instead he just stood behind her, his hands resting on her upper arms.

“It’s really . . . how?” Her reappearance had rendered him almost speechless.

“Long story, mate. Settle down and we’ll tell it.” Spike motioned him back into his seat. And what followed had Wesley more than once scratching his head in disbelief. The only part of the recitation that was left out was where Buffy had been, but everything else, including her climb from the grave was recounted. When they were done, Wesley sat in his chair absolutely stunned.

“Lethe’s Bramble? You do know in the wrong quantity it can be deadly.” At some of the looks that were returned, that obviously hadn’t been discussed yet.

“You do realize it’s only been just over a week since Buffy’s come back to us.” Giles was the first to speak.

“Oh, dear. No, I hadn’t.” Directing his first comments to her, Wesley asked, “Are you feeling any
better?"

Reaching up a hand to clasp one of Spike’s, Buffy answered him, “I’m doing lots better,” and
surprising them all, added, “Nearly ready to patrol again, just not alone all the time. Hopefully,” and
this time she looked over her shoulder, “I’ll have a partner.”

To which Spike couldn’t resist kissing the top of her head. “Say the word, kitten, wherever,
whenever.”

Which surprised no one but the ex-watcher. Wesley was taken aback. No wonder information flow
from Sunnydale was a hot topic, there was so much going on here that it boggled his mind, and he
knew everyone, how much more astounding it must be to a Council member who’d never met them.

“And Willow did this all on her own?”

“Yes. She hid everything, confided in no one.” Giles was finding it increasingly hard to keep his
emotions in check when discussing the wayward redhead.

“Very dangerous, Rupert. No telling what she’s capable of now.” Realizing her girlfriend was in
the room, Wesley apologized. “I’m sorry, Tara.”

Ducking her head, the girl just nodded. Dawn, who was sitting beside her and up till now had been
strangely silent, hugged her.

An uneasy silence settled over the group, until Spike broke it. “Rupert says you’ve some
information for us. Out with it then.”

“Right. As I told Rupert last night, I recently heard something I found disturbing from two different
sources. My father, during our last phone call, let slip about a video he’d seen of Spike patrolling
alone.” He let that sink in, then continued, “And more recently I learned from someone at Wolfram
& Hart about surveillance at the hellmouth.”

Dawn piped up. “Who’s Wolfram & Hart?”

“Not who, what.” Giles started answering, but stopped when Wesley continued.

“It’s a law firm with demonic origins and more than a finger in many pies.” He sighed, finishing up
with “For the last year or so they’ve been attempting to bait Angel into, well, into darker pursuits.”

“Lovely,” was Giles’ comment, while Spike just tightened his grip on Buffy while Tara looked
confused.

“How do you bait a souled vampire?” Dawn didn’t realize how much like a stupid joke that
sounded until everyone else chuckled.

“On a hook, Niblet,” was Spike’s half-chuckled answer.

But Buffy wasn’t really laughing. “What did they do?”

“They managed to bring Darla back.

“What?”
“Oh, that she-bitch?” Spike’s voice was loudest, and poor Tara just asked, “Who?”

Spike quickly re-capped who and what Darla was, unaware of Buffy’s history with her, until, “She tried to kill me. She was the first that really dared to target me.”

Suppressing a shudder, Buffy shifted closer to Spike, looking for and finding protection.

“Why’d they bring her back?” Was Tara’s question.

“I believe they hoped to duplicate what had happened here in Sunnydale, between Buffy and Angel.”

Without consciously thinking about it, Spike enfolded her in his arms, her back firmly against his chest. One hand wrapped around a solid forearm while the other reached for Dawn.

Wesley blinked, unsure what his eyes were seeing.

36. *Through a glass darkly.*

*Signs cannot be represented, in a spy’s report, so damningly as words.*  
*Stendhal, The Red and the Black, ch. XXVII*

*Each friend represents a world in us;  
a world possibly not born until they arrive,  
and it is only in meeting them that a new world is born.*  
*Anais Nin*

Willow woke up to find the house empty and pitch dark. She was so tired, exhausted, even her bones ached. Every muscle in her body protested and her eyes were all crusted over. Her mouth felt like little men with fuzzy slippers had left them around her teeth and her belly was screaming for sustenance.

Getting up, she glanced at the clock. Blinking at it in disbelief, she wiped her eyes. *No way. It couldn’t possibly be that late.* She’d only gone up to take a quick nap while Tara made dinner. She couldn’t possibly have slept nearly four hours.

*Nope,* stupid clock still said nine twenty-seven. *What the heck?* Hadn’t anyone tried waking her? Willow wandered out into the hallway, straining for sounds of anyone else being home. The house was eerily silent.

Following the instincts of her grumbling belly, Willow wandered into the kitchen. Tara had propped a note against a prepared plate, telling her nothing more than the other four had gone out and would
be back later. There was also a bit about how she’d tried waking her a couple of times, but Willow hadn’t woken up.

Well that’s just . . . phooey, Willow thought, feeling just out of sorts. Lifting the foil off the plate, she scrunched up her nose. Veggies and chicken and good stuff. Wiggling her fingers, Willow got nothing more than a weird tingly feeling, like accidentally sticking your finger in a socket or when static electricity hits but nothing else. The plate didn’t even heat up. Trying again, Willow didn’t even get that sensation.

Aggravated at herself now, Willow tried again. Still nothing. Getting short-tempered, she grabbed the plate and nearly flung it into the microwave.

This is not fair. Shouldn’t be drained like this, magic was kind of — self-generating, you either had the power or didn’t. While the microwave whirred behind her, she wondered if maybe trying to, well not so much with the trying as doing, she corrected her thoughts, she had done a lot, moved all the park stuff around, rearranging everything and best of all, making the moon dance in the sky. That had been cool.

Lost in the moment of remembrance, Willow didn’t hear the microwave beep or the phone ring, in fact she didn’t register anything until she heard the tail end of Angel’s message, but by then she was focused on trying to remember exactly what she had done in order to get the moon to move.

Whirling around, Willow nearly stumbled and fell. She was tired and hungry, almost beyond hungry. Her belly felt like it was scraping against her backbone. Suddenly remembering the food in the microwave, Willow made her way over to it. That’s all this is, body needed food and rest and then, tomorrow I’ll be just fine and dandy. Just needed nutrients and rest.

Without thought of taste or temperature, Willow scarfed down the leftovers then trudged back up the stairs. Idly glancing at the clock again, she noted it was nine forty-three as her head hit the pillow.

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For perhaps the third time this evening, Wesley was rendered speechless. It was beginning to become something of a pattern. He thought he had a permanent look of confusion on his features.

The active slayer was holding onto Spike while clutching her sister’s hand. Looking furtively at Giles, Wesley realized this was not a surprise to anyone but him. Best keep his . . . questions to a minimum.

“Don’t think he’d make Sunnyhell his first stop, pet,” was Spike’s softly worded reassurance.

Giles and Buffy were both shaking their heads, but it was the Watcher who spoke first. “He would seek out those he knows are capable of defeating him and restoring his soul. Which puts more than a few of us in harm’s way.”

“But he’s not all evil right?” Dawn’s voice sounded scared, which made sense, because the monks had implanted a memory of Angelus kidnaping her along with Giles.

“No, he held on, though it was a near thing.” Wesley stared down into his glass of scotch. “Not before he allowed Darla and Drusilla to take out half the senior management of Wolfram & Hart.”
“This before or after he nearly burned them to a crisp?” That night came back sharply for both of them, but instead of pulling away, Buffy settled closer into his embrace, letting go her sister’s hand. Leaning forward, Spike whispered something in Buffy’s ear, to which she rolled her eyes and hissed at him, but the whole time she had a soft private little smile.

“So we don’t have to worry about evil ex-boyfriends do we?” Was Tara’s query, pulling everyone’s attention back to the discussion.

“No. We don’t.” Giles took off his glasses, thinking hard. “What we do have to worry about is an invasion of our privacy. I would imagine the shop is the primary location, while in all likelihood they may have limited surveillance on our homes.”

“Haven’t been by the crypt for anything longer than to pick up weapons in weeks, so the place is probably safe, only because it’s not being used.” Spike shrugged a bit, breaking away from Buffy to pace.

“What about here?” Buffy wasn’t happy with any part of this discussion, nor with Spike moving away.

“I did a sweep earlier, before Wesley got here, everything was clear, except for those.” And he gestured at the two little devices in the water glass. “They appear to be listening devices and I didn’t find a video feed, so I would imagine they haven’t attempted that yet.”

Wesley continued, “Hopefully your house is safe, because it is privately owned, but we should assume that Xander’s apartment is wired.”

Spike was muttering under his breath about interfering wankers and his agitation was growing. “How do we keep ’em from finding out we know before we strike?”

“How do we find all these devices?” Was Buffy’s question.

“Well, I’ve brought some counter-measures with me, not to mention you do have some fairly powerful magics at your disposal.” Wesley leaned forward in his chair and for the first time, everyone noticed the boxes of supplies at his feet and piled beside him. “I’ll teach you how to look for cameras and bugs and how to short circuit the signals for brief periods, so that it all looks accidental.”

“That’s good. But we need to know who is supplyin’ the wankers with the pictures.” Spike stopped pacing, looking at the other two men. “Gotta protect the girls, can’t have them goin’ after Niblet or Glinda, ‘s not right.”

“Hey – girl here!” Buffy pouted at him and Spike scowled playfully at her. Brushing a kiss against her temple, he pulled her close, “Beautiful one too, but you can protect yourself, they can’t.”

Then he whispered something else in her ear that had her melting against his chest, her eyes suddenly misty.

Silence reigned for a little bit, then Giles asked, “What was the other reason you called Wesley?”

“Right.” Clearing his throat and tearing his eyes away from the two blonds, Wesley stole a glance at Dawn and then spoke. Giles had told him something of the girl’s origins and the implantation of
memories by the monks, as a means of enlisting his help should something come to light in the
course of his work. Well, it had, but Wesley suddenly realized that this information he brought with
him might just change the course of their lives. He didn’t know exactly what was contained in the
texts, but he knew enough to know they might be the very same monks that had given the key form
after protecting it from Glorificus for centuries.

“Recently some old texts were acquired from a . . . well, a group of monks that all perished recently.”

Everyone’s attention riveted on him. Flushing under the focus of so many eyes, Wesley shifted in
his seat.

“Texts?”

“Monks?”

“Acquired how?”

Were all flung in the air, from differing voices and Wesley tried to answer each one.

“The texts, some scrolls, some books, and a few private journals from some of the brethren were
acquired by Wolfram & Hart just recently. Their rarities collection is quite extensive and they must
spend millions.”

“Focus, Wesley, back to the subject.” Buffy interrupted him, more than passingly familiar with the
bookworm gleam in his eyes. Kind of reminded her of Giles.

“Sorry. Well then.” Shifting his attention back, he continued, “I’m not quite certain how the texts
came into the possession of Wolfram & Hart, but they did. And when my contact gloatingly
informed me of such, I . . . liberated them.”

He had the grace to look sheepish until Spike and Giles both laughed out loud. “Means you stole
them from underneath their noses.”

“In a manner of speaking, from . . . from one point of view, perhaps.” He was visibly embarrassed, a
fact which didn’t go unnoticed.

“Don’t go all missish on us now, Wes. Proud of you. Bloody good job. Lifting priceless texts from
Evil Inc., must’ve been right fun.” Spike was enjoying both the revelation and the idea of stuffed
shirt going all pink panther.

“Stop teasing him. It’s not nice.” Which would’ve worked if Buffy hadn’t been laughing softly.

“Um, Buffy, these are my monks?” Dawn was both uncomfortable and strangely excited. Maybe,
just – could these books have the information she needed? It was probably in them somewhere. Just
one . . . that’s all she needed, just one of them to have what she was looking for. She was almost
afraid to hope, but it had to be there, they must have kept records of something as important as the
key, since they were the ones guarding it. Turning wide eyes on her sister and Spike, and then Giles,
Dawn tried again.

“They are the ones that . . . right?”

Instead of answering her, Buffy opened her arms to hold her tight. Raising her eyes to Spike over
Dawn’s head, Buffy’s held a question and a need.

Knowing how fragile his Slayer was, and knowing, too, that this was a hard subject for Dawn, Spike came round the couch and sunk down on his haunches facing the sisters.

“Niblet?” He reached out a hand, brushing away her hair.

“Just tell me it’s them . . . the ones that made me.”

It was Wesley’s voice that sounded in the room, though, not Spike’s but it was his arms that she clung too.

“It appears that way.”

Dawn buried her face against Buffy’s shoulder, holding tight onto Spike’s hands.

Her origins were in those texts, she knew it. She just had to find them.

37. A little bit of angelshine

Every form of life is in its origin not natural, but divine and human; for it must spring from love, just as there can be no reason without spirit.

Friedrich Von Schlegel, Idea 91 in Selected Ideas

Her eyes the glow-worm lend thee, the shooting-stars attend thee, and the elves also, whose little eyes glow like sparks of fire, befriend thee.

Robert Herrick, The Night Piece to Julia

After Wesley’s second revelation of the night, Spike had gathered his little family and herded them home.

They all needed time to think.

No doubt Rupert was already itching to get into the texts and he had a feeling Dawn was going to get snippy if they refused her access. Way he figured it, she deserved to know, and it shouldn’t be kept from her. He just didn’t think she should be alone while she looked. Someone should be there with her.

He also didn’t like the idea of her finding out she wasn’t from the people she thought she was. Yeah, they’d planted the memories of her being Joyce’s, but what if she wasn’t?

Glancing in his rear-view mirror, Spike watched Dawn for a moment. She was quiet, watching the
dark night roll by, her mind miles and miles away. Looking sideways at Buffy, he could see that she too was a million miles away. Reaching out with his right hand, Spike hooked it around her thigh. “All right, kitten?”

Instead of answering, she moved closer, snuggling up against his arm, humming softly.

Tara too was quiet. All of his girls were lost in thought.

Breaking the silence, Spike said, “No one goes out alone, even in daylight. No one.”

If he’d been expecting an argument, he would’ve been severely disappointed. The three girls just murmured agreements. Apparently Wesley’s announcement they were being watched and videoed bothered all of them.

_Hallelfuckinglujah._

Spike figured it was the last time he’d ever get all of them to agree to his suggestions, especially Buffy. Girl was nothing if not stubborn.

They pulled into the driveway, silence reigning in the car. No one moved, until Dawn asked, “Do you think that the house is bugged?” Then, “Yuck. What if they have cameras in our rooms or . . . eeeeeeewwwwwwww in the bathrooms?”

Buffy turned wild eyes to Spike, while Tara made a noise in the back.

“Don’t think we have to worry, ‘bout cameras rolling, probably jus’ recording devices. Should be okay.”

“Nahuh.” Dawn was freaking. “Not going. I’ll sleep out here.”

“Niblet, c’mon. Don’t think they’ve gotten inside the house to plant cameras.” Spike was being patient, but Dawn’s worry was spilling over to the other two.

When Tara started to speak, Spike slapped a hand against the steering wheel. “All bloody right. I’ll go. I’ll look. If I find anything I’ll spray it, right?”

Reaching under his seat for a can of black spray paint, Spike kicked open his door and strode angrily for the front door. He really wasn’t angry with the girls, more like he was angry with the entire situation. He didn’t necessarily relish the idea of people watching him, taping his every movement during the day, and he could only imagine what the girls must be thinking about all of this. So he was angry, he’d rather not take it out on the girls. They didn’t deserve this. Truly, none of them did.

Taking his time, he looked around before entering the house. As he’d suspected, there was one outside the door, aimed in, to log arrivals and departures. Leaving that one alone, Spike entered. Going methodically from room to room, he searched the whole house.

And got more and more angry with each inspection.

There were four cameras on the first floor.
One in the hallway.

One in each bedroom.

Spike sprayed around each one, gumming up the works but not touching the lenses. Hoping the wankers had gotten a good show, he cursed softly and at length. At last he came to Buffy’s room. He was not going to be happy if he found anything in here. For himself he almost didn’t care, but he knew Buffy would be upset.

Going over her room carefully, Spike found nothing. Which was good, yet more disturbing. Good because they hadn’t been in the house recently and disturbing because the lack indicated that surveillance had been in place since just after Buffy died.

Heading back out to the car, Spike decided whoever it was doing the spying was going to die.

Giles gave Wesley fifteen minutes before the questions started. He knew they were coming, knew there was a queue of them lining up in the other man’s mind, just waiting for the opportunity to spill out. It wasn’t all that late, though Wesley had driven for a couple of hours, then had the shock of a lifetime, so he didn’t figure Wesley would be wasting much time.

“Giles?“ Wesley looked up from perusing his almost empty glass of scotch to face the older man. There was a look of infinite patience on his face, which Wesley took as a sign to go ahead and ask those questions.

“How is she really?” It actually wasn’t the first question on his mind, but it was one of the more pressing ones.

“A lot better than when she first returned. We’ve still no idea what dimension Willow pulled her from. When she . . . when Spike first found her, she was unable to speak and he said she looked starved.” And, Giles added mentally, hadn’t looked much better when he’d first seen her hours later.

“Spike mentioned that he found her. I would imagine it was a bit of a shock for both of them.” Fidgeting with his glass, he continued, “Buffy appears a bit skittish.”

Was more of an observation than a question, but Giles felt compelled to respond in any case. “I’m taking it as a positive sign that she will accept and initiate physical contact with anyone. Her first couple of days back she shied away from nearly everyone.”

“A bit understandable. She seems to be comfortable around Spike.” He stared pointedly at Giles, waiting for confirmation of what his observations had led him to surmise.

Well, Giles thought, might as well start here and now. If I’m going to do this, support them, then it means with everyone – especially outsiders, people like the man in front of him, for one. “It is rather understandable. Spike has . . . done more for her in the last few months than anyone.”

Giles waited a moment, letting that sink in, then added his own thoughts on the matter. “He took a beating for the sake of Dawn, at the hands of Glory that, well, had he been a lesser man, it would have killed him or, at the very least, broken him. He withstood abuse that I have personally never before witnessed. And,” he took a deep breath, “he never once gave Glory the information she was
“He protected Dawn.” This was something he hadn’t heard. “When did this happen?”

“Shortly after Joyce passed away. It was, I believe a turning point.” Giles thought back, realizing his words were the actual truth. Spike’s beating had been a turning point, it marked the instant when both he and Buffy had started taking Spike seriously, and stopped just thinking of him as a pest.

“After he did that, instead of running and leaving us to face Glory alone, he stayed, fought beside us, no hesitation within him at all about it. Buffy asked for his help and Spike came through.” Giles left out most of the details, they weren’t all that important. “I honestly am not certain how we would have gotten through the summer without him. He patrolled, most nights alone, took care of Dawn and generally redeemed himself right before my eyes.”

“All this without a soul.” Wesley got up, heading to the bottle of scotch Giles had left on the counter. “Amazing.”

“I’m coming to realize that Spike is a . . . unique. And that perhaps, in his case, having or not having a soul might be immaterial.” Going back over some of Spike’s prior actions, as he’d done more than once over the past few weeks, Giles was convinced something in Spike’s make-up set him apart from other vampires, set him apart even from Angel. It was as far as Giles was willing to go. Anything else he had to say should be said first to Spike and secondly to Buffy.

Wesley was about to say something else when the phone rang.

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He’d escorted the girls inside, closing and locking the door behind him as he made his way through the house once more. Double checking the back door, Spike saw the light blinking on the answering machine and thought about ignoring it. Dawn and Tara had headed up the stairs, while Buffy was waiting for him, sitting on the bottom step. He wasn’t particularly tired, but he knew the girls had to be exhausted.

Hitting the play button on the machine, Spike did a double take when Angel’s voice sounded in the darkness.

At first he didn’t listen to the message, his aggravation blocking the words. Exasperated with himself, Spike hit replay, this time determined to listen. As the machine cycled back to the beginning, Buffy wandered into the kitchen. She stopped, hearing the voice and the innocuous message, then kept walking toward where Spike stood leaning against the stove. Without hesitation, Buffy walked right into his chest, pushing her way forward, forcing his arms to circle around her. “Think he’s just checking?” Her voice was muffled against his chest, but he heard her clearly.

“Dunno, pet.” He didn’t want to get into the tangled complexities that made up his relationship or non-relationship with Angel anytime soon. There wasn’t much love lost between them and no doubt the reappearance of the girl in his arms would further complicate things.

“I meant it earlier, you know. I don’t want to see him.” She nuzzled her face against his chest.

“Have to face him sooner or later.” Whether he meant alone or not never came up, because as the
message ended, Spike reached for the phone hitting Giles’ speed dial number.

“Rupert. Angel called looking for Oxford. Let ‘im know papa wants to make sure his chick is safe and sound in Sunnyhell.” Buffy never moved from his arms, her own wrapped around his waist, as she held onto him. “Right. Taken care of.”

A pause while Giles said something, then, “We’ll suss it out in the morning.”

He hung up, absently resting his hand on her shoulder. “Watcher figures Angel is being nosey. Won’t come with Oxford, but will call jus’ to make sure. Bloody ass. Mus’ think we’re all stupid. Like he doesn’t know Oxford’s cell number . . .” Spike’s voice drifted off into nothing as Buffy slid her hands underneath his tee shirt.

“What’s with the sudden Oscar?”

“Who?” Spike was confused.

“You know, Oscar the grouch, mean little green guy, lives in a garbage can? Furry green . . .” There was a touch of amusement in her voice now, as her fingers made swirly patterns on his lower back.

“No, sunshine, don’t know.” Unconsciously, he began bunching up her shirt, sliding his thumbs inside her jeans waistband.

“It’s a kid show, Sesame . . . never mind.” Pausing a second, Buffy looked up at him. “Angel, right?” Was all she said, was all she needed to say.

They both knew it was because of the phone call, Buffy just wondered if he was going to admit it. When he did finally speak it wasn’t exactly what she’d expected.

“He was here, y’know. After. Dunno who told him the bad news, an’ by then I was half living here – Niblet wouldn’t stop crying – near two days before Tara sent Rupert to come get me – we hadn’t . . . put you to rest.” Tightening his arms around her, then breaking away, Spike sat her down on one of the stools, then began pacing around the small kitchen. “Poofter, Oxford and the cheerleader all show up, night before, wanting to know why I was here, like I was less than them. Giles gave Angel what for – askin’ him if he’d give up LA to stay here and protect Dawn – bloody jackass couldn’t say yes. Couldn’t even answer ‘im.”

He kicked the stove, “Not even for your m’emory would he do it. Watcher said he didn’t trust him – tha’ he trusted me to protect her, like you did.” He didn’t, wouldn’t look at her. “An ‘n all this time, knowin’ you were gone . . . knowin’ money was tight . . . knowin’ Dawn was all alone, that bleedin’ son of a bitch ne’er once called, not even to be nosey.”

Spike stared out the window, not seeing anything, unaware he’d started crying. “Now you’re here. Safe ‘n one piece, an’ now the opportunistic bastard calls? Now he wants to know how we are? Jus’ because Oxford comes to visit?”

His clenched fist rested against the counter, poised to pound into the counter top. Still he wouldn’t look at her. “So much for . . . god, there were nights, when only thing keepin’ me from waitin’ for the sunrise was my promise to you. Only thing keepin’ me on m’feet after battlin’ to keep her safe.”

His voice fell into a harsh whisper. “Jus’ don’t wanna lose you, kitten. Jus’ got you back . . . can’t . . .” His voice was so low now that Buffy strained to hear it. “Can’t go back to before – before . . .
need you, kitten, don’t . . . want to lose you again.”

When her arms came round his waist, one hand reaching for his clenched fist, Spike jumped, moving to wipe his face, to hide his tears from her. Her warm fingers pushed hard against the outside of his fist, easing away some of the tension. Almost of their own accord, his fingers opened, then his hand rotated, so their fingers entwined, clasped together. Urging him wordlessly to turn around, Buffy reached up with her other hand to wipe away his drying tears.

Her words were just as soft as his had been and just as full of emotion. “Angel left me . . . never once asking me what I wanted or needed. He always gave up too quickly. Riley wasn’t any better. Wanting me to be something I wasn’t, couldn’t be. Neither one gave me a choice – they decided what was best.”

When he started to speak, she placed a finger over his lips, just holding them closed. “Now it’s my turn to choose. My turn to . . . if I wanted Angel, I would’ve called him, told him I was back. If I wanted Riley, I’d find a way to get to him.”

Opening her arms wide, she looked into his eyes. “Who do you see here? Spike . . . you . . . the one thing I know for sure is, you won’t leave, probably not even if I asked you too. You’d stay then, pestering me, wearing me down until I took you back.”

Taking a deep breath, Buffy said, “I need you. I need you, Spike, not Angel, not Riley – you. I want you . . . here, with me, as part of my life.”

So it wasn’t those three words, not yet, but, Spike thought as he swept her up into his arms, didn’t mean they weren’t there waiting to be said.

38. Preparedness prevents peril.

Let us presently go sit in council,
how covert matters may be best disclosed
and open perils surest answered

Julius Caesar, act 4, sc 1

“Danger! What danger do you foresee?”
Holmes shook his head gravely, “It would cease to be a danger if we could define it.” said he.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, (Watson and Holmes)
“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”

Having spent part of the early morning while the girls were all asleep stripping wires and neutralizing the recording equipment on the first floor, Spike was reasonably certain that the house was once again secure. After discussing it briefly with Buffy, they had decided together that leaving the one camera, the one aimed at the front door, was the lesser of all evils. After double checking one last time, making sure he’d gotten all the cameras and bugs, Spike headed up the stairs to finally get into bed with Buffy.

He stopped short, with his pants almost half off, when he realized Buffy wasn’t alone. At some
point, while he had been downstairs working, Dawn had crawled into bed with her. Half-hopping about, his foot stuck in the leg of his jeans, Spike swore, nearly falling on the two sleeping girls. The noise woke Buffy up and she sleepily giggled at his predicament.

“Go ahead and laugh, missy.”

Sitting up, she giggled more, finally catching sight of his dilemma. He was half laying on the bed, one foot caught in the jeans, completely exposed to the gaze of anyone in the room. Tossing one end of the light blanket over him, Buffy got out of bed. Grabbing a pair of sweats from the pile that Tara had given her earlier she watched while he struggled out of the jeans.

“Here,” was all she said then leaned over to kiss his bare chest. Spike froze, his body instantly craving hers. He growled low with a hint of a whine to it, reaching for her hand, as she pulled away from him.

“We can’t,” was all she whispered at him, pointing at the still sleeping teenager.

Drawing on the sweats and standing in the same motion, Spike pulled her toward the door. “Can’t in here.” When she resisted, he picked her up, hooking his hands underneath her hips. “C’mon, kitten, where’s it written we can only do this in a bed?”

Wrapping her arms around his neck and locking her ankles behind his back, Buffy leaned in to run little kisses around his chin. Spike worked his hands up to hold her around her lower back, his fingers splayed wide against her skin. Every step he took brought his erection closer to her center, rubbing against the soft material of her shorts. He stopped, needing to kiss her, at the same time grinding his erection hard against her. She wiggled closer, unconsciously sliding her hips up and down, whimpering when he started to walk again.

The first step down jarred her clit against him hard, and Buffy arched up against him, desperate to hold on. His hands had slipped down inside her shorts, cupping the globes of her ass tightly. They were both gasping for air, little noises emerging from their throats, echoing softly in the close hallway. The trip down the stairs nearly ended in a heap when halfway down, the first of Buffy’s orgasms rippled through her and Spike nearly faltered when she clenched her legs tight around his hips. His name hissing from between her lips, her fingers digging hard into the muscles in his shoulders, Buffy writhed against him, as they teetered on the stairs. Regaining his balance, Spike stepped down hard purposely, watching the look on her face.

The rest of the trip to the first floor was a blur – surrounded by her heat, her feel, her scent, Spike was drowning. Drunk on all of her. His step lurched sideways down each riser reeling from the sensations. She affected him like no one else he’d ever met, human or otherwise, not even Drusilla had captivated him this way. He wanted to bury his erection inside her, slide into her and never let go. To crawl inside her skin, stay there warm inside her forever.

Reaching the bottom step, Spike nearly dropped her again as his feet hit the floor too soon, expecting another step down. Buffy clutched him tighter, almost crawling up his body, a second orgasm rippling as his cock rammed hard against her clit.

“Ssspppppiikkkee.”

And that was it, he could go no further without being inside her. Forcing his hands down, Spike ripped apart the soft material shielding her. Letting the now useless rags drop to the floor, he lifted her higher, wriggling his hips to try and get at least partially out of his sweats.
The tip of his cock peeked over the seam, seeking her wet heat, his mouth on hers, devouring her. One handed he half pushed the sweats down, just enough to free himself and let her slide onto his straining cock.

“Gggaaaaahhhh.” He groaned into her mouth, tightening his hold on her ass. “Wet . . . drenched. . . Jesus.”

Somehow he made it into the kitchen, Buffy hanging on, impaled on his cock. He didn’t need to thrust, just walking while embedded in her depths, rubbing against her clit, was enough. Slamming against the basement door, Spike cursed a blue streak then thrust in and out, keeping them both teetering on the knife’s edge.

The rest of the way down the stairs to his room was vague, hazed by the sensations. He held off coming by reciting Latin declensions in his head, something he hadn’t needed to do in nearly a hundred years, while Buffy whimpered and moaned in his arms, gritting her teeth every time he bumped against her clit.

Finally reaching the bedside, Spike raised his knee and Buffy shrieked at the contact, which released the tenuous grip he had on his control. Not loosening his hold on her, Spike began thrusting, driving into her hard. Buffy had nothing to hold on to except him. It was over in instants.

Dropping down onto the bed, their bodies still entwined, they jolted through another series of orgasms, both of them shaking from the force. Rolling over onto his back, Spike didn’t let go of Buffy, pulling her over to rest on his chest. Her chest was heaving, her body shook by the small tremors racing through her muscles. His breathing started to match hers and he could feel the beats of her heart slow down then finally settle. Buffy was covered in a light sheen of sweat and Spike inhaled deeply, thinking he’d never get used to this. The after . . . when she was putty in his arms, content to just lay there against him, every curve of her body melting into the angles of his. His right hand came up to run lightly down her back and it was only then that he realized she was still wearing the tank top. A soft chuckle rang through the air, and she mumbled something incoherently against his skin.

“Sleep, kitten,” he rumbled at her, brushing a kiss against the top of her head. She was already more than halfway there, but her arm came round to hold onto him, as she nuzzled a soft kiss into his chest.

Spike closed his eyes, content to just lay there, holding her.

***********************************************************************

Tara was the first one up. She was still tired, restless from another night spent tossing and turning, trying to sleep next to an oblivious Willow. She didn’t understand the redhead anymore, didn’t understand what was happening between them. Didn’t know if she could fix things or even if she wanted to. She’d been thinking hard for the last couple of days, in and around life that just kept happening while her brain focused on the situation with her girlfriend. Willow’s display yesterday preparing their breakfast was probably the single most disturbing thing she’d ever seen. Which was saying a lot, especially since this was the hellmouth.

Demons, vampires, werewolves, witches, they were all in some way easier to deal with than
inanimate objects floating around in the air becoming breakfast before her very eyes. She’d told the three other adults, not to “tell tales”, but because of genuine concern for her girlfriend. What bothered her most was Willow’s inability to understand she’d done anything wrong. So maybe she could concede that fixing breakfast wasn’t really harmful, but all in all, it wasn’t any easier or faster. It still took time and energy, just maybe a different method, but the ends were still the same.

Breakfast got put on the table.

No, what really, truly deeply disturbed her was what Willow had done to her and Dawn, and her complete disregard for their feelings, their thoughts and really, their persons. Leaving what she’d done for Buffy out of the equation, Willow had stripped both Dawn and herself of a basic human right. They were thinking, feeling beings, and they had free will. Willow had stolen that from both of them.

Willow had broken one of the basic covenants of Wiccan practice. The fact that she’d done so to rescue Buffy was almost – in Tara’s mind that was the problem. She knew Dawn would have risked anything to get her sister back. Same with Giles and Spike. And, if she were completely honest with herself – balancing the scales, she’d probably be willing to do almost anything also. But Willow never should have just assumed that. She should have asked.

Once again, Willow had done something without really thinking it through, unconcerned about the consequences. Like Spike had said, and she agreed, there were always consequences. Always some sort of payment.

Heading down toward the kitchen to start breakfast, Tara found Buffy’s shorts shredded in the hallway just at the bottom of the stairs. Staring down at the remnants of her summer pajamas, Tara looked up toward the top of the stairs, then gingerly peeked into the living room. Breathing a sigh of relief that ended in a knowing little giggle, Tara shook her head, continuing on her way into the kitchen.

One thing about living here, life was never dull. There was always something new and strange to look forward too.

***********************************************************************

Footsteps overhead and a stirring woman in his arms finally woke him. Buffy stretched beside him slowly coming awake. Spike was tempted to just fall back into sleep, when an unfamiliar, heavier tread shook the floor above him. Listening hard to the noises above them, Spike hoped it was the watchers west invading his territory, because if it was the whelp, he was feeling in the mood to shove his nose in that judgmental shit he’d been tossing around earlier.

Not that he’d expected much better from the boy, but Buffy didn’t deserve the kind of shit he’d been sending her way. Spike didn’t understand the lack of tolerance nor the complete inconsideration for the girl’s feelings. Christ, she’d only been back, from what they thought was a hell dimension, just over a week and the whelp expected her to just jump right back into being herself. . . do any of these people actually know this girl? Does any one of them pay attention to anyone but their own selves?

Spike rolled over, resting his head on his elbow, watching Buffy going through her waking up ritual. He didn’t know about before, but now, she would get this little scrunch to her face, stretching out like a little kitten then cuddling back into a little ball. Lately, she’d taken to nuzzling up against him, holding on while her situation crashed back. He knew it bothered her, being here, facing life,
though there wasn’t much he could do about it. Spike was going to do everything in his power to keep her here, with him, to keep her safe for as long as possible. And if that meant working with Rupert Giles or Xander Harris or even, Angel, Spike would do it. *Hell, ’d even consider working with Riley Finn if it would keep her safe.* Realizing the train of his thoughts, Spike bit back a growl. *Probably draw the line at the last two.*

Watching her swim toward wakefulness, he came to a hard truth. He loved her. Oh, he’d said it often enough, but now, in the quiet, watching her come awake in his bed, he realized just how deep that feeling ran within him. There probably wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for her. He’d already gone against his natural inclination – patrolling for her memory – taking care of her sister. And yeah, if it came down to it, he probably would swallow his pride and work with Angel or Finn.

Reaching out a hand, he cupped the side of her face, running his thumb across her cheek. His voice was low and gentle, because he wasn’t saying the words for her to hear them, he was saying them because he needed to say it. He needed to say out loud . . . “Would do anything to keep you safe, Buffy, anything.”

*************************************************************************

Tara had just finished her own breakfast when Giles and Wesley walked in the front door. Jumping up, she made somewhat nervous motions about fixing them something to eat, but Giles shooed her away, saying “I’m perfectly capable of finding my way around this kitchen. Sit and relax.”

Running water into the kettle and bypassing the overly sugary cereal choices, Giles vainly looked around for something not so juvenile. Settling on the discarded donuts from the day before, he inquired, “Buffy and Spike up yet?”

“Uh. . . um . . . no. I don’t think so.” Her eyes glanced toward the basement door. “I’ll get Spike.”

Opening the door just enough to slip through with a shy smile at both men, Tara only went halfway down the steps before she stopped and wrung her hands. “Spike? Buffy? Are you awake?”

“Yeah, we are. We’ll be right up.” Instead of Spike answering, Buffy’s voice sounded sleepily as the sheets and blankets rustled.

A quiet giggle sounded in the air, making Tara smile. “Okay.”

*************************************************************************

They were dressed and up the stairs quickly. Spike was just buckling his belt when Buffy opened the door, brightly saying, “Morning, Giles, Wes.”

He shook his head. Girl was always going to surprise him. Spike just tilted his head at the other two Englishmen, heading straight for the refrigerator. Buffy perched on one of the stools, a banana in one hand and a piece of Tara’s toast in the other. Waving the banana about, she asked, “What’s up, guys?”

“We wanted to talk more about what we discussed last night.” Giles figured there was no time like
“Right then, so talk.” Spike took one of the blood bags from the refrigerator and tossed it into the microwave.

Wesley stared at it, aware it was human blood and turned questioning eyes to the others. Tara was the first to respond to the unasked query. “Spike got badly hurt the other night fighting the Cwn Annwn. Nearly lost his right hand.”

Spike opened a cabinet, finding none of his mugs, then went toward the dishwasher. Without much thought, while he waited for the blood to heat, Spike started unloading the clean dishes. Wesley gaped at him a moment, not really certain he was watching William the Bloody perform domestic chores.

Catching sight of the look on Wesley’s face, Buffy giggled then brought them back to why they were invading her house at ten in the morning. “So what’s the what?”

“Yesterday when your sister encountered the Huntsman he said something to her, which she repeated,” Giles realized they hadn’t really discussed this by the look on Buffy’s face, but continued, “as best she could. Wesley believes he’s translated a part of his message.”

“Rupert, you didn’t tell us she had tea with the bugger.” Spike sipped his blood, gauging the level of Buffy’s aggravation.

“In all the concern about Wesley’s arrival and news, I thought we could wait until the morning.” Giles glanced from one to the other, understanding he was going to have to make up for the deliberate omission on his part.

Conceding the point for a moment, Spike let it go. Buffy wasn’t so forgiving, though waited silently. She wasn’t so sure she wanted to get into it with Giles in front of Wesley.

“So what’s the translation?”

“Word for word – it was ‘warnings from my lord. Red Willow is dangerous.'”

39. Grace in her frailty

Good news about someone never gets past the door,
but bad news will travel a thousand leagues away.

Chinese proverb

I well believe it, to unwilling ears;
none love the messenger who brings bad news.

Sophocles, Antigone
O fallen angel,
the companion within me,
whisper something holy
before you pinch me
Into the grave.

Anne Sexton, The Fallen Angels

Tara was really glad Giles had urged her to sit down. Because at this moment, her knees were weak and she wasn’t sure if her breathing . . .

Spike handed her a glass of water, standing over her until she started drinking it.

Buffy looked at Giles, eyebrow raised, waiting for an explanation of everything.

Catching her look, Giles quickly filled them all in, including Wesley, about what had been going on, and more importantly, about Dawn’s encounter with the Huntsman and the pack.

He explained how Dawn had almost memorized what the Huntsman said, and then willingly let Giles record it. “Not recognizing the language readily, I asked Wesley this morning, who recognized it as some form of Gaelic. It’s a sort of mix of some Welsh words, some Irish, some Scots. Which would make sense since the hounds are endemic to all of the Celtic peoples of the British Isles.”

Spike asked, “Did you bring the tape?”

“I have it right here.” Giles pulled the small machine out of his pocket, placing it on the counter.

They all listened intently as Dawn’s voice filled the room, the unfamiliar consonants apparently rolling off her tongue easily.

After it finished, Wesley stated, “I’ve been unable to completely translate the beginning part.”

Spike’s voice broke in, saying, “She who guards the gates of space.” At everyone’s surprised looks he just shrugged. “It’s either that or She who guards the walls of eternal evermore.”

Only Tara wasn’t looking at him strangely, having far more on her mind than Spike’s weird ability to speak various forms of Gaelic.

“What?” Looking at the other three completely floored faces arrayed before him, Spike tried for the innocent look.

Giles was the fist to recover, knowing not to underestimate the vampire. “Another hidden talent?”

Spike smirked at him, raising his scarred eyebrow. “Jus’ another in a long list, Watcher. What’s your excuse this time?”

“Gaelic wasn’t required reading at Oxford when I attended.”

“Wasn’t when I . . .” Spike shut up, abruptly realizing he was going to admit to something about his life before turning.
Giles was about to call him on the near admission, when Buffy interrupted, “Guys? What are we gonna do?”

She’d been watching the exchange, realizing for once, Giles had someone he could banter with and who could challenge him intellectually. It was nice to see, even if it was more than a bit on the weird side. Kind of bizarre considering they were a watcher and a vampire, yet somehow they’d formed a friendship, or at least the start of one. Both men fell silent, aware their joking argument wasn’t really timely. Tara was sitting in her chair, staring down at her hands, which were clasped together on top of the counter. Her shoulders were stiff and she wouldn’t look at anyone else.

“Could . . . could you say that about Willow again?” Her voice was soft and hesitant, clearly upset.

Instead of answering, Wesley grabbed the recorder, hit rewind, then play. Finding the spot on the tape, Wesley raised the volume. Stopping after two words, “‘Earail bhuainn’ literally means ‘warnings from’.”

Hitting the play button again, Wesley repeated “‘Mo tigherna’ is ‘my lord’.”

Repeating the procedure, he continued, “‘Ruadh Seileach’ is ‘red Willow’.”

And for the last time, “‘eil gaueagh’ means ‘is dangerous’.”

Looking up at Spike for confirmation of Wesley’s translation, Tara’s face reflected the conflicted emotions running through her. Reacting to her look, Spike reached out for her, pulling her into his loose embrace.

That was all it took. Tara’s hold on her composure broke and she started crying into Spike’s chest. Buffy got up, running her hand down Tara’s back. Unconsciously linking her hands with Spike’s the two of them held Tara, letting her cry.

Waiting until she’d composed herself, Buffy spoke over the other girl’s head. “Giles, I think we need to know everything now.”

Conceding the point, Giles removed his glasses and embarked upon an explanation of what he knew so far.

“Apparently the hounds were unleashed because of actions on the part of Willow during her retrieval spell for Buffy.” Continuing, Rupert looked down at his hands, then back up at everyone else. “The hounds normally retrieve souls destined for a hell dimension.”

“One of the words Dawn repeated translates as heaven.”

Buffy’s fingers tightened around Spike’s but she said nothing. He didn’t move, didn’t look at her, waiting to see if Giles was going to make a connection.

Giles went on to say, “Which is a bit odd, because the Celts didn’t really differentiate between heaven and hell dimensions, the ancient ones anyway, but Christian mythos has invaded most Celtic legends to the point where the lines are very blurred. Especially the Irish myths.”

Wesley’s voice broke in, “It also appears, as near as I can figure, the Huntsman’s words refer to himself, as an emissary of those who guard heaven.”
“The real problem is the same sounding words, or similar sounding words can be interpreted differently depending on the language, and since this is already an amalgam of all of them, I’m unsure which meaning is the correct one.”

He hadn’t slept well, an unusual occurrence for him. Xander couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t gotten a full night’s sleep, well, whenever they weren’t working on averting an apocalypse.

Last night, watching Buffy and Spike he’d wanted to get up and leave. But he hadn’t. And he had no clue why he’d stayed.

Xander was trying to think, trying to come to grips with why Buffy was allowing Spike to be part of her life, why Buffy seemed to want Spike around. The guy was annoying, sarcastic, a thief . . . there really wasn’t any redeeming quality to the guy at all. At least Angel had a soul, something Spike didn’t have, and the chip didn’t count. All it did was prevent physical action on his part, but, he thought as he winced at the pain in his cheek, not always.

So why does Buffy want Spike around?

Okay, he was strong. He could more than hold his own against another demon, anything not human. Was that it?

No. Because when it comes down to it, Spike is a vampire and vampires are not good.

The only good vampire is a staked vamp.

Another thing that bugged him, that actually made him cringe, was the ick factor. Spike was dead and Xander couldn’t understand why Buffy was drawn to the dead. This made her second vampire. What made her want to be near a dead guy? Cause dead guys, just . . . he couldn’t see the attraction.

What was wrong with a living guy? There had been nothing wrong with Riley that he could see and yet Riley had left. He still didn’t understand what had happened between them, although he knew that Riley had believed Buffy had never loved him. He’d seen her after Riley left and Buffy had been all broken up, crying and generally being down. Well, at least until stuff had started happening, the whole Glory thing. But thinking about Glory brought to mind Spike, mainly what he’d done. He’d felt bad for Spike after Glory had kicked his undead ass so hard she’d almost broken him. Thinking about that just brought him round to where he’d started.

How could she let a dead guy near her?

Xander sat in his living room unable to reconcile what he knew about Spike, which was considerable, and about vampires, which was also a lot and understand how Buffy could agree to have a relationship with him – to sleep beside him.

So he decided there and then that he was going to do everything in his power to prove to Buffy that Spike was evil and that she needed to get rid of him.
Dawn stumbled down the stairs half asleep to find the kitchen full of people. Like everyone. Mentally rolling her eyes and making a face at herself she tried not to react to finding the kitchen packed. She wasn’t a happy morning person and waking up to a houseful of people just irked her. Looking around she noticed that Tara was leaning against Spike’s chest, wiping her eyes and Buffy was patting her hair, like she did whenever Buffy was trying to calm her.

So that’s weird.

Dawn grumbled a good morning at everyone and opened the refrigerator. Grabbing the milk and reaching for something sugary, Dawn avoided looking at anyone else. She really didn’t want to see what anyone thought of her sleeping attire or her breakfast choice. Not that most of them cared.

Tara wiped her eyes, rested her head against Spike’s solid chest then pushed away. “I’m okay.”

Giles looked up at Spike, saying, “I think it’s time to tell the girls what you heard.”

Pulling Buffy into his embrace, her back against his chest, Spike wrapped his arms around her. “Yeah.” Dropping his head onto her shoulder, Spike took a deep breath.

“Yeah. Little chit, Kirsten, Niblet’s friend, went all Sibyl-like, gave me a head’s up of sorts.” And without letting go of her, Spike recounted Kirsten’s message, leaving out only the part he’d kept back initially, no need to go into that now – or ever.

Everyone was silent, taking in all that had been said so far.

Tara gave a half-hearted laugh when Spike said he’d always thought ‘Yellow’ meant her, but when Giles said he was coming to believe Spike was right, the poor girl nearly fell over.

During this whole discussion, Dawn had remained quiet, calmly eating her cereal, just letting the adults around her talk. One way to get them to talk openly was to keep silent. But something Spike said had her thinking and she didn’t realize she’d said anything until she blurted it out. “I’ve never met her parents.”

Buffy looked over at her, “Never?”

While Tara said, “Didn’t you say she had to watch her new baby brother?”

“Yeah. I did.” Dawn shrugged. “He’s like three months old. She’s had him at the park a couple of times. Her parents both work nights.”

“Janice has known her since like kindergarten, I think she’s okay.” Dawn shrugged again, showing that she wasn’t all that concerned. Kirsten was harmless and her brother was just the cutest little baby. With dark blonde curly hair and big blue eyes, Will was adorable. Dawn swallowed hard. The baby’s name was Will. . . Nah, nothing weird about that, lots of people were named Will. For
all she knew, he could have been named for Will Smith. She’d only freak if his middle name was Rupert or Giles. Realizing she was letting her imagination run wild, Dawn hid a smile and kept chomping on her cereal. There was no way Kirsten and her family could be related to her, despite the sometimes weird feelings she got from looking at the girl. Maybe it’s just the fact I have no idea who my real family is, beside Buffy. Am I wishing so hard to have some connection that I’m finding it everywhere? She looked up at Spike, wondering if she was making up or exaggerating all the similarities between them because she wanted so badly to belong to someone.

“Not sure the chit’s a problem. Problem is all the rest of it. The hounds, the hellmouth and now we gotta worry about Red.” Spike for some reason agreed with Dawn. The little girl wasn’t a problem. To his mind the little one was a . . . maybe because she’d reminded him of Buffy at a time when he thought he’d never get her back, but the little girl wasn’t harmful.

The problem was what to do about Red and how to get rid of the hounds.

40. A sheltering holly tree.

Friendship is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love.
   Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

Love is like the wild rose-briar;
friendship like the holly tree.
The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms,
but which will bloom most constantly?
   Emily Bronte, Love and Friendship

Flowers are lovely; love is flower-like
friendship is a sheltering tree
   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Youth and Age

Only solitary men know the full joys of friendship.
Others have their family – but to a solitary and
an exile, his friends are everything.
   Willa Cather, Shadows on the Rock

Given enough time, Spike was reasonably certain Giles could come up with the answers to most demonic questions, or apocalyptic ones, provided he was in possession of all the facts.

Unfortunately, Spike knew he wasn’t. And that uncanny bond he shared with Buffy made it clear that the Slayer had no intention of telling him.

After everyone had left he had followed Buffy upstairs to her room. He’d tried earlier to convince her to tell Giles, but Buffy wouldn’t budge.
“No, Spike. I already told you I don’t want any one to know. And why.” Buffy was repeating exactly what she’d said earlier, this time with a bit more force. Her arms were folded across her chest and her face was set. Spike was pacing around her bedroom, gesturing wildly.

“Pet, it’ll help figure out what’s going on. An’ I don’t think its gonna bother the girls as much as you think.”

She was finding it hard to follow his movements. Finally she stepped in front of him and whapped his bare chest.

“Ow.” Rubbing his hand across the stinging spot, he looked at her with a bit of indignation. “What’s tha’ for?”

“You weren’t listening to me.” Buffy looked at him, waiting for him to understand.

“All right, love.” Sitting down on the edge of her bed, Spike drew her between his legs. “Tell me your reasons.”

Buffy put her hands on his shoulders looking down at him. “Tara and Dawn are all ready upset enough. How much worse are they gonna be if they find out Willow used them to pull me from heaven? What would it do to them?”

Dropping her head down to rest on his, Buffy whispered, “Poor Tara’s already . . . Spike, I can’t do that to her.”

He waited a bit, thinking hard. She did have a point about the girls. Tara was teetering on the edge of falling apart and with Dawn you never knew which way the teen was going to jump. *Niblet is like a cat, temperamental and high strung.* Pulling her closer into his embrace, Spike rested his head against her belly. “All right, kitten. We’ll do this your way. ‘S your decision.”

Buffy was braced for an argument. Was all prepared to have to argue more and at length, prepared for his withdrawal and disapproval of her decision and actions. So when she didn’t get it, Buffy was deflated.

“That’s it? You’re just going to agree with me?” Buffy didn’t believe this. Spike was . . . “No argument?”

“Buffy, it’s your call. I can’t decide it for you. Wouldn’t want to.” Spike let her go, watching her pace now.

“You know Angel would be all disapproving guy right now.” When he snorted, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like “jackass” Buffy shot a look at him. Shutting his mouth, Spike tried for the innocent look. Raising her eyebrow, she just continued, “Riley would have just . . . not been able to deal, he would have just kept at me or worse he would have told someone else.”

Turning back to him, pushing her way into his embrace, she simply said, “Thank you for understanding.”

Spike just pulled her closer, kissing her hard.
Tara slipped into the bedroom she was technically still sharing with Willow. The red head had slept nearly round the clock, although Tara knew she’d gotten up while they were out last night and eaten, but beyond that Willow had been asleep most of the night.

It was getting to the point where she was going to have to initiate a serious conversation with her girlfriend and then decide what she was going to do. She still wanted to talk to Spike and maybe today was a good day. After Giles and Wesley left, Dawn had said something about needing school things and with some urging from Spike, Buffy had offered to take her.

Looking down at the still sleeping girl, Tara hesitated. She thought about waking her up, and then thought maybe the reason why was because she wanted to avoid talking to Spike. Well that’s just silly. He’s not gonna think I’m a bad person for wanting to talk about this. Gathering up her clothes, Tara slipped from the room.

She figured she’d give Spike a half hour or so. It would take at least that long for him to say goodbye to Buffy.

She was really grateful to Spike for a lot of different things. For taking care of her all summer long, for being the one person she could rely on when everyone else was gone off doing their own things, Spike had always managed to make her his main priority. Now that her sister was back that had changed but not in a bad way. His protective circle had just widened a little bit to encompass the two of them. And if the scene earlier this morning was not acting, then his protection now extended to include Tara as well. Which was pretty cool.

The weird thing was, and by rights she really should be feeling this way, she wasn’t at all jealous that Spike’s main attention had shifted to her sister. He wasn’t leaving her out, forgetting her or even treating her like she was no longer important because Buffy was back. If anything, he’d made sure she wasn’t feeling left out. She and Tara both knew that Spike was sleeping in her sister’s bed every night and that Buffy was, well at least it seemed that way to the two of them, admitting her feelings. The only one who had a problem with the whole thing was Xander and maybe Willow and how weird was it that Giles wasn’t lecturing about how ‘vampires were all bad’ and ‘one mustn’t be involved with the evil undead’. Weird but cool.

Dawn flipped open her journal and thought about writing, but looking up at the clock, she changed her mind. She was going shopping, with Buffy of all people. Not that she and Buffy didn’t love to shop, but since long before their mother had died, it wasn’t something they normally did together. And after, well, there just had been other things on both their minds. Like Glory. Like just getting through the day without either of them collapsing into tears.

Buffy still wasn’t herself, was still getting used to being home, loud noises and bright lights and unexpected movements still bothering her. But she was getting better. Having Spike around all the time was a huge part of how Buffy was feeling, at least as far as Dawn could tell. She still heard the tears in the middle of the night, still found Buffy staring off into nothing, her sister still shook when the stress got to her and every single time, every single time, Spike was there, holding her, whispering to her, doing anything and everything that Buffy needed.
Dawn had long ago decided that Spike really loved Buffy, way more than Riley had ever loved her, and much more than Angel had. Now, though watching the two of them, Dawn realized something else. Her sister had changed. And despite the shakiness and tears, she’d come back a little bit better, a little softer. At least for now. With any kind of good luck, she’d stay that way.

At least she hoped so. It would be nice, if she and Spike managed to stay together, if they became a real family.

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Their kisses had a way of quickly becoming more, every time they touched. It was so simple to give over to her senses, drowning in the taste, the feel of him surrounding her. His touch, the rough pads of his fingers grazing across her sensitive skin, was enough to set off warm tingles. His cool unnecessary breaths blowing over her, into her, drove her to madness. That moment when he laid her bare, when they were both skin to skin and he slid his hard length inside her, driving the air from her body; that was what she craved, that instant, that moment when he slid inside feeling her warmth surrounding him and his eyes opened wide and his expression . . . Buffy loved that look.

It was the one on his face right now, as he thrust inside, forcing air and noise out of her mouth. His hand gripped her hip, holding on, his fingers digging in, no doubt leaving bruises that would show up later. She didn’t care. Her hands were wrapped around his upper arms, squeezing hard.

“Buffy.” His mouth was at her ear, his voice filling her head. “Buffy . . . love . . . come with me.”

Raspy with need his voice rolled through her, her name on his lips enough to melt her, warm her, sealing the ragged edges of her back together. Liquid fire raced through her, surging, pounding . . . Her heart thudded heavily in her chest, beating hard enough for both of them.

“Spike.”

Every muscle screamed his name, ached for his touch, wanting to envelope him, hold him there . . . he thrust hard hitting that spot and Buffy convulsed around him, a strangled scream wrenched from her throat. His hips stilled and a chest deep groan rumbled inside her, his ejaculate coating her depths.

Arching her head up, Buffy ran her tongue across his lips, feeling his smile.

“Love you, kitten” was whispered into her mouth and Buffy held him closer.

How she wanted . . .

Her heart wasn’t ready yet.

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Spike was watching television in the living room when Tara finally made it back downstairs. He was flipping channels idly, slouched on the couch, another mug of blood clutched in his hand.

Rounding the stairs, Tara looked around. Cautiously entering the living room, she sat down on the
edge of the couch. “Buffy still around?”

“Girls are jus’ puttin’ on the final touches. They’ll be ready soon. You goin’ with them?”

“Uh no. I . . . I have some things around here I have to do.” Tara fidgeted in her spot.

After watching her for a few minutes, Spike took pity on the girl. He knew she wanted to talk to him, and figuring she’d gathered up her courage now, poor chit didn’t know how to proceed.

“What’s up, Glinda?”

“Can I . . . can we . . . you aren’t busy are you?”

He almost laughed, except he knew it took a lot for her to come to him and it wouldn’t be nice to laugh. Didn’t want to hurt her feelings either. “‘M all free, pidge, what’s your question?”

But before she could say what was on her mind, the two Summers girls clattered down the stairs. Dawn looked thrilled although both of the other two could see Buffy was pushing herself. The Slayer’s face was set and the strain was showing around her eyes and mouth.

Dawn was practically bouncing around, excited to be out anywhere with Buffy. Looking up at his girls, Spike suppressed a grin at Dawn’s behavior and reached out a hand to Buffy. “All right, kitten?”

Faking a bright smile for her sister’s benefit, Buffy took his hand and pulled him to his feet. Spike wrapped his arms around her and dipped her down, causing the others to laugh. Directing his words to Dawn, Spike said, “Get my wallet, Nib.”

Rushing out of the room, Dawn found his wallet in record time. Spike had not much need for the money he won playing poker, most of it going to household expenses, although sometimes he kept a bit extra back. Since Rupert had brought more human blood this morning, the stash he had wasn’t necessary.

Kissing Buffy’s forehead, Spike reached out with one hand to take the wallet from her sister. Pulling out a couple of bills, he handed them to Buffy. Despite her surprise, a bit of the strain was gone from her face. Whispering her thanks, she said so low only Spike could hear, “Thought this was going to be a window shopping expedition.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

Kissing her again, Spike pushed her toward the door. “Go on, you two. Be here when you get back. Go on.”

Buffy tried hesitating, but Spike pushed her toward Dawn, who was already out the door. He raised an eyebrow and kissed her once more. “Go.”

With a huff and a roll of her eyes after he playfully slapped her butt, Buffy was gone, trailing after Dawn.

Watching him watch Buffy, Tara smiled. He had such an enraptured look upon his face. Without really thinking about it, she said, “You really love her.”

“Well, yeah.” Spike wasn’t about to deny it.
Settling back down on the couch, Spike looked at Tara. “So what’s up, pet?”

Completely uncertain how to proceed, Tara was at a loss for words. She looked at him for a minute, her distress clear. Taking pity on her, Spike put his feet up, saying, “This about Red?”

“Yeah . . . yeah it is.” Thank god he pays attention. I just thanked god for a vampire. A soft giggle escaped her. He looked at her strangely and Tara just smiled. “You’re a pretty good guy you know that?”

Spike ducked his head. Tara was watching him closely so she saw the change in his coloring, as slight as it was.

Diving right in, she went on, “I’m worried you know? This isn’t good what she’s done. She used me, used Dawnie. What Willow . . . what she used could have . . . Wesley said Lethe’s Bramble is deadly if ingested too much. Gods above, Spike, what was she thinking?”

Dropping her head into her hands, Tara tried to hold back the tears. Reaching out tentatively, Spike rubbed his big hand across her back. “All right, pet . . . jus’ cry it out.”

Through her tears, Tara said, “I don’t know if I trust her any more. She doesn’t even realize what she’s done. And . . . now . . . you tell me she’s still . . . Spike I don’t know what to do . . . what am I supposed to do?”

Brushing back her hair, Spike soothed her with nonsense words, just letting her get it all out.

“’Jus’ tell me what you’re thinkin’. ”

He was at a loss. He had nothing to say that might help her. Willow was, right now, on his short list of people to avoid. Except for those few minutes spent with everyone around, Spike had yet to be alone with Willow since Buffy’s resurrection. Had only seen her twice since Buffy’s admission that she’d been in heaven. Given how he felt about it, Spike wasn’t so sure he’d be able to restrain himself from going after her. Red was not currently one of his favorite people.

He kept his hand in motion, while Tara wiped away her tears. “Gods, Spike, what am I gonna do? What should I do?”

“Dunno, pet. Got my own issues with what’s goin’ on.”

A watery smile crossed her face, trust Spike to not lie to me, to any one. Good thing he always told the truth because he is a really bad liar.

“What you do is up to you, pet. Only you can decide how to go about things. You’re the one got hurt in all this.” He didn’t want to fall on platitudes, not with Tara. She deserved better than that from any of them, especially him. The two of them had been close over the summer and in the past week or so, what she’d done for Buffy . . .

“C’mon, Glinda, you’ve got to suss this out, so talk.”

Facing him, Tara just let the words flow, the confusion, the pain, the feelings of betrayal, the utter loss she felt for what had been ripped away from her. How Willow’s actions had violated her. And not just her, but Dawn too. Willow had violated another innocent.
The really hard thing to admit, the really really hardest thing of all, was that none of it seemed to matter at all to Willow. That some how, Willow couldn’t make the connection between her actions and what she’d done to them. Like it was someone else entirely who’d done that to her and Dawn.

And through it all, through her long halting explanation Spike just listened. Sometimes patting her back, sometimes holding her hands, he was there. He listened, but he also heard what Buffy had said to him earlier, about how the girls wouldn’t react well to hearing Willow had used them to rip her from heaven. He got it. Listening to Tara spill out her fears and worries and sadness, Spike finally understood what Buffy had been trying to tell him.

That was pretty much what she’d really wanted. Someone to listen. Wiping her eyes again, Tara told him so, saying, “You know, Spike, you’re a really good friend.”

Tara’s declaration had surprised him.

Sitting beside her, one quarter of the Scourge of Europe flushed beneath her praise. “Pet . . .”

“No, really, Spike. You just listened, that’s so important. Thank you.” Touching his hand, she repeated herself. “Thank you, Spike, for being my friend.”

41. Sluggish men

*There are some sluggish men who are improved by drinking; as there are fruits that are not good until they are rotten.*

--- Samuel Johnson

*Experience is that name that everyone gives to their mistakes.*

--- Oscar Wilde

*The first thing in human personality that dissolves in alcohol is dignity.*

--- Anonymous

As much as talking to Spike had helped, three days later, Tara wasn’t any closer to a decision. Neither was she any closer to Willow.

School was starting tomorrow for Dawn and since their shopping trip days earlier, she had been in a frenzied state. Nothing was worse than a fifteen year old girl starting a new school, especially when the school was on the hellmouth. Part of her problem had been the shopping trip. It hadn’t lasted very long, in fact, the girls had returned less than two hours after they’d left, Buffy retreated straight up into her room and Dawn had gone over to Janice’s in a slight huff. Spike had taken Dawn out just last night, before Wesley and Giles came over, to get the rest of Dawn’s things. Neither sister spoke about it, although Buffy had told her it was difficult, Dawn just rolling her eyes and making a face.

UC Sunnydale was open also, Willow’s classes were starting today, although hers didn’t start until later in the week.
At the moment, the three Englishmen were sprawled in various positions in the living room exhausted and hung over. They’d been up until all hours trying to translate some of the older scrolls before Wesley left later on during the day. Picking up some of the empty bottles she wondered if he was going to have to put off leaving until much, much later.

She and Buffy moved quietly around the sleeping men, stepping over out-stretched legs and gently moving their arms into more comfortable positions. Giles looked the least comfortable, his head tilted at an awkward angle while Spike was stretched out next to him, slouched low, his head resting against the back of the couch. Wesley was sprawled in the armchair, his exceedingly long legs extended out nearly to the couch.

They looked so disreputably cute that the two girls kept exchanging glances and trying not to laugh out loud.

In spite of the fact Wesley had brought not so good news, Buffy had reversed her earliest opinion of him. His first trip to Sunnydale had been an absolute disaster. Arriving as an unwanted and unwelcomed replacement for Giles, Wesley had been so stiff there had been only one possible response to him.

Leaving Sunnydale in disgrace had probably been the best thing to ever happen to him. He’d found himself, found some security and self-assuredness. Funny how it had come working for Angel.

Throwing a glance at Tara, Buffy lifted Wesley’s glasses off his face, putting them within reach on the coffee table. He wasn’t a bad looking guy, if you liked tall and thin and smart. Moving toward Spike, Buffy smiled. She had her own personal hottie, didn’t need to be looking anywhere else. He looked so peaceful and utterly adorable when he slept. He didn’t look like the picture of evil. If anything he looked like an angel or at least an adorable little boy. Running her hand down his cheek, Buffy smiled when he shifted and inhaled.

She rarely had time like this to just sit and watch him. Buffy thought back, trying to remember any time she’d ever had an opportunity to just watch any of her boyfriends. Stopping short, she realized that Spike was her boyfriend. Smiling again, Buffy wondered what he would think about that label. Not realizing her hand was lingering on his face, Buffy leaned forward, looking at him closer. Boyfriend was a term that just . . . a soft laugh escaped her, followed by a gasp of surprise when his deep sleepy voice startled her. “Come snuggle with me, kitten. Need your warmth.”

Snaking a hand around her waist, Spike pulled her down onto his lap. “What’s got you smilin’?”

She had to say it once, just to see the look on his face. “Just watching my boyfriend sleep.”

And just as she expected, the look on his face was priceless. It was so . . . Buffy couldn’t help her giggles. There was no describing it. His eyes were wide, his mouth was open and there was just . . . It was so classically stunned that Tara, who was just coming back into the room, stopped short and started giggling.

“Buffy?” Tara’s soft laughs were infectious. “Did you break Spike?”

Collapsing onto his chest, Buffy gave into the giggles that had been threatening. “Cute, sunshine, real cute. Go ‘head, laugh at me.”

Their laughter got louder until Spike shushed them both, gesturing to his fellow Englishmen. “Don’t wanna wake the boys, do ya?”
Which quieted both girls. Pushing Buffy a little bit away, Spike dropped his voice, not wanting to be overheard. “Buffy, did you mean that?”

“Guess I just sort of realized it, you know? Sort of just discovered it myself.” Her eyes were focused on his, unafraid to face him.

“Not sure ‘m boyfriend material, but if that’s what you wanna call me, won’t object.”

Huffing a little bit, Buffy thumped him lightly. “Knew you would say something like that. You know what I mean. Stop being so . . . so you.”

Spike smirked at her, turning her insides to mush and then, damn him, he smiled at her putting his tongue just under his teeth. “But you like me this way, kitten.”

“Gggrrrr, Spike.” She had a smile on her face, which only made him smirk more.

In one swift movement, Spike had lifted her up and was halfway to the stairs before she realized it. “C’mon, kitten, your boyfriend wants you.”

Her laughing, “Sssssppppppppiiiiiiikkkkkkkee,” followed them down the stairs then his answering voice rolled across her skin “Buffy.”

Tara’s answering laughter floated up to them.

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Dawn was chomping at the bit. Giles and Wesley were taking too long to translate the texts. Why they’d decided to start translating from the beginning, instead of the end she didn’t really understand. Were they trying to drive her mad? What was wrong with them?

Didn’t they understand she had to know?

Once Wesley had arrived and told them he’d found the texts, Dawn had been on edge. She didn’t want to wait for someone else to tell her what and who she was made from and how they’d done it.

Dawn was convinced the answers were in the newest of the texts.

When she’d left the house this morning, Spike and the other two were asleep in the living room, glasses and empty beer bottles next to priceless and ancient scrolls. Running past them out the front door, Dawn was tempted to steal the most likely volume, but changed her mind at the last minute. Better she waited until Wesley was gone and Giles completely focused on what he was doing. At least that was what she’d thought.

But now, coming back in the door a couple of hours later to find two of the three men still in the same positions, Dawn changed her mind. Of all of them, Spike would have been the one to wake up and catch her. Now that he was gone, Dawn decided this was her best opportunity.

Quietly tiptoeing past both men, Dawn dropped to her knees beside the box of thin leather-bound volumes. With a quick glance over her shoulder, Dawn grabbed the top four books. Flipping through them, she discarded three that weren’t written in English. Grabbing some more, Dawn
quickly checked again and found three more that were.

Stash in hand, Dawn looked around and quickly scurried from the living room up the stairs.

Hiding the books under her mattress, Dawn figured she would read them later, when no one was around.

He’d fallen asleep, something he rarely did after they . . . well, had sex. Buffy snorted a bit. It wasn’t just sex. Just sex was what she’d done with Parker, she understood that now. Sex is pretty much what she’d done with Angel too. Riley had been different, they’d had something a bit more, but even then that couldn’t compete to what she and Spike did. Sexual marathons or Olympics was more like it. . . ‘cept no, truth was that wasn’t it either. Spike had years of experience beyond what Riley could ever hope to have and well, the upside was after a happy, he didn’t go all evil on her. He might kid himself about being evil, but Buffy had seen the truth, had known it when he’d taken that beating for Dawn.

Maybe it was the whole being back from heaven thing, or maybe it was just that she’d stopped kidding herself about the nature of good and evil, but Buffy knew he wasn’t such a bad guy. He was more like an over roasted marshmallow, all blackened and crispy outside, yet soft and sweet on the inside. Not so tasty burned stuff . . . okay, that was just not true. Looking at his face, Buffy had to admit he was probably the best looking guy she’d ever been with. Oh yeah, he is . . . edible.

A small giggle escaped from her. At least she’d be able to beat up anyone dumb enough to hit on him. But he wasn’t, he was hampered by the chip. Growing serious, she reached out to touch his face. Giles had said chip or no chip, he trusted Spike. How long was it supposed to last anyway? Would it still . . . could it be removed without hurting him?

Shaking her head, Buffy drove those thoughts away. She wasn’t ready to really think about that yet. Closing her eyes, Buffy snuggled closer to his chest and settled in for a nap.

Tara had felt much better after talking to Spike, although he hadn’t really said much back to her. All he’d done was just allow her to vent and get everything out.

The only thing was, she still wasn’t sure what to do. What Spike had done for her wasn’t anything direct and rather had a totally unexpected side-effect. She’d been able to sleep next to Willow. Baring her soul, so to speak, to Spike had made sleeping next to Willow a lot easier.

How weird was that? She could sleep next to Willow without getting all uptight and worried about things.

Still hadn’t really talked to her, but for some strange reason it wasn’t so pressing anymore.
Willow ran into the building at UC Sunnydale, knowing she was cutting it close.

She didn’t know what had been bothering Tara, but for the last couple of days things between them had gone sort of back to normal, the way they were before Glory had messed with Tara’s mind. It made her feel good, like Tara was finally getting back to her old self. *Maybe I’ll take her out to dinner tonight to celebrate . . . something.* Maybe they could go out with Xander and Anya. She knew that Xander wouldn’t agree to go out with Buffy and Spike so she wasn’t even going to suggest it.

Not that she’d seen much of Buffy lately. Not since bringing her back. Which was like so wrong. Willow had been the one to rescue her, the one to bring her safe from wherever she’d been trapped. And who does Buffy go and turn to? *Him. . . which really . . .* Xander did kind of have a point. Before Glory, Buffy had been all *eeeeeewwww Spike is evil and bad and disgusting and . . . and now, it was oooooooohhhhh Spike.*

Willow made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. She was right there with Xander’s confusion.

Not that she couldn’t figure out what the attraction was, so she was gay, but she wasn’t blind. Spike was good looking . . . *okay so that too is kind of an understatement . . .* Spike was hot.

Yet still dead, still a soulless vampire. *And hey, he was the very same guy that had threatened her and Xander, tried to bite and turn her, hurt Buffy and just . . . he’d nearly betrayed them all to Adam . . . okay, so he’d come through with Glory but that was it.* Spike was basically not a good guy, nor was he liable to be trustworthy, at least not in the long term.

Willow realized she was rushing forward while everyone around her was standing still. She knew she was running late, but she hadn’t thought it was that late. Rushing into the small lecture hall, it wasn’t until Willow sat down that she realized why no one else was moving.

Everyone else was frozen in place.

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Wesley stirred, slowly coming awake as his brain registered all his sore muscles, pains, and the dull ache pounding in his head. Groaning into his hands he made a personal vow to never again try and match a vampire drink for drink. Especially this one. Gods he was deceptive.

Short, slight little bugger was . . . *Gah.* Wesley felt like he was going to pitch his stomach onto the floor.

There was a noise by the stairs and Wesley slowly turned his head to look at whatever it was.

“Dawn,” he rasped out.

“You okay?” She was quiet, something he greatly appreciated at that moment.

Grunting some sort of positive response at her, Wesley groaned into his hands. Dawn hesitated at the door uncertain whether her presence was welcome. “Do you need anything?”
“Would kill for some aspirin. . . or a mallet.”

Thinking for a second, Dawn giggled softly. “We have both Wes, which one do you want first?”

“I’m thinking the mallet. More effective and much faster.”

She was silent for a moment. Then there was rustling, though it was neither loud enough nor lasted long enough to make him pick up his head. He didn’t think there existed anything short of an apocalypse that would get him moving faster than he was. Which was sloth speed. He didn’t move until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

Barely lifting his head up to look, Wesley chuckled despite the pain in his head. Dawn was standing next to him, a mallet in one hand.

Silently she offered it to him.

42. The Poison Tree

*If you betray me, can I take a better revenge than to love the person you hate?*

---Pierre Corneille, *Titus and Berenice*, act 4, sc. 3---

*Love is whatever you can still betray . . .
Betrayal can only happen if you love.*

---John le Carre, *A Perfect Spy*---

*Giving up doesn’t always mean you are weak; sometimes it means you are strong enough to let go.*

---Anonymous---

They’d been patrolling for about two hours when they came across the first signs of the hounds. True to form, Spike scented the blood long before Buffy did, but she was the one to find the body.

Searching around for other signs, Spike found the second one. “Got another here, pet.”

“You thinking dogs?” Buffy looked around from her crouched position by the first body.

“Unless we got somethin’ else to worry about.” Spike rolled the corpse over with his foot. “It’s all birds. Haven’t found any blokes.”

Buffy turned to look up at him. “What . . . no guys. Spike?”

“All young chits – all recently had sex. . . guess most of these birds are from the college.” He stared off, looking past the grave markers and out into nothing.

“You have thinking face . . . spill it.” Dusting off her hands, Buffy stood up, wandering over to the
“Somethin’ the Huntsman said . . . sounded like it might’ve been about payment.” Running a hand through his hair, Spike avoided looking at her for a moment. “Dunno, pet, jus’ thinkin’ out loud.”

“Ahuh. Sounds like more than that.” Crossing her arms, Buffy waited, knowing Spike would start talking in . . .

“Jus’, some of what Oxford translated could be taken another way. More like ‘we seek payment for that which was taken from heaven’ which is you . . . you’re the only one I know’s been in heaven of late.”

He still wouldn’t look at her. He knew she really didn’t want to talk about this, at least not with anyone else. He knew she trusted him to keep her secrets, which warmed him to the bone. But he also knew she wasn’t about to budge unless there was overwhelming evidence to contradict her decision. The trick was getting her to admit it.

This was only her second night patrolling since she’d been back and the strain was showing. Her reactions were just a second off, although he didn’t think anyone other than himself would pick up on it. She’d been training, but her workouts were half-hearted, except for the last one when they’d sparred for a bit.

A theory was beginning to take form in his head, one he was loathe to give voice too. If he did, she might be willing to change her mind. Making up his mind Spike faced her. “All right, kitten, here’s what I’m thinking. Red brought you back from heaven.”

Pacing now, Spike was gesturing. “Right, same time you come through from heaven, the hounds of hell are released. ‘M thinkin’, they aren’t here to get you, but to take payment in exchange for lettin’ you go.”

He stopped short, turning to watch her. She had that look on her face, the one he almost hated – the ‘I’m the Slayer, I know better than you’ look. Spike faced her dead on, not backing down from her, not taking his words back.

And watched while the wheels in her head turned. He knew, half a second after she did, when she’d realized his theory might actually have some validity. Her facial muscles were working like her brain was trying to say something her mouth nearly refused to say.

Well, he wasn’t going to make it easier on her. If his words made her change her mind then she had to say it out loud. There was no one saying the girls had to be told, at least not right now, but he still was of the opinion that Rupert should know. For once, though, he kept his mouth shut.

Buffy started to say something and then he didn’t hear anything because his ears were ringing. Turning around, Spike lost his balance and fell. Six Cythreuliaids. *Fucking hell.* Wobbling a bit, Spike cleared his head then joined the fray.

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She didn’t want to be here. Feeling decidedly out of place and very uncomfortable, Tara reverted back to her old patterns. Ducking her head, fidgeting quietly, these were all obvious signs to anyone who cared enough to notice. But no one was noticing.
Instead, she was the one doing the noticing. Noticing how much she didn’t fit in, how very uncomfortable this was, how self-absorbed her girlfriend was, how . . . mean Xander really was to Anya.

That surprised her. And not in a good way. Since they’d gotten to the restaurant, the conversation had flowed around her, and she was content to not contribute in her state. Willow kept going on about herself, while every time Anya tried to talk, Xander practically shushed her.

And he was not very nice about it. Tara thought that Anya sometimes said things inappropriately only because she’d forgotten some things about being human. It was confusion, which should be helped, not ridiculed like Xander usually did.

So yeah, she didn’t want to be here. In fact, she’d rather be home doing something else, like laundry or cleaning the bathroom or . . . anything.

The restaurant was packed and they’d had to wait for a table, though the wait was becoming a problem, because the last thing she wanted was to sit around and talk – or rather listen to Xander and Willow talk at each other. The evening hadn’t started out with much promise and it had gone steadily downhill the longer they sat and waited. Scanning around at the crowd, Tara thought of ways she could get out of continuing this whole evening. Too bad Buffy and Spike had gone patrolling, otherwise she’d call the cell phone and have them come get her. She was so uncomfortable that faking a stomachache might not pose a problem much longer.

Anya’s voice brought her back to the table and Xander’s return comment just bugged her, causing her to very nearly said something about it, though her natural shyness kept her silent. Catching poor Anya’s eye, she tried to show her some support by smiling at her, but the tears pooling in the ex-demon’s eyes told the real story.

Tara’s fists clenched in her lap, echoing the tightening in her belly. Tingles began racing through her muscles and her vision kept wavering. Alternating patterns of white energy flashed before her eyes, superimposed over the figures sitting with her, like a negative image of everything. The waitress passed by their table, holding up her hand in a ‘one minute’ gesture that somehow irked the redhead beside her.

Muttering under her breath, Willow nearly growled, “I’ll give you wait a minute.”

Then everything went still. The noise stopped and the air grew thick. Tara could feel the magic pressing against her skin, knew Anya could feel it also by the stiffening of her shoulders, and the wide eyed look she threw at Willow. Slowly Tara turned to look at her girlfriend, fighting against the weighty air. Willow’s eyes flashed dark and her cute little bow mouth got that set look to it. “Come.”

The waitress, who had just given them the brush off, moved slowly in their direction.

Abruptly, time snapped back into sync and the waitress was standing there, pad in hand, waiting to take their order. Tara couldn’t keep her mouth shut any longer. “Willow, what did you do?”

“Just got her attention that’s all. It’s no biggie.” Willow shrugged off Tara’s concerns. “We’ve been waiting for a while.”

“So? It’s not a big deal to wait for our turn.” Tara felt the twitches and twinges building in her
belly. *This is not good.* “We could have waited a little bit longer.”

“I’m hungry and we’ve been waiting long enough.” Willow turned a bright smile to the waitress, giving her order. Anya watched the emotions flickering across Tara’s face and felt the tension building. Smiling over-brightly and batting her eyes, Anya tried to say something but Xander cut her off, speaking over her to the waitress.

The back of Tara’s neck got hot, her arms tensing from the strain of keeping her hands below the table and her jaw was beginning to hurt. Anya swung a hurt look at Xander, who kind of apologized by smiling at her and taking her hand.

“Willow, that wasn’t right.” Tara barely got the words out through her tight jaw.

“It’s your turn, baby, give the girl your order.” Completely ignoring Tara’s previous statement, Willow turned a bright smile to her girlfriend and waved a hand. Again the air went still, pressing heavily on her skin.

“Willow. Stop it now.” She ground out the words, her temper barely in check.

Waving her hand again, Willow smiled and released the waitress, stating, “I’m not doing anything bad, just getting our dinner ordered.”

“No, you’re not. This is wrong, Willow, what you’re doing right now. Stop it.” Pulling away from Willow, Tara shook her head. “This is wrong and you know it.”

“How is it wrong? I’m just getting our order in now. Not a big deal. Why are you getting so upset about this?” Willow turned to face her girlfriend, confusion etched on her features. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Not doing? Gods, Willow, have you been paying attention? What is with you? This is so . . . why waste energy this way? Magic isn’t something you should be using to get ridiculous things like your dinner order in first.” Tara found herself growing more agitated by the moment and Willow’s innocent demeanor wasn’t helping matters.

“Tara? Baby, why is this bothering you?” Willow was genuinely confused. *This isn’t such a big deal, why is Tara making an issue of it?*

“Why is this bothering me? Have you been . . . Willow, you use magic for the silliest reasons. Making breakfast, getting someone’s attention. What purpose does all that serve? You can do all that without using magic.” Tara was getting agitated, her voice starting to rise and people were beginning to look at them.

Willow narrowed her eyes. “I’m not using too much magic. So what I fixed breakfast. It’s not a crime to use the talents the Goddess has given me.”

“It is when you misuse them and abuse them. This isn’t about the end results, Willow, this is about the means you are using to get there.” Tara pushed away from the table, her agitation growing. “Don’t you see what you’re doing?”

“I’m not doing anything. This isn’t such a big thing.” Willow had also pushed back from the table, while Anya took the opportunity to get up. “I’m just going to powder my nose. You continue.”

"This isn't such a big deal, why is Tara making an issue of it?" Willow was genuinely confused. *This isn't such a big deal, why is Tara making an issue of it?"*
Xander looked from one girl to the other, uncertain what was happening. “Ah, Wills? Maybe this should wait until later?”

Shooting him a glance, Willow shrugged. “I’m not sure what’s going on at all.”

“Oh please, Willow, stop acting like you don’t understand. What you’ve been doing is wrong. What you did to me and Dawn – Willow this has to stop. You have to stop using magic foolishly – just because you can. It’s wrong, Willow, and you have to stop.”

“I’m not using it to hurt anyone.”

“What about me and Dawnie? You hurt both of us.” Tara was on her feet now, her hands clenched beside her, her face pale with anger.

“What . . . how did I hurt you? I just used a little bit of your blood. Hardly cut you at all.” Willow was perched on the edge of her chair, earnestly trying to plead her case.

Shaking her head in denial, Willow continued, “No. I was careful, I knew exactly how much to use and I didn’t give you too much.”

Staring at the redhead, Tara felt the rage reaching a breaking point. “How did you know? You checked? Somehow I don’t think you were all that thorough in your research. Did you even know that Lethe’s Bramble is deadly?”

“It is, you know. Very deadly.” Anya’s voice sounded from the opposite side of the table, apparently she hadn’t been able to leave. “It should only be used outside the body, unless you’re trying to kill the other person.”

Willow was shaking her head. “No. I knew what I was doing. It wasn’t dangerous at all.”

“No, Willow, you’re wrong. It was dangerous. Can’t you see what you’re doing?” Angry tears sprang to Tara’s eyes. “How could you have done this? What were you thinking?”

Willow was still shaking her head, although now Tara was beyond angry and unable to be placated by the redhead’s obtuseness. “I can’t do this. I can’t . . . I don’t trust you, Willow. I can’t be with you. You don’t even see what you’ve done.”


But Tara was gone and Willow was just pleading with thin air.

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It had taken some pleading and some coaxing, but Dawn had managed to get Buffy to agree to leaving her home alone. Surprisingly, she’d had an ally in Spike. He’d backed her up, pointing out that Dawn was sixteen now and should be more than okay on her own. She’d been tempted to kiss him, instead just settling for an enthusiastic hug.

So now here she was, snacks at the ready, soda chilled and priceless books strewn about haphazardly on her bed. What could be better? Brad Pitt or Jude Law or . . . hey, my sister’s boyfriend . . .
Dawn giggled. She was so over that crush – and how much creepier would that have been crushing on your own father. Shuddering, Dawn stopped that train of thoughts before it got any further. Not like she knew for sure anyway. It was probably just really hard wishful thinking on her part. The monks could just have easily used part of her mom and, thinking for a bit, Giles. Okay, that mental image is even ookier than lusting after Spike. Or they could have used Buffy and Angel. Eewww . . . nope, didn’t want to go there either. Just as long as the monks didn’t use Buffy and Xander, she’d be all happy. Xander wasn’t one of her favorite people right now. Stretching out on her belly with her feet in the air, she flipped open the first journal.

An hour later she was no closer to finding out anything other than monks were pretty boring guys and that popcorn and marshmallows and soda just made you really burpy, when she spotted the first intriguing entry.

Checking the date of the entry, Dawn re-read it.

It was a description of a dark warrior, as the monk called it, and except for the hair color and clothing, Dawn thought the description sounded a bit like Spike. Reading faster, she sat up, grabbing the post-it notes she was using to mark interesting things.

And was rewarded not thirty seconds later when the writer mentioned the dark warrior was a vampire.

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Once outside the restaurant, Tara realized a couple of things. First, she was really far away from Buffy’s house. Secondly she wasn’t really wearing the best shoes for a long walk and lastly, but probably most importantly, she felt a whole lot better.

Her palms were sweaty and her knees were kind of wobbly, though on the whole, she felt better. Like a weight had been lifted.

Deciding she really didn’t want to wait around to see if anyone was going to follow her out of the restaurant, Tara walked quickly down the street. There was a cemetery not too far, and she could swing by and that was a crazy thought, still, if they were around, she’d feel safer with them. She could always ask the Mother for a cloaking spell until she found them.

Tara sped up, hearing the door of the restaurant open behind her. She suddenly wanted to put a whole lot of distance between her and Willow.

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His head was swimming. One of those lousy buggers had gotten in a heavy blow to his head before the fight had even begun and Spike was still reeling. Of all demons he’d ever come across, he hated the ones they were fighting now. Carrion eaters, they were like hyenas, eating the leftovers from other predators. Like hyenas, they traveled in packs, deferring to the alpha. Unlike hyenas, these wankers walked upright. Which was okay with him, since his last encounter with four legged beasties hadn’t ended so well. At least right away. The afters had been just lovely.

One of them got a swipe in across his chest and Spike stopped his happy thoughts, focusing on the
matter at hand. Snapping the neck of one, Spike stole a glance at Buffy. She was holding her own, but flagging. He knew it just by the slump to her shoulders.

“Got my three. How’re you doin’, Slayer?” He figured the banter would get her blood pumping, not to mention his taking out more than her.

“Just dandy.” Grunting from the force of a blow to her solar plexus, Buffy faltered visibly.

Spike was at her side in a blur of vampire speed, the demon’s heart clenched in his fist. “Right here, kitten. Let’s get this last bugger and head home.”

Gasping for air, she wheezed out, “Good idea. Let’s do just that.”

43. If

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
if you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
if you can meet with triumph and disaster
and treat those two imposters just the same;
Rudyard Kipling, If

When love is lost, do not bow your head in sadness;
instead keep your head up high and gaze into heaven
for that is where your heart has been sent to heal.
Anonymous

Children find everything in nothing;
men find nothing in everything.
Giacomo Leopardi, Zibaldone Scelto

The journal entry was dated February 1911.

‘We have spotted the dark warrior again, this time with his consort. They have been living in Spain, feeding off the wealthy and powerful of Barcelona. He has just fought his second chosen one. He left her wounded but alive, in fact both were wounded. Sunlight is what caused the end of their battle, neither warrior gaining an advantage though they fought for hours. It was not I that witnessed their battle, but Brother Jerome, who told me that it was a fierce struggle. Brother Joachim fears we will lose sight of him now, since he was wounded. I am of the same mind. 23rd February, 1911, by my hand, Alexios, Prior.’

Dawn hadn’t breathed the entire time she’d read that entry. It had to be him. She was absolutely certain the only vampire to consistently seek out slayers had to be Spike. There was no one else as insanely brave and stupidly courageous as him. Or quite so bold. It had to be him. She flipped quickly through the pages, hoping to find another mention of the dark warrior, but there was nothing. Only more mention of the chosen ones.

Interestingly enough, there was another entry not too long after that one, this time for March 1911,
mentioning that the chosen one had died of secondary injuries received after going out too soon after battling with the dark warrior. So maybe he had gotten three slayers. If this dark warrior was him.

Knowing him though, he probably wouldn’t take any credit for it, since he hadn’t been the direct cause of death.

But she had to know if it was him.

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It felt good to be away, felt good to be out of that situation. *Gods it had been so stifling, so . . . heavy,* was the best word she could come up with. Even before Willow had messed with the waitress, the atmosphere had been dense, everything uncomfortable. She hated that feeling. It was the feeling she’d grown up with, feeling like she didn’t belong, that no one understood her, and that she had no safe place. The only time Tara had felt differently growing up was when her mother was alive, and even then only when she was nearby.

But this was a different kind of uncomfortable. This was . . . despite being a witch and gay, it wasn’t either of those things making her uncomfortable. It was the feeling she was getting from being around Willow. The skin crawling not in a good way feeling. Thinking there were butterflies in her belly only to find out it was worms. And it wasn’t even the same kind of feeling she got whenever a strange vampire was around, which was generally creepy, but she didn’t feel this . . . *used.*

That’s what it all boiled down to. She felt used. Cheap and unwanted and just not as important as she should be feeling.

If things had been a bit different, if Willow had come to her sooner and spoken about her plans, what she wanted to do, perhaps things wouldn’t be like this now. But Willow hadn’t. She hadn’t told anyone. Instead she had gone ahead and brought Buffy back.

Tara hadn’t talked to Buffy about any of this, mainly because the other girl still wasn’t completely herself. But she had a sinking suspicion that Buffy was feeling the betrayal also. Wasn’t hard to miss who was talking to who in the house, or where people were sleeping, and she was pretty certain that Buffy wasn’t talking to Willow. She knew for a fact that Spike wasn’t.

As she walked through the cemetery, Tara wondered what it might have been like if Willow had just done one thing differently. *Gods,* she could have killed both of them. One tiny misstep with the Lethe’s Bramble and poof, it would have been over for both her and Dawn.

Leaning down, she stepped out of one shoe then the other, scooping them up in her hands. A deep sigh escaped her lips and Tara was forced to admit to herself that sooner or later she was going to have to leave Buffy’s house. Which she didn’t want to do. She was comfortable there and it was starting to feel like she had a place there, outside of being Willow’s girlfriend. Maybe she could talk Spike into letting her have the basement.

A soft smile graced her features and she looked wistfully up at the stars. Well, she’d just take things as they came for now. If this was meant to be, then everything would work itself out. If not, then so be it. She could always find another room at the college, or a small apartment off campus.

Exiting the small cemetery, Tara spotted the DeSoto parked down the block at the entrance to Shady Rest. She’d sit on top and wait for the others to come back.
Giles had been immersed in the texts and other books since Wesley’s departure almost a week before. So far, he’d found nothing more about the reason why the Cwn Annwn were in Sunnydale, although Anya’s words about payment kept circling round his head. He knew there was a connection yet at the moment he was forced to admit it was eluding him.

On the other hand, the texts were proving to be of an enormous benefit, albeit one that neither he nor Wesley had anticipated. Apparently, these monks were extremely adept with manipulating energy, in short, they were most accomplished magicians and sorcerers. Odd, given the fact that they called themselves monks. Monastic orders were normally Christian, although there were Buddhist monasteries strewn about Asia. Somehow Giles got the impression that these monks were neither Buddhists nor Christians, though they may have hidden themselves in plain sight inside the Church. Wouldn’t have been the first time a covertly pagan group had protected themselves by entering en masse into the Church.

What intrigued him was the meticulous records they kept. For an order that eschewed Church teachings, they had perfected the liturgical hours. Each Prior had kept his journal according to the medieval Church, recording a bit each day at Prime and then again at Compline, roughly six in the morning and then again at nine at night. There were also copious annotations to herbals and grimoires that nearly had Giles salivating. He wondered if Wolfram & Hart had obtained all the books from the monks, and Wesley had only liberated the journals, believing them to be of primary use, leaving the others for later. He could only hope Wesley had thought ahead and ‘liberated’ all of them.

If those grimoires fell into the wrong hands – and he considered Wolfram & Hart to be the wrong hands – there would be no telling what kind of havoc they could wreak.

Reaching for his cell phone, Giles hit speed dial, hoping Wesley was available.

They approached the DeSoto, Spike scenting Tara long before the car came into view and he told Buffy that, so neither one of them was surprised when she smiled up at them from her perch on the hood.

“Hey, guys.”

“Glinda.” Spike opened the trunk, dropping in a small double-headed axe.

“Hey, yourself. What’s up?” Buffy didn’t want to come out and ask it, but she was a bit curious why Tara was here. Last thing she knew the two girls were going out to dinner with Xander and Anya.

“Thought you were out with the Scoobs?” Spike didn’t have any compunctions about asking. He knew Buffy was curious, hell he was too.
“We did go out. Um... well,” Tara sighed a little, looking from one to the other, “I guess I sort of broke up with Willow.”

Buffy hopped up to sit next to her. “You okay?”

Nodding her head, Tara said softly, “Yeah, I guess I am.”

Spike stood silently letting the girls talk.

“You sure?” Buffy offered again, but Tara just shook her head.

“You know, I am okay. This isn’t so sudden, been building for a while. Since...”

“Since she brought me back.” Buffy made a face, then glanced up at Spike. They shared a brief look, then as one they shifted their attention to the other girl.

“So what happened?” Buffy shifted a bit, trying to get comfortable.

Relaying the story to them, Tara repeated her fears about Willow’s misuse of magic. Spike snorted, interrupting her. “‘S not about magic pet, for Red it’s about control. Always acts out when a situation is out of control and ‘specially if it’s outta her hands.”

Tara stared up at him. She’d never really thought about it that way. “You know, I think you might be right.”

There was silence for a bit, then Spike asked, “So what now, pet?”

“Well, I’m not sure. I’ve got nowhere else to go. I could try and get another dorm, but it’s probably too late.”

Shooting a look at Buffy, Spike raised his eyebrows at her. She just looked at him, then very quietly said to Tara, without taking her eyes off Spike, “You could always sleep in the basement. Spike’s room isn’t really being used.”

Well, Tara thought, this is going better than I expected. She’d never thought Buffy would be the one to bring up any of this.

Buffy’s voice went on, “I don’t want you to leave. I’d really... you’re a good friend, Tara. And I don’t want to lose you.”

She’d shifted her gaze to the other girl, reaching for her hand.

Tara was touched. Truly. She’d never expected this, she’d hoped for it, but figured she would have to be the one bringing it up.

Smiling at the two of them, Tara suddenly had tears in her eyes. “Thanks, Buffy. It means alot.”
They hadn’t made him promise to keep quiet about things in Sunnydale, hadn’t even spoken about it, but Wesley had not spoken about the situation there beyond, “Everyone’s doing okay. Better than I’d expected.”

Angel had left it at that. He had enough to worry about anyway.

Wesley still couldn’t believe the mess he’d come back too. Darla was back, again, vamped and unbelievably, inexplicably pregnant. Nearly eight months gone with Angel’s child.

Wesley figured that his little secret about Buffy’s return paled in comparison to Angel’s indiscretion. It was completely unprecedented, at least as far as he knew. He’d done nothing but non-stop research since his return and he was beginning to wonder if he’d ever find any answers. He was starting to doubt it.

He was contemplating calling Giles when his cell phone rang.

Looking at the caller ID, Wesley heaved a sigh of relief and flipped it open.

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The ride home had been quiet. Neither girl was inclined to talk, each immersed in their own thoughts. Spike figured it was just as well, since he was also deep in thought. Part of him was aware that a step had been taken in his relationship with Buffy and was rejoicing, but a larger part, remnants of William no doubt, was left wondering if it was just because Buffy didn’t want Tara moving out. He was also worried about Glinda. She appeared to be okay with things, yet outward appearances sometimes lied. Her heartbeat was slow, her breathing regular. He wondered for a moment, if she truly felt okay, or if she was just putting on a brave front for them and was going to fall apart when reality hit.

He pulled the DeSoto into the driveway, looking at the girls as he did. Oddly, Buffy was the one with tears falling from her eyes.

“Buffy?”

She didn’t answer, only reached for his hand, the tears falling faster now. Tara got out of the car, unaware of Buffy’s state, heading right for the front door.

“Love? You okay?” He was starting to worry, because she wouldn’t talk or look at him. Instead she just shook her head holding out a hand to him.

Pulling her close, Spike gently pushed her head onto his chest. “Ssshhh. ‘S all right. I’m here.”

His big hands ran up and down her back, soothing away her tears. “C’mon, love, let’s go in.”

Maneuvering them both from the car, Spike half carried the crying girl into the house. Tara was in the kitchen, getting a drink and on his way upstairs, Spike called out, “I’ll help you move things around come daylight.”

Then his boots pounded up the stairs. Passing by Dawn’s room, Spike called out, “Lights out, Bite-size,” however he didn’t wait for a response.
Buffy was still crying, though the torrent had slowed to a trickle. Placing her on the bed, Spike hunkered down to get her shoes off. He looked at her face and instead he reached out to cup her cheek and wipe away her tears. The words rasped out before he could censor them. “What’s this about then?”

At first she didn’t answer. Sniffling and shaking her head, she only answered him after he nudged her again.

“What if you hadn’t been there? If no one had been there when I got out?” Her voice was thick with tears. “If I hadn’t trusted you, what would have happened to Dawn? If . . . I couldn’t . . . if something happened . . .”

“Oh, baby. Shhhh.”

Wrapping her in his arms, Spike held her close. “I’m here, kitten. Not goin’. Gonna stay here.”

Buffy cried against his chest, breathing him in, his strength, his nearness and his promises.

“If you hadn’t been there . . . oh, Spike.”

She held on tight, afraid to think about it; what it would have been like if he hadn’t been there. If he wasn’t here whenever she needed him. If he wasn’t here with her now.

That was something he didn’t even want to contemplate. It was different for a vamp, you woke up without any breath and made your climb out that way. Even so, he’d had nightmares for awhile. He figured Buffy was in for some very long nights, well no, actually they were.

His arms around her, half laying on the bed that they now officially shared, Spike realized this was his life. She owned him, lock stock and barrel. Unbeating heart and without a soul, he was hers.

No ifs.

He was hers.
Chapter End Notes

Title of Chapter 31 is from a longer quote by the Bard, from Othello, act 3, scene 3. The Chapter 32 title is from a Bryan Ferry song entitled More than this. The Gaelic in Chapter 33 is my translation, so the errors are mine, since its been a while since I spoke or wrote any Gaelic, so forgive me in advance for the errors (although some of them are deliberate). The title comes from another song, this one from Depeche Mode, one of the best ever dance/club/new wave bands to ever record. It’s from Strangelove (oh the irony is great) from the album Music for the Masses, released in 1987. The title of Chapter 34 is a paraphrase of the Bard’s words, (his quote is ‘unless to spy my shadow in the sun’ from King Richard III, act 1, sc.1; while Audioslave’s is the actual song title, Shadow on the Sun, which is an awesome tune but you really, really truly need to listen to the words. Beautiful sentiment, despite the heavy “metal” music. The title of Chapter 35 comes from the Bard. The title of Chapter 36 is an over-used one, I realize that, but it seems to fit, and besides, I can’t seem to come up with something more apt. The original source is the Bible, from the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, 13. Chapter 37’s title is from Alan Beck, from his “What is a Girl? Chapter 38's title is from Victor Hugo, “Thoughts”, postscriptum de ma vie (postscript to my life – in his Intellectual Autobiography). I couldn’t decide on a single quote for the title of Chapter 40, so I put two together and came up with something new. The title for Chapter 38 is from Victor Hugo, “Thoughts”, postscriptum de ma vie (postscript to my life – in his Intellectual Autobiography). I couldn’t decide on a single quote for the title of Chapter 40, so I put two together and came up with something new. The title for Chapter 38 is from Victor Hugo, “Thoughts”, postscriptum de ma vie (postscript to my life – in his Intellectual Autobiography). I couldn’t decide on a single quote for the title of Chapter 40, so I put two together and came up with something new. The title for Chapter 42 is the title of one of my favorite poems, by William Blake. The title of Chapter 43 is, well, there are two sources for this title. The first one is Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem of the same name (one of my very favorites) and the second source is a quote from the Bard – in As You Like It, act 5, sc. 4., which reads “Your ‘if’ is the only peacemaker; much virtue in ‘if’.” Such a small tiny little word – and yet it wields so much power. If not for this . . .
Chapter 44. Privacy is raked

Was ever book containing such vile matter
so fairly bound? O that deceit should dwell
in such a gorgeous palace!
    Romeo and Juliet, act 3, sc. 2

We chase misprinted lies
we chase the path of time
and yet I fight, and yet I fight
this battle all alone
no one to cry to
no place to call home

My gift of self is raped
my privacy is raked
and yet I find, yet I find
repeating in my head
if I can’t be my own
I’d feel better dead
    Alice in Chains, Nutshell from the albums Jar of Flies and Unplugged

She snuggled closer into his embrace, feeling safe. The tears had finally stopped and Buffy felt much better. In spite of the fact she hated crying, hated showing any kind of emotions, this time, crying had helped.

Wiping away the last of her tears, Buffy looked up to the face of the man holding her. He just . . . she didn’t know how he did it, but he always managed to be whatever she needed at any given moment. Her hand reached out to touch him and his eyes rested on hers.

“All right then, kitten?”

Her hand rested on his throat, feeling the vibrations of his voice. Closing her eyes, Buffy nodded once, nestling in even closer. They were laying on the bed, still fully clothed, just holding each other. One of his hands slipped under her shirt, his thumb running up and down her back soothingly.

They heard the front door slam, then light footsteps up the stairs. The door to Willow’s room opened, then nothing. More footsteps, then a knock on their door.

“Buffy?” Willow’s voice sounded through the door. “Buffy, you awake?”
Taking pity on the girl, Buffy called out, “Yeah, I am.”

“Can I talk to you a minute?” She almost sounded like her old self, like she did in high school, scared and unsure, although Buffy really wasn’t fooled. Nor did she want to get up. She almost did, then decided she didn’t want to.

“Come on in.”

Spike raised a brow and started to sit up as Willow opened the door.

“Oh.”

The look on the witch’s face was worth whatever price he was going to have to pay for it.

“Sorry. Didn’t realize . . . um. . .” She was clearly flustered. “I’ll go.”

“Willow, what’s up?” Buffy asked, knowing full well what brought the other girl in and what had her flabbergasted. Sitting up, Buffy pulled off her socks, completely at ease.

“I was . . . well,” She stood wringing her hands, trying not to watch Spike as he pulled off his boots, “I was wondering if you’d seen Tara tonight.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to snipe at her ‘lost your girlfriend have you’ but Buffy’s evil look kept him silent. They hadn’t talked about this, yet Buffy had a feeling Tara didn’t want Willow to know where she was. So she lied.

“No. I thought she was with you.”

“We had a fight.” Willow’s shoulders slumped.

Spike hid his face by ducking down to move his boots, determined to follow Buffy’s lead. Better she handle this anyway, because he’d just as soon lace into Willow for everything and once he started, he knew there’d be no going back for him.

“She probably just needs some time. I’m sure she’s safe.” Buffy got up from the bed, moving toward her dresser. Taking off her necklace, she continued, “She’ll probably be home in the morning.”

Unfortunately there was nothing Willow could say. “Kay, I’ll just head to my room. You’re right, I’m sure she’s fine.”

Sounding suspiciously perky, Buffy said, “Yup, she’ll be back safe and sound first thing in the morning. She’s probably just tucked away in a borrowed bed. “

“Yeah.” Stealing one more glance at Spike, Willow continued, “G’night, then.”

Then she was out the door, no further word from her.

Buffy started to speak, but Spike held up a hand, motioning her to quiet. Raising an eyebrow, Buffy started again while Spike motioned to the door, mimicking someone listening. Her eyes grew wide and Buffy crossed the room to where he was sitting. Breathing into his ear in a very soft whisper, she said, “I couldn’t tell her.”
Spike kissed her shoulder, responding, “I know love, shouldn’t worry. Glinda needs rest right now, not another fight with Red.”

Lowering herself onto his lap, Buffy hugged him. “Can we go to sleep now?”

“Sure you want to sleep?” His leer was almost irresistible.

She laughed softly. “Can I think about it?” Which only got louder at his affronted look.

“Oi. I’ll let you think, after.”

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Giles hung up after his conversation with Wesley both relieved and concerned. The good news was Wesley had stolen every book obtained by Wolfram & Hart, just not transported them all. The bad news, however, was far more disturbing.

All was not right in the city of Angels, nor with the vampire of the same name. Giles had only heard of one other instance when a vampire had managed to impregnate a woman. The woman had been a hybrid – one quarter demon – which no doubt facilitated things but . . . this was . . . He was going to have to mention this to Buffy and Spike and he really didn’t look forward to that at all.

He couldn’t begin to imagine Buffy’s response to this. Perhaps he’d tell Spike first and then together they could tell Buffy.

Wesley was proving to be an unexpected ally. He’d been concerned that his fellow former watcher would blurt out the way of things in Sunnydale, instead he’d kept his silence, kept their secrets.

Not that he felt it mattered one way or another. Angel was just another obstacle they had to face. Sooner or later, the older vampire would find out and come flying back to Sunnydale and pronounce his extreme displeasure. Pompous ass. Giles was inclined to agree with Spike’s opinion of the souled vampire.

Initially, Giles had trusted him, although in the aftermath of losing his soul and Angelus’ subsequent actions, Giles had never been able to trust him ever again. Had been more than happy to see him go.

Now, if forced to chose between the two vampires, there was no doubt in Giles’ mind which one he’d choose. With or without his chip, Giles trusted Spike far more than he ever would trust Angel.

All that aside . . . Giles stopped pouring the water he was about to drink. Everything clicked into place. The Cwn Annwn had been released to exact payment for Buffy’s return from whatever dimension she’d been trapped within. How could he have been so dense?

Sitting down hard in his chair, Giles closed his eyes. He wasn’t stupid, just . . . he’d been temporarily blinded by his joy at Buffy’s return that he’d completely overlooked the obvious. Glancing at his watch, he realized it was just a bit too late to call the house. Everyone with the exception of Spike was probably asleep and while he enjoyed talking to him, he wasn’t the one Giles wanted to speak with. Besides, Giles wanted to see her face when he talked to her about this.

Willow’s mistakes just kept growing exponentially by the day.
Standing outside Buffy’s bedroom door, Willow strained to hear their conversation. Something about that whole short exchange with Buffy bothered her. If she didn’t know better she’d swear that Buffy had been lying. Or maybe it was just really seeing for the first time how much Spike had moved in that was so disturbing.

Obviously he was very comfortable in Buffy’s room — something she hadn’t known until just now. And just as obviously Spike was preparing to sleep in there and not in his room in the basement.

Willow got the distinct feeling that they were talking about her even though she couldn’t hear anything. It bugged her. Everything about the whole... She was supposed to be Buffy’s best friend, the one she went to for support, the shoulder to cry on and the listening ear. So how come she didn’t know about Spike’s new sleeping arrangements until now?

This was... wrong. She didn’t like this one bit. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Pursing her lips and furrowing her brow, Willow concentrated and suddenly she could hear and see everything going on behind the closed door in front of her.

Buffy was straddling Spike’s lap, her mouth by his ear, laughing softly. She whispered, “Can I think about it?” Then laughed a bit louder when Spike gave her a look.

His hand snuck under her shirt, pressing her down and his leer was evident in his tone as he teased, “Oi, I’ll let you think after.”

Willow mentally grimaced but didn’t leave the room. They couldn’t see or sense her so she opted to stick around to see what happened to see if they talked about her.

Spike’s low voice caught her attention. “Feelin’ any better, pet?”

Both his hands were under her shirt now preparing to lift it off. His fingers moved, releasing her bra and when her answer wafted between them, Spike removed both items at once.

Nice move, Willow thought, wondering if she could perfect it.

Leaning her back away from him, Spike licked a path upwards from her belly button to the valley between Buffy’s pert breasts. Slowly his tongue worked its way from one hardened nipple to the other as Buffy held onto his arms tightly. Neither one of them spoke, though soft gasping breaths filled the room.

Willow watched, a silent invisible voyeur, as Spike continued his gentle assault on Buffy’s sensitive nipples. Buffy’s whimpers filled the air as he caught the tip between his teeth and he tugged back. He did it again repeating the action on her other nipple and Willow felt her own skin grow flush.

Great Mother, he’s good.

His deep rumbles of pleasure erupted from his chest counterpoint to Buffy’s soft mewls. Spike moved, quick as a cat, laying Buffy down on the bed, sliding his hand inside her pants, his body blocking her view of what his mouth was doing.
Moving about, Willow drifted closer to the bed, unable to stop watching. Spike’s hand effortlessly peeled Buffy’s jeans down her legs, tugging them off without any difficulty.

Her own breathing hitched along with Buffy’s when he slid two fingers inside her pussy pumping against her clit. Hissing his name, Buffy slid her hands inside Spike’s jeans, returning the favor. His tee shirt followed and before she knew what was happening Spike had lowered himself and slid inside Buffy.

His gasped words were so low they were just erotic rumbles matching his thrusts. Buffy’s hands gripped his ass then her legs came up to wrap around his hips and Willow was drowning in the energy pouring from them in waves . . .

Until she was abruptly slammed back into her body by Dawn’s voice in her real ear.

“Ugh. Nosey much?”

There was real disgust both in her tone and in her expression. What she’d done earlier had been accidental, freezing her entire class because of her own inner turmoil. Tonight – that was deliberate. Intentional. And there was nothing at all that Willow could say in her own defense.

*************************************************************************

Dawn had stood there watching for about two minutes before she figured out a couple of things. First was her sister and Spike were at it again and um, that was okay, but the second really creepy thing was Willow was standing there listening. Which was not only gross but really wrong.

So, like any good child when confronted with an “adult” in the middle of wrong doing, she’d called her on it.

Willow’s quick retreat and totally guilty expression did nothing to help her cause. Dawn’s first thought was Buffy’s gonna wig followed quickly by but boy is Spike gonna be ripe for violence.

Shaking her head, Dawn headed for her original destination before going back to bed.

*************************************************************************

Buffy writhed beneath him, her inner muscles tightening around him. “God . . . Buffy . . . love this. . . . Come for me, kitten . . . uuhh.”

His breath was cool against her, his lips deliciously chilly against her overheated skin. Buffy wanted this to never end . . . she was drowning, floating, soaring . . . beyond herself. She wanted him inside her . . .

“Spike . . please . . Spike.” She breathed into his mouth, her hands cupping his face. Her eyes stared up into his, awe etched deep within blue and hazel depths.


Clamping down Buffy arched up, body rigid and wound so tightly trembling from head to toe,
keening his name as her orgasm slammed into her. Her inner muscles tightened around him, encasing him in silken steel and Spike lost himself in his own orgasm. Shuddering around him, Buffy bit down hard on his shoulder.

Spike was instantly hard again within her warm depths his demon screaming now for release. Fangs elongated, ridges formed and Spike reared up on his knees dragging Buffy’s lower half with him. Locking her feet around his hips, Buffy held on, softly shrieking his name in one long continuous moan. Her mind barely registered his state, her eyes seeing only him. Using her strong stomach muscles, Buffy pulled herself up, her fingers digging hard into his shoulders. Her lips captured his, her tongue seeking his. He growled into her mouth, his hands gripping her hips. He was pounding so hard and fast inside her she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t . . . his name sounded in the air between them, her overheated body craving release. She wanted . . . Needed . . .

Wrapping her arms around him, Buffy held on. “Spike . . . oh . . . god . . .”

Her hands slipped, trying to find somewhere to hold on. “Spike, please.”

His growls got louder, deeper, she could feel it inside, every delicious rumble . . . her name rolled from his throat as he thrust deep, hitting her cervix and Buffy whimpered from the pain-filled pleasure. Fighting back a scream, Buffy clamped down, her mouth on his shoulder and feeling her teeth in his skin, Spike growled, stilled his hips and pulled her back, so she could see him.

He was still in game face, still rock hard inside her. Buffy flexed around him, watching as his eyes nearly rolled back. He thrust inside, hard, making her gasp out, then growled his own response when she tightened around him again.

Her head dropped forward, resting on his shoulder and she licked his skin, sucking on the bite marks she’d left. His hips bucked as he ground out, “Playin’ with fire, missy.”

He was never so surprised in his life when she purred in his ear. “Fire pretty.”

Spike closed his eyes and nuzzled her neck. His reward was Buffy writhing against him, and when he did it again, she moaned against him. “Oh . . . Spike . . .”

“Can’t . . . love . . . Need you . . . Buffy . . .”

“Yes . . . Spike . . . oh, god.”

Slowly, almost gently, Spike slid his fangs against the salty skin of her neck, drowning in her scent. Buffy grasped the back of his neck, her breath sirocco hot against his skin. She whined his name, as he nicked his first bite, squeezing all around him.

When his teeth finally sank in, Buffy cried out his name, her body shaking with release. Her mind went blank and the whole world went dark as he exploded within her depths.

She slumped bonelessly in his strong arms, surrendering to him, safe, protected and loved.

45. Boundless as the sea.
He shall love my soul as though
body were not all,
he shall love your body,
untroubled by the soul,
love cram love’s two divisions
yet keep his substance whole.

William Butler Yeats, The Lady’s Second Song

Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.

Zora Neale Hurston

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.

Emily Brontë

Re-arranging rooms proved less of a problem than she’d anticipated. By unspoken agreement, they’d purposely waited until Willow left the house to start playing musical rooms.

Buffy was moving around the contents of her drawers, aware of the huge shift her life had gone through in one night. She’d been deliberately low key about Tara moving into the basement room, hoping Spike would take it exactly the way she’d meant and not that she wanted him to leave. She should have known better.

Her vampire had understood without having to hear the words what she’d meant. So right now he was downstairs in the basement, clearing out his meager belongings, boxing them up to carry them upstairs into her room.

Was she ready for this? Not like he wasn’t already sleeping beside her every night. He was there every morning when she woke up and . . . so yeah, she was ready for this.

Shoving aside some old clothes, Buffy glanced around at her . . . now their room. Was it too girly for him? Would he even care? Looking around, she realized there was enough evidence that this move was merely a formality.

A second pair of his boots was in the corner, a couple of dirty tee shirts and a pair of jeans piled together with her dirty clothes, his favorite pillows mixed in with hers, candles on nearly every flat surface. Buffy wandered over to the bed, smoothing the sheets, rearranging the pillows. She’d fallen asleep in his arms, his hard length still inside her and woken up several times throughout the early morning hours to find him still there. Once, he’d woken her, the slow slide of his length driving within her, his hips moving forward fractionally. The feel of him barely moving, yet so solidly within her had been enough, his heavy breathing of her name triggering her own slow rolling orgasm.

He’d rolled onto his back then, pulling her along with him, her hip thrown over his, still embedded deep inside her. One hand on her ass, he’d nudged her closer, whispering, “Go back to sleep, kitten,” as she’d slipped back into slumber.

Buffy grabbed his pillow, burying her face, breathing in his scent. Butterflies took flight in her belly, fluttering in a giant wave. So lost in the memories of this morning, she didn’t hear his footstep, nor
his tentative step into the room.

He watched her for a moment, holding an unneeded breath. The pillow, his pillow, was in her hands, her eyes closed and a look on her face that he’d never seen before. She was beautiful, glowing, his golden girl . . . his sun, his moon . . . his all . . . his everything.

Spike stared at her, random lines of stolen poetry running through his brain, yet none of it did this moment justice.

His arms were full of cardboard and clothing yet ached to take hold of her, wrap her in his arms, holding on for eternity.

Some noise must have escaped his throat, some sound reverberated in the air, because she slowly opened her eyes, unerringly finding his. A soft smile crossed her features, her eyes luminous and clear emerald. The box dropped from his arms tipping over as it fell. He moved toward her, slowly, inexorably, wanting to savor this feeling, this moment.

Her name breathed from his lips at the same time his sounded from hers. Reaching her, Spike dropped to his knees, his arms sliding around her waist. A single tear surfaced in her eyes and he smiled, pulling her close. Buffy’s arms closed around his shoulders holding him tight against her breasts.

“I love you.” He murmured against her and his heart almost beat when her arms tightened around him and she whispered his name.

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Tara was going through her things, piling up everything haphazardly. She wasn’t sure if this was the right thing to do, packing up while Willow was gone, even so she wanted to get a start on things before Willow returned from morning classes.

They’d spoken briefly before Willow had left, failing to say anything significant. The redhead had asked if she was all right, then asked pointedly if they could talk this afternoon.

She suddenly wasn’t so sure that moving down to the basement was the right thing to do. They’d be forced to still see each other all the time and Tara wasn’t sure that was a good idea. It sure as hell wasn’t going to be easy. On the other hand, she really, really didn’t want to leave. And judging by Buffy’s statements last night, they didn’t want her too either.

That made her happy. Made her heart smile. This really was home. She heard Spike come up the stairs, his familiar heavy tread a comfort. When had he ceased to be just an annoying pest and become something more? A part of her family? A rock of strength?

For her it had been when he’d punched her, proving to herself and the world that she wasn’t part demon. She’d always be grateful to him for that.

Smiling again, Tara gathered up some clothes and headed to Buffy’s room.

She stopped at the doorway, captivated by the scene in front of her. Spike was on his knees, his arms around Buffy’s waist, her arms around his shoulders. They were staring at each other although she could only see the look on Buffy’s face.
She’d known Spike was head over heels in love with her but she’d never guessed Buffy completely returned those feelings. Judging by the look on Buffy’s face Tara had no doubt what the other girl was feeling. Tara closed her eyes not wanting to intrude.

Though the vision remained even as she backed away. They were surrounded by soft light, flashing colors of pink and green and blue and gold, shimmering in the air around them. She had no idea how much either of them believed in aura readings but she did. And what she’d just seen had stolen her breath.

*That*, she thought, *is what love’s energy looks like.*

Midmorning sunlight filtered in through the drawn curtains, bathing the room indirectly, warming it despite the opened windows. Neither one of them was sleeping, though her eyes were closed, Buffy again curled up in his arms. His eyes roved over her face, noting the stress lines disappearing, the haunted look she’d carried slowly leaching away. No matter to him, she was beautiful, his entire world encompassed in her eyes, her hands.

He’d thought with Drusilla that he knew what love was, knew the heights and depths of that emotion, the breadth of sensation. How very wrong he was. That night of revelation, when he’d woken from what he’d come to term *The Dream*, opened his eyes to his love for Buffy. Only opened his eyes. It took months of yearning, watching her from across the gulf separating them, to learn what real unrequited love was. Then she let him in, because of his selfless act to protect her sister, and he learned what it was to be close to her.

When she died, he learned what real grief was. His heart had disintegrated that early morning, wept for what might have been, when her body hit the ground, shattered, broken, lifeless. He’d wept too, those long nights in between, when Dawn had sought him out for comfort, his tears mingling with hers. He wept in silence too, alone in his grief, unwilling to share it with anyone else.

Just as the pain was beginning to age, but not die, just as he was adjusting to being without her, she appeared. Returned. Alive. And, for the most part, whole and in one piece. To be able to hold her, see her, smell her . . . Just be near was enough. Or so he’d thought.

Now he wasn’t content to just be near her. Spike wanted to drown himself inside her, hold her close and not ever, ever let her go again. In the deepest, darkest part of night, when she slept within the circle of his arms, her heartbeat thumping against his still chest, her breathing rolling across his arms or chest, Spike quite often found himself imagining it was all a dream his grief-filled heart and mind had conjured up. That she wasn’t back. But she was. And she was with him, wanting him, needing him. There were times when he touched her just to convince himself. When he watched her sleeping beside him, safe and sound. Content to just watch her.

Which was what he was doing at this moment. Just watching her. His thumb brushed against her cheek, his fingers twining in her hair. Should he live for another hundred years, he’d never ever forget these moments, nor the way her body felt wrapped around his. The heat, the absolute delicious heat of her encircling him, her muscles contracting around him, speeding them both toward climax.
Spike sighed softly against her forehead, feeling her eyes open, as her fingers flexed around his waist. Lines of long remembered poems drifted in and out of his head, none of them equal to her, they were words, and thankfully none of his own, though he was craving for the ability to put pen to paper and make a sad poor attempt once more. Without much conscious thought, Spike’s voice drifted softly in the air, drawing her attention to his lips.

“Trusty, dusky, vivid, true, with eyes of gold and bramble-dew, steel-true and blade-straight, the great artificer made my mate.” She said nothing, waiting breathlessly for his next words, just watching his averted eyes.

“Honour, anger, valour, fire; a love that life could never tire, death quench or evil stir, the mighty master gave to her.” He smiled a bit, his hand reaching out to lay just underneath her ear, resting on her cheek.

“Teacher, tender, comrade . . .” and his voice hitched and broke, breathed more than whispered, “wife.” He paused for so long that Buffy thought he wasn’t going to continue, but then he recovered and his voice sounded out again “S fellow-farer true through life, heart-whole and soul-free, the august father gave to me.”

Her eyes were bright and wide. Spike ducked his head, unwilling to let her see the depth of his emotions swimming in his eyes. Warm fingers brushed across his lips, drawing his face down to hers. The kiss was chaste, given the fact they were both naked, yet carried a wealth of emotion he was suddenly afraid to analyze. He pressed their bodies together, rolling half onto his back, bringing her with him. Spike closed his eyes, content to just listen to the cadence of her heart beat, feel her resting over him like a living blanket.

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Sooner or later, it was bound to happen. Once certain wheels were set in motion, triggered by events sometimes out of the control of the people they effect, the inevitable does occur.

It was just as likely to have come from him as it was from any other source, the demon world, especially that surrounding the hellmouth, abounded with rumors.

So Wesley wasn’t entirely surprised when Angel loomed over him, accusation and betrayal in his dark eyes.

“When were you going to tell me?” His hands fisted on the desk top as Angel leaned across to confront him.

“About what precisely?” He looked up, not at all intimidated by Angel’s demeanor.

“What’s going on in Sunnydale, Wes?” The vampire didn’t move, didn’t back away at all.

Neither did the human. “Why don’t you tell me what you think you know?”

“I’ve heard things,” was all Angel would say.

Losing patience with this unnecessarily cryptic conversation, Wesley tossed his pen on the desk,
saying, “The point Angel, if you have one?”

“Oh, I’ve got a point.” Angel stood up to his full height, flexing his broad shoulders. “Rumors are flying that there’s a Slayer in Sunnydale again. What do you know about that?”

“There is.” Wesley wasn’t going to lie, as much as he wanted to, as much as he wanted to protect them, Angel would find out the truth and then there would be hell to pay.

“Did you see the new Slayer while you were there?”

Ah, so he thought this was Buffy’s replacement, not the girl herself, maybe he could buy them some more time. Wesley didn’t know why, nor could he explain it, and despite all odds, he’d liked William the Bloody. He hadn’t been at all what he’d expected, nor had his welcome been anything at all like his first stint in Sunnydale. They’d welcomed him, made him feel at home, part of them and he’d enjoyed that feeling. Would like to repeat it.

“No. No, I didn’t meet the new Slayer.” Gauging the other man’s reaction to see if Angel thought he was lying, Wesley watched him pace around a bit.

“You were there for a couple of days, you mean to tell me you didn’t meet her?”

“No, Angel, I didn’t meet the new Slayer. She’s apparently a bit antisocial, not adjusting well to her circumstances.” Which wasn’t exactly a lie, any of it.

“Oh.” His response totally took the wind out of Angel’s pending explosion.

“Spike still there?” It was almost an after thought, however Wesley wasn’t fooled.

“Yes, protecting Dawn.”

“Good. Okay then.”

And as quickly as he’d arrived in Wesley’s office, Angel departed.

The Englishman waited ten minutes or so, then called the house.

Spike’s voice answered on the third ring.

“Lo.”

“Hello.”

“Oxford.” The vampire was immediately wary. They’d talked about this, that last long night when they’d drunk themselves silly and Spike knew there was only one reason Wesley would be calling him.

“He’s asked about the new Slayer.”

“Bloody hell. Only a matter of time then.”

Wesley sighed a little, then agreed. “More than likely, he’ll probably call the house. He’ll assume our counterpart won’t talk, probably hoping. . .”
“He’ll get Niblet on the horn an’ pry the info from her. Right.”

“It’s something he would do.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell the girls.”

They both avoided using names, neither one knowing how many ears were listening or who those ears belonged to.

“Ta, mate. ‘Preciate the info.”

“Pass along my greetings to everyone.”

“Will do.” There was a brief pause, then, “Oxford. Don’t be a stranger.”

It was probably the closest thing to an admission that Spike had enjoyed his company as much as Wesley had enjoyed Spike’s.

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Buffy caught sight of his face after hanging up the phone and knew immediately something was wrong. “Spike?”

When he didn’t answer her, she tried again, “Spike, what was Wes calling about?”

So she had heard. This was not a conversation he wanted to have with the imminent arrival of everyone. It was just after two in the afternoon and Giles and the girls were due at any moment. He was hoping they’d never have to face this, yet knowing that was nothing more than wishful thinking on his part.

Raising his eyes to hers, Spike fought the impulse to lie. “Oxford says Angel’s heard about a new Slayer bein’ in town.”

She was stunned. “A new? Here?” Rolling her eyes she surprised him by shrugging, “Obviously telephone game still works not so well.”

“Huh?” He wasn’t following her.

“Information breakdown. Too much repetition and information goes wonky.”

“Right.” Looking at her intently, he asked, “You’re not worried about the poofter?”

“Nope. Should I be?” Buffy perched on the kitchen stool, watching him.

“Dunno, pet. Figured you’d wanna hide me away from himself.”

“Spike. We talked about this. We’re good.” Looking back at him, she could see he wasn’t completely reassured, but it was okay, or it would be. She wasn’t worried about Angel, was more worried about Willow and Tara.
And she really didn’t want to think about Angel at all right now.

Giles was the first one to arrive, although Spike almost expected that. He’d sounded like he had much on his mind when he’d called earlier.

His greeting upon arrival had reflected that, or so Spike thought, and his first real sentence, “Is Willow home?” reinforced that thought.

“Red’s not back yet. Expect her soon though. What’s up, Rupert?”

“Tara’s the only one besides us home. Why, Giles?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask you, Buffy, if I may.” His glasses were on, so that was good. However, it was his next words that stole her breath.

“When were you going to tell me Willow took you from heaven?”

46. *Mere white truth in simple nakedness*

*The truth is rarely pure and never simple.*
   *Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, act 1*

*There is more truth in honest lies,*
   *believe me, than in half the truths.*
   *Samuel Butler, Notebooks, pg 52*

*Truth is after all a moving target*
   *Hairs to split, and pieces that don’t fit*
   *How can anybody be enlightened?*
   *Truth is after all so poorly lit*
   *Rush, Turn the page, from the Album Hold your Fire*

She could not believe what she’d thought she heard. It just wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be possible. Please god, make this a dream, some sort of nightmare. No. That is not what she’d just heard. Giles did not just ask if she’d been in heaven. There was . . .

Buffy was staring at her Watcher, her father-figure, her friend, absolutely speechless. There was nothing she could say. Spike stood next to her an unmoving solid presence. Everyone was frozen in place, hardly anyone was breathing.

A soft noise sounded in the air, drawing everyone’s attention to the doorway by the kitchen. Tara stood there, hand covering her mouth, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes searched Buffy’s needing confirmation of what Giles had just said. Another noise came from the doorway between
the front hall and the living room entrance. Dawn was standing there, her backpack falling from her hands, a stunned look upon her face.

“Buffy?” The teen sounded so lost, so scared that it brought tears to her sister’s eyes.

He hadn’t seen that look on her face or in her eyes in quite some time. In fact, the last time he’d seen it, Buffy and he were sitting on the back porch, just after she’d discovered there was something wrong with her mother. Spike felt as useless now as he did then, but this time, there wasn’t any hesitation in her mind what she wanted to do. Turning to face him, she reached for him, a soft sob breaking through her lips, tears now swimming in her eyes.

“All he said was her name and she crumpled, reaching for him, anguish in every line of her face.

He took a step toward her, closing the gap between them, his arms automatically pulling her close. The storm broke when her cheek rested against his chest and she could feel him all around her, supporting her and keeping her safe.

“Rupert. Have you any idea . . .” Spike didn’t know what to say. He currently had an armful of crying Buffy, Tara was frozen in shock and Dawn had moved closer into the living room, where the three adults were standing. Giles had stepped forward, then back as Buffy had turned into Spike’s embrace.

“See to the girls.” Everything was secondary to making sure Buffy was okay. Holding her close, he dropped his head down to hers, whispering softly into her ear, too low for anyone else to hear.

“Shh . . . Buffy love, I’ve got you. ‘M right here. Hold on to me.” It was nonsense, just his voice sounding over and over, to give her something to focus on, to anchor her to him. Buffy’s arms were circled around his waist, snuggled up against his chest.

Giles had herded the two girls to the couch, his mind reeling. He’d not imagined his questioning Buffy would have been overheard. Nor had he meant for it to sound accusatory. Yet it had. And he’d spoken, without taking note of who was present, nor had he . . . God. He’d just not thought it through clearly.

He turned to face the two still figures his gaze resting on the smaller of the two.

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Xander had gotten out of work early, planning on meeting Willow at the Magic Box for lunch. His oldest friend had called him while she was between classes looking for a sympathetic ear and some support. She’d said she needed to talk to him about a couple of things but hadn’t said what exactly was on her mind. But he had a few ideas what might be bugging her.

That scene last night was . . . he’d been embarrassed for both of them.

He was walking into the Magic Box when Willow’s voice calling his name caught his attention.

“Xander!”
“Hey, Will.”

Grabbing his arm, Willow pulled him away from the door, urging him toward the Espresso Pump. “So, what’s the dire?”

“Buffy’s sleeping with Spike.”

“Don’t wanna know this, saw it with my own two eyes.” Taking a deep breath, Xander continued, “Did you need to rub this in, coz, gotta say, so not needing the reinforcement.”

Willow was shaking her head, “I mean really sleeping with him.”

“Aaaaaahhhhh! Stop, Will, don’t need visuals.” Missing Willow’s guilty flush, Xander said, “I really don’t wanna talk about this.”

“But, Xander, we’re her best friends and you know, she should be trusting us not him and so . . . not with the trusting him and . . . hey, I rescued her from a hell dimension!”

Willow got more agitated the longer she talked about it, dragging Xander into outrage with her.

“If we could just . . . maybe she’s under some sort of spell or something?” Xander was still trying to figure out Buffy’s attraction to Spike.

“She needs our help, Xander. Buffy needs us – her real friends.” Willow looked around moving closer so they weren’t overheard. “We just have to prove to her that Spike will always be evil and she’ll get rid of him.”

She had his full attention now. Xander trusted Willow, she was smart and well, he’d known her most of his life, so yeah, he’d go along with pretty much whatever plan she could come up with. “All right, Will, what should we do?”

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Tara’s voice was the first to break the tense silence. “Is it true? What Mr. Giles asked?”

Lifting her forehead from where it rested against Spike’s chest, Buffy shared a look with the vampire, drew in a steadying breath and gaining strength from his proximity, she said softly, “Yes it is.”

Dawn’s indrawn breath broke on a sob while Tara’s hand shook as she raised it to her mouth. Giles shook closed his eyes, mentally kicking himself.

Holding onto Spike, Buffy wiped her eyes, then faced the girls. Dawn was hugging one of the pillows against her belly, her face pale, the shock clearly visible. Tara was no better, the implications of Willow’s actions weighing very heavily. She at least was aware of the possible complications and the huge consequences of Willow’s reckless and thoughtless actions.

“It’s not. . .” Buffy’s voice broke, then taking a deep breath, she tried again. “I didn’t want you to know. It’s not your fault. I’d never . . .” It happened again, only this time she looked up at Spike for
Finding whatever she was looking for in his eyes, she continued, “Neither of you knew what Willow was planning, so not your fault.”

Tara was shaking her head, trying to force words to her tongue. “We . . . we . . . I didn’t know. Buffy, I would’ve stopped her.”

For the first time, Dawn spoke, her voice harsh and sounding very, very old. “No. She would have figured out something else. She would have tried again and again until it worked.”

It was, Spike thought, exactly what he’d been thinking, and a more than fair assessment of Willow’s character. Buffy broke from his embrace, moving toward the obviously distressed Tara.

“Hey. It’s really not your fault. I don’t blame either of you.” Reaching her side, Buffy crouched down in front of Tara, then slid onto the coffee table. “Look, I know you wouldn’t have done this, tried something so dangerous. I know it. What Willow did . . . you aren’t responsible for it. Please, Tara, don’t feel like you . . . it wasn’t your fault.”

Tara turned anguished blue eyes toward the floor shaking her head. “I could’ve figured it out. Tried to stop her.”

She was so upset her stutter was very pronounced. Buffy wouldn’t let go of her hands and Tara was very aware of the tears sliding down her face.

Dropping her gaze to their joined hands, Tara could see tiny lines, scars of long healed minor wounds criss-crossed on the backs of Buffy’s hands. Her hands were so small, fine boned and delicate, almost child-sized, yet they wielded extraordinary power, delivering death to demons, saving the world. So much rested on those delicate hands.

“Tara.” Spike had stepped up behind Buffy, his hands resting on her shoulders. He rarely used anyone’s real name, especially when talking directly to them, so she knew whatever he was about to say was important.

“Tara.” He repeated, forcing her gaze upward by the strength of his tone. “Aside from being duped, you had nothing to do with Willow’s spell, yeah?” When she opened her mouth to speak, he held up a hand, motioning her to wait. “Red kept it from you both, didn’t say a word to anyone save the boy and even then she lied to him. You’re no more responsible for what Willow did than Buffy is. She used you both. Hell, used all of you, Dawn, you and Buffy.”

His face wore a look she’d never seen before, his features stern and forbidding, a dangerous glint in his eyes. There was no forgiveness in those blue depths, none at all. Tara realized she was looking into the eyes of a man who had no compunctions about taking a life, a man who had no remorse.

Glancing down at Buffy, Tara found the same look staring back at her.

“I’m so sorry,” slipped from between her lips before she could censor the thought.

“Nothing for you to be sorry about.” Buffy’s voice hadn’t wavered. “I’m sorry that you found out like this.”

For the first time since blurting out his question, Giles spoke. “That is my fault.”
Apprehension was written in the depths of Giles’ eyes and it was clearly visible that he feared an eruption of monumental proportions was about to occur. He was braced for it.

What he got instead was a Buffy who just turned wounded doe eyes up and him and her softly worded, “I didn’t want to upset them Giles, it’s not fair to them. They didn’t know.”

“I am very sorry.” His regret was evident.

They stared at each other, neither one able to find the words to heal this latest breach between then, but aware it needed healing.

It was Dawn who mended the tiny crack.

“Not even half as sorry as Willow should be.” Then she remembered the scene outside Buffy’s bedroom last night and figured, what the hell, Willow’s already in deep. “OH! Last night, she was listening outside your bedroom door.”

All eyes had swung toward her at the first comment but at the second, two pair narrowed further.

“What?!”

“When was this, Niblet?”

Dawn rolled her eyes, clearly not wanting to say exactly when she’d busted Willow listening, however, judging by the looks on various faces, everyone had pretty much figured it out. Which was good, coz she really didn’t want to blurt that out.

If it was at all possible, Spike’s expression hardened even more. Buffy looked both embarrassed and pissed off, which was hard to do, but Dawn figured in this case, both worked.

“Maybe we should think about taking the basement.”

“Maybe it’s time we taught Red a lesson,” was Spike’s comment back at her.

None of them could argue with that.

***********************************************************************

For once in his life, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce was grateful for the fact that vampires slept during the day. And that this particular vampire preferred to sleep in the afternoon.

He was, therefore, alone when the call came in. Nearly the last two people on earth he’d expect to call to speak to Angel were on the phone. He got that tingle in the back of his neck, the one indicating something wasn’t right, the one that right now was agreeing with the gut feeling he had this phone call wasn’t about anything good. Unsure if the two even knew he’d been in Sunnydale recently, since he’d seen neither one of them while he’d been there, Wesley was certain this had something to do with Buffy.

With the phone hung up, Wesley sat at his desk not seeing what was in front of him, instead his mind
was on the non-conversation he’d just had with two of the slayer’s friends. He couldn’t imagine what they were hoping to accomplish and how Angel was supposed to assist them in whatever they were planning. At this rate he was going to be calling Sunnydale once or twice a day.

Heaving a sigh, he reached for his phone and had half dialed the number when Angel wandered in to his office. He hung up, warily eyeing the vampire pacing around, watching him carefully. When he spoke, Wesley mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

“Have you found anything about this? About Darla’s condition?”

Looking down at the books opened on his desk Wesley had to admit that it had been slow going. His only lead had come from Giles, who admitted the information was in the Council’s library, which was closely guarded. It was more than possible he could find more there, although that would entail going back to England, which was something Wesley had zero intention of ever doing. “I’ve gotten something about a hybrid getting pregnant by a vampire but nothing else so far. Darla’s not a hybrid. She was fully human when she got pregnant.”

“Yeah. She was.” Angel thought for a moment then looked at Wesley. “Could it have something to do with her being brought back from the dead? She died twice, maybe there’s a connection there.”

He was staring at the vampire, a myriad of thoughts running through his head. Could that be it? Twice dead; returned the second time by mystical means. The implications of that had him reeling. It was as good a theory as any other he’d heard. And, oh dear gods.

Buffy. And Spike.

They were living together.

Wesley realized he really needed to call Sunnydale.

*******************************************************************

Giles knew he’d hurt Buffy. Knew his question was ill-timed. He’d been so focused on getting a straight answer from her he hadn’t thought it all through.

He tried again, needed to assuage his conscience. “Buffy, I am sorry.”

“Not you too.” Noting his confused look, Buffy shrugged a little. “Pulling me from heaven – not your fault.”

“I meant about the way I asked.” Giles shook his head. She was so very impulsive.

“Oh. Yeah, very much your fault.” She looked back at Tara then glanced at her sister. “Was thinking about maybe baring my soul – only telling you.”

Getting up from the coffee table, she laced her fingers together. “Just didn’t want anyone to feel bad.”

“Not something you should’ve kept secret though.” Giles knew he wasn’t completely off-the-hook, just temporarily forgiven. “The thing is, I know why the hounds are here.”
When he didn’t say anything for a moment, Buffy said, “Spill.”

“They’re here to exact payment or restitution for your release from heaven.”

Buffy shot a glance at Spike that was laced with anger. “Don’t say it.”

Spike grinned unrepentantly. “Not goin’ to. You are.”

“Nahuh.” Buffy crossed her arms and set her features.

“Have to, pet.” He was trying badly to suppress a grin.

“Fine.” Grimacing, Buffy ground out, “Spike wanted me to tell you because he translated the part Wesley couldn’t. And he was right.”

Tara’s and Dawn’s watery giggles broke the silence. “Spike’s right?”

Despite the current mood, Buffy’s reluctant admission was funny and Dawn was laughing at her sister.

“Hahah. Very funny, Dawnie. He’s only right this once.”

Dawn laughed harder. “Oohkay, Buff, whatever you say.”

“Spike? Got a moment?” Giles knew he had to talk to him before he said anything else to drive a wedge between himself and Buffy.

“Yeah.” Sharing a look with Buffy, he shrugged, not knowing what Giles wanted.

Giles walked out of the room and headed downstairs to the basement. At the bottom of the steps, he looked about, noting the boxes piled up outside the new bedroom. Spike’s heavy tread hit the stairs and Giles said as he walked down toward him, “Are you leaving?”

“No. Tara’s taking this room. She’s given Red the boot.” Spike wandered inside the room, sitting on the bed, waiting for Rupert to blast him.

“Where are you going to sleep?” At Spike’s pointed look understanding dawned in the older man’s eyes. “Ahh. I see.”

“Actually I need to talk to you about something.” Motioning him to wait, Giles hesitated then blurted out, “Darla’s back in Los Angeles. She’s eight months pregnant.”

“What in fucking hell?”

“That was about my reaction.” Waiting a bit, Giles then said, “It’s also Angel’s.”
47. Innocence creates my hell.

Passions are generally roused from great conflict.
   Titus Livius, Histories III

And through the heat of conflict keeps the law
in calmness made, and sees what he foresaw.
   William Wordsworth, Character of the Happy Warrior

I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do,
because I notice it always coincides with their desires.
   Susan B. Anthony

He was laughing. It was the only thing he could do at the moment. No doubt Darla was . . . oh god. Spike convulsed in absolute hilarity, his eyes tearing up.

It took him a while, but finally Spike wiped his eyes and, taking note of Giles’ expression, said, “How’d this happen then?”

“Obviously they slept together before Drusilla re-sired her. And somehow she got pregnant.”

Well this certainly was a kicker. Not something he’d ever imagined hearing. “Is there a prophecy? What’d Oxford say about this?”

“Wesley told me late last night. I called him about something else, about the texts and he told me this.”

Spike was well and truly gobsmacked. Angel had done the nearly impossible. “It’s an old legend, ‘bout vamps getting human women w’child. Somethin’ mystical always around it, jus’ don’t know the p’ticulars. Not exactly talked about, yeah?” Spike had shifted on the bed, clearly uncomfortable.

“She’s . . . Dunno how she’s likely to react.” He shook his head. “Suppose you want me to tell her.”

Giles looked at him. This wasn’t fair to put on Spike’s shoulders. Not that he wanted to be the one to tell her either. She was already not happy with him. However, he knew about this first so, the task was rightly his.

Before he could say anything his phone rang. Lifting it from his pocket, Giles saw the incoming number and said, ‘It’s Wesley.”

“Good. I need a word with him.” Spike motioned for the phone. Handing it over, Giles prepared to listen.

“You bloody wanker.”

If he was surprised at the greeting, Wesley made no mention of it. “I suppose he just told you.”

“Yeah. How come you didn’t say anything earlier?” Spike’s growl was barely controlled.
“Wasn’t sure who was listening. These two lines are secure.”

“Were you plannin’ on sharing with the rest of us?”

“Soon as I had more information.” He paused, then, “Look I’ve not much time. Angel asked if Darla’s pregnancy might have something to do with her being brought back from the dead by mystical means.”

Spike nearly dropped the phone. Closing his eyes and letting out a deep breath, Spike said, “Has the ring of truth.” Then he looked at Rupert. “You tell him. Hold on. Oxford wants to tell you somethin’.”

Giles’ face blanched visibly upon hearing Wesley’s news and Angel’s new theory.

“Oh good gods.”

The three girls sat in silence for a bit, each one of them deep in thought and then at some signal, all three of them spoke at once.

“What was heaven like?”

“I can’t believe she did this.”

“I didn’t want to hurt either of you.”

Relieved laughter rang through the room then just as quickly as it started it stopped. Motioning for one of the others to go first, Tara forced a smile. Buffy looked at Dawn, who just repeated her question.

“It was quiet, peaceful . . . sort of like being in a big comfy bed with soft pillows and just . . . safe.” Buffy shrugged, unable to find the words to describe exactly how it had been, other than quiet and safe.

“Was Mom there?” Dawn’s voice wavered.

“It wasn’t really like that. There was no need for names, just . . . I didn’t really see any one else either. Sorry, Dawnie.”

Dawn didn’t quite understand, but she’d think about it for a while before she said anything else. Before she realized it, she’d said, “Guess it’s kinda hard being back here, huh?”

“Yeah it is.” There wasn’t anything else she could say. Now that the truth was out, no point in hiding the rest of it.

“I’m ssso sorry, Buffy.” Tara’s voice was thick with unshed tears.

Turning to look at her, Buffy nearly started crying again. The anguished guilt was stamped upon her features and it wasn’t even her guilt to bear. “Tara. Please stop blaming yourself. It wasn’t you. Please.”
“You should be angry.”

“Well yeah. But not with you or Dawnie or Spike or even Giles.” Buffy searched the other girl’s face. “I’m so not happy with your ex-girlfriend or with Xander.” She hesitated, taking a deep breath, “You’ve done so much for me, so much for Dawnie. Without you, we’d be in a mess.”

Pausing a beat, she continued, “I can do laundry and cleaning but cooking, not so good. We’d be eating lots of take out.”

She got half-hearted laughs from the other two, which she figured was progress.

************************************************************************

On the fourth try, she got lucky. She’d kept trying after talking with Wesley the first time and getting the run around, Willow didn’t give up.

Finally Angel answered the phone. The conversation was short and not so sweet. She’d chickened out in the end, the news that Spike and Buffy were a couple somehow unable to leave her lips.

Oh, Willow had wanted to tell him, but she couldn’t. Couldn’t force herself to say those words.

Angel had sounded a bit distracted though, like there were other things on his mind more important than Buffy, which she didn’t understand. She started having some doubts about involving Angel anyway, then she’d remember it was Buffy and that Angel would want to know she was back and Buffy would be grateful for that.

She’d called the Hyperion from one of the phones at school and then headed toward Revello Drive. There was still the situation with Tara to resolve. Checking her watch she figured it was a half hour walk to the house, which would get her home around four.

************************************************************************

Neither man spoke after Giles hung up.

Independently they both arrived at the same thought, the same conclusion. Buffy had to know, because if Angel’s theory proved correct . . .

“Not sure you should be the one to tell her.” Was Spike’s first comment.

“How is she likely to react?” Giles was concerned.

“Dunno, Rupert. Still not sure how she’s feelin’ from your little bombshell.”

Ouch.

He deserved that, even though the barb hit hard.
Spike exhaled loudly. “Dunno . . . she’s likely to pitch me out on my ear or just as likely to not.”

“Would just as soon hold off on this . . . tellin’ her.”

Giles shot him a look that was more father than watcher. “And what happens if she ends up like Darla?”

Spike’s look was pure venom. “You thinkin’ I’ll skip out? I’d walk away?” He stood up, crowding the older man. He poked a finger at his chest, punctuating his words. “Not likely. Not the leavin’ type, an’ if that’s mine she’s carryin’ you’d have to sweep up m’dust to get rid of me.”

Dropping his eyes, Spike shifted away. “I’ll tell her tonight.”

The phone ringing upstairs caught their attention. Sharing a glance, the same thought was in both their minds. Before the third ring, Spike was at the top of the stairs, bellowing out, “Don’t answer that!”

Which stalled Buffy’s hand from picking up the receiver.

The confusion was clear on her face as he burst through the doorway, though when Angel’s voice sounded on the answering machine, Buffy smiled at him. It faded a bit listening to Angel’s message.

“Dawn. Dawn, it’s Angel, pick up the phone.” A pause. “Willow just called to tell me Buffy’s back. What the hell’s going on? Dawn . . . please pick up the phone.”

Buffy turned a pained look in his direction, asking, “Why would she do that?”

“‘Spose she’s not happy ‘bout me being here, ‘bout what she saw last night.” He couldn’t think of any other reason.

She could see the concern, the worry in his eyes, no doubt the same look her own eyes had. “I don’t understand, Spike.”

“Me either, love.” His hand reached out for hers and Buffy met him halfway, then pushed forward into his arms. Her head found its natural spot beneath his chin and she held on until his arms circled round, holding her tight.

He looked up to see everyone in the kitchen watching them. Dawn had tears in her eyes and Spike just opened his arms and she was clutching both of them.

Giles leaned against the kitchen sink watching them.

“He’s going to keep calling right? Maybe I should call him back, tell him to stay away until you’re better.” Dawn broke away from the pair, moving to sit on one of the stools.

Sharing a look with his fellow Englishman, Spike said, “It’s up to your sis how she wants to handle this.”

“I think it’s a good idea.” Tara spoke from the doorway. “Willow’s going to be here soon, and we may not need to use the basement.”

“What?”
“Why?”

“No, you can’t leave.”

Out of all the protests, it was Buffy’s voice that really caught Tara’s attention. “No, Tara, you can’t leave. You’re family. And family stays.”

No one missed the implication that Willow might not fall into that category anymore.

“Call him, Dawn. Tell him I’m not ready for a visit. Tell him whatever you want but convince him that I’m not ready to see him.” Buffy had turned to face her sister still within the circle of Spike’s embrace.

Looking at the clock, Buffy turned to Spike, “Is it okay to . . . can you make it to the sewers at this hour?”

“Sure. Not a problem, kitten. What’s this about?”

Buffy looked at Giles, “Can you stay the night and make sure the girls are okay?”

“Of course. Buffy, what are you planning?” Giles stood up straight, watching the slayer awaken. “Not planning anything. Not sure I want to see Willow right now . . . and . . . don’t want to hear Angel giving Dawn a hard time.”

She laid her head against Spike’s chest. “I’m just not ready for all this.”

Spike brushed a kiss against her hair. “Might be best if none of us were here when Red gets back.”

“I think I need to do this alone anyway.” Tara weighed in, looking from one face to the next.

“You sure, Glinda? Don’t mind stayin’. ” Spike wanted to make it clear he was willing to protect her also, but Tara was shaking her head. “No. Buffy needs you. Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Dunno, pet. I’ve a funny feeling ‘bout this. Maybe we should stick around.”

Buffy started to speak, but in the next moment it didn’t matter, because the front door opened and Willow’s voice was ringing out a cheery “Hello!”

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“You knew she was back, didn’t you?” Angel was pacing the Hyperion’s lobby apparently waiting for Wesley’s return.

He stilled halfway down the steps. Unslinging his backpack, Wesley hesitated before answering. “I did.”

“How come you didn’t tell me?” Angel was facing him now, arms crossed over his chest, his features deceptively without expression.
“I don’t think she’s ready for emotional confrontations. She barely leaves the house.” It was the only answer Wesley could come up with that wasn’t another outright lie.

“What makes you think it would be a confrontation?” Angel hadn’t moved, effectively blocking Wesley’s further entry into the hotel.

“The possibility exists. She’s not ready for it.” Wesley had had enough of Angel’s posturing. Brushing past him, Wesley headed for his office, Angel trailing after him.

“What makes you so sure she’s not ready to see me?” Angel was beginning to sound petulant, behavior Wesley found exceeding boring and not to mention childish.

“Angel. She’s just not ready. She’s barely talking and she’s still skittish. Give her another couple of days and then maybe, if she’s ready, go see her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Wesley rolled his eyes and sat down at his desk. *Spare me lord,* he prayed, *from hormonal vampires.*

*************************************************************************

It was too late for any of them to leave now. Willow was back and unless they all managed to slip out the door, they were all going to be present for the confrontation.

“Showtime,” was Dawn’s low voiced comment. As she grabbed a drink and some fruit, she said to the adults, “I’m going upstairs. I’ll call Angel from my room.”

Walking past Tara, she whispered, “Good luck.”

Rushing out into the hallway, Dawn pointedly ignored Willow, not returning the red-head’s chipper greeting.

“’M heading downstairs.” Spike figured the other two would either follow or not, although he thought the girls needed some privacy.

Giles glanced around, then stated, “I’m going into the shop. There’s some research I need to do about the Cwn Annwn. I’ve a theory on how to send them back.” Heading for the back door, Giles said, “Are you patrolling tonight?”

At their mutual agreement, Giles replied, “Stop in before you go. Hopefully I’ll have a bit more to go on.”

Then the men were gone, leaving only Tara and Buffy in the kitchen when Willow wandered in.

“Hey.”

There was a definite chill in the atmosphere, the comfortable feeling of moments ago replaced by something else. Buffy shivered as the hairs on her arms and neck stood up. This was the first time
she’d be in Willow’s presence without Spike’s protection and she was feeling the lack. Suddenly wanting to be elsewhere, Buffy waited for the first possible moment to make her escape.

“Hey, Wills.” She tried smiling even though it felt funny on her face.

Tara still hadn’t said anything.

Moving toward the refrigerator for something to drink, Willow watched as Tara stiffened when she walked past her. *Uhoh, not a good sign.*

Deciding to face this head on, Willow turned around, facing her girlfriend. *At least I hope she still is.*

“Tara, baby, can we talk?”

“I don’t know. Not sure there’s much to . . . left to talk about.” Tara fidgeted a bit, shifting from one foot to another.

“We had a disagreement, a little fight . . . over not so big a deal. Lots of people fight. We can work through it. Be like before.” Willow dropped the pretense of getting something to drink, facing Tara, pleading with her eyes.

“I don’t think we can. You don’t see what you’re doing is wrong. What you did was wrong.” Tara’s voice was soft but strong. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind what Willow had been doing was wrong. And if the only way to get her to see that was to break up with her, well, so be it.

“How do I know you aren’t doing more of this when I’m not around to say something?”

Neither blond missed the guilty flush that graced the red-head’s features.

“Oh my gods, Willow, what have you done?” Tara was horrified.

“Nothing.” Willow’s stance got even more defensive. “Just moved some things around. No biggie.”

“Willow. What you’re doing isn’t right.” Staring into her eyes, Tara let Willow see her hurt and disappointment. “I can’t trust you right now. What are you thinking?”

“I’m not hurting anyone. I’m just . . . I’m not hurting anyone.”

“You’ve hurt me and Dawnie.” Tara didn’t want to say anything about how Willow had hurt Buffy, that was for her to say, but it was there, on the tip of her tongue, just waiting to be said.

“Your actions, especially your magical actions always have consequences, Willow, sometimes really unexpected ones. You aren’t thinking clearly.”

The anger started bubbling in Willow’s belly, a purely defensive anger, because some part of her knew there was more than a bit of truth to Tara’s words.

“No. I wasn’t trying to hurt you or Dawn.”

“Maybe so. Yet you did anyway.” Tara was shaking her head. “I don’t trust you any more Willow. And it’s not a relationship when there’s no trust, at least on some level.”
Willow was pleading now, hoping to get through to Tara, hoping to make her change her mind. “How can you say that? I love you, I’d never mean to hurt you. I’m just doing what I think is best.”

Buffy’s voice broke in. “And that means calling Angel?”

“What? I didn’t call Angel.”

Raising an eyebrow, Buffy moved the short distance to the answering machine and hit the play button. For the second time that afternoon, Angel’s voice filled the kitchen.

Willow had no defense.

Hanging her head, Willow fought tears. “Please, baby, I . . . please . . . I was just . . . I thought he should know, that’s all.”

“No, Willow. I just don’t understand.” Tara glanced once at Buffy, waiting for a moment to see if Buffy was going to speak.

“Just like you thought I should be rescued from hell?” Buffy couldn’t help the words spilling out of her mouth. “What if that’s not where I was? What if I was someplace else? Did you think of that?”

Willow was shaking now, finally becoming aware she might have made a huge mistake. “No . . . no. Glory was from a hell dimension.”

“Yeah she was. But the key opens all dimensions, not just hell dimensions. It wasn’t hell you rescued me from.” Buffy had her arms folded across her chest, mostly to stop the shaking. She felt rather than heard Spike’s ascent on the stairs, drawing comfort from his nearing presence.

Willow looked from one girl to the other, the inescapable truth dawning in her eyes. She tried one last time, hoping one of them would relent.

“Tara, baby?” Then in a half breath, “Buffy?”

“Baby, please . . .”

After long silent moments, Dawn’s voice came from behind Tara, “I think you need to go.”

Spike slid through the doorway, his arms reaching for the visibly trembling slayer. Dawn stepped forward, out from behind Tara, her face set, her stance equally resolute.

One last ditch effort.

“Baby?”

“No, Willow. You need to go.”
48. Never break the chain

And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on.
   George Gordon Byron, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, canto iii, stanza 32

Only the broken-hearted know the truth about love.
   Mason Cooley, City Aphorisms, 13th selection

Love is dead; let lover’s eyes,
locked in endless dreams,
the extremes of all extremes,
ope no more, for now love dies.
   John Ford, The Broken Heart

It was an odd thing, watching a couple fall apart, seeing two lives separate. Especially when it wasn’t anticipated.

This wasn’t how she remembered her parents’ split up, there had at least been signs of that happening. The fights, the long nights listening to her mother cry, the missed dinners and family moments, all escalating until they weren’t a family, until her parents weren’t a couple. That end had almost been inevitable.

This was different. This was a zephyr, a blitzkrieg, a rapid strike, this was lightening in a bottle. One moment things were fixable and in the next heartbeat everything was broken.

Now she was the one watching as Willow despondently tried packing up her belongings, using the boxes Spike had emptied earlier. Tears were sliding down her cheeks, dripping off her chin, plopping indiscriminately onto clothes and papers.

Ordinarily, Dawn would have been moved to pity, moved enough to plead for some form of reprieve, a sort of forgiveness. But this wasn’t ordinary, not even by Sunnydale standards.

Willow paused, the flood of tears rendering further movement impossible. Burying her face in her hands, Willow sobbed broken heartedly.

Dawn was singularly unimpressed. If anything, her sympathies lay completely with the dark blond girl downstairs, who was sitting in the living room with a much calmed Buffy and a still agitated Spike.

By default, Dawn had been the one to stay with Willow while she packed what she could on such short notice. Xander was coming by after bowling, sometime around nine or so, and he would be taking Willow back to her parent’s house. And also by default, Dawn and Tara were going to be the only two home when he arrived, little over three hours from now.

Willow gathered herself and continued packing, while Dawn watched, a silent unforgiving sentinel.
It took him about an hour or so of soul searching before he reached a decision. It was two hours since he’d called Buffy’s house in Sunnydale and no one had called him back.

Darla was sleeping, her belly lumping up under his sheets. She was constantly uncomfortable, her body weighed down by more than the unlikely pregnancy. Guilt prayed on her mind, like rabid mice nibbling away on a round of cheese, the souled infant within infecting her.

He loomed over the bed, torn in two. He should stay, watching over Darla, guarding her and protecting the others from her. A part of him wanted to stay, wanted to be here for Darla, but an equal part of him was urging him to go to Sunnydale, to at least see Buffy, to prove to himself she was back in one piece.

Two hours now and still no word from Dawn. No call back from Buffy. His mind refused to believe that Wesley might be right, that Buffy wasn’t ready to see him, wasn’t ready to see anyone.

And Spike was there. No telling what kind of damage he was doing to the two girls.

He told himself that he wasn’t making this decision to go to Sunnydale now, because Spike was there, with two defenseless girls. He told himself he was going because he loved Buffy and needed to see her.

That’s what he told himself.

But he wasn’t entirely sure even he believed it.

Shackling Darla to the bed, Angel figured he could be in Sunnydale long before nine.

He eyed the girls warily. If he could, he’d take them both out, get them both away from the house while Willow packed up her things. He probably could get them out, if either of them gave an indication that they wanted away.

Neither did. In fact, sprawled on the couch as they were, neither one looked inclined to move. Shell shocked the pair was. He, on the other hand, was not.

After settling the two girls on the couch, Spike had stalked into the kitchen needing to do something. He’d grabbed a drink, but that hadn’t worked. He needed to hit something, to pound away and work out some of the anger, work off the aggression. There was no way he’d be able to contain his temper until it was time to patrol.

Shortly after moving in, he’d set up some equipment, hanging a punching bag, things he could bash at will without fear of the chip firing.

Stepping back into the living room, he took in the scene before him. Buffy was curled up on the couch, her feet tucked underneath her, talking softly to Tara, who was now sitting on the floor next to her.

Girl stuff. Grinning a bit, he waited until they noticed him watching them. “Goin’ downstairs.”
Buffy caught on immediately nodding her understanding. She smiled knowingly going right back to her conversation with Tara.

When Spike was gone, Tara said, “Buffy, what’s he doing?”

She laughed a bit, saying, “He’s gonna beat on the bag for a bit. Work out a couple of things.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I guess.”

“He’s worried about us.” Buffy smiled again, seeing the confusion in the other girl’s eyes. “Doesn’t like to see either of us upset.”

“I think you mean you.” Tara was shaking her head, disagreeing with Buffy’s words.

“Nope. I mean us. He’ll probably never tell you this and would be all denial guy if you asked him, but he likes you.” At Tara’s disbelieving look, Buffy continued, “Oh, yeah, too late to get out now. You belong to William the Bloody, you’re one of his.”

Her eyes were twinkling so Tara at first thought Buffy was just teasing her, though when she looked closer she realized that Buffy wasn’t teasing her at all, she was just reacting to her own expression.

“Is that a good thing?” She couldn’t help herself.

“Well, it’s a thing.” Buffy was laughing now.

It was a good sound, Tara realized. Something that had been sadly lacking in the house for a long time.

At least now it wasn’t tinged with tears.

************************************************************************

Giles was sitting in his office at the shop trying to ignore the ranting that was currently being conducted in the main area and it was proving difficult at best. Anya was typically unsympathetic, alternating between telling Xander to be quiet because he was going to drive away customers and then making snide remarks that went right over the boy’s head.

While he’d hoped for something different, Giles was pragmatic enough to realize that everything had gone wrong after he’d left the house. He was tempted to call, but had no doubts that the situation there was even more fraught with tension than the one here. Despite his inclination to stay out of their personal lives, he found himself increasingly acting as a surrogate father to nearly all of them, which was disconcerting. Giles never imagined he’d be the father of seven. Not that Spike really needed a father figure. Or Anya. But sometimes the others... Giles sighed, realizing that, by the sound of Xander’s voice, he needed to either quiet the boy down or make him leave.

“I just don’t understand how Buffy would make Willow leave. It’s got to be Spike’s influence. He’s going to keep us all away from her and then he’s going to... do stuff.” Xander was sitting at the table, while Anya was dusting around him. Neither one noticed his approach.

“Xander. Spike isn’t going to hurt Buffy.” Anya moved about the shop, fixing things, straightening
up before the evening rush.

“How do we know that, Ahn? We can’t trust him. He’s a vampire. Vampire equals non-trusty.” It was so very clear and black and white to Xander.

“I’ve met some vampires that were very trustworthy. In fact, some of them actually keep . . . ”

Xander cut her off, “Not the point. This is Spike we’re talking about. Spike who tried to kill us.’ Anya was shaking her head, “Spike never tried to kill me.”

Giles spoke up, unwilling to let this go further, “You are forgetting Glory and everything he’s done this past summer.”

Both of them looked at him, Anya welcoming his interruption, while Xander’s expression narrowed on the older man. “How can you defend him? He’s a vampire. Aren’t you like sworn to remove them from existence?”

“I’m sworn to help the Slayer and any assistance I receive on behalf of the Slayer is welcome. From wherever it comes.” Giles moved further into the research area, reaching for a cup and setting the automatic teapot to boil. “It’s not the first time a Watcher has accepted assistance from an unconventional ally. It isn’t even the first time I’ve done so.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that it’s Spike.” Xander was being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn.

“And you are blaming Spike for what now?” Giles wanted to bring this to a conclusion, end Xander’s diatribe.

“Willow has to move out.” His tone and expression were both petulant.

“This is Spike’s fault how?” Giles knew changing Xander’s opinion of Spike was going to be probably the single most difficult task of his life.

“Because . . . he’s Spike. It’s got to be his fault.” The petulance was wearing very thin.

Anya caught Giles’ eye and rolled her own eyes at Xander’s childish insistence on blaming Spike.

“Has it occurred to you that perhaps this has nothing to do with Spike at all? And that this is mostly between Willow and Tara?”

Xander gaped at Giles. “Why would you say that?”

Anya’s voice was carefully modulated. “Willow’s using magic without worrying about the consequences. She’s not listening to anyone else. She’s playing with fire and she just doesn’t understand what she’s unleashed.”

Seeing that everything she’d just said went completely over her boyfriend’s head, Anya broke it down again. “She hurt people, Xander. Stole something from Tara and Dawn.”

Xander thought for a minute, but his natural reluctance to distrust others surfaced. “How do we know that? I mean, Tara’s the one that keeps saying that. Dawnie doesn’t.”

“Dawn isn’t even talking to Willow.” Anya tossed that out over her shoulder.
“Oh.” There was nothing he could say to that. “Well okay. So why does Tara get to stay? She’s the one doing the breaking up. Maybe she should leave.”

Knowing what he did, Giles couldn’t let that go without comment. “Tara has no place else to go. No dorm rooms and no place else, Willow has a family she can go back to. Tara has none.”

He neglected to add that Buffy had all but insisted Tara stay, with the only alternative that the girls take separate bedrooms. Apparently that compromise hadn’t worked.

It was clear Xander hadn’t thought of that and his opened mouth indicated as much. “Didn’t think of that.”

Sharing a look with Anya, Giles realized the same thought was in both their heads. Thinking and Xander were usually mutually exclusive things.

Tara had gone upstairs a little while ago, needing to relieve a headache that had sprung on her unexpectedly, so she was left to her own devices. She could hear the occasional noise from upstairs as Willow piled up boxes by the stairs and a thud beneath her when Spike gave a particularly good hit. Buffy didn’t feel like moving from the couch, but she also didn’t feel like feeling guilty if she didn’t go up to help Willow.

Instead she followed her feet. And obviously her feet missed Spike because that’s where they were leading the rest of her body. Silly feet. How could we miss Spike – he’s always around, doesn’t give us a chance to miss him. As quietly as she could, Buffy slipped down the basement stairs to watch him.

His movements were fluid, controlled, his sleek muscles flexing beneath marble white skin. Not bothering with taping up his hands or any other preparation, Spike had just started pounding away at the bag. Now, over an hour later, his movements hadn’t slowed or faltered or changed in rhythm. His proximity set off two sets of bells within her, the first was master vamp and the other was pure Spike.

She’d know him anywhere. In a dark hole at the ends of the earth, all senses stripped from her, she had a feeling she would know if he was near.

And she knew he’d know her too.

Just like he’d known she was here the minute she opened the basement door. He’d kept on though, working out his frustrations. He paused a moment, adjusting for the bag’s return swing and she finally spoke.

“Save some of that for patrol.”

“I’ll be fine, jus’ havin’ a go.”

“It’s been a day.” Her sigh was deep and heartfelt.
“That it has love, an’ hours left.”

He didn’t need to be facing her to see the grimace. Deciding that now was as good a time as any, Spike grabbed the bag and said, “Need to talk to you, Buffy.”

“Gonna look at me while you do it?”

With a slight grin, Spike turned, saying, “Could look at you all day, kitten.”

She gave him a delightful blush as a reward.

“Giles had more news.”

“Figured that. What’s the 411?”

Shaking his head at her deliberate misuse of English, Spike stood in front of her as she sat on the stairs. “Darla’s back in L.A.”

“No . . . oh god. Is everyone okay? Is Wes?” She was immediately on edge.

“Yeah. They’re all in one piece. Darla’s not in any condition to be torturing innocents.”

Spike heaved a sigh, drawing one of her hands up to his mouth for a quick kiss. “Seems Darla’s got a bit of a condition.”

“Is it fatal? Coz that would be of the good.”

“Dunno, love, not sure how this is goin’ t’ end. She’s pregnant. And before you ask, it’s his.”

“What? I thought . . . Spike, what’s going on?” She was confused and the confusion showed clearly on her face.

Threading their fingers together, Spike launched into the tale as best he could, leaving out nothing. Getting to the part about Angel’s theory, Spike wouldn’t look at her. This affected them both, if Angel’s theory had any weight at all, this was something they had to at least be aware of.

Buffy watched him throughout, knew when he was fighting his own nature to try and lie to her, to try and hide the truth. She was very aware of everything, the hard wood beneath her, the gentle swing of the punching bag, the smell of bleach and unwashed socks, her own heartbeat echoing in her ear. And him.

Standing over her, studiously avoiding her upturned gaze, Spike’s whole body was taut with tension. Her eyes traced his averted face, idly noting his clenched jaw. Dark lashes covered his crystal eyes and Buffy got a sudden vision of a baby’s face with his eyes. Her breathing hitched and her heart beat changed. Enough for him to notice, enough for him to steal a glance at her features, to tighten his grip on her hand. Mistaking the changes as triggering a different reaction, Spike was surprised when instead of tears he found an enigmatic look on her face and a faraway stare in her eyes.

“Buffy?”

“Angel got Darla pregnant.” She stopped, aware of just how strange that sounded. “After she came
“Yeah, sounds a bit dicey.”

“And I thought weird stuff only happened on the hellmouth.” Buffy’s words were laced with sarcasm.

“You’re not upset?” Spike’s voice was laced with perplexity.

“Should I be? Angel isn’t part of my life anymore. Hasn’t been for two years. Aside from the creepy factor, it’s no big thing.”

He peered at her, trying to sense any change in her that may have indicated she wasn’t being completely truthful. Far as he could sense she was fine.

“What ‘bout the other?”

“Angel’s theory?” Buffy looked straight at him, almost daring him to look away. “Is it a bad theory?”

“Opposite. Has the ring of truth.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Sometimes he just didn’t understand this girl. He loved her deeply but he just couldn’t figure her out.

“I don’t think so, but you need to know.”

Buffy tugged him closer, whispering, “I don’t either.”

49. The girl from all those songs

A love that dies has never lived.
    Franz Grillparzer, Notebooks and Diaries

The girl from all those songs
who made everything feel right
she came in like an angel, into your lonely life
and filling your world with light
oh and everybody told you “you’re oh so lucky”
    Genesis, Evidence of Autumn

He was speechless. Gobsmacked. Buffy was sitting on the basement steps, her hand fist in his shirt, smiling up at him. Spike wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly or that he was understanding her completely.

“Buffy?”
Pulling him closer, she looked up at him, mischief in her eyes. “Yeah?”

“You hearin’ me?” Spike wasn’t exactly fighting her off or resisting, he just wanted to make sure she had heard him and understood.

“Loud and clear.” Their faces were inches apart and her warm breath blew across his lips.

His nostrils flared, catching her scent woven with traces of his own, and the need for her rose up in him like a big cat scenting his mate. His knees collapsed onto the riser below where she sat, her legs opening, brushing against his flanks. Spike tilted his head just watching her breath, a knowing smile playing across her lips. Her hand slid up around his neck, playing with the fine hairs at his nape, her touch burning against his skin.

“Buffy?” Her name rolled off his tongue, dark chocolate intertwined with the roughness of whiskey and leather, his fingers reaching out to brush against her cheek.

“Mmmm?” Was all she said, closing the gap between their mouths, her eyes lazily drifting closed. He held himself away, teasing them both, drawing out the moment.

His tongue reached across the distance, unable to resist tasting her, licking across her lips. Opening hers, Buffy smiled, breathing him in. Taking the smile for the invitation it was, his mouth invaded hers, slowly, gently but strongly without fear of rejection. Her breath caught in her throat as his hand drifted down her side, cupping her breast, running his fingers over the shielded surface. Pulling her close, Spike deepened the kiss, lifting her in his arms and staggering to his feet.

“Love you so much.” He whispered against her ear, his cool breath ruffling her hair. “Never leave you.”

Buffy tightened her arms around him, her heartbeat speeding up at his words, her head falling against his shoulder, just listening to the sound of his voice. Smiling against his skin, she breathed out, “I know.”

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Xander had finally left, taking off to go bowling and then pick up Willow and her hastily packed belongings. Giles was drinking a cup of strong Earl Grey, watching Anya as she filled out orders.

“Giles, we should think about expanding.” Checking their current stock of deadly herbs behind the counter, Anya quickly inventoried their supplies.

Fighting a smile at her efficiency, Giles asked “And why is that?”

“There’s clearly a market niche for our services and if we expand via the internet and mail order business, we’ll have minimal overhead and lots more money.”

“Mail order is very time consuming. One of us would spend an enormous amount of time daily just filling orders.” Giles found himself watching her carefully, noting, not for the first time either, that she was very perceptive. The others wrote her off as being blunt and single-minded in her pursuits, yet Giles found her candor refreshing, so long as it wasn’t at his expense. Her willingness to work hard was a definite asset.
“Well,” she said interrupting his musing, “we could hire someone just to do mail orders. This way I wouldn’t lose any valuable consumer interaction time.”

“Obviously you’ve thought this through. There are a few drawbacks though.” Anya turned to face him, her arms crossed in front of her, waiting for his next words. “We’d have to get a website running and we’d have to . . .”

She waved off his objections. “Already done. And before you ask, I didn’t use Willow. I got Jonathon to do it.”

“How?” He shook his head in near disbelief.

“I told him he owes us for saving his life all those times. And that I’d give him a discount on any purchases for one year.”

Raising an eyebrow, he waited for her to continue.

“It’s good business. Besides, it’s only a prototype, a test site. If we like it, he gets the discount. If not, he gets nothing.”

Creative blackmail. Giles was convinced she was a bloody financial genius. So far every single marketing ploy she’d implemented had made them money. He had no reason to doubt her now.

“All right. I’ll take a look at it. How many days do we have to test it before we agree?”

“How?”

She turned away when the overhead bell at the door rang. He watched her greet the incoming customers, an amused half smile on his features.

She really was a remarkable girl.

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Willow and Tara were both upstairs, although in separate rooms. Tara was currently napping in Dawn’s bed while Willow was still packing up her belongings. The remaining three were downstairs in the living room, the television on as background noise and the glass living room doors closed off to block the hallway. They ate in comfortable silence, Dawn sitting on the floor between them, two pizza boxes on the coffee table. She kept stealing Spike’s wings, giggling every time one disappeared into her mouth.

Buffy had watched them, laughing right along with her sister, whenever Spike growled at her.

This was fun.

Fun like it hadn’t been in a very long time. Since long before their mother got sick.

Buffy decided it was over far too soon because suddenly it was time for them to leave.

“Dawnie. We’re taking the cell phone. If anything happens, call and we’ll come right home.”
“You mean other than Xander being a jerk?” Her eyes darted between the two standing in the hallway.

“Yeah, other than that.” Buffy shot a glance at Spike.

“He’s not likely to get too bad ’s long as I’m not here. Should be fine, Platelet.” Spike pulled her hair, then play shoved her when she smacked him.

“He’s gonna say something stupid though.” Dawn made faces at Spike, trying to distract him.

“Well wouldn’t be him if he didn’t.”

They were out the door and long gone before Dawn realized he’d tied her hair in knots.

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When he drove into Sunnydale, it was just past eight thirty, the night sky was settling into full darkness. He headed straight for Restfield, parking as close as possible to the nearest entrance. The place was quiet, no one wandering about, no vampires or other creatures of the night out seeking prey. In fact, the only one on the premises was him.

Angel made his way slowly to the spot where they buried her, reluctant to view the evidence of her death once more. He’d spent the last two hours thinking about his conversation with Wesley, realizing reluctantly that perhaps he shouldn’t just knock on the door, announcing his uninvited presence.

The ground had been disturbed. There was evidence that something had happened here. He didn’t know the particulars, hadn’t bothered to get the full story from Wesley, or even find out if the Englishman even knew the whole truth. It didn’t matter. Angel’s temper began to simmer, believing somehow that Spike was at fault for all this. He couldn’t imagine anyone else daring enough to attempt something of this magnitude. Or quite as stupid.

Giles was still in Sunnydale. Still owned the Magic Shop. Angel made his way out of the cemetery, his stride covering the distance back to his car in mere moments. He had no illusions that Spike’s latest sins were going to set the Watcher against him.

He just wanted to be there to help take care of Spike.

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They walked into the shop, hand in hand, laughing like they hadn’t a care in the world. It was a sight that Giles hadn’t seen in a very long time. Probably, if he truly thought about it, he’d never seen such a glimmer in her eyes. They might be unconventional, even by hellmouth standards, but as a couple they made a striking pair.

“Hey, Giles.”

“Hello, Buffy. Spike” Motioning them both to the table, he spoke quietly so the few customers
wouldn’t overhear. “Everything all right?”

“We’re doing okay. Everything else? Not so much.” Buffy looked around, noticing that Anya had her hands full, saying “Willow’s all weepy and Tara’s, well, she’s doing okay, I think.”

“Glinda’s all right.” Spike nodded his agreement with Buffy. “So long as the whelp keeps his yap shut.”

“Little chance of that happening. He was rather vocal earlier. I take it nothing went well?”

“Well,” started Buffy with heavy inflection and drawing out the one word to sound like three, “I hadn’t planned on being outburst girl and . . . She lied to us right there about calling Angel.”

“Oh dear.” Giles took off his glasses, peering at the two of them. “And Tara asked her to leave?”

It was Spike who answered. “No, Niblet did it. Th’ other two were . . . Glinda told her after, yeah, but ’t was Niblet who said it first.”

“Dawnie said Willow’s going back to her parents for a bit.” Buffy shrugged. “I don’t know what’s happening, everything . . . When did stuff get so weird?”

She sat down in one of the chairs, looking up at the two men. “I don’t understand her anymore.”

Unfortunately, neither one of them had a good answer for her. “So not wanting to deal with this.” “I think you should, well, perhaps it’s for the best that she go to her parents for a while.” Giles wasn’t really sure how he felt about this turn of events. It would probably be safer all around for someone to keep a close eye on Willow and the easiest way to do that was to have her stay in Buffy’s house. On the other hand, given Willow’s actions of the past few weeks, and the message from the Huntsman, some distance might be better all around.

Changing the subject, Giles drew their attention to one of the books that was opened on the table. “I’ve found something of importance, regarding the Wild Hunt.”

“The who-hah?”

He could tell by the look on her face she was teasing him but even so, Giles fell for her ploy. “Really, Buffy, must you?”

His only answer was a soft giggle.

He was just about to show them something else, when the bell over the door rang. Glancing up automatically, Giles stiffened, moving to block their view of the entrant.

“Hello, Giles.”

Buffy froze then looked at Spike, who was sitting across from her, his movement stilled. Oh god, oh god, not this not now. Please, I’m dreaming this, this isn’t real. Buffy’s eyes closed, her hand automatically seeking Spike’s. She didn’t know how he did it, but he was round the table and at her side before her breathing returned to normal.

His voice was pitched low, so that only she could hear the words, though Giles was intensely aware of the shift behind him, and Spike leaned in close to her. “Kitten? It’s goin’ to be all right. I’m
She clutched at him, her fingers constricting around his, holding on tight. “Spike?”

“Right here, love.”

Buffy collapsed against him, her head dropping down to rest on his shoulder, her arms pulling them together.

“Angel.” Giles moved to shield them, blocking Angel’s view of the table.

Spike silently moved them into the corner, so they were further blocked by the display shelves. She was shaking in his arms, panting breaths heaving against his skin. “Hey, kitten, slow down . . . shhhh . . . I’m here.”

His voice was softer than a whisper, felt rather than heard. Buffy raised her head from his shoulder, her warm fingers sliding around his face, resting against his cheeks. Her forehead rested for an instant against his then she moved back fractionally. “Spike? Promise me . . .”

“Always, Buffy. Goin’ to stay always.”

Tears fell from her eyes only to be caught by his cool fingers. Her lip quivered as she drew in a steadying breath. His thumb brushed over her face, ending at her lips and she kissed it as he smoothed it over them.

“I love you,” he whispered, “always.”

They held still, lost in each other, while Giles spoke above them.

“Why are you in Sunnydale, Angel?”

Anya had drifted closer standing next to him while he faced the vampire.

“Willow called me. Told me Buffy was back.”

The girl at his side flinched although Giles had suspected this would happen sooner or later.

“I see.”

Angel had come no further into the shop than the steps, using the added height to intimidate. “How did he do it? Used black magic?”

“By he I assume you mean Spike?” Giles was going to enjoy blasting holes through Angel’s misconceptions. Sharing a glance with Anya, Giles smirked a bit. “It wasn’t Spike. Willow brought her back.”

“Willow?” That set him back momentarily, but Angel leapt right back into his assumptions. “So he got Willow to do his dirty work? Typical. I told you he couldn’t be trusted.”

Angel looked smug. At least until Anya spoke up.

“Hardly. Willow did this all on her own. Used Lethe’s Bramble on Tara and Dawn and, well, I
think the power’s going to her head.” Anya chirped that last bit conspiratorially, causing Giles’ smile to widen.

“What? Willow did all that?” Angel shook his head. “Are you sure Spike wasn’t involved in some way?”

Not once taking her eyes from Spike’s, Buffy spoke up. “Positive.”

“Buffy?” Angel’s voice held a thousand differing emotions and he fairly flew down the steps to circle around Giles and Anya. What he witnessed stopped him in his tracks.

She was there. Whole. Safe.

Kissing Spike.

50. Words like violence

Memories are just where you laid them
drag the waters ‘till the depths give up their dead
what did you expect to find?
was there something you left behind?
don’t you remember anything I said
when I said
don’t fall away, and leave me to myself
don’t fall away and leave love bleeding
in my hands, in my hands again
love lies bleeding

   Fuel, Hemorrhage from the album Something Like Human

There was nothing in the world that I ever wanted
more than to feel you deep in my heart
there was nothing in the world that I ever wanted
more than to never feel the breaking apart
all my pictures of you.
   The Cure, Pictures of you, from the album Disintegration

The turning point in the process of growing up
is when you discover the core of strength
within you that survives all hurt.
   Max Lerner, The Unfinished Country

He couldn’t be seeing what his eyes were looking at. There’s no possible way he was seeing this. This was not happening. Angel blinked, then looked at Giles, who wasn’t moving to separate the two. He blinked again hoping the vision would go away. Anya sighed a little, which drew Giles’ attention, then smiled wistfully.
Angel tried one more time. He cleared his throat and the two blondes broke apart reluctantly. Buffy’s head rested against Spike’s and even his ears didn’t hear the words murmured between the two. All he could hear was the low vibrations of Spike’s voice and Buffy’s answering murmur.

“Buffy?” He didn’t realize he’d spoken until the others looked at him.

Spike lifted his head away from Buffy’s, raising his eyes to meet Angel’s intense gaze. Neither man looked away. Anger was rolling off Angel in waves, both humans feeling it. Buffy turned around, holding onto Spike’s hand, all signs of her previous tears gone.

“Hello, Angel.”

“What the hell is going on?” His tone was snappish.

“Nice to see you too.” Buffy wasn’t in the mood for this, wasn’t ready for this confrontation at all, but apparently today was full of major badness. She offered nicely, “Sit down, Angel.”

“I’ll stand.” He shot back, not even waiting for her to finish speaking.

“Angel, please sit.” She tried again, this time sounding more weary than anything else.

“I’d rather stand.” His hands were fisted at his side, tension tightening his jaw.

“So you can be all looming guy?” Buffy paused, leaning back against Spike. “Please sit down.”

Spike kicked one of the chairs, pushing it away from the table in a belligerent invitation then dropped Buffy’s hand. “Sit, you bloody great git. Do as the girl asked.”

If anything, Spike’s actions had broken the other two from their inertia. Giles turned away to go lock the front door, while Anya hurried over to the last customers. Angel, however, wasn’t impressed.

“What are you doing, Spike?” He still hadn’t moved.

“Angel, please just sit down.” Buffy tried one last time, almost pleading with him.

He finally looked at her, and something in her eyes pierced his anger because he sat down, after pulling out a different chair from the one Spike had kicked.

“Thank you,” was all she said.

They sat in awkward silence for long minutes. Buffy was leaning against Spike, her eyes downcast, trying to avoid Angel’s pointed stare. She was very conscious of the fact there were complete strangers in the shop and her mind was desperately seeking and discarding different ways to avoid the coming confrontation. She knew there was going to be one. The moment Angel had walked in the door it had been a foregone conclusion. Why did he have to come? Why did Willow do this? What the heck am I gonna do now?

It was impossible not to feel the increasing tension in Spike’s body. He hadn’t taken a breath since she’d turned around to face Angel and she was suddenly desperate to make him understand she was scared and worried and upset and confused . . . but not about him. Shifting in her chair, her head resting against his upper arm, Buffy knew this wasn’t enough contact. Wriggling around, she
nudged his arm, bumping up against his hard biceps. Her fingers reached for his under the table, squeezing hard when she found his. For long seconds he didn’t move, but when she nudged him again, Spike took the hint. He leaned back, almost lounging in the chair, his left arm circling the back of Buffy’s chair. Her two hands were melded together around his right, Buffy clinging tightly, their legs pressed against each other from hip to knee. She was practically sitting in his lap.

Angel watched them, his expression growing more thunderous by the second. “Someone want to tell me what the hell is going on?” His tone was harsh, the words clipped and terse.

“Ease off, you great bloody jackass.” Spike’s voice was low and dangerous, almost growling.

“Tell me what is going on.” He very nearly barked out the words and Buffy was surprised to see a glint of gold in his eyes.

“Quit makin’ demands, peaches.” His actions hidden by Buffy, Spike moved his left hand, sliding it under her shirt, needing to touch her skin. She relaxed against him, an unconscious sigh of relief shuddering through her. “Ask nicely an’ we might tell ya.”

Angel clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth, laying a fisted hand on the table. Buffy imperceptibly shrank back against Spike. Giles came to stand beside the pair, lending his support, his eyes boring into Angel’s.

Caving in, Angel unclenched his jaw long enough to say, “Please.”

Buffy opened her mouth to start, but Giles’ voice sounded from above her, saving her the explanation.

He narrated it almost dispassionately, clinically, laying out only the bare facts. It was a marked contrast to the way they’d explained things to Wesley and those who were there for both encounters knew it.

Spike watched the imperceptible reactions displayed by Angel. Only someone who knew the vampire well would be able to see them and he’d spent nearly twenty years learning all the nuances of the Irish vampire’s moods. Angel was in a towering rage – the kind that only he used to incite – the kind only a good bloodletting would assuage.

Who that rage was directed at was anyone’s guess.

Which was why, despite his thumb running across Buffy’s back, Spike was poised for action.

A long silence filled the shop when Giles finished.

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Her boxes were all packed, waiting by the door for Xander to come and load them into his car. Everything she’d accumulated over the two years was in those boxes. Her life encased in cardboard. Willow stood in the kitchen, waiting . . . hoping Tara would come downstairs before she left, before it was too late.

She wanted to see her face once more, gaze into her blue eyes, hoping to find some trace of the love they’d shared still within her. But Tara wouldn’t come down, was still upstairs in Dawn’s room,
secluded away from Willow.

Willow was afraid to go upstairs to confront her – afraid of the rejection she was almost certain would happen. She hadn’t . . . Dawn had ignored her, refusing to even look in her direction after all her boxes were packed and piled up beside the front door. The teenager was watching television, flipping channels, pretending she was alone.

Xander was due any minute.

And Willow couldn’t stop the tears.

************************************************************************

“So Willow did all this on her own?” It wasn’t addressed to anyone in particular and Giles once again chose to answer.

“Yes. She waited until I was on my way back to England and Spike was out patrolling.”

“And Willow retrieved you from a hell dimension?” He paused, then, “That explains this,” motioning at the blond pair.

“Angel.” Buffy leaned forward, letting Spike’s hand go, dropping her hand to grasp his thigh.

“Stop it.”

“Well have you got any other explanation for what you’re doing?” He got up, no longer able to keep still. “This is . . . I didn’t leave so you could fall into the arms of . . . Spike?”

“In the room.” Spike’s voice was very dangerous.

Angel tried ignoring his statement, just like he’d been ignoring Spike’s presence since he’d arrived. Pacing around, Angel turned around to face Buffy.

“What are you doing? What is this?” The contempt in his tone was enough to penetrate even Anya’s usual denseness.

She was very conscious of Spike beside her. His body close, his irregular breathing wafting across her shoulder. Buffy wanted to be anywhere but here, having this conversation. His hand flexed against her back then let go. She tensed, knowing Spike was about to launch into a verbal attack, trying to come up with some way to divert it.

It came from the most unlikely source.

“Why does everyone think Buffy was in a hell dimension?” Anya was shaking her head, “She was probably stuck somewhere very boring, someplace heroes go, unless it was Valhalla.”

Smiling very brightly, Anya continued, “Well, she’s a hero, right, the Chosen One. It just is logical for her to go to well, some sort of reward.”

Rocking forward, she smiled wider, noticing the shared looks. “I’m right, aren’t I?”
“Yes.” Buffy shook her head in disbelief that Anya, of all people, would figure out something this important on her own. “It wasn’t a hell dimension.”

Spike’s hand slid back under her shirt, his fingers splayed across her warm skin. She leaned back resting against him. Angel narrowed his eyes, watching the two of them. “So what, you came back from Valhalla and just decided to take up with William?”

He said his name with such contempt that Buffy flinched. “Stop it, Angel.”

“No, Buffy, I don’t get this and I’m not going to stop.” Angel was leaning on the table, looming over the blond pair.

“Get over yourself, peaches, the girl obviously has.’ Spike’s posture was deceptively lazy.

Giles thought he was watching a bear trying to incite a panther into fighting over a particularly good kill, but the panther already had the prey. It was a fitting analogy, only he wasn’t entirely comfortable with thinking of Buffy as prey.

Squeezing his thigh, Buffy turned her head to share a look with Spike. Neither one spoke, just stared at each other, then Buffy leaned into him. He kissed her forehead and smiled grimly.

“Angel, come with me.” Buffy got up from the table, moved purposely toward the training room, not waiting for any acknowledgment from him.

Spike watched her go, watched Angel as he stood there stunned, a knowing smirk playing across his lips. Angel whirled around, following after Buffy.

The smirk disappeared and Spike’s voice sounded softly in the air. “Bloody fucking hell.”

**************************************************************************

She was standing in the middle of the training room, running her hands over the pommel horse, her back to the inner doorway. He stood watching her for a moment, unsure of what was about to happen, unsure what to say. Welcome back felt really inappropriate.

“I loved you so much you know. With everything I had, everything. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for you.” She paused, not looking at him. “I defied Giles, lied to him and everyone else for you – even after everything you did when you were Angelus.”

He must’ve made some noise, because she turned further away from him. “No. It’s my turn to say this. Let me say this first. I loved you . . . and I thought you loved me back.”

“But . . . I don’t know anymore.” She stopped moving, ducking her head down, studying the floor. “People in love don’t make decisions alone, they don’t hide from each other. They don’t treat . . . they don’t make the other person feel like something less than what they are.”

Angel took a step closer to her. “Buffy, I didn’t . . .”

“Oh, yes you did, Angel. You treated me like something you needed to protect – like a possession.
Like I wasn’t smart enough to make a decision without you.”

“You always made pronouncements or issued orders and expected me to just . . . go along with what you decided was best for us.”

“I made the right decisions.”

“You made easy decisions, Angel. They weren’t always the right ones.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Angel wasn’t understanding her.

“It was easy to walk away. Easy to run to L.A. Easy to give up being human to protect me.” This time she did look at him.

“How did you know about that? That was supposed to be erased from your memory.”

“See, making a decision you thought was best.” Pausing, she said, “I remembered a lot of things after I died. . . and even more when I came back.”

“Buffy, it as for the best, what I did that day.”

“Keep telling yourself that. You made that decision alone, just like when you decided to spy on me one Thanksgiving.”

“Buffy, I wasn’t spying, I was just trying to spare you. It was torture for me that day. I didn’t want to hurt you further by being there.”

“Another time you tried making a decision for me.” She shifted on her feet, prelude to some other movement, then thinking better of it, stood her ground.

“So you spared my feelings by hiding and stalking me? What was that? It hurt more to find out that you’d been here and didn’t want to see me.” She held up a hand to forestall his retort.

“That’s not love, Angel. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s not love.” Buffy folded her arms across her chest, craving the comfort of Spike’s arms, yet knowing she had to do this alone. “You never once asked me what I wanted, what I needed.”

“I was thinking about what was best for you.”

“You know what? Not impressed with other people thinking they know what’s best for me. It’s kinda my decision to be making.”

“And that includes deciding to be with Spike?”

“Funny thing about Spike. He doesn’t decide what’s best for me, he lets me figure it out on my own.” Buffy reflected on how Spike had gotten her to change her mind about telling Giles where she’d been. “And he isn’t always happy about my decisions, but he lets me make them.”

She waved a hand, “And so not the point.”

“It is the point, Buffy. You’re making a mistake. He’s not . . . what about the chip in his head? What happens when that goes haywire?” Angel couldn’t believe his ears.
“Not worried about that right now.” And she wasn’t. But she wouldn’t talk to Angel about the chip before talking to Giles or Spike. In fact, he was probably the last one she would talk to about Spike’s chip.

“This isn’t about Spike. This is about you and me, Angel.” Buffy moved a step away as Angel moved closer into the room.

“He’s a killer.”

“So are you. So am I.” Buffy stopped moving when he did.

“What we had, Angel, wasn’t real. Wasn’t love.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because, Angel, love doesn’t go away when you don’t see the other person, it doesn’t just stop. Love doesn’t die. Love stays . . . even when you’re gone. When there’s no hope of ever seeing that other person again. Love . . . takes care of the ones you care about . . . the ones you left behind. Love never leaves . . . and love is there when you come back against all odds.”

There were tears in her voice, matching the ones that sprang to her eyes. Angel looked at her, trying to figure out what she was talking about.

“What we had wasn’t love. You never loved me, Angel.”

“I did,” he paused, “I do, Buffy, I still do.”

“No, you don’t.” She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, fighting off the nonexistent chill. “Tell me something, Angel, would you have stayed for Dawn, to take care of her?”

“What?” He was surprised by her sudden change of subject.

“If the others hadn’t been around, if Spike hadn’t been here, would you have stayed in Sunnydale to take care of my sister after I died?”

“Buffy, I . . . L.A. . . . that’s my life. I couldn’t just abandon that.”

“Not even for my memory.” Buffy echoed Spike’s words. “No, of course you couldn’t.”

“That’s not love, Angel.”

“And what, you’re telling me that because Spike had no where else to go, that’s love?” Angel almost laughed, though Buffy’s expression stopped him.

“He could have gone anywhere, he is still a master vampire of the Aurelius line.” Buffy shot back at him, anger rising in her belly.

“Spike stayed because I asked him to, the night I died. Because he loves me and Dawn. Because he doesn’t know how not to love. He stayed and took care of Dawnie and patrolled and he even took care of my friends and he hates some of them. Spike did all of that because he loves me.”
The tears were openly sliding down her cheeks now, her shoulders shaking with emotion.

“It was Spike who rescued me that night – took care of me . . .” Her breath hitched, caught on a soft sob, “he’s been taking care of me since. That’s love, Angel. . .”

She smiled then, like sunshine breaking through clouds, the tears drying up. Her eyes focused on something behind him and before he turned around Angel knew it was Spike.

“Go back to LA, Angel – go back to Darla.”

He watched while Buffy crossed the room, walking toward Spike, an expression he’d never seen on her features.

51. The space between your heart and mine

Beloved, let your eyes half close, and your heart beat
over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast,
drowning love’s lonely hour in deep twilight of rest . .

William Butler Yeats, He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace

Peace and rest at length have come
all the day’s long toil is past,
and each heart is whispering, “home, home at last.”

Thomas Hood, Home at last.

He’d become so attuned to her in the short weeks since she’d returned, aware of her every mood, quickly learning what might cause her a problem. The return of the great foreheaded one was without a doubt something to set her off. Just the end of this whole damn day was enough to set her off and cause a backslide of enormous proportions. It was bad enough when they’d tried to get her to go shopping. This was bound to be twice as difficult. He paced around the shop, shooting glances at the closed training room door, every couple of moments. This was . . . god, what I wouldn’t give to be able to fight this battle for her. To tell the Irish git he could go back from whence he came.

But he couldn’t. Because there was a small part of him that feared she wouldn’t be able to do that. Wouldn’t be able to tell Angel he wasn’t wanted here in Sunnydale. That she didn’t love him anymore. That they were no longer a part of each other’s lives, except as memories.

And that part of him was also afraid that he would burst into the other room only to find the two of them snogging like teenagers.

Wouldn’t be the first time he’d found Angelus with his lady-love. But he thought this one might be the hardest of all to recover from.

Pacing around, he nearly walked into Giles, who was watching the doorway with almost as much concern. They’d been in there for a while and Spike could feel his own agitation growing. Before he realized it, he was at the door, leaning against it, straining to hear any sounds from within.
Nothing clear came through, only the sound of her voice. It was enough.

Spike opened the door slowly, to hear her saying, “It was Spike who rescued me that night, took care of me. . . .” He winced when the tears that he’d heard in her voice broke, a soft sob hitching in her throat, “He’s been taking care of me since. That’s love, Angel.”

He’d made no sound, made no move other than to barely open the door, though when the last words crossed her lips, he drifted inside the doorway, leaning back against the wall, just watching her. Buffy sensed his entrance, shifting her head to look at him, smiling at him through her tears and he stopped breathing just to watch her walk toward him. Spike almost didn’t hear the last thing she said to Angel, only catching the end of it, which sounded suspiciously like, “Go back to Darla.”

Because suddenly she was in his arms, her face buried against his neck, holding on tightly.

The last of the boxes was loaded; every trip, beyond the first one, conducted in silence. When he’d first arrived, Xander had hugged Willow for long moments, letting her sob onto his shoulder. Dawn had barely returned Xander’s greeting, smiled at him once, her attention immediately refocused on the television.

Willow was standing in the hallway, staring at nothing, praying for Tara to come down the stairs. Xander stood in the doorway, watching her. “C’mon, Will.”

He tugged on her arm, pulling her outside, drawing her away from the stairs. “Wait right here, I’ll be right back.”

Xander walked in the door, closing it firmly behind him. “Dawn, where’s Buffy?”

Without looking at him, she replied, “Out patrolling.”

“This isn’t right, Dawn. Letting Willow leave . . . letting Spike throw her out.”

“What are you talking about?” Dawn finally looked up at him. “Spike had nothing to do with this.”

“He probably rigged the whole thing to separate you from the rest of us.”

“Xander, are you deranged? Spike never even said a word to Willow. I’m the one who told her she had to leave.”

“No. Dawnie, why would you?” Xander was completely confused now.

“Willow’s off the deep end, Xander.” She was losing her patience, not that she’d had much to begin with, especially regarding this situation.

“How can you say that?” He moved closer into the living room, trying to keep her attention.

“Because it’s true. She’s like so not herself. Doing freaky magic things.” Dawn got up, moving away from Xander toward the kitchen. She really didn’t want to be having this conversation with him.
“That’s not freaky – she’s not hurting anyone.” Xander parroted with what Willow had kept on insisting.

“Gee, then Tara and I don’t count. Thanks, Xander.” The sarcasm was dripping from her tone, impossible for even him to miss.

“Oh c’mon, Dawnie, she did that to rescue Buffy from hell.” He kept following her as she moved about the living room.

“Yeah, sure she did. Only Buffy wasn’t in a hell dimension. Willow kind of lied about that.”

“What?” He was shocked.

“Buffy was in heaven, Xander. Willow pulled her out of heaven.”

“She’s also been lying to us.” Tara’s voice preceded her down the stairs. “She called Angel and lied about it.”

“How do you know that?” Xander cut her off, feeling defensive.

“Because Angel called here earlier and left a message. He said Willow had called him.”

Making her way down the steps, Tara stopped on the last riser. “I don’t trust her anymore, Xander, and maybe if she hadn’t lied to our faces about telling Angel, we . . . well, Buffy might’ve let us both stay, but she did.”

Tara rested her arm on the newel post, watching Xander for signs of comprehension. At the time Willow had proposed calling Angel, Xander had thought it was a good idea. But now he wasn’t so sure.

“So what happens now?” Xander’s head was reeling from all the information.

“We go back to everyday stuff, Xander. We try to pick up the pieces.” Tara shrugged, not really sure where they were going, or what was in store, only knowing this was a sort of ending.

There was a noise at the front door and Dawn said, “Take Willow home.”

He held her for long endless minutes, ignoring the third presence in the room. Angel wasn’t important now Buffy was. Spike had no idea what had been said beyond the little bit at the end. Right now that was enough.

The tears had dried up but she was still shaking. Buffy had dug her fingers into his sides, her nose butting his sternum. One of his hands held her tight around the waist, while the other stroked her, running over her hair and back. Neither one of them spoke, it wasn’t like they needed words anyway. Her face was hot, the warmth leeching through to his skin, tears and snot wetting the cotton fabric of his tee shirt. Spike leaned back against the wall, his shoulders resting against the brick. Buffy sighed against him, her breath warming him.

“Love you, kitten,” he murmured into her hair, feeling her smile. The shaking increased, her fingers
digging in hard, the tremors rippling throughout her body. Suddenly she sagged against him, letting it all go. Spike held on, whispering against her, wishing he could just whisk her out of here. She needed to be home, tucked into her own bed, away from the stress of the day.

It had been a hellacious day, even though it had started out so promising. Spike had no idea what in all hell had gone wrong but something had. Buffy slumped against him, her body molded to his, utterly spent. His attention was all for her and he didn’t even notice when Angel left the training room.

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Giles was watching the door, straining his ears to hear what was going on behind that closed door. Spike had gone in about ten minutes prior and there had been nothing since. No noises. No shouting. Giles was hoping it was a good sign. If something were going on with Buffy and Angel, no doubt Spike would have stormed out, leaving the pair alone. He’d been anticipating some sort of physical violence between the two vampires, more than half expecting it, afraid Buffy would be caught in the middle. The poor girl was already between the two of them, although Giles had a suspicion this was just another battle in their long rivalry.

Not knowing how this was going to end, Giles watched the doorway, failing to realize Anya had come to stand beside him.

“I hope she picks Spike.” Anya whispered as only she could. “I’m not sure I like Angel. He’s too broody for good orgasms.”

Giles suppressed the grin that was threatening, waiting with anticipation for what might next pop out of her mouth.

“Spike’s much more deserving of Buffy orgasms.” Pausing, she cocked her head to the side, continuing, “He’s much better looking also.”

Looking down at her, Giles bit back his laughter at her completely inappropriate yet somehow logical remarks, commenting dryly, “I’m not sure I share your appreciation for Spike’s obvious charms.”

“Oh,” she chirped.

He smiled at her and she smiled back.

Neither one was really paying attention then, when the training room door opened and Angel walked out.

The big vampire stopped, watching the two of them, noting how close they were standing. He thought the girl was Xander’s, but maybe this wasn’t Anya. He didn’t know her on sight so he couldn’t be certain. And it wasn’t like he really cared. Angel walked over to the table bypassing the pair who were now staring at him. The rage he’d felt earlier was now a simmering heat in his veins, lending false warmth to his muscles, directed solely at Drusilla’s childe. At the moment he wanted to disavow all ties with the Englishman almost as much as he wanted to sever the bastard’s neck. There was nothing right with any of this. His mind was reeling from all that had happened just now.

Rage had started upon speaking with Willow, growing stronger with the time spent driving to
Sunnydale. Actually seeing Buffy’s disturbed grave had set match to smoldering ashes, then seeing her with Spike had just thrown gasoline on the blaze.

Angel was not the forgiving sort. His anger was raging with no clear target. Willow... what arrogance for a little girl to attempt a retrieval of, no, it was really a resurrection, and how dare she? What was her purpose in calling him? Did she just assume he would swoop in and eliminate Spike? He disliked being manipulated into getting rid of someone Willow considered a threat. His anger with Spike needed little or no outside help. That was something so old, Angel wasn’t sure that anything would change it, not even Buffy’s impassioned speech about Spike and love.

Angel wanted to break things. Spike and love were just... Angel knew he was capable of love, he couldn’t fool himself about that, but he doubted Spike truly loved Buffy, not the way he did. Buffy was his ideal, she was perfection, she was his. How dare William, that pathetic excuse, that simpering fool presume to love, to touch his girl.

Buffy belonged to him.

“Kitten?” Spike murmured into her forehead, his lips against her skin. “You wanna go home?”

Her eyes drifted closed lazily, nuzzling into his kiss, “Yeah. Can we go?”

“All you want, Buffy.” Spike shifted away from the wall, his hand cupping her butt, walking her backward.

Her arms slid around his waist anchoring herself to his solid presence. She was feeling insubstantial again, fragile, like her skin was stretched too thin and there was nothing protecting her. Spike traced a finger over her face, almost lighter than air, but it was enough to warm her, enough to break through the bubble surrounding her.

Closed eyes finally opened, lifting tortured hazel orbs to search his features. Tilting her head up gently, Spike kissed her forehead and both her eyes. Whisper soft his thumb stroked her lips crosswise, followed by his own lips. “All right then, love. Time to go.”

Ducking her head against his arm, Buffy nodded, grabbing his hand and holding on tightly. With Spike in the lead, they left the training room, encountering Giles wiping his glasses.

His unspoken signal drew Spike’s attention to where Angel stood by the table. The big vampire growled, seeing the pair of them hand in hand, Buffy almost hidden behind Spike. She clenched his hand, her other circling his upper arm, using him as protection. Angel growled again and Spike raised an eyebrow. “Thought Buffy told you to go back to LA?”

“She’s not thinking clearly. I think you need to go.” Angel ground out the words, taking a step forward trying to gain some advantage.

Spike stood his ground. Glancing sideways once, he caught sight of the look on Buffy’s face. Sensing his eyes on her, Buffy looked up at him and smiled softly. His eyebrow raised in question and was rewarded with Buffy’s answer. Whispering against his arm, Buffy knew only he would understand her next words and she said them deliberately so he would know exactly what she meant.
“Not just crumbs.”

It only took half a second. The light in his eyes burned incandescently, darkening at first, then lightening to ice. A thousand different emotions shimmered in shades of blue, causing her golden green to sparkle in answer.

“Love you, Buffy.” He mouthed at her.

“I know . . . I . . .” but before she could say anything else, he dipped his head down and stole a kiss.

Turning to face Angel, Spike said, “Don’t believe Buffy’s not thinkin’ clearly. Just seems you aren’t happy with the train of her thoughts.”

Angel stepped closer. “When she comes to her senses, she’ll shut you out. I only hope I’m there when she does it.”

“Aren’t we sore, Peaches.” Spike smirked, knowing it would set him off. “Too bad Buffy’s not a toy. Stop treatin’ the girl like she’s your possession.”

The Irish vampire started forward again only to be held up by the sound of Buffy’s voice as she stepped up to Spike’s side. “Angel. I told you to go back to LA. Don’t come back unless you get an invitation.”

“Buffy, he’s using you. He’ll turn on you.”

Spike snorted his annoyance. “Could’ve done that any time if I wanted, you bog-trottin’ paddy. Why in all hell would I turn on Buffy?”

“You have no soul, Spike, the only thing holding you back is the chip.” Angel grinned. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

“The only thing holdin’ me back is me, Peaches. Chip doesn’t define me any more than the soul does you. And,” he continued, “stop actin’ so high and mighty, you nit, not like you went out and earned the bloody thing. Yours is a curse.”

Advancing on the bigger vampire, Spike’s temper started getting the better of him. “I know the difference between right an’ wrong, you wanker. Jus’ don’t care either way. That’s the difference between us – you never could figure out what was wrong.” Thinking for a minute, Spike kept on speaking, “Or worse, any way that wasn’t yours was wrong. Your way or no way. Get over yourself.”

He stood his ground, not intimidated by Angel’s belligerent stance at all. Spike was sure of one thing, he wasn’t leaving this place his tail tucked between his legs, cowed by Angelus. He’d not bowed before him over a hundred and twenty years ago as a fledgling, though he’d gotten beaten for it, and he’d be damned further if he was going to kowtow to him now. Not this time. Not with this woman.

Angel flexed his fists, visibly straining his hands to keep them by his side, trying hard not to take a swing at Spike. The strain was beginning to tell. His jaw was clenched and his eyes flickered between murky brown and amber. Spike, on the other hand, was loose-limbed and relaxed. Buffy’s whispered words had sent hope zinging through his veins, coupled with his own inner strength and Spike was not going to backdown.
Giles aligned himself opposite Angel, within short distance of his office where he kept additional weapons. The physical confrontation he’d imagined appeared imminent.

Angel caught Giles’ movement out of the corner of his eye. “Don’t tell me you’re still buying his line of crap. I would’ve thought you would see reason.”

“Actually, I have.” Throwing a glance at Spike, Giles smiled. “Seen sense that is. Can’t imagine why I trusted you in the first place. Spike’s earned my trust, more than once.”

Staring at Giles, Buffy’s smile was tinged with almost happy tears. To tell her he trusted Spike when no one else was around was a big step. To voice it out loud, in front of Spike – Buffy squeezed his hand, getting a return and a second, firmer pull toward his body.

Angel snorted in disbelief. “You can’t trust him. The minute you let down your guards he’ll strike.”

“Not bloody likely. Not my style ‘t all, more yours.” Spike rocked forward, mischief lightening his features. “Need to go check on the mistress and the sprog.”

“What? How did you know about that?” Angel’s disbelief at being called out over Darla and his child was a masterful distraction on Spike’s part.

“Not so high an’ mighty now, are you?” Pointing to the door, Spike said, “Go on, ya great looby. Don’t let it hit ya on your way out.”

Angel didn’t move, continuing to glare at the blond. Spike, growing bored instead of angry, stared back. *Stupid bloody ox. Can’t an’ won’t hear the truth when it’s written on the wall.*

The two kept staring at each other until Buffy threw up her hands in exasperation. “Augh,” looking from one to the other, she said, “Enough. Angel. Leave. Go away. Go back to L.A.”

Tapping Spike on the shoulder she nagged playfully. “You promised to take me home.”

As he turned to look at her, that bottom lip snuck out to tease him and he was lost.

“All right, kitten, let’s go.”

And before Angel could make a further dire prediction or pronouncement, the pair was out the door, completely ignoring his presence.

The titular head of the line of Aurelius was speechless, floored by the dismissal. She’d chosen Spike – over him.

Staring at nothing for a few moments, Angel focused his attention on Giles. “You’ll regret this, when he turns on her, when the chip stops working.”

“I sincerely doubt that.” Giles watched the broad shoulders hunch a bit at his words, noting the grimace on the other’s face and, as he pushed open the door, said, “Goodbye, Angel.”

52. *In her you’ll find sanctuary*
And the world and the world
the fire in your eyes
the world拖s me down
keeps me alive
and the fire in your eyes
keeps me alive
I’m sure in her you’ll find
sanctuary
I’m sure in her you’ll find
sanctuary
The Cult, (She sells) Sanctuary

At the close of day
the sunset cloaks
these words in shadowplay
here and now, long and loud
my heart cries out
and the naked bone of an echo says
don’t walk away
Reach out your hands
I’m just a step away
how in the world
Can I wish for this?
Never to be torn apart
close to you
til the last beat
of my heart.
How in the world
Can I wish for this?
Never to be torn apart
til the last beat
til the last fleeting beat
of my heart
Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Last Beat of my Heart, from the album Peepshow

Tara had gone back upstairs after Xander and Willow left, telling Dawn that she wasn’t hungry and
that if she wanted anything she’d fix it herself later.

Dawn watched her go, worry written on her face. Tara, along with Spike, occupied a very important
place in her life, all unexpectedly. They had become, in the time that Buffy was gone, the two
people she could rely upon. Tara had helped her, and it was nearly as good as having her mom,
probably doing a way better job than Buffy could’ve. She’d done stuff for her that a friend shouldn’t
have to do – like help her with her first period. And other stuff, like making sure the everyday things
were taken care of – food – laundry, hell Tara had paid the bills, using a lot of Spike’s money, but
she still paid them.
Stricken by a sudden thought, Dawn pounded up the stairs after the other girl.

“Tara?” Tapping on her bedroom door, Dawn wasn’t surprised when she heard Tara crying. “Tara?”

The door opened and she watched while Tara walked to the bed, her back to Dawn. “What, Dawnie?”

“I just wanted to say something. Is this a bad time?” Oh god, what a dorky thing to say.

“What is it?” Tara slumped on the bed, turning watery eyes on the younger girl.

“Thank you. For everything you did for me, all summer.” Dawn sat down on the bed at Tara’s feet. Looking earnestly at the older girl, Dawn continued, “I had to tell you, because it’s important for you to know.”

Tara was surprised. “Dawnie . . th. . . that’s so sweet.”

“Just wanted you to know. You’re important to me. Without you, dunno what would’ve happened.”

Fresh tears, this time not of grief, filled Tara’s eyes. “Oh, sweetie.”

Her arms opened and the younger girl just settled against her. Dawn’s murmured, “Plus I think you needed to know how much you mean to me,” went straight to Tara’s battered heart.

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Going backwards, that’s what she was doing. Moving nowhere. Her parents weren’t home, they didn’t know she was coming back, not that either of them would notice. She’d left a message on her mother’s cell phone earlier, after she’d called Xander, just to let her know that her only daughter was returning home. He’d offered her the spare bedroom in his apartment, but she’d said no. Willow couldn’t imagine sharing living space with Anya. She wasn’t all that comfortable around the ex-demon even with their sort of bonding over Olaf.

Truth was, she still didn’t like Xander’s girlfriend. Could only take her in small doses. So she’d refused Xander’s offer.

Which was how she ended up back where she started, lost and alone, no one at home and on the outside again.

Still with the not understanding why. She’d thought Buffy was in a hell dimension – it’s the only thing that made sense, but Buffy said that’s not where she was. How could she have made that big a mistake?

Had she?

Tara seemed to believe her, and except for the Spike situation, which was still ooky and bad, Buffy’s admission had a ring of truth.

What had she done?
They stood there stunned, as the door shut behind Angel, neither one sure what had just happened. Anya twitched a bit when some of the smaller display items teetered on the shelves from the force of the slamming door. The roll-down gate rattled ominously then stilled.

“Do you think he’s going to follow them?” Anya wrung her hands. “That wouldn’t be good if he did that.”

Giles ventured a guess. “I don’t think he will.” Replacing his glasses back on his head, he wandered to the register in preparation for counting out the day’s receipts, when Anya realized what he was doing.

“No. Giles, that’s my responsibility. I count the money. You deal with the rest of it.” Reaching out to shoo him away, she brushed her hand against his, feeling a jolt of energy go through her. Looking up at him quizzically, Anya fought the urge to blurt out her reaction, wondering if he’d felt it also. Giles stepped back from the register, moving away from her, suddenly aware they were in the shop, alone, after hours.

Brushing aside his reaction to her presence as nothing more than the over-charged atmosphere of the last few hours, Giles moved through the glass bead curtain to the front door, his hand still tingling from her touch.

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“Anya?” His voice sounded over his shoulder. “Do you think perhaps Buffy or Spike might be interested in filling the mail orders?”

Ever since she’d mentioned it the other day, it had been in the back of his mind to broach the subject with her, get a feel for what she thought about it. He thought it felt right, offering the position to either one of them, rather than seek outside help. The job would go a long way to paying some of the bills, though between them all they’d managed to keep the house afloat, and give Buffy more time to acclimate back into the world.

With his back to her, he sensed the increased intensity of her gaze on him, suddenly attuned to her attention. As he reached the front window, releasing the roll-down gate, Giles asked her again, “Well, what do you think?”

She was watching him, a calculating gleam in her eyes, with a mixture of emotions on her features. Anya thought about it for a moment then reached an internal decision, saying, “It’s not an entirely bad idea. I’m not sure Buffy’s up to working and really, do we know what kind of work history Spike has? Is either one of them competent enough to handle the business?”

Giles gaped at her. “You are aware you are talking about Spike?”

Nodding her head, Anya countered with, “I do know it’s Spike. There’s no denying his appeal, but I mean, really Giles, I don’t know if he knows how to coordinate orders like that.” To Anya, nothing was more important than customer satisfaction, because customer satisfaction meant increased sales and increased sales meant more money. It was a win-win situation. She wasn’t going to sacrifice any of her profits for any reason.
“Do you realize that Spike is probably the best educated person you’ve ever met?” It pained him to admit that, yet Giles had to give the vampire credit, despite his own reluctance to admit to Spike he was the smarter of the two of them.

Lifting her head up from counting the day’s totals, Anya stared at Giles. He’d just admitted Spike was intelligent. “Well, I’ve always known he was smart.”

Making his way back toward the counter, Giles shook his head in denial. “I don’t think you realize what I’m saying Anya. I think the last person we need to worry about being able to fill orders is Spike.”

Anya put the money down then reached across the counter to touch Giles’ hand. This time, neither one of them could deny the spark, because at the same instant, they both looked up at each other. She forgot completely what she was about to say and watched transfixed as Giles fiddled with his glasses. Keeping uncharacteristically silent, Anya went back to counting, her eyes downcast and tried vainly to stop the blush spreading across her cheeks.

*************************************************************************

They were both quiet on the walk home from the Magic Box, each immersed in their own thoughts. Spike had no illusions that this was completely resolved, especially given Angel’s single-mindedness. The only positive was Darla’s condition because there was enough turmoil there to keep the bloody poofter occupied and keep his attention away from them. But they’d weathered this storm, come through the first hurdles, and it amazed him.

Which was more than he’d ever hoped for. He’d been prepared for her rejection once she found her bearings, though so far she hadn’t cut him loose as she gained her footing. If anything she’d opened up more.

They weren’t hiding in the shadows, pretending they weren’t together, pretending there was nothing real between them. The opposite was true. They were openly living together. A couple. Giles approved. Tara approved. Dawn – well, his Niblet was happier than a piglet. And Buffy had just given her first love the boot but good.

He gazed at her for a moment, catching sight of her profile. She wasn’t classically beautiful, but gods above how the thought of her affected him. He stopped in his tracks just to watch her.

The enormity of what she’d just done hit him with the force of a drowning wave. She’d just told the love of her life – and some vague memory of a half-drunken impassioned speech he’d made to her once about it flashed in his head – she’d told the love of her life to leave. And now, here she was walking home, to a home they shared together, beside him.

And obviously not thinking he was the second prize.

He stared at her back, dumbfounded.

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God, so needed out of there, was her first coherent thought away from the Magic Box. Away from
Watching Willow and Tara fall apart had forced Buffy into some serious thinking, about control and power and what it meant to be a couple – Spike’s actions since her return doing the same thing. And she’d realized some hard truths. She may have loved Angel, but he hadn’t loved her back, not the way she needed, anyway.

She’d been blind, unable to see what was in front of her the whole time. Angel had controlled and manipulated and made decisions about their life together, never once taking into consideration her wants or needs or desires and he’d completely ignored her dreams.

Whatever that emotion was – it sure as hell wasn’t love.

Buffy was pretty sure she knew what love was now. Like she’d just said to Angel, love was doing all the things Spike had been doing, taking care of the people she’d left behind, all of her loved ones. She’d trusted him with everything that was important to her – with Dawn. And he’d kept them all safe – even Xander.

She was pretty sure that alone was love.

Buffy stifled a teary laugh.

To think she’d once told him he was beneath her. God, what a bitch she’d been to him. Still he’d done it all for her.

For her memory.

She’d almost blurted it out – in front of Angel, what she was beginning to feel, what she was going to stop denying. Instead, almost as if he’d known what she was about to say and wanted it said differently, he’d stolen a kiss.

Buffy looked up at him – and realized he wasn’t there, walking beside her. Whirling around, slightly panicked, she turned about and caught him watching her, a pensive look on his face.

“Spike?” Tilting her head, she watched him as he shook off his reverie.

“Yeah?” He tried for the swagger, but it faltered after a moment, his awe too great to overcome.

“What’s wrong?” Her smile was a bit tentative almost as if she were afraid of his answer.

“Nothin’s wrong love. Jus’ . . .” Struggling to find the right words, he settled for honest emotion to carry him through, “jus’ dunno if you understand . . . how I feel. I love you, Buffy. W’everythin’ I am, all I have. Isn’t anythin’ I wouldn’t do for you.”

Her lip quivered and tears sprang, not just in her eyes, but in his also. “Give up my life to keep you safe, you an’ Dawn.”

Taking a step forward, he continued, “Think I’ve always loved you, from the first, knew I wanted you then, jus’ . . . god, kitten, so full of fire an’ life. . . you light up the world for me.”

Spike watched as tears slid down her cheeks, her hand raised to her mouth, holding back little hitching sobs.
“Christ . . you jus’ . . I love you.”

Neither one was sure who reached out first, neither one cared. All that mattered was his arms around her and she holding onto him. “Oh Spike . . I . . .”

“Shhh, love. I know.”

And he thought, for the first time in his long existence, that he actually might be right.

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After leaving Tara, Dawn had gone to her own room to get ready for bed, tired and drained. Today had been difficult. She should have known major badness was on its way, after all, school had started. Dawn was beginning to wonder if activity around the hellmouth was triggered by excessive teen-aged hormones in the vicinity. It was as good a theory as any.

She had a sudden need to write all that had happened down in her journal.

Pulling it out from under her pillow, Dawn unintentionally grabbed two of the monks’ journals. For a long couple of minutes she stared at them, wondering where she got the constant need to chronicle her day from, was it because the monks kept journals?

Opening the top one resolutely she curled up on her bed and began to read. On page fourteen, she hit pay dirt.

*We have found him again. He has radically changed his appearance once more. Brother Adam almost missed him. His hair is white blond and he’s taken to dressing in leather and ripped denim. He is tracking another Slayer, this one located in New York. Her name is Nicholette Wood, that much we have discovered but not much else, other than the fact she has been the Slayer for five years now. We have also discovered his true name. It is William. The Council of Watchers calls him the Slayer of Slayers. By my own hand, this 18th day of August, 1977, Gerald, Prior.*

Dawn stopped breathing.

Chapter End Notes

The Chapter 44 title comes from a line in the song “Nutshell” by Alice in Chains (listen to the unplugged version), probably one of the best bands to emerge in the early 1990’s – the pain and the angst coupled with real good rock and roll make for good music. Layne Staley, the lead singer, accidentally committed suicide little over 2 years ago, and his demise was predicted many, many times – because of his heroin addiction, but the media made much of it (well the music industry media did anyway). Vocally, he was truly gifted and could sing like a lark. May you rest in peace, peace you never found on this plane. Platitudes can go on forever, and quotes can only capture a moment, but sometimes they are all we have to describe that moment. Title of Chapter 45 comes from the Bard, from one of the most tragically romantic stories ever told, act 2, sc. 2 (My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to thee the more I have, for both are infinite) – and see if you can figure out which play I mean. And the poem Spike quotes? It’s by Robert Louis Stevenson. The title for chapter 46 comes from
a line by Alfred Lord Tennyson, Idylls of the King: Balin and Balan, line 509. The title of Chapter 47 comes from Alice in Chains (yeah, yeah, them again) and the song is Love Hate Love from Facelift and numerous bootleg live recordings. Okay, so the title for Chapter 48 is a line from a song, The Chain by this band that had the single highest selling album of the 1970's and probably one of the highest ever. The title of Chapter 49 comes from Genesis, from a B side (meaning it was never on an album) song called Evidence of Autumn. It’s a really sweet song about lost love, and well. It’s just nice. Chapter 50's title comes from a song by Depeche Mode, Enjoy the Silence, from the album Violator. Emotionally draining moments can be more exhausting than physical violence. Words that have been held for years are sometimes the hardest to let escape. Releasing old hurts is very cathartic. I was always waiting for that moment with Buffy – and it never really came. Poor girl. The title for Chapter 51 is from a Dave Matthews song – although I’m not really sure the song’s lyrics really apply here, I just liked the title. Chapter 58: Here endth the beginning. To quote Winston Churchill, “Now is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” I’ve always liked that quote, even before I really knew what it meant. The title of this comes from the song by The Cult, (she sells) Sanctuary (great English underground band).

End Notes

[A/N: The quotes throughout belong to those who uttered them. The title in Chapter One comes from a song by the Welsh band, The Alarm. And the quote? Well, that’s the Bard of Avon. Second Chapter title comes from Sir Walter Scott. Chapter Three title comes from a song by Alice In Chains, one of the best hard rock bands ever – if you haven’t listened, give it a go, and then say a prayer for the soul of the lead singer, Layne Staley, one tortured man. Chapter Four's title comes from a Eurythmics tune. The quote arises from controversy surrounding the publication of James Joyce’s masterpiece Ulysses and how it would endanger the mind of young girls. If only they knew. The title for Chapter Five comes from an old Alice Cooper song, you know, THE Alice Cooper song. The quote just seemed more appropriate given the tone of the story up until now. Chapter Six's title comes from new wave band Romeo Void, as do the lyrics. It just seemed to fit, so I used it. Chapter Seven is the part where things start to get a bit heavy. Watch out for the dark stuff contained herein. None of the rituals herein should be used by anyone. You have been warned. Chapter title comes from a Led Zeppelin tune, *smirks* you figure out which one. The title for Chapter Eight comes from W.H. Auden’s poem, “This Lunar Beauty”. And lastly, Chapter Nine: Time is a relative thing. When you are planning or awaiting something great and wonderful, it seems to take years. When bad times are afoot, time can be endless. And good wonderful moments are gone in a blink. Its going to progress like that now. Everything will move too fast and then stop. The title is from the Scottish Play (Hecate to the 3 sisters, Act 1, sc 5).

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