Charms of the Clarion

by eurydice72

Summary

When the Council approaches Buffy with an offer she can't refuse, she finds herself in another world, with Spike as her necessary partner.

Notes

This starts immediately after the season 5 episode, Family, so Spike has realized his true feelings for Buffy (albeit only recently), Tara knows she's not a demon, and Joyce has just recently fallen ill. Oh, and I hate to say it, but Buffy is still with Riley.
The fumes hit her even before she could see the building, and Buffy grimaced, stopping in her tracks as she sniffed at the air. Blood, most definitely, and something that smelled like kerosene, and...was that chocolate? She breathed in again, somehow not repulsed by the combination, only to confirm that, yes, someone had most definitely tossed Hershey into the mix. No way could she miss out on that particular aroma, not after marathon midnight binges with Willow.

The door opened before she reached it, and the Slayer watched as Willy came rushing forward, grabbing her arm and yanking her away from the bar's entrance. "Not in the front, not in the front," he hurried, pulling her around the side of the building.

With no effort, Buffy wrenched herself free, sending the little man sprawling to the ground. "You're the one who called me, remember?" she said, hazel eyes bright with annoyance.

"And it took you long enough to get here," he complained, scrambling to his feet. When she shook her head and turned from him, ready to walk away, he darted around to her front, putting up his hands to stop her although not daring to actually let them touch the young woman. "OK, OK, I'm sorry, but you gotta take care of this. I got no one else to call."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Take care of what?"

"He's out back. C'mon."

The smells were stronger at the rear of the club, and Buffy saw the overturned garbage cans sprawled around the littered alley. "I don't feel like playing Columbo, Willy," she said, stopping short as he opened the back door and disappeared inside. "So why don't we make this nice and easy, and you tell me what the hell I'm doing here."

"No problem." His voice was muffled from inside the bar, and she heard the unmistakeable tones of fighting, a second voice undercutting the high squeals of the owner's arguments. It only took a moment for her to recognize the baritone, and when a very familiar, "Bloody hell!," pierced the air, Buffy sighed. Great. This was about Spike.

Her irritation changed to amusement, however, as soon as the vampire came thundering from the bar, Willy's hands firmly planted on his back, propelling him to face the Slayer in indignation. Her gaze swept over his rumpled form, taking in the reddened knuckles, the bruising over his left eye, the distinctly wet shirt clinging to his torso, outlining his muscles as if the cotton was a second skin. What elicited the giggles from her throat, though, was the absence of his trademark platinum hair. In its place was a sticky brown tangle, with chocolate rivers streaking his face where he'd tried wiping away what was running down into his eyes.

"What's wrong, Spike?" she laughed. "Did you lose a fight with the Easter Bunny?"

"Don't. Start," he growled, sweeping past her in a flurry of black leather.

Buffy turned back to Willy. "As entertaining as this is---and I've got to say, this definitely rates high on the Slayer meter o' fun---what has any of it to do with me?"

"You're the only way he's going to make it home in one piece after what he pulled tonight. He's got half the demon population hot on his tail right now, including one very pissed off Truva, and if he sticks around here any longer, the whole block's going to go up in flames."

The owner of the bar was hopping around on his feet like he was standing on something hot, his anxiety blowing up his
normally nervous energy into an explosion that was making her dizzy.

"And that would be a bad thing because...?" she asked.

Spike sighed. "Told you she'd be a bitch about it," he snapped at Willy. "I'd rather take my chances running into that Truva wanker. Least then when she's havin' to put out all the little fires he decides to set once he's dusted my ass, you can have a right jolly good time laughin' in her face sayin' told you so." He swiped angrily at his eye as another drop of chocolate dripped into his lashes.

"Oh, great, throw my job back in my face." Buffy started walking away, shaking her head. "This better get me some major attitude adjustment next time I need info, Willy."

"Sure, whatever you say, Slayer. Just trying to do my part to contribute to the health and wealth of Sunnydale's finest, you know." 

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered. She was all the way to the end of the alley before she realized she was walking alone, and stopped, half-turning to glare back at the vampire. "For someone who's currently more closely resembling a Fudgsicle than a formerly deadly creature of the night, you're not moving very fast."

His boots echoed against the brick walls as he stomped down to meet her. "Don't suppose you'd take the back way to my crypt," he growled, attempting to glance at her out of the corner of his eyes, only to blink rapidly as yet another slip of chocolate made its way down the side of his face.

Her smile was wide, her laughter loud, and Buffy made sure her hair went sailing as she whipped herself around to stroll down the sidewalk. "Oh, no," she gloated. "I think this is definitely Main Street material."

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He deliberately kept pace a few feet behind her, azure eyes locked on the swing of her hips as she marched along through the cemetery, his mouth watering every time the breeze caught a whiff of her perfume and blew it back to him. The parade downtown had almost been worth it for this spectacular view, though Spike thought that stopping to chat with Xander and Anya, or to look at every single shop window, was worth just a little bit more than watching her walk. Wonder what the bint would do if I tossed her in the shower with me? he thought, and felt his cock harden as a result. Naked Buffy, lots of soap...He grinned. Definitely had potential.

"So you going to tell me what actually happened back there?" she asked, the first words she'd directed to him since leaving Willy's. "Because anything that makes you look that ridiculous has got to be a good story."

"Thought it was obvious," he said, wiping the smile from his face before she could catch it. "I got in a fight."

There was no disguising the twinkle in her eye as she glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Fights don't usually involve chocolate," she said. "Unless they're of the romantic variety." Her grin widened. "You got a new girlfriend we should know about?"

"Since when do you give two figs about my personal life, Slayer?"

She shrugged. "I don't. It's just been a very slow night and I could use a little entertainment."

"I'm not in the mood to be your party pick-me-up," he growled, although inwardly groaned at the prospect. Pick me up, throw me against the wall, shag me senseless...Fuck. Gotta stop these kind of
thoughts before she susses me out and stakes me for good.

"Whatever," she replied and turned back away, returning them to the silence they'd shared earlier.

Their footsteps seemed too loud in the deserted graveyard, and Spike frowned as the sight of his crypt loomed in the distance, bringing Buffy to a halt before him. "Home sweet crypt," she said, hazel eyes returning to his face. "Last chance to give me the scoop."

Using the hands he had stuffed deep inside his pockets, the vampire tightened his coat around his body, hiding his erection from her probing gaze. "Nothin' to dish," he said. "Went out to get some smokes and blood, and found that Truva pillock torching my favorite butcher's. He ran, I chased him to Willy's, and we got into a fight. End of story."

"That doesn't explain the chocolate sauce, or why Willy seems to think you're in danger."

Spike snorted. "Willy's a melodramatic little monkey who thinks just because a couple of demons threaten to barbecue me, my sorry undead life is on the ropes." Actually, he was lying here and seriously hoped that the Slayer wouldn't notice or call him on it. Truth was, that one Truva had turned into a gang of assorted lowlifes at the bar, and with Spike as the current thorn in their side, life around Sunnydale was going to be a little dicey until they got bored with him and decided to try and kill someone else. But there was no reason for Buffy to know that. He certainly didn't need her laughing at him more than she already was.

"And somehow that still doesn't tell me why you're just minus a big red cherry on top from being a sundae." She was enjoying this just a little too much, the sight of the chocolate-stained vampire the highlight of her boring night. Consciously lessening the breadth of her grin, Buffy waited expectantly for his forthcoming clarification.

"And you're not goin' to know," Spike retorted, pushing past her to head for the door to his crypt. He'd only sauntered a few yards, however, when the unmistakeable scents reached his nose, stopping his feet as his head tilted, blue gaze flickering to his right. "Think you're about to have some more sittin' to do, Slayer," he commented.

"Oh, I think I've done all the sitting I can handle in one night, thank you very much."

"Tell that to the group of humans hangin' out up there by my crypt then," the vampire drawled, lips curling into a smile. "Unless you just plan on leavin' them. I'm sure there's a few local vamps who wouldn't complain about havin' dinner delivered to their gravestep for a change."

"Crap," Buffy muttered, and reaching behind her, pulled the stake from the waistband of her trousers. "I'd like to find out when hanging out in cemeteries became Sunnydale's number one attraction." She glanced around, eyes jumping from one dark shadow to the next, the night swallowing up the surrounding area in an ebony gulp.

She was oblivious to him as she walked past, weapon poised, fingers curled around the stake in such a way that Spike's mouth watered, and he had to fight to keep his hands in his pockets and off her curves. Each muscle was a tense celebration of menace, her every movement an exercise in grace, and the anticipation of watching her fight made his blood seethe. Tiny flecks of gold flickered through his eyes as the demon within caught the lust that was surging through his body, but he kept it leashed, all too aware of the fact that vamping out without provocation would most likely earn him a good thrashing, if not a thorough staking...although the thought of a thrashing sounded like it could turn out to be fun...

"Am I alone on this, or do I not sense any demons around?" Buffy asked, glancing back at Spike.
"Other than you, of course."

His eyebrow lifted. "You're askin' for my advice?" he queried. "Gee, Slayer, I'm touched."

"Hardly. We'll just consider that a rhetorical question." Slowly, her body relaxed, her hand lowering. "But I better go tell those people they should get out of here. It's probably just a bunch of kids looking for some post-Halloween creepiness, anyway."

"Actually, we were looking for William the Bloody."

Buffy whirled, the stake back at attention, and watched as a group of three dark-suited men emerged from the darkness, one holding a crossbow while the other two held large crucifixes before them. Even if she hadn't heard the accent in the leader's voice, she would've known that they weren't locals. Only the dead were that stiff in this cemetery.

"So, Spike...this a family reunion or something?" She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "'Cause the only British people in Sunnydale that I know are you and..." Her head swivelled back to stare at the trio. "Oh, no. Please, tell me this is some late Halloween prank, and that you're not really part of the Council."

One of the men holding the crosses stepped forward, hand extended in greeting. "Miss Summers, I presume," he said. "How fortunate we've found you here. It saves us a further trip before we convene with the others." Buffy held her ground, ignoring his offering, and after a moment of awkwardness, the man blushed, retracting his welcome with a clumsy shuffle. "Yes, well, I certainly understand your hesitancy. After all, you are the Slayer. That's your job...to be cautious, and to, of course, slay."

Spike's lips lifted in smile at the man's ramblings. Nice to know I'm not the only one Buffy gets to, he thought, and watched as she slowly crossed her arms over her chest.

"So what's the Council doing lurking around Spike's crypt?" she asked. "And for that matter, what's the Council doing in Sunnydale anyway? I haven't seen you guys since, you know, you tried to kidnap me last spring."

"Oh, that wasn't us," he rushed to explain. "That would've been one of our special operative teams. We're part of the board back in...England...the good guys, not the...bad...ones..." His voice trailed off as he realized he was only making his situation worse, and he cleared his throat. "We're here, actually, to fetch Spike and yourself to meet with Mr. Travers---."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "And this just gets better and better," she drawled. "The head honcho decided to show up himself, huh? Is he tired of not having a Slayer to boss around anymore? Not that I really care." She brightened. "Oh! Unless he's here to apologize. That might be kinda fun to see."

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to disclose the particulars," the man said. "We're merely here in a retrieval capacity."

"And Spike and I are the sticks?" Buffy said. "Sorry, but I've never been big on the doing tricks for other people gig, especially if those other people are the Council, so why don't you run on back to your boss, Mr. Watcher Guy---."}

"It's Colin. Colin Sadler."

"---run on back to your boss, Mr. Colin-Colin Sadler, and tell him this Slayer doesn't roll over for him anymore." She seemed to notice the vampire behind her for the first time since the trio had arrived. "Oh, but Spike you can have. I don't care about him."
"Thanks so bloody much, Slayer," Spike growled.

Colin glanced over Buffy's shoulder and frowned at the vamp's dishevelled appearance before returning to address the young blonde. "Our instructions are for both of you," he said. "Now, the vampire we're prepared to take by force, if need be, but in the event you were to refuse to cooperate, I was authorized to offer you an incentive. Regarding your mother and her illness."

Buffy stiffened. "That doesn't sound like an incentive. That sounds like a threat."

"No, no, no!" Colin stuttered. "That's not what I'm saying. Mr. Travers is prepared to offer you expert medical attention for your mother, which, I'm sure you'll agree, is definitely an inducement for meeting with him. So, not a threat." He smiled nervously, doing his best to appear calm but inwardly cowering.

Spike watched as the young woman's eyes narrowed, the mention of her mother tensing her jaw as her brain worked over the Watcher's words. They had her attention now, and though he had no idea what the pillocks might want with him, if Buffy was going along for the ride, he planned on being right next to her.

"All right," she finally said, mouth grim. "I'll go. But first sign of trouble, I'm out of there, got it?"

Colin looked relieved, exhaling loudly as the weapon relaxed in his arms. "Well, we should really set on then," he said and nodded behind him. "Our vehicle is back there, so if you would---."

"Hey!" Each turned to look at Spike, standing in chocolaty splendor in the moonlight. "You think I'm goin' anywhere without gettin' a shower first, you've got to be off your box." He waited for an objection, and getting none, began sauntering toward his crypt.

The Watcher's eyes darted between the marching vampire and Buffy, his brow furrowed in worry. "Is it safe to leave him unattended like that?" he questioned.

She shrugged. "You want him so badly, you go watch him, 'cause Spike in a shower is one show I do not need to see." The Englishman hesitated, his fear in spite of his ready weapon shining through in his face, and the Slayer sighed. "Hello? Haven't got all night here. And besides, it's pretty much your job description, isn't it? Watcher, watching things...?"

"Right," Colin murmured, and took a bold step forward, only to stumble back when the vamp pretended to lunge at him.

"Spike!" Buffy admonished. "Don't make me get into this!"

He couldn't help his grin. "Just havin' a bit of a laugh," he joked before pushing open the door to his crypt. "Not my fault he didn't think it was funny..."

Standing in the silence of the cemetery, the young blonde felt her insides begin to clench in anxiety, the thought of facing the Council again worrying her more than she was prepared to show. I so don't have time for this right now, she thought, but the promise of help for her mother was just too good to ignore, especially since the Sunnydale doctors seemed so ineffectual in determining what exactly was wrong. Experts were of the good, and if that meant a showdown with Quentin Travers, well then, so be it...
The Rights of Woman

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Spike have been approached by members of the Council to meet with Quentin Travers...

The shrill whistle of the kettle pierced the close air of the kitchen, momentarily distracting Giles from the fury that was simmering beneath his skin. Hastening to remove it from the burner, he cursed under his breath as a few drops of the fiery liquid splashed onto his fingers, startling him into almost releasing his grip on the handle, renewing his ire at his unwanted guests. Arrogant, interfering bastards, he grumbled angrily, and cast a quick glance out of the corner of his eye at the recumbent form of his former employer.

"We've had remarkable weather in London this fall," Travers was saying. "Quite mild, considering."

He had to physically restrain himself from shaking his head. Why in bloody hell do Brits spend so much time discussing the damn weather? Giles thought as he poured the water through the strainer. It had been the only consistent topic of conversation since Quentin and his entourage had arrived on his step just minutes earlier, and though he wished he'd had the fortitude to just slam the door in their faces, the slight spark of curiosity as to their presence convinced the Watcher to allow them entrance.

"I'm afraid Sunnydale doesn't offer the same meteorological interest as the ways and means of British rainfall," Giles said, walking into the lounge with the tray of steaming cups of tea balanced in his hands. He set it down on the coffee table and stood back, gazing down at the elderly leader of the Council. "But I'm certain that isn't why you've flown across an ocean and an entire country to see me."

"Actually, you are not our primary interest here," Quentin replied, gingerly picking up his cup.

As if in direct response to his assertion, there was a knock at the front door, and Giles frowned as he glanced at the clock. The hour was much too late for proper visitors, leaving only the possibility that it was yet more of the Council arriving to make his life miserable. "I do wish you'd called first," he said as he crossed to answer it. "I would've arranged to be out."

Willow was the last person he expected to see on the other side of the entrance, her eyes wide in nervousness, cheeks pale in spite of the cool night air. "Hi, Giles," she said as brightly as she could manage, and jumped slightly as the stern woman accompanying her prodded her over the doorstep.

"What does the Council want with Willow?" Giles demanded as he shut the door.

"She told me this was about Buffy," the redhead exclaimed. "Isn't she here?"

"My apologies for the subterfuge, Miss Rosenberg," Quentin said. "We merely wanted you to come of your own volition. We do hate to use unnecessary force." He ignored Giles' snort of derision and smiled at the young woman. "Do sit down. I'm sure Rupert would be more than happy to provide with you some refreshment while we wait."
She glanced at her mentor before perching herself on the edge of the couch cushion, hands folded uncomfortably on her lap. "It's all right, Willow," he assured. "Would you---?" Another knock at the door interrupted him, and with one last glance at Travers, the Watcher returned to answer it.

"You have no idea how glad I am that Travers wants his little confab here," Buffy said as she breezed past, stopping when she realized the man to whom she was referring sat within just a few feet of her. "And speak of the British devil," she added.

For the first time, Quentin stood, inclining his head slightly in welcome. "Miss Summers, it's good to see you in such fine health."

Her brows lifted. "You expected to find me laid out on a cold slab?" she asked, and then held up her hand. "Wait. Don't answer that."

"Well, hail, hail, the gang's all here," Spike drawled, sauntering in to stand just inside the doorway.

Giles whirled at the sound of the vampire's voice. "What are you doing here?" he demanded irritably.

"I got myself an invite." He smiled, enjoying the Watcher's consternation.

"Yes, Rupert," Quentin confirmed. "Spike is here at my request. Although, I must say, I didn't expect him to be able to enter your flat without an express invitation. Are there perhaps details of your involvement that we should be aware of?"

"Like you bloody care," Giles muttered, containing his temper from slamming the door shut behind the three men who entered after the vamp. "Any other guests I should be expecting?" he asked, blue eyes blazing. "Xander? Anya? The Queen of England?"

Travers resumed his seat. "No, everyone is present." His watery gaze watched as everyone settled, Spike collapsing to a sprawl in one of the chairs while Buffy stood at the end of the sofa with her arms folded across her chest. "I'm sure you're curious as to our presence here. We haven't exactly been on the...friendliest of terms for the last few months unfortunately."

"Just cut to the chase," the Slayer said. "I'm not really in the mood to play out some bad movie scenario with you as the police inspector about to tell us someone was murdered and that one of us is a killer. You wanted us. We're here. Now talk."

"The chase, yes..." Quentin met her eyes with a directness she found unsettling, the urge to duck her head like a chastened schoolchild suddenly seeming too heavy to ignore, but Buffy remained firm, meeting his gaze with an assurance she didn't feel on the inside. "The Council requires your presence in Scotland for a matter that has grown...beyond our control."

"Requires?" For the first time since running into the trio at the graveyard, she began to feel some of her control returning to her grasp, and her shoulders relaxed slightly. "You got a vamp infestation you need a Slayer to take care of for you?"

"Not vampires, at least, we don't believe so. And it's not just your skills we need." He glanced pointedly at Willow and Spike before continuing. "Several months ago, the Council was requested to help with the renovation of a property in the Highlands as it held...historical significance. In the process of our excavation, however, we unearthed a network of tunnels that led into the nearby hills."

"The hollow hills..." Giles murmured, eyes crinkling as he began to get involved in his ex-employer's tale.
"Yes, Rupert, although fairies were certainly not what we were expecting to find."

Buffy couldn't help the smile that crept to her lips. "You want me to fight Tinkerbell?" she asked.

"According to Celtic mythology," Giles offered, "the hollow hills can be construed as the home of the fairies, or their death mounds, or even as portals to the Otherworld, but there's never been any conclusive evidence to support any of those theories in modern-day society." He turned to look at Travers. "What did you discover?"

For the first time, Quentin looked uncomfortable, lowering his gaze to his cup as he took a long sip of his tea. "It's not so much what we discovered," he finally said, "as what we...unleashed."

The Slayer's eyebrows lifted. "You let a big bad get out?" she asked, her amazement unable to be hidden any longer.

He was quick to respond. "I can assure you that was not our intention," he stated. "The entrance to the tunnels was found just a week before Samhain---."

"Sa-what?"

"Samhain," Willow interjected. "The old name for Halloween, although it's still considered a witch holiday in coven circles."

Quentin nodded. "We continued work as normal, but on the night of Samhain---."

"It got out." Giles finished the older man's thought, not even noticing when Travers nodded in agreement.

"It?" Buffy repeated. "You let some demon escape? Didn't you think, maybe, it might be a good idea to put a guard on it or something?"

"It's not quite that simple," her Watcher said. "On Samhain, the veil between our world and the Otherworld lifts, allowing those on either side to cross over. By exposing the tunnels, it appears the Council inadvertently opened a new path for them."

"So you need me to come to Scotland and kill whatever you let loose." She looked at the others in the room. "That doesn't explain why you've dragged Willow into this. Or how you could possibly need Spike."

"Killing the creature is only part of the task," Travers explained. "We also wish to permanently close the portal so that this sort of...incident doesn't occur again."

Very slowly, Willow raised her hand, waiting until Quentin looked at her before speaking. "That kind of magic isn't really my forte," she said meekly. "I mean, I'm getting pretty good, but a spell of that magnitude requires more juice than I can give you."

"That would not be your role, Miss Rosenberg, although your capabilities will most certainly come in handy. The ritual requires three---someone living---" He nodded at Buffy. "...someone dead..." His gaze turned to Spike. "...and a third to act as a host." His eyes returned to the young witch. "That would be you. We attempted the ritual ourselves the night after Samhain, but it proved...beyond our capacity at the time. Our next opportunity lies at the end of the month, and the Council believes that the three of you are more than strong enough to...fulfill the requirements."

"So once again, you guys make a mess of things and expect me to come in and save your asses." Buffy shook her head. "Why should I do this? Why should I let you place me and my friends in
"Because if you agree, we will arrange for the world's finest specialists to come in and treat your mother." His face was implacable, his confidence in his offer enough to reaffirm his directness with the Slayer. "I understand that the Sunnydale physicians have yet to determine the cause of her illness. Do this for us, and we will guarantee her the best diagnosticians and treatment that money can buy."

The air was thick in the crowded living room, and both Willow and Giles turned their gazes to look at Buffy. Her concern over her mother's health had been her top priority lately, and though she had no love for the Council, they both knew this offer was not something she could just ignore.

"What about me? What do I get out of this little arrangement?" It was the first time Spike had spoken since sitting, and Quentin turned to gaze at the vampire as if his presence were negligible.

"We assumed cash would be sufficient for you," he replied.

There was a moment, and then the vamp nodded with a small shrug. "Yeah. Works for me."

"What about you, Willow?" This came from Buffy, her voice low as she addressed her best friend.

The redhead shook her head. "As long as I know we'll all come out of this alive and still breathing, I'm OK with it." She smiled. "Plus, I've always wanted to go to Scotland. It's supposed to be gorgeous."

"Giles?"

He shook his head, mirroring Willow's earlier action. "I will be there, no matter what you decide, Buffy."

She sighed. "Well, it's not like it's something we haven't done before. And if it helps Mom..." She lifted her chin. "Fine. You've got a deal."

Travers smiled. "Splendid. Now, about the arrangements---."

Buffy ignored him, turning to her Watcher. "You should call Xander and Anya and let them know so that they can start packing, and then I'll get on the phone with Riley---."

"They won't be coming."

With widened eyes, the Slayer turned to stare at Travers. "Excuse me?"

"They won't be coming," he repeated, unmoved by her hostile glare. "We've made accommodations for the four of you, as you are the only ones necessary in this...matter."

"Oh, but I don't want to go without Tara." Willow swiveled to face the man at her side. "She's a witch, too. She'd be a huge help in...whatever it is we have to do."

"And Xander and Anya are part of the team," Buffy added. "I wouldn't be here today without their help."

"They have no abilities to contribute to this," Quentin argued. "They will merely get in the way." He glanced at Willow. "Although I suppose another witch could possibly be beneficial."

"If Tara gets to go, then Riley does, too. He's big, and strong, and knowledgeable about demon stuff. He can help."
Spike snorted. "And if Soldier Boy goes, you can count me out. No amount of dosh is worth a month of torture from him."

"Gee, chip on your shoulder much?" Buffy retorted. "Oops, sorry. I meant, chip in your head."

"Well, let's just see how friendly you get when someone zaps you with one of their techno space guns and shoves a piece of metal in you that takes all the fun out of your sorry existence of a life," he snapped back, rising to his feet. "See how much you like hangin' around playin' at bein' best mates."

"It beats the hell out of hanging around with a whiny, over-bleached, pitiful excuse of a vampire, who doesn't even know better than to duck when someone throws a bucket of chocolate sauce at him!" The color was high in her cheeks as she took a step toward him.

"I'm not whiny!" he growled. "And for your information, you guessed wrong. It wasn't thrown, it was dropped from overhead. Do you have any idea how bleedin' tall Truva demons are?"

"Oh, like you'd even notice. You're not exactly starting center for the Chicago Bears, now are you?"

"That would be the Bulls, you stupid bint---."

"Enough!" Travers' voice crackled through the air, stopping the argument with the utterance of that single word. He frowned as his eyes flickered between the pair. "There will be no more discussion on this matter. Riley Finn will not be accompanying us to Scotland." Spike smirked at Buffy. "I will allow Miss Rosenberg's...friend to come along, but that will be it. Understood?"

"Not understood." The Slayer turned her furious form to face off with the head of the Council. "If Xander and Anya can't go, then I'm not going either."

"Me either," Willow said, hopping to her feet to stand by her friend.

"Xander and Anya have both proven to be valuable allies in the past," Giles offered. "Their particular skills may not be readily...apparent, but you can trust that they will be necessary."

They waited as Quentin regarded them, taking in their unsmiling countenances before finally settling with a sigh. "Very well," he acquiesced. "But their welfare will be in your hands, Miss Summers. I am not prepared to waste Council resources just so that your...friends can enjoy a free holiday." He stood. "We should let you start packing then," he said, striding toward the door. "We leave at dawn. I will send a car for you and your things."

"Dawn's not exactly good for me," Spike started, only to be cut off by the elder man's hand.

"We've taken the appropriate measures for your safety," he stated. "You will be picked up at sunrise."

The room was silent after they left, the four remaining lost in his and her thoughts. "I should probably be the one to call Xander," Willow finally said, shattering the quiet. "Anya gets cranky when people call in the middle of the night."

"And I'm going to go see Riley," Buffy said. "Someone's going to have to keep an eye on Mom and Dawn while I'm gone."

Spike followed after her to the door. "Don't suppose you'd mind swingin' by my crypt first?" he asked, jerking to a halt when she turned to glare at him. "Still got a Truva demon after me,
"I didn't think you had other clothes worth packing," she commented, hazel eyes sweeping over his traditional black garb.

"You want to be around me for a month wearin' the same thing, I got no problem with that. 'Course, I can always give them a wash, but then that'll mean not wearin' anything..."

"Fine." Buffy pulled open the door. "At least this time it won't feel like I'm walking through town with Willy Wonka."

Willow stared at the entrance as the pair exited the apartment. "Do you know what they were talking about?" she asked Giles, a small frown wrinkling her brow.

He shook his head. "And, for some reason, I really do not care to find out."

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He couldn't help whistling as he tossed his few clothes into the ready sack. Three weeks or so with Buffy...having to work alongside her...getting to watch her without having to worry about getting caught under that bleedin' tree...and he was getting paid for it. Someone was certainly smiling down on him tonight.

At that very minute, she was standing outside his crypt, waiting for him to come out so that she could go and tell her paper doll boyfriend that she was leaving the country without him, that she was in fact leaving town with a certain blond vampire, off to foreign lands to play out her every fantasy...OK, so that was his own interpretation of how that little scene was going to play out, but Spike figured it was infinitely more interesting than how it would actually go.

"Oh, Riley..."

"Oh, Buffy..."

"I'll miss you..."

"I'll miss you, too..."

Absolute swill.

For a moment, he debated on whether he should leave a note for Harmony, let her know just what he was up to, but quickly dismissed the idea. She probably wouldn't even notice for a few days anyway, not 'til she needed something or got horny, and he wasn't about to go out of his way for someone who couldn't be bothered to see that he wasn't even around the crypt anymore. Let the silly bint suss it out for herself. And if she laid one finger on his nail polish while he was gone, Spike was going to kick her to the curb for good.

As he strolled to the door, the vamp's thoughts returned to the images of Buffy in Scotland that had been bouncing around in his head since they'd left Rupert's. This time of year, it'll be colder than a witch's tit, he reasoned, and his mouth watered as he suddenly imagined the Slayer out on the heather, kicking the crap out of some demon, nipples hard under a tight sweater. Gotta love those stiff Scottish breezes...
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Council needs Buffy, Spike, and Willow to handle an issue that's arisen in Scotland, and the Slayer has agreed, in exchange for medical care for her mom and the addendum that Xander and Anya are allowed to come...

Flying to another country was supposed to be exciting, the prospect of a few weeks living in a world so different from Sunnydale thrilling. New countryside to admire, new foods to try, new shops to explore. And all at someone else's expense. It had the makings of a dream vacation, a once in a lifetime opportunity to travel before her Slayer license finally expired. But, if that was the case, why was Buffy in such a foul mood?

Actually, she knew the reasons for that, and one of them was sitting just a few feet away, whistling something she didn't recognize under his breath as he flipped over the cards on the makeshift table in front of him. Not one of the Council guys had been willing to spend the entire flight to Scotland holed up alone with Spike, and it had fallen on Buffy's shoulders to volunteer to keep an eye on him, to make sure he didn't do anything about trying to escape or plotting to hurt anyone. Personally, she thought it was just a load of malarkey, paranoia on the part of a bunch of stuffed shirts who couldn't comprehend that the chip in his head meant the vampire couldn't do anything more than threaten to hurt them. But Colin's story about how he'd tried to attack him had spread fear throughout the group, in spite of her arguments that Spike had just been playing a joke, and now none of them would go near him without being heavily armed.

Giles had offered to vamp-sit, but Buffy had turned him down, extending the "He's a vampire, I'm the Slayer, it's my responsibility," argument. She'd lay good odds that nobody else would last more than a few minutes before they got fed up with Spike, and though the prospect hadn't exactly put her over the moon, it did give her another opportunity to find out about the chocolate sauce. He kept leaking details about what had happened at Willy's that made the story sound just too good not to hear.

Her bad mood probably wasn't helped by the fact that she was cut off from the rest of her friends for the duration of the trip, the area the Council had closed off for Spike being situated in the cargo area. It wasn't uncomfortable; in fact, for a cage, it was actually quite spacious, with enough room for two seats, a card table that had been bolted to the floor complete with two benches alongside it so that it more closely resembled a corner booth in some cheap diner, and a small fridge for refreshments. Still, a cage was a cage, and though they'd only been in the air for little over an hour, she was already starting to feel a little claustrophobic. She glanced at her watch and almost groaned. Great. Only eleven more hours to go.

"You don't have to sit there lookin' like someone just staked your best friend," he said, not even looking up from his spread. "I know games other than solitaire."

"Y'know, I've got a sneaking suspicion that I wouldn't like the kinds of games you play," Buffy said, and shifted painfully in her seat.

"Suit yourself," he shrugged. "Just thought it might help pass the time. We've got a long flight ahead of us and I'd hate or you to have to sit there and twiddle your thumbs the entire time." He
couldn't help the smile that curled his lips as he glanced up at her. "Unless there's other things you'd rather twiddle."

She rolled her eyes. "The only response that that deserves is a big ewwww."

He watched her through his lashes as she struggled to get comfortable, squirming between the narrow armrests of the chair that had never been meant to really be put to use for long flights, the barely there cushion providing little padding between her bottom and the metal tracks of the seat. He'd been chuffed when he heard her offer to watch him, even more so when she'd told the Watcher he didn't have to bother, but that promise of quality alone time with the Slayer had quickly lost its sheen as she set about doing everything she could to ignore him.

"Look," Spike finally said, setting the cards down to address her. "This is bloody ridiculous, us sittin' here in silence like this. 'Specially since it looks like we're goin' to be workin' side by side on this Council problem, gettin' in each other's faces, watchin' each other's backs. Seems to me that might require actually communicating in ways other than with your fists."

Her hazel eyes were annoyed, meeting his directly for the first time since they took off, but her mouth remained closed, biting back the smart retort that had automatically sprung to her lips. She hated to admit it, but the vamp was probably right and she wasn't helping matters by being so antisocial. She sighed and unbuckled her seatbelt. "What other games do you know?" she asked, rising to join him at the table.

The impulse to suggest strip poker hung there on his tongue, but Spike pursed his lips, holding it back. "How 'bout cribbage?" he suggested.

"Don't know that one. Go fish?"

There was no mistaking his look of disgust. "With two people? Now there's a bloody challenge."

He paused, then offered. "Canasta. Wait, we need two decks for that one."

"My turn. Crazy eights."

This time he grinned. "Do you know any grown-up games, Slayer?"

"Don't start, Spike. You're the one who wanted to play cards."

"I s'pose we could try whist, though I'm not sure I remember all the rules. Haven't played that one since Dru and I took that trip to China."

"And you're not playing it on this one, because I have no idea what you're talking about." Buffy bit her lip, thinking. "Will and I used to play 2-handed euchre."

"Boring. War?"

"Too much like real life. Rummy?"

"Only if we can't think of anything better."

The pair sat in silence, both brains ticking over possibilities, until finally Buffy brightened. "Oh! Let's play slapjack!"

He looked at her, brows knitted together. "OK, I'll bite," he said. "What the hell is slapjack?"

"Dawn and I used to play all the time." She reached forward and picked up the cards, handling
them between her fingers as she shuffled. "It's super-simple. Basically, we deal out all the cards, and then we each lay down a single card at a time. Then, when a jack comes up, you yell out 'Slapjack!' and try and be the first to, well, slap it. Whoever gets there first gets the pile and you keep going on like that until someone has all the cards." She squared off the cards on the table and began dealing them between out.

Spike's face relaxed. "Sounds like Snap," he said, and then his frown returned. "Wait a minute. We can't play this."

She stopped. "Why not?"

"What happens if, and notice I use the word 'if', you beat me to it, and I end up hittin' your hand instead of the card? That soddin' chip'll be goin' off the entire flight."

"Oh." Buffy physically deflated, her shoulders slumping. "Darn it, that actually sounded like fun."

The sight of the potential return of her bad humor sent Spike's mind racing. Don't lose the moment, he thought. Figure out a way for this to work. "This slappin'," he mused aloud. "It's not like I'm tryin' to hurt you or anything. Could be that the chip won't fire if it happens."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she queried. "Are you trying to tell me it doesn't work all the time?"

He could hear the suspicion automatically creeping back into her voice, and jumped on his reply. "No, trust me, it works," he assured. "Just I've come to figure out that if there's no intention, like I know I'm not goin' to hurt you, it picks up on that and leaves me alone. Like with that Watcher bloke at my crypt. Sure, I made with the growl and attack, but I knew I wasn't goin' to do anything, so I walked away from it free and clear."

"Which is why none of them believe me when I say you're effectively neutered," Buffy replied, mildly annoyed. "Next time you pull a stunt like that, the least you could do is pretend that it hurts."

"They need to learn how to take a fuckin' joke," he muttered, and picked up the cards in front of him.

She bit her tongue, the desire to call off this whole charade countered only by the tiny, dark part of her that actually agreed with Spike's assessment of the Council. Even if she hadn't found it funny, it certainly wasn't anything for them to have gotten all freaked out about, and she wasn't going to make things potentially worse by stirring things up with the vampire now. Instead, she straightened her own cards in her hand and met his blue eyes. "Ready?"

* * *

Her sides hurt from the giggling. It had been ages since she and Dawn had had a good night of slapjack, and Buffy had forgotten just how silly it could get...the speeding up as each player tried to get their cards down quicker, knowing because they'd been through the decks so many times just when the next jack was going to show up...the bickering over who was indeed faster, when fingers got interlocked because both of their hands made it to the table at the same time...the couple times Spike's chip actually gone off when his temper got the better of him and he hit at the jack just a little too vehemently. She was a little surprised their noise hadn't grabbed the attention of the others, but, for some inexplicable reason, found herself glad it hadn't. She was enjoying herself too much to have it interrupted by warnings of, "Keep it down in there." That would sound like Mom yelling up during sleepovers she'd had as a kid, and that kind of thinking was not someplace she
needed to go right now.

She knew her face was flushed, could feel her heartbeat pounding from the adrenalin running through her system, and slyly, Buffy glanced up at her opponent, watching as his nimble fingers shuffled the deck of cards like an expert, his face relaxed but his body tense as he prepared to start a new game. Playing with Spike was different than playing with her sister. After becoming the Slayer, beating Dawn every time they played had taken the joy out of it for her. She was just too fast. Now, though, Buffy faced someone whose speed quite often matched hers, and, considering he'd won the last two games, occasionally even beat it. It was actually kind of a nice feeling getting to play someone she could consider an equal.

"No cheatin' this time," Spike said as he began to dole out the cards.

Her jaw dropped. "I did not cheat!" she protested.

"You think you're playin' with a novice here?" he asked, blue eyes twinkling. "I saw you slip that jack to the bottom of your deck." The sudden tightening of her lips was the only confirmation he needed, and the vampire laughed out loud. "Not that it did you any good. I'd beat you even if I had one arm tied behind my back." He saw her mouth open, and held up a warning finger. "Not that that's goin' to happen," he added.

"Maybe we should try a new game," she ventured, even as she picked up her cards.

Her words made him freeze. "You're not havin' fun?" He tried to keep his voice level, to not betray the fact that he was having the time of his life. Everything about the past few hours---the bantering, the fleeting touches of his fingers on her skin or hers on his, the sheer joy that seemed to bounce from her laughter---had been more than he'd imagined possible, almost surreal in what seemed now its inevitability. Spike had assumed she was enjoying his company; the thought that she hadn't wrenched in his gut, leaving his body aching.

"No. I mean, color me surprised, but you've actually not been a total pain in my butt for the past couple hours. Well, except for that comment about my hair last year. That was uncalled for."

His shoulders relaxed, just ever so slightly. "I stand by my assessment," he stated. "It was too fluffy."

She ignored his gibe. "I'm just feeling...jumpy," she said. "Like I don't want to be sitting anymore."

"That would be the adrenalin talkin'." He realized his mistake as soon as the words came out of his mouth, and the stiffening of Buffy's jaw caused him to curse silently.

"How do you...know about that?" she asked warily.

Best to play it cool, shrug it off. Don't make a big deal of it. He almost shook his head in disbelief. Like being around the Slayer was ever not a big deal. "'Cause I'm a vampire, remember?" he replied. "And you're a potential lunch. Well, you would be if I didn't have this leash on me right now. It's how we suss you out. Hear the heart, feel the blood pumpin'. Doesn't your Watcher teach you anything?" That was good. Shift the conversation to her training. Put her on the defensive. Don't let her think you're actually spending time assessing her every bodily function.

"I must've missed that lesson," she said, her body still rigid. "I was too busy concentrating on the just-tell-me-how-to-kill-them part."

"Oh, that's right. I keep forgettin'. Buffy Summers, the high priestess of wham-bam-slay 'emma'am." That was it. He had officially burned his last bridge in this little truce, and he knew it.
When was he going to learn to just shut up while he was ahead?

She threw the cards down onto the table and stood, reaching behind her to grab her foot and stretch out her legs. Spike watched as this forced the Slayer to arch her back, torso thrusting forward as she sought to relax the muscles that had tensed while they played, and felt his jeans tighten across his thighs. Great, he thought. Even in the throes of defeat she still manages to press my buttons. He stood no chance in hell of surviving the next three weeks if she was going to play him as easy as this.

"I should probably thank you." Her voice was ice as she turned her back on him and walked over to the cooler that housed their food for the journey. "For a second there, I almost forgot what an asshole you are."

He sucked at his teeth, checking his temper as it flared. "Just call 'em like I see 'em, luv," he drawled. It was gone, the camaraderie they'd shared fleeing like tumbleweeds in the desert, and for a moment, Spike felt an ache echo in his gut. It was almost better not getting these glimpses into what being with the Slayer on a friendly basis might be like; it offered hope, when he should know better than anyone that there wasn't any.

"So tell me," he said, desperate to get away from those kind of thoughts, "how did Soldier Boy take the news? Can't imagine he'd be jumpin' with joy knowin' I'm along for the ride."

"I didn't...tell him that part," Buffy said, popping the top on a diet soda. She deliberately avoided his gaze, and didn't see the quizzical tilt of his platinum head.

"Well, now, ain't that a surprise. Don't tell me there's trouble in paradise?"

"No, no trouble. I just...didn't...want to worry him unnecessarily." Lie, big fat humungous lie, but no way was she going to tell Spike how Riley had just about blown his lid at hearing she was working for the Council again. Even the promises of medical care for her mother didn't seem to convince him they could be up to any good.

"You can't trust them," he'd argued. "Not after what they tried to do to you last spring."

"They thought I was Faith," she'd countered, but had only been met with his back as he began pacing around the room.

"It's just like what the government did to me," he'd raged. "They suck you in with all these promises and good wishes, and then just when they've got you relaxed and believing in them, that's when they throw you the left cross that sends you reeling to the mat."

Nope, no way was she going to add, "Oh, by the way, they want Spike and not you. See you in a month!" Too hard, and not worth the headache it would've caused.

"So I guess you're all for the secrets, huh?" the vampire was saying, and she jerked her head around to frown at him.

"What're you talking about?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Secrets from the boytoy, secrets from your friends...Oh, unless I misunderstood about the not-telling-Xander thing. Have to admit, I wasn't really payin' that close attention."

"Don't play dumb, Spike. I know you heard everything we said on the way over. And don't you dare blab a word to Xander and Anya. They don't need to know the Council didn't want them to come along. It would only hurt their feelings."
"Think it'll get obvious fairly soon, pet. 'Specially when they'll be standing around, asking for something to do and there's not even a donut shop for them to run to."

"They won't---." Buffy stopped, her brow furrowing. "Scotland doesn't have donuts?"

"Like Sunnydale?" Spike laughed. "Uh, no. And in the Highlands, depending on where we end up, you may not even be lucky enough to get a baker who'll sell you some buns."

She wanted to ask why she'd want bread instead of sugary treats but fear of looking even more foolish in front of the vampire stayed Buffy's tongue, and she drained the rest of the soda without saying another word. The more she thought about it, the more worried she got, as the reality of what she had done by getting on the plane only now began to sink in. Three weeks, in a foreign country, surrounded by people she didn't know and probably wouldn't be able to understand, with Spike as her right-hand man of all people...Was it too late to ask for a parachute so that she could try jumping to safety before they landed?

"I'm going to go to sleep," she mumbled, returning to the awful seat she'd vacated to play cards. "Try not to kill anybody while I'm out of it, OK?"

Spike watched as she buckled herself in, adjusting the incline of the chair so that she could at least have a sporting chance at getting some slumber, and ducked his eyes as she cast one last glance in his direction. Sleep for him was out of the question, not with the Slayer so near yet so untouchable, his body refusing to rest within her proximity as his fingers ached to reach out and curl into the long locks of her hair. It was maddening, knowing he'd had it within his grasp, had enjoyed even a few stolen minutes of a relaxed and smiling Buffy, relishing the fact that her laughter had been genuine and that he had been the cause. Three more weeks of this? he wondered. Part of him didn't think he could make it, and yet another---the louder, more opinionated part---screamed that he would, that he had to, that if ever he stood a chance to turn her from her dislike, this was it. And if nothing else, Spike was a vampire who knew when to grab his chances...
"Buffy...wake up..."

The touch was feather-light on her shoulder, and she shifted in her seat, trying to get away from it. "Don't wanna," she mumbled. What she wanted was to escape from whoever was trying to rouse her, to return to the warm dreams that promised easy answers and soft kisses, and so twisted her body away from where the voice had come, encountering a hard wall that she proceeded to bury herself against. The veil of sleep began to cover her again, and Buffy felt herself falling, lost in a cloud of black while faraway scents began to tickle her nose. Mmmm, leather, she thought drowsily...

"Buffy!"

It was louder this time, the grip harder, and this time, the Slayer batted it away, her forehead creasing into a frown as her lip jutted into a pout. "Said to wake me when we got there," she argued sleepily. "All nice and comfy here."

She felt the vibration under her cheek as it rippled across her skin and down her spine, waking her body with icy tingles before becoming audible to her ear. "Have to remember that," she heard. It took a moment for the baritone to register, but when it did, Buffy shot straight up, suddenly awake, suddenly alert, and suddenly staring into Spike's amused blue eyes.

"Have a nice nap, luv?" he asked, and, this time there was no mistaking the chuckle in his voice, or the curl of his lip as his tongue ran along the edge of his teeth.

Her head turned to see Willow on her other side, the young redhead's gaze wide. "Does this mean we're there?" Buffy asked, as calmly as she could, deliberately sliding herself away from any further contact with the vampire, ignoring his laughter as it floated to her ear.

"Just about," Willow replied. "Colin said it's around the next bend."

"Colin...?"

The witch nodded toward the driver, and Buffy's gaze shifted forward, noting the Council guy who'd been at Spike's crypt chatting with Tara in the front seat. Well, more like chatting at her. She seemed to be doing everything she could not to fall asleep in front of him. Poor thing, the Slayer thought. She's just too nice to say no.

When they'd landed at the airstrip, deciding who was going to ride with whom had taken longer than anyone had anticipated, since both the Council guys accompanying them insisted that Buffy had to travel with Spike in order to protect the rest from the vampire. "For the last time," she'd argued. "He. Can't. Hurt. You."

But they hadn't listened, and it had been up to the rest of the gang to divvy up the remaining seats.
Xander, Anya, and Giles filed into one car, while the rest of them piled into the second. As Buffy had squeezed into the back, placing herself next to Spike at the Council guy's---Colin's---request, she was grateful that she had listened to Travers' limitation to one bag per person. The trunk of the car had been absolutely tiny, with barely enough room for their luggage as it was, and with the interior just as small, the option of placing any extra on the floor was out of the question.

She had fallen asleep almost right away, the gentle rocking of the car and the complete absence of light outside making it inevitable. All her protestations on the plane about needing rest had been in vain, because no matter what she'd done, Buffy couldn't get comfortable, all too aware of Spike's presence, her body betraying her with its own desire for some type of physical activity. It had taken ages for her adrenalin to ebb, and by the time it had, the vamp's incessant whistling was doing everything it could to keep her awake. She hadn't called him on it, but the young woman couldn't help but believe he'd done it on purpose, choosing the most annoying way possible to drive her crazy without actually stepping out of line. Stupid vampire.

Purposely ignoring the male presence at her side, Buffy leaned to look out Willow's window, wondering how it was possible it could be even darker now than when they'd landed. "Where are we?" she asked, her brow furrowing. "How come I don't see any houses or streetlights or anything?"

Behind her, Spike snorted. "You're in the middle of bleedin' nowhere, pet," he drawled. "Welcome to the Highlands."

Her eyes widened as they rounded a curve and the sudden scratching of tree branches across the window sent a dull screech throughout the car, startling her into jerking backward and landing quite effectively against Spike's chest again. "I thought they drove on the other side of the road in England," she said slowly, easing herself away from him.

"They do," Willow replied.

"So, if they drive on the left side, how come we just hit something on the right side?"

"Actually, we're on what we consider a B road here in Britain," Colin offered from the front. "And in a rural area such as this, they often go down to just one lane."

"One lane?" Buffy repeated in alarm. "What happens if a car comes from the other direction?"

"There are passing areas to pull into, to allow oncoming traffic to go by without barring their way," he explained further. "But, in an area such as this, it's actually quite rare to utilize them."

"And people wonder why I don't drive," the Slayer muttered.

"Here we are!" Colin announced, easing the car to a gentle stop.

"And here is...?" Buffy murmured, peering out into the night sky, trying to discern anything other than the big, black, blobby things that seemed to loom on the horizon.

As he lifted the hand brake, the Council member turned around to smile at the two girls in the back seat, doing his best at the same time to ignore the blond vampire in the corner. "This would be Dall Rath." He stiffened as Spike laughed, a short bark of derision that hit the windows in serrated edges, only to bounce back and fill the small space of the car. "Pardon?"

"Please tell me it was already named that," the vampire asked, leveling an azure gaze at the other man that made him shrink back in disquiet.
"Actually..." he stammered, "...we...the Council...named it. It was unknown until we came along."

When Spike shook his head and rolled his eyes, Buffy frowned. "What's so funny?" she demanded. "Dall Rath sounds like a perfectly normal-sounding name. Well, for being in a foreign country."

"Oh, it's a bloody great name," he replied. "As long as you don't speak Gaelic." His gaze returned to Colin. "You wankers have a twisted sense of humor."

"Why don't you let us be the judge of that?" Buffy asked. "Or is this just another story you're going to hold back on telling me?"

He hesitated for only a moment. "Seems your bosses have decided to drop us off smack dab in the middle of what they've dubbed, 'Blind Luck.'" He couldn't help his smile as her eyes widened and she turned to stare at the driver in disbelief.

The Watcher blushed, pulling his keys out of the ignition as he hastened to open his car door. "We really must be getting inside," he rushed, avoiding the stares of the three girls as he got out and scurried to the rear of the vehicle.

"Knew I should've jumped from the plane," Buffy said under her breath, sliding across the seat to exit the car behind Willow. She had half-turned to help Colin with the bags when she was stopped by her friend's soft gasp.

"Oh, my," the redhead breathed.

"What is it...?" she started to ask, only to have her own jaw drop as her hazel gaze fixed on what had captured the other girl's attention.

She had seen them in books, watched them in movies, but none of that quite prepared Buffy for the sight of the castle that now loomed in front of them, its weathered stone walls rising in august majesty to melt into the night sky. It didn't seem to end; in either direction, a low wall stretched in gentle curves to surround what looked like an inner building, a square block with twin towers that were crumbling from disuse. There were few windows, and what were there consisted of small, tiny squares devoid of glass, blacker even then the heavens overhead, and for a fleeting moment, she wondered if anyone was actually at home.

Spike watched her reaction in amusement, swinging his bag over his shoulder as the three girls just stood in silent awe. "Don't be goin' all rosy on me now, Slayer," he drawled as he sauntered to her side. "If they're just renovating this place, it's goin' to look a helluva lot prettier on the outside than on the in."

"I'm afraid he's right," Colin offered as Buffy turned a curious gaze back to look at him. "It most definitely lacks some of the...amenities I'm sure you're accustomed to." The sweep of headlights across the path gave the Watcher the diversion he was so desperate for, and the group watched as the other car came to a halt.

"Where's Giles?" Buffy asked as Xander and Anya emerged from the vehicle.

"That's right, you were asleep," said Tara.

"We dropped Giles off," Willow added. "He's not staying here with us."

"Yes," Colin interjected, cutting off the Slayer's words before she could start. "Unfortunately, accommodations are rather limited here at Dall Rath, and since we already have one Watcher on site, it was decided Mr. Giles would stay at a bed and breakfast in the local village. No need to
worry. He will be here during the day to help organize and research and such."

"So who's the stuffed shirt we've gotten saddled with this time?"

She could see his blush, even in the darkness. "That would be me."

"OK, am I the only one here dying to paint his face blue?" Xander asked as he approached the group, the enthusiasm in his voice belying the exhaustion in his shoulders.

At their confused frowns, Anya rolled her eyes. "Braveheart," she explained. "That's all he's been talking about since somewhere over Greenland."

"Ah, the film, of course." Colin grew thoughtful. "Actually, you might find it interesting to know that it's highly unlikely William Wallace ever painted his face for his battles, although Pictish warriors were reported to paint their bodies---."

"And as fascinating as the history lesson is," Buffy interrupted, "I'm freezing my Slayer tushie off here. You think we might, maybe, move this inside?"

"Right. Well, then." Colin slammed the trunk closed and tossed a quick smile toward the girls. "Onward and upward."

* * *

"Lemme guess," Buffy said, as they stood in blackness and listened to the Watcher stumble around. "Lights are one of those extra amena-thingies that the castle's short on."

"Well, not lights per se," the Englishman replied. There was the distinct sound of the flick of a lighter, and a tiny orange flame illuminated his face as they watched him reach for a candelabra that stood on a nearby table. "More like a...centralized power system."

"But if there's no power, how is there heat?" This came from Willow, and there was no mistaking the anxiety in her voice.

"Ah, well, that's a...very good question." His hand tremored slightly as he lit each of the wicks, but his mouth remained closed, looking for all intents and purposes that he was done speaking.

"Which deserves a very good answer," Buffy prompted.

Colin cleared his throat. "Well, as this is a very old castle, and we were really only in the beginnings of our renovations, there isn't any central heating in place yet. However," he hurried as he saw the looks of indignation spread throughout the group, even in the flickering candlelight, "we have equipped the bedrooms with their own space heaters and plenty of blankets for sleeping. The great hall, which is located behind us, has a large fireplace that will be stoked throughout the day. That is where we see most of your time being spent...researching, meeting, eating, and the like. When you're not out trying to find...what got out," he finished awkwardly. He began walking down the corridor, his heels clicking on the stone floor. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you your quarters."

The dull orange from the tapers bounced against the crevices in the walls, refracting the light into eerie shadows across the Scoobies' faces as they tagged after the Watcher. At the end of the hall, Colin pulled open a heavy door to reveal a narrow, spiral staircase. "The wing we've renovated is just above us," he instructed. "There are three bedrooms prepared for you, two doubles on the first floor---."
"I thought we were on the first floor," Buffy interrupted.

"You're in Britain now, pet," Spike said from behind her. "And here, this is the ground floor."

"And the second floor is really the first floor?" she queried, unable to mask her confusion as she glanced back at the vampire for confirmation.

"You got it." He grinned. "Ain't life grand?"

"Yes, well, like I was saying," Colin continued. "There are two doubles on the first floor and a single on the second that have been readied for your arrival."

"Just three rooms?" asked Xander. "How does that work? I mean, there's one for me and Ahn, one for Tara and Willow---."

Buffy's eyes widened. Of course there were only three rooms. The Council hadn't wanted Xander and Anya to even come so why would they make anything ready for them? Crap. "And one for me and Spike!" she hastened to finish, meeting her friend's perplexed eyes with a guileless smile. She was not going to have his feelings get hurt just because Travers couldn't possibly understand his contribution to the gang. "Because they need me to keep an eye on him, to...make sure he stays out of trouble."

The vampire watched as the color jumped into the Slayer's cheeks, her anxiety in keeping up her pretense that Harris was a useful member of the fold causing her heart to race as she buried herself in the lie. Not that he was going to argue with keeping up the charade now, not if it meant sharing sleeping arrangements, having her within arm's reach, where all he had to do was turn around and see her whenever his unbeating heart desired.

"Oh, yeah," Spike added. "Apparently this is my punishment for pretendin' to jump ol' Colin here. Council blokes don't trust me not to eat the lot of you."

"But we know that's not true," Xander argued.

"And since when does that make a difference with the Council?" she said lightly. "Besides, it's no big. You guys take the doubles and I'll have the single." She laughed. "It's not like he's going to be in my bed or anything. Plus, he doesn't get cold so I get all his blankets. I'm going to be just fine."

"Um, what about b-b-bathrooms?" Tara asked.

Spike laughed. "In a castle? They don't have heat and you think you're goin' to have a walk-in bloody shower?"

"There is a toilet on the first floor for communal use," Colin explained. "We ensured that almost right away."

"But what about washing up?" Buffy shifted the weight of her bag in her hand as she stared at their supposed leader. "I mean, I'm hardly expecting to be able to take a bubble bath, but things are going to get pretty rank around here if we don't get to shower some time in the next three weeks."

"Each bedroom is supplied with its own tub and toiletries, and we have made arrangements for the woman we've hired to do the cooking to also fulfill your water needs for any bathing you wish. Of course, it'll have to happen during the day when she's here. At night, we will be pretty much left to
our own devices."

"In our room?" she repeated.

"Yes."

Spike grinned. This was getting better and better. He had to remember to add Quentin Travers to his Christmas card list. The man just made his undead lifetime.

* * *

She deliberately avoided his gaze as she cupped her hand around the flame, making sure the candle didn't extinguish before she could light the other wicks. "OK, we're going to have some ground rules here," she said. "And the first argument you make about them, I'm going to stake you and say to hell with the Council and this stupid demon they let out."

"Sure, pet, whatever you say." Spike lounged against the wooden headboard of the bed, legs stretched out in front of him, hands folded behind his head. Actually, rundown castle or not, the room wasn't bad, definitely a step up from the crypt, not that he cared about that sort of thing. Furnishings were sparse—the bed, the screen that cordoned off the corner for a dressing/washing area, the ornate wardrobe that now housed the contents of their luggage—but the walls had character, carvings made into some of the stones as if to provide permanent artwork for its occupants to enjoy. The sconces were, if not original, then very nearly, the tarnishing of years of exposure only adding to their rustic charm as they swept into a curlicue that housed the tapers. The renovations had even gone so far as to include glass in the small, high window, so that some of the Scottish chill could be kept at bay.

She turned to finally see him and pursed her lips. "Off the bed," she ordered. "That's rule one. Bed equals Buffy's. Got it?"

He smiled as he swung his legs over the edge of the mattress and stood. "Obviously, you got it," he drawled. "Where do you expect me to sleep?"

"You get the floor."

"Figures," he muttered, glancing down at the worn stone.

"Rule two. Buffy takes a bath, Spike leaves the room."

He folded his arms over his chest. "What if Spike doesn't want to leave the room?"

"Spike gets staked."

"Why do I think all my questions are goin' to get answered with, 'Spike gets staked'?"

"Because they probably are."

"Do I get to make any rules in this little scenario?" he asked.

"No."

His teeth clicked together. "Then maybe Harris and I should have a little chat," he said, and took a step toward the door.

She had moved before he could even blink, grabbing his arm and whirling him around to face her before he could get any closer. "I told you not to tell him," Buffy said.
"And I haven't," he retorted, "but if you're going to be such a bitch about this, then I don't see any reason why I have to play nice."

"I'm not---." She bit back the words, feeling the familiar rush that fighting with Spike always gave her, and gritted her teeth. "Fine. You can make a rule. One rule."

She still hadn't let go of his forearm, and Spike glanced down at the delicate curl of her fingers around his flesh, noting with satisfaction the white of her fingertips as she held him firm. Her anger was a solid thrum against his skin, and when his azure gaze rose back up to meet hers, there was no denying the darkening of the irises, hazel almost completely swallowed by the black of her pupils. "Only need one," he finally replied. "But you're not goin' to like it."

"That's a big shocker. Since when is there anything about you I do like?"

"Oh, I dunno. You seemed to be OK with me while we were playin' cards. It was only the after bit that pissed you off."

"That's because for a while there you were almost acting human."

"Funny, I could've said the same thing about you, pet."

Her grip tightened on his arm as Buffy fought to control her anger. "What's your rule, Spike?"

His platinum head tilted as his lip curled. "Only one way I can get a good sleep," he said. "And that's if I sleep in the buff...Buff."

Her hand jerked back as if burned. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "You are not going commando in my room!"

"Our room. And too bad. That's my rule."

"You take your clothes off," she threatened, "and I will stake you."

Spike chuckled, and took a step toward her, inhaling deeply of the scents that were rising from her skin. "See, that's where I think you're all talk," he murmured, blue eyes sweeping over the flush of her face, stopping for a moment on the curve of her lip before lifting back up to meet her gaze. "'Cause if you stake me, your whole deal with the Council gets shot to hell, and your mum doesn't get the help she so richly deserves, and it'll be...all. Your. Fault." He watched as the doubt began to creep into her brow, the tiny lines etching themselves in shadow. "But, just for you, I'll forgo my one rule. Let you have a trade instead."

"What do you want?"

"The bed."

"I am not sleeping on the floor!"

"Didn't say you had to, luv." He knew he was pushing it, could see the fury glittering in her eyes, but the prospect was just too delicious not to put forward. To be honest, he had no idea how she was going to respond. If she was smart, she'd beat him within an inch of his undead life and put him in his place, or at least, what she considered was his place. But...and his palms itched as he drank in the aroma of the sweat that was pouring from her body, not visibly but in those dark, private areas that he had only dreamed of. Even if Buffy never admitted it, there was no way he was wrong about what being around him did to her. Could be all she needed was a little persuading.
"You can even have all the blankets," he offered. "Not like I need 'em. Hell, I'll sleep on top of them if you want. That way, you don't have to worry about tainting your precious Slayer skin with mine."

It was all he could do to hide his surprise when she answered. "And you'll stay dressed?"

"I'll even put on more clothes if you want."

"And you won't say a word to Xander and Anya?"

"Cross my heart and hope to not get staked."

"And if anyone asks, you say you slept on the floor."

"Curled up at your lily-white feet."

"I can't believe I'm agreeing to this," Buffy muttered as she turned away.

Spike smiled. Neither can I, luv, he thought. Neither can I.

* * *

Her eyes refused to stay closed, and Buffy stared at the shadows that were cast by the candles she'd insisted remained lit. Oh, look, she thought. There's a vampire. And that one's a stake...and, oh, that one kinda looks like Principal Snyder. She grimaced at the memory. Definitely need some sleep, she decided. When I'm playing Guess-the-picture with the shadows on the wall, it's definitely past my bedtime.

It wasn't like she wasn't warm enough. True to his word, Spike let her have all of the bedcoverings, laying on his side on top of the uppermost comforter, effectively tucking them around her like a cocoon. He wasn't even facing her. She could feel his hard back against her shoulders, the curve of his buttocks against hers. OK, that last part wasn't quite so distinct, not with four blankets between them, but still, she could tell he was there, and that it was unquestionably not his front that was pressing into her. Which was good. Except for the fact that she still couldn't sleep.

I shouldn't have slept in the car, she grumbled. That's my problem. I'm just not tired enough. Plus, unfamiliar bed. That doesn't help. What did she do when she couldn't sleep back home? Oh, yeah. She slayed things. And the only undead thing she could get her hands on at the moment, she unfortunately needed to keep alive for the time being, so that pretty much killed that idea. Shit. Sighing, Buffy closed her eyes, hoping one last time that they'd stay like that until morning.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Scoobies have arrived at Dall Rath to discover limited accommodations, leaving Buffy and Spike forced to share a room…

Jet lag was a bitch in high-heel shoes who insisted on tap dancing on his skull, and nothing Spike could do would get rid of, or even ease, the dull ache behind his eyes, or the blanket of needles that wrapped itself around his still wakeful body. Of course, the fact that he was still awake probably had more to do with the sleeping Slayer beside him than an eight-hour time difference---not that he was complaining about that aspect, not in the slightest---but it didn't mean he had to like what flying long distances always did to him. They couldn't have been digging around in Mexico or something, he grumbled to himself as he shifted his hips yet again in an attempt to get comfortable. At least that's on the same bleedin' continent.

His one small consolation was that Buffy had had just as much trouble falling asleep as he was, although her slow, even breathing now indicated that she had finally managed to succeed. He knew she hadn't slept on the plane, but her stubborn need to fake it had meant he could watch her unmolested, reveling in the graceful curve of her cheek as she rested her head against the seat, consumed by the lines of her legs as they stretched out before her.

Those same legs now pressed against his, indirectly of course, through too many sodden' blankets, but there nonetheless. At some point in the past half hour, Buffy had rolled over so that now her front faced him, her warm breath an erotic tickle on the back of his neck, an unnerving rhythm of in and out that beat in time with the throbbing in his cock. OK, so that was reason number three for his own current wakeful state. How in hell he ever thought he could handle being in such close proximity with the Slayer without being driven around the bend from the torture was beyond him. Stupid git, always thinking with the wrong head.

Although there was still no indication of light from the lone window, Spike knew that it was approaching dawn, the demon within long since practiced in sensing the sunrise. The candles had burned down quite low, leaving the room in an earthy dusk that prompted memories from long ago, and he decided then and there that if he wasn't going to sleep, he might as well get up. Most likely, the Slayer and her little friends would want to go exploring later in the day, and since even Scottish sun was deadly to him---even if it did so rarely poke out its head this time of year---that would leave him with plenty of time to catch up on rest.

The bed creaked as he swung his legs around, his boots hitting the stone floor with an audible thud that seemed to reverberate through the stillness of the bedroom. When the tiny moan came whispering from behind him, Spike froze, daring to glance over his shoulder to see if Buffy still slept. If he woke her up now, she'd be in a bitch of a mood with a yen to take it out on the nearest body…namely, his…and the thought of a pre-breakfast beating didn't exactly appeal.

Her lashes were dark against the shadow of her skin, and he felt his mouth soften as his gaze swept over the arc of her brow, the fine bone structure that was the sculpture of her face. How was it possible she was even more beautiful in repose? Actually, that answer was simple. Sleeping was the only time she wasn't looking at him in either distaste, anger, or frustration. Sleep softened her,
made it possible for him to fantasize that she could ever house positive feelings for him. Sleep was a time for dreams.

Spike let his shoulders flatten against the mattress, his right leg swinging back up to the bed so that he lay on his back, head turned so that he could just watch her for a few more stolen moments. The gentle movement of her eyes beneath her lids told him she was dreaming, and the soft curve of her lips meant that it was a good one, something that brought her pleasure, something that…

Unbidden, his hand stole up to brush a stray lock of hair from her cheek, the lightest of touches as his fingertips flitted across her skin. It was automatic, an impulse he doubted he could've stifled even if he'd wanted to, but though he instantly started chastising himself for such idiocy as to actually touch the Slayer in her sleep, Spike's simple gesture was rewarded with a satisfied groan from the back of her throat as she turned just ever so slightly into the touch. His slight frown was immediately replaced by a quirk of his lips, and he let his fingers stay, the tips tangling in the golden tresses while his thumb began gently stroking her cheekbone.

The urge to kiss her was overwhelming, but that was one impulse the vampire knew he couldn't indulge, not if he wanted to make it to breakfast without having to go down in a dustbag. But he could watch…and he could touch…and he could pretend, for just a few seconds, that she was actually his…

"Mmmm," murmured Buffy, eyes still closed, still adrift in slumber. She began moving her head against his hand, allowing herself to be petted like some sleeping tigress, encouraging it further when she turned to rest her cheek more fully in his palm, sighing as she did so. "Riley…"

His body froze, the illusion shattered, and Spike's lips pursed as the other man's name hung between them. Of course. Dreaming of the boyfriend. What else could he have expected? Although, he guessed it could've been worse. She could've said Angel.

As carefully as he could manage, the vamp disengaged his hand from her hair, drawing it back as he slid himself off the bed. Her reaction to his absence was immediate, her eyes opening, blinking in vague confusion. Spike glanced at her over his shoulder as he strode to the wardrobe. "Sorry 'bout that," he said, voice crisp and matter of fact. "Didn't mean to snap you out of Soldier Boy slumberland."

"Wha…?" Buffy frowned, sitting up as she rubbed at her eyes. "I wasn't dreaming about Riley. Least I don't think so."

"You said his name, ducks. If that's not dreamin', I don't even wanna know." He kept his back to her, taking his time to pull out a clean t-shirt. He didn't want to look at her, didn't want to see the disgust on her face. There would be enough of that in the weeks to come; no reason to subject himself to it now if he didn't have to. "You should go back to sleep," he added. "It's still dark outside. Others won't be up for a couple hours yet."

"What're you going to do?"

Spike shrugged. "Thought I'd do a bit of explorin'. See what passes as a castle these days."

Buffy watched as the vampire reached over his shoulders, grabbing the cotton of his shirt to tug it over his head, exposing alabaster muscles that looked as if they'd been carved with the most delicate of chisels, before tapering down to the slimness of his waist, disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans with promises of even more glory. Her eyes widened. Knowing the blond vampire was strong was one thing; seeing the evidence in the sculpture of his muscles was something else. Even Riley, with all his commando training and obsessive workout routines, didn't
Shoving the blankets off, the Slayer swung her legs around, setting her bare feet down on the stone, only to yank them back with a small squeal. Cold. Freezing. Should've packed slippers. "Mind tossing me some socks?" she asked. "Cause these little piggies are not getting out again without cover."

Spike glanced back just in time to see her shove her feet back under the covers, and frowned. "Don't tell me you're gettin' up," he said. "You just fell asleep."

"I'm your leash, remember? You go wandering around, and the wrong somebody sees you? You're going to end up getting swept under the rug, and I'm going to get yelled at by Travers. So, hand me socks, because it is cold out there."

"Don't need a fuckin' babysitter," he muttered, but got them anyway, turning to toss them to the blonde on the bed, his annoyance shining in his blue eyes.

Were it not for Slayer speed, Buffy would've missed them, the sight of Spike's bare chest—ohmigod look at those pecs—taking her by surprise. Just as nice as the back, just as…She could feel her mouth open, and quickly snapped it shut, tearing her gaze away to concentrate on getting her socks on, the simple action suddenly the most important thing in the world right now. Naked Spike bad, she scolded herself. Stupid annoying vampire, remember? Can't even duck when someone tosses chocolate at him? And you've got a boyfriend…a cute, attentive, breathing boyfriend. Emphasis on breathing. Even if he's not quite as…

Spike saw the sudden rise in color in Buffy's face and tilted his head as he watched her become too absorbed in the minutiae of putting on her socks. Now what the hell had spooked her so? he wondered. Unless she just remembered her dream. He rolled his eyes, turning back away to slide the fresh shirt over his head. If she brings him up again, I swear the silly bint won't have to stake me. I'll do it myself.

It was better when she stood up, no more cold toes, no more naked Spike. Life could return to normal…well, as normal as it was going to get being stuck sharing a room with a vampire in a castle in the middle of Scotland. Actually, considering how her life usually went, this didn't seem so out of the ordinary at all.

"Did you have anything specific in mind?" she asked, ignoring him as she brushed past to stand before the wardrobe. "Or are we going to be all Stanley and Livingstone and just wander around?"

His eyes narrowed as he watched her extract a sweater and jeans from her side of the wardrobe. "Interesting analogy, Slayer," he drawled. "Which one do you want to be?"

"Why?"

"'Cause Livingstone disappeared."

She smiled wickedly, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye as she strode to the screened-off portion of the room. "Then I want to be Stanley."

He couldn't help his grin. "Stanley's the one who found him."

"Figures," she snorted from behind the divider. "That's not any different to you and me now. You get in trouble, I get you out of it."

"Yeah, 'cept when he found him, he didn't go back." He could hear her changing, saw the clothes
drop to the floor, and resisted the urge to slide his body over so that he could steal a peek behind the panel. When she emerged, pulling her hair out from underneath her collar, he added, "They went off exploring together 'til Livingstone died."

"Even more of a reason for me to be Stanley." She picked up her shoes and perched herself on the edge of the bed. "You get to be the one who dies."

"Already dead, luv."

"You never answered my question, though."

"There was a question in there somewhere?"

Buffy sighed, rising to her feet. "Where did you want to go exploring?"

"There's only one place in castles worth explorin'." His smile was wicked, his blue eyes dancing. "The dungeons."

* * *

When the candles went out the first time, Buffy realized that she had never been placed in such utter blackness before, the complete absence of light chilling as it sucked in around her. The sounds of Spike reaching for his lighter echoed in the narrow corridor, magnifying to proportions she knew were unrealistic, and she found herself holding her breath, doing everything she could not to add to the eeriness of the small space.

"First thing we tell that new Watcher," the vampire said as the wicks caught the flame, "is he needs to go and buy some bloody torches."

"I think this is the first time I've ever been glad you smoked," Buffy commented as she started walking down the corridor again. She poked her head through an opening to her left, her brow wrinkling into a frown. "When we were driving in," she asked, "did you see these hollow hills Giles was talking about?"

"Didn't see much of anything," he drawled, trailing along behind her. "Too dark." And too busy looking at you, he added silently.

"I'm just wondering if we're going in the right direction. This place is a maze down here." She stopped, looking back at him, noticing how the flickering candlelight made the planes of his face seem deeper, his eyes darker. "Maybe we should head back."

"What's wrong, Slayer? Afraid some big nasty's goin' to jump out and bite you?" Fuck, why did he do this to himself?

"Nooooo, more afraid of missing breakfast because we've managed to get ourselves lost."

He rolled his eyes. "Always thinkin' with your stomach." He brushed past her, holding the candles in front of him as he swept the light across their path. "And we're not lost."

"And you know this because…?" She scurried to catch up with him, the absence of the illumination sending shivers over her skin.

"Because we've gone in one big circle." Spike nodded toward the staircase that stood before them. Buffy scowled. "Well…shit." Glancing back over her shoulder, she began tapping her foot against
the stone. "How did we do that?"

"I believe it's called four right turns." He tilted his head, watching her consternation. "Ready to go back?"

"I was only half-serious," she murmured, and turned to look at the vamp with a small frown. "From what we've seen, can you figure out what's got the Council so uptight about this place?"

"You're askin' my opinion?" There was no hiding the incredulity in his voice.

"You're the only one down here other than me. And since I already know what I think…"

"Then, nope. I've got no idea what's got their knickers all in a twist."

"And double-shit," Buffy muttered. "Why do I keep feeling that the Council's just playing us?"

"Not to have it soundin' like I'm on their side and all," Spike said, "but maybe we should give them a chance to explain everything. We are kinda jumpin' the gun here by goin' off on our own."

She smiled, and he realized that it was the first genuine smile she'd given him since playing cards on the plane. "And William the Bloody decides to join the team!" she exclaimed. "Now that is something I wish Giles could've seen."

"I am not!" His glare was furious, brows knitted together, as flashes of gold speckled in his eyes. "You take that back!"

"Next thing you know, it'll be you and Xander as patrol buddies." She laughed as she brushed past him, a silver tinkle in the musty air. "And Willow will be asking you to help on spells." She stopped halfway up the stairs, grinning back at him. "I bet if you asked Giles really nicely, he'd even get you a white hat."

"Now that's hittin' below the belt, Slayer," Spike growled, his own feet stomping up the stairs after her. Not a fuckin' Scooby, he thought. No matter how much I love the girl.

* * *

Waking early wasn't nearly as difficult for Colin as he suspected it would be for the rest of the group; his two day stint in Sunnydale had not given him nearly enough time for his body clock to re-adjust itself, whereas the Slayer and her friends were still running eight hours behind. It was probably just as well. The woman from the village---why could he never remember her name?---never arrived before eight, which would ensure that the vampire would be firmly ensconced in his room upstairs, hiding away from the sunlight, and no uncomfortable explanations would have to be issued. As it was, Colin himself was being held responsible for supplying Spike with his food, making the necessary trips into the local butcher to retrieve the blood they'd requested be available on a regular schedule. Under no circumstances did the Watcher want the vampire to even think about looking for dinner elsewhere. He understood Buffy and the others believed Spike when it came to the effectiveness of the government chip in his head, but until he saw it for himself, Colin was going to play it safe, carrying the bottle of holy water in his jacket pocket at all times just in case there was a recurrence of what had happened in the Sunnydale cemetery. It still gave him shudders to consider how close he'd come to actually being attacked, even armed, and the thing that bothered him most about it was that the Slayer had just stood there and let it happen. Quentin Travers was one of Buffy Summers' staunchest supporters within the Council---contrary to what Colin knew Rupert Giles believed---stating that she was one of the strongest Slayers they had been privileged to train in
decades. But the young woman's rather curious relationships with those around her made her weak in this Watcher's perspective, and he fully intended to keep a close eye on her.

The sound of laughter captured his attention, and Colin halted in his path to the great hall, watching as the door to the dungeons flew open and Buffy herself came bouncing up. She spotted the Englishman right away and tossed him a bright smile. "Mornin'!"

His mouth opened to respond, and then froze as the platinum head appeared in the doorway, a thunderous scowl on the vampire's features. "Told you to take it back!" Spike called after her retreating form, boots thudding heavily on the stone floor as he marched after her.

Slowly, Colin's mouth closed, the lines deepening in his forehead. Yes, will most definitely keep an eye on her, he thought. And Spike as well. Most peculiar…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Scoobies. Scotland. The Council. And Spike's along for the ride…

Even in the crisp light of early morning, the castle still seemed dark to Buffy as she climbed the spiral staircase to the second floor. First floor, she quickly amended. Gotta remember that here, two equals one and one equals ground, and what the hell have I gotten myself into? She would've thought that being around Giles for the past five years would've helped in the culture shock of actually being on his home turf, but for the first time, the young woman was beginning to realize just how Americanized her Watcher had really become, in spite of all their jokes to the contrary. If it weren't for Spike and his translations, she would've been completely lost already, and if that wasn't proof that all wasn't right in the world, she didn't know what was.

He was downstairs right now, rummaging around in the kitchen, trying to help Colin get some type of breakfast thrown together for the gang because the woman the Council had hired hadn't shown up yet. The Watcher had practically begged Buffy to stay and help, brown eyes wide in fear as he kept glancing over at the vampire, but as soon as the towel had caught on fire---some kind of weird chain reaction thing from splattering sausage grease on the gas stove---Spike had kicked her out, claiming she was more of a menace than she was worth, leaving her to entertain herself in the great hall until Colin had come out and asked her to wake the others.

Maybe it's just the stairs, Buffy thought, glancing back down at them as she emerged onto the next floor. The stairwell itself was extremely narrow, allowing only one person to go up at a time, with steps so narrow even her small foot only half-fit on them and so steep that more than once she had caught her toe because she hadn't lifted her leg high enough to make it completely. There was no proper handrail; instead, along the outer wall, a coiled rope was looped through hooks in the stone, but because they were placed every few feet, it wasn't taut, and offered little support when someone occasionally stumbled…which she quite often did. Just like training, she thought determinedly. New physical challenges just means reconditioning the way my body thinks. I can do that. It's only a set of stairs.

The corridor she stepped into wasn't nearly as gloomy as it had appeared when they'd arrived, sunshine streaming in through the few high-placed windows that lined the wall. With the benefit of natural light, Buffy could see the years of erosion that pocked the uneven stonework, its rough texture just begging to be touched, and decided it looked much better by day than it did by night. Not that it was wiggins-worthy when it was dark, but knowing what was around her, what the layout of the place was, was definitely of the good.

Although there was a row of doors down the hall, she knew from dropping them off last night that her friends were in the first two, and knocked on the nearest, foot tapping impatiently as she waited for Xander to open it. The sounds seemed to get swallowed in the vast length of the place, disappearing into the floor as if the building was starved for it, and slowly her rhythm stopped, the young woman suddenly all too conscious of being alone. She knocked again, harder this time. "Xander?" she called. "Time to rise and time to shine!"
This time, she heard noises from within, the faint scuffling of shoes along the floor and the low murmurs of Anya's voice. Within moments, the door opened to reveal a disheveled Xander, eyes squinting from the sudden exposure to light. "It is entirely unnatural that you're awake at this hour," he grumbled.

"What? It's almost nine-thirty. We let you guys sleep in."

"Nine-thirty?" He glanced at his wrist, only to realize he wasn't wearing a watch. "In the morning? How is that possible?"

"Well, the earth does this turny thing around the sun---."

"Xander, shut the door! You're letting in a draft!" Anya's voice filtered from inside the room, and Buffy bit back her grin as her friend automatically narrowed the gap, using his body to block the warmer air from escaping.

"Breakfast is in ten," she said. "And Colin wants a meeting after we eat to talk about everything."

He nodded, his lids already starting to droop. "Ten. Got it."

One down, Buffy thought as he closed the door, and one to go. She had barely raised her hand to rap at the second room, however, when it opened and an already dressed Willow stepped out with Tara right behind. "Don't bother," the redhead said tiredly. "We're up."

The Slayer grimaced. "God, Will, didn't you guys get any sleep?"

She shook her head. "For being a castle, it's got walls like tissue paper."

It took her a moment, but then Buffy's eyes widened, and she glanced over her shoulder at the room she'd just left. "Through stone?" she exclaimed. "Are they really that loud?"

"Louder."

"Guess I'm glad my room's on the third floor then, even if I do have to share with Spike."

"You know," Willow's face creased into a frown, "you don't have to do that. I'm sure Xander would understand if we explained it to him. Then, he could share with Spike and you could share with Anya---."

"And you could get a good night's sleep," Buffy finished with a smile.

She blushed. "I'm just saying, maybe we should rethink the whole keeping them in the dark thing. Unless…you want to share with Spike."

As she headed back to the staircase, Willow and Tara exchanged a puzzled look, before the
redhead said, "Sure, Buffy, whatever you say."

* * *

When they walked into the great hall, the food was spread out on the table, platters of sausages, bacon, and scrambled eggs dotted amidst the empty dishes. The girls' eyes widened, glancing quickly at Spike as he walked in from the adjoining kitchen with a covered bowl and a steaming mug. "You c-c-cook?" Tara asked.

"Don't sound so bloody surprised," he commented, setting down the last dish. Carefully skirting the sunlight that streamed in through the windows, he strolled over to a chair in the corner, tucked carefully away in shadows, blowing gently at the cup he still held. "Just 'cause my food of choice happens to be of the red liquid variety, doesn't mean I can't enjoy other culinary experiences."

"Besides," Buffy chirped, sliding into one of the seats, "he didn't do all of it. I made the sausages."

"No, you made a mess," Spike retorted. "Colin made the sausages."

"I thought Colin said they'd hired a woman to do the cooking," commented Willow.

"They did. She never showed." Lifting the cover of the bowl, the Slayer frowned. "Is this baked beans?"

"Last I checked," the vampire replied.

"For breakfast?"

He sighed, exasperated. "Look, the sooner you stop questioning every little thing you don't get, the happier I'm goin' to be, 'cause I did not sign on to this gig to be your live-in travel guide, got it?" He sipped at his drink. "And yes, baked beans for breakfast. What you're lookin' at is a traditional English spread, minus the mushrooms and fried bread 'cause Watcher Boy is still workin' on those."

"Who is he expecting to eat all this food?" Buffy mused, spearing a sausage on her fork and placing it on her plate. "There's enough here to feed Mongolia."

"A good solid breakfast is the best foundation for a productive day," Colin stated as he marched in with two more platters of food. "And we have a very busy one ahead of us. Lots of issues to cover, roles to delegate, jobs to assign, and so forth."

"I don't suppose one of those jobs is a shopping job," the Slayer said.

"Shopping?" He frowned. "Why on earth do you need to go shopping?"

In the corner, the vampire chuckled. "Lemme guess," he drawled, leveling an azure gaze at the other Englishman. "You're single, right?"

"Yes, but…" The Watcher's lips pursed into a thin line. "Why are you even here? I thought vampires slept during the day." He wasn't ready to have to be dealing with Spike today. Though he seemed to behave himself when the Slayer was around, his presence still left Colin on edge, and it was all he could do to reach for the eggs without his hands shaking.

"Still on Hellmouth time, mate. So unless you're a dab hand at sortin' out jet lag, I suggest you get used to me bein' around."
"I was thinking we should get some flashlights," Buffy volunteered. "And as long as we need to go into town, it might be kind of nice to see what it's like, maybe pick up some souvenirs."

"Oh, and I forgot conditioner," Tara interjected.

"Maybe we could meet with Giles," was Willow's contribution. "Instead of him having to come all the way out here."

Colin frowned as the three girls began running away with the conversation, his head swiveling between them as they chattered away. He could see Spike smirking in the corner, watching the whole thing in amusement, and wondered just exactly when he had lost control of the situation. This would never do. They'd only just arrived. They needed to know who was in charge here.

Before he could speak though, the door opened and the other couple came strolling in, hand in hand, looking very much like they could've used another few hours of sleep. Buffy brightened when she saw them. "Guess what, guys? Council's springing for us to go into town and get some highly needed retail therapy. Wanna come?"

When he saw the new girl---Anya, he reminded himself, the girlfriend of the other friend although for the life of him he couldn't remember the boy's name---light up and begin jabbering away with the others, Colin sighed, leaning heavily back in his chair. Apparently…the Slayer was the one in charge.

* * *

Spike heard it first, the heavy thrum as the front entrance of the castle was closed, and cocked his head as he watched the group at the table, wondering how long it would take them to notice the new arrival. He wasn't disappointed. Within seconds, Buffy had stiffened, golden head turning ever so slightly as she listened. That's my girl, he thought, his lips curling into a satisfied grin.

"You expecting company?" she asked the Watcher.

He frowned, rising to his feet. "Mr. Giles is the only one due to arrive," he said. "And that's not until later." As he reached the door, hand outstretched, it opened into him, knocking the Englishman in the head.

"Oh! Terribly sorry!"

Colin scowled in pain as he gazed at the young dark-haired man before him. "I do hope you have a very good reason for just barging in," he complained. "Because if not, you're trespassing on private property and I'll be forced to contact the local constabulary."

"Actually, I was looking for Colin Sadler." His smile was wide, effusive, and immediately ingratiating, bringing frowns to Spike and Xander's faces and smiles to the girls'.

"And you've found him, or rather, you've hit him."

"Again, so sorry."

There was an awkward pause. "And you would be…?" Colin prompted.

"Oh! Duncan. Davison." His hand shot out in a late greeting, but when it was met with a cold silence, he quickly dropped it. "You're not actually expecting me. You're expecting my aunt. Fiona Davison?"
The look of recognition relaxed the Watcher's face and he nodded his head. "That's her name," he exclaimed, and then frowned again. "Wait. Is there a problem?"

"Well...yes. There's been an accident." He rushed onward at the consternation that immediately beset the group's faces. "Oh, it's just a little break, nothing too serious. But, she can't get around right now, so when my mum found out she had this job lined up, she asked me to come up, see if maybe I could fill in for Aunt Fiona."

Colin's frown deepened. "We hired her to cook."

"Yeah..."

"And clean..."

"Yeah, I know." Duncan laughed. "I get it. You want someone local, right?"

Buffy had to stifle her giggle at the Watcher's confusion. "No, not necessarily..."

"Because I used to come spend my summers with Aunt Fiona so I do know the area, even though I don't sound like I should..."

"That's good, but..."

"And it's probably actually better for you, right? I mean, I know even I have problems sometimes understanding the accent and I grew up with it. My mum, you know, being from up here. So, I could help translate for you if you wanted. It would save you the trouble---."

"Really, it's not---."

"I think what Colin's trying to say," Buffy interrupted, "is he wasn't expecting to have a guy doing the cooking and cleaning up. Somehow, I get the feeling that's just a little too twenty-first century for him."

Duncan's smile was quizzical as he turned to look at the young blonde at the table. "Aunt Fiona said it was a bunch of Englishmen staying here," he said slowly. "She didn't mention anything about Americans, or...girls."

In his chair, Spike straightened, brows knitting as he watched the new arrival take a step closer to the table. There was no mistaking the attention this Davison chap was now focusing on the females at the table, and what made it even worse, each and every one of them seemed to be responding to it, even the two witches. The vamp's eyes flickered to Xander, and took a small bit of satisfaction at the agitation in the young man's visage, watching as he leaned just enough so that his arm fell protectively across the back of Anya's chair. At least it's not just me, he thought, his gaze returning to Duncan.

"We're only here for a few weeks," Buffy was saying. "Just...visiting, doing a little sight-seeing, you know...hanging out."

"Well, if you need a tour guide, I'd be more than happy to volunteer. I used up my holiday at work in order to come up here and help Aunt Fiona out, so I'm here for the duration anyway. I can show you all the local haunts. There's a ton of history around this part of Scotland, especially associated with this place---."

"You're well-versed in the local legends?" Colin asked, stepping back into the conversation.
Duncan started, almost as if he'd forgotten the other Englishman was even there. "Blame it on my mum and Aunt Fiona. They told so many stories while I was growing up, it was probably inevitable I'd end up studying Scottish lore at uni."

The Watcher seemed impressed with this. "And it would save us the trouble of finding someone else," he mused.

"So…are you saying you want me to stay?"

"I don't see why not," Colin replied, straightening. "You can cook, right?"

Duncan laughed. "And clean, so you don't have to worry. Aunt Fiona would never let anyone sully her good name around here." He glanced over at the table. "I've missed getting your breakfast, but I might as well start with the washing up, if you don't mind." He didn't even wait for a response, just began peeling off his coat as he headed straight for the kitchen door. "Just let me know when you're done eating and I'll come clear," he said, disappearing from the room.

Spike slumped back in his chair, his mood darkening to thunder. Something about the guy rubbed him the wrong way, probably the way the Slayer seemed to warm to him without his even having to try. He glared at her over the rim of his mug. Bitch. Doesn't know this new wanker from Adam and she flirts with him like there's no tomorrow, yet with me, it's all, I'm gonna stake you, you evil, disgusting vampire you. She's even got a boyfriend at home, even if he's not the catch of the century.

His lips tightened, and he sucked the blood from between his teeth before swallowing. At the moment, he wasn't sure who he was angrier at…Buffy, for flirting with someone who wasn't him…or the lucky bastard in the kitchen who got to be on the receiving end of it…

* * *

In the end, Buffy and Colin compromised. Since he was the only one who could feasibly drive---as it was daylight and Spike was the only other person present who'd even consider it---the Watcher agreed to take Xander and Anya into the village to get the supplies everyone needed, provided Buffy unpacked all the research materials so that when he returned, the entire group could sit down and have a thorough debriefing, right before launching into the literature. She'd wanted to argue, but the pleading exhaustion on Willow and Tara's faces convinced her not to, and when they had vanished upstairs upon the other's departure, the Slayer had found herself alone yet once again with Spike.

"Have fun," he said, as he began sauntering toward the door.

Her hazel eyes widened. "You're not helping me?" she demanded.

He stopped, tilting his head as he looked back at her over his shoulder. "Wasn't my deal," he replied.

"That doesn't mean you can't pitch in when there's work to be done."

"The witches get to rest. Why can't I?"

"You weren't up all night because of loud sex."

His eyes narrowed, and his lips curved into a shameless slash. "That could've been arranged, pet," he drawled. "All you had to do was ask."
She ignored his taunt. "What happened to that vampire constitution? You can't be tired. I've seen you go way longer without sleep."

"It's called jet lag, pet, and why the hell aren't you sufferin' from it like the rest of us?"

"Probably because my body clock is so screwed up from slaying," she replied. "Sometimes I don't know my Tuesday morning from my Saturday night. Eight hours is nothing compared to that."

Buffy glanced back at the boxes stacked in the corner before returning her gaze to his drawn face. "So...you're really not going to help me?"

Her voice had softened, and though she still looked annoyed, Spike could've sworn there was a genuine plea in her tone, his resolve vanishing in spite of his determination to stay mad at her. He sighed. "Are you askin' me to stay?" He knew it wasn't what she really wanted, though why he insisted on torturing himself like this, he had no idea. Just shut your gob and do what she says. Make your pathetic excuse of an undead life a little easier.

"The company would be...nice," Buffy replied, and the admission surprised both of them. She rushed to add, "This place gets a little creepy when you're all alone in it."

"I suppose I can always sleep during the Watcher's meeting," he said, quirking a smile and moving a small step back into the room.

"That'll be two of us then." He joined her in the laughter, and together, the pair headed for the boxes.

* * *

He heard them moving around in the great hall and stepped back away from the door, just in case one of them decided they needed to come into the kitchen for some unknown reason. Witches? Vampires? And the pretty American had mentioned something about slaying. Not your normal topics of conversation, yet the two who remained in the adjoining room bandied the terms with a nonchalance that spoke of familiarity.

Duncan's brown eyes were thoughtful as he wiped his hands on the towel. This certainly hadn't been what he'd been expecting, yet given the circumstances, he really wasn't that surprised. If nothing else, it made it all the more exciting, and if there was one thing he hungered for more than anything, it was excitement...
Two hours of Watcher-speak and Buffy still wasn't sure why the hell they were in Scotland. As she observed the proceedings from her vantage-point at the end of the table, she stifled the yawn that seemed to appear out of nowhere, ducking her head so that Colin wouldn't notice and stop his presentation yet again. Twice was enough for her. And the dirty look Giles had given her after the last interruption was not something she was ready to face again just yet, not to mention Spike's incessant chuckling from the corner behind her. It seemed that everything she did today was cracking him up.

She had to give this new Watcher credit for being prepared, though. The man had a flow chart for everything. Diagrams of the castle, maps of the outlying areas complete with color coding for what he considered the most likely areas for demon activity, even a completed calendar for the duration of their stay. That, of course, was going to get tossed out the window once he realized that she didn't work that way, but for now, Buffy was content to let him have his little fantasy that he was actually in charge.

"Now," Colin was saying, "are there any questions?"

"Let me get this straight," the Slayer said, thankful for the light at the end of the tunnel he was offering. "You guys went digging around in the dungeons, knocked a hole through the wrong wall, and now there's a back door between our dimension and this Otherworld, right?"

"Well, that's putting it a little bluntly, but, yes, generally speaking---."

"And you know something got out because all of a sudden there were these deaths in the village, but you don't know what it is yet because nobody's seen or heard anything useful."

"Yes, but---."

"And you want us to go do a search and slay on this demon or whatever, and then me, Will, and Spike do your little ritual to close up the door for good, and then we go home, right?"

"That's a very simplistic interpretation---."

"But that's it, right?"

Colin sighed, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. "Essentially, yes, that's it."

The rest of the gang did their best to suppress their smiles as Buffy faced off with the new Watcher, his obvious fluster shadowed before her matter-of-fact summary. After five years, they were used to this, but that didn't stop them enjoying her effect on those uninitiated on the Summers' style.

Standing up, the Slayer stretched, lifting her arms overhead and arching her back as she spoke. "I want you to show us where this back door is. I don't remember seeing anything this morning that
looked like a dig site." She turned to look back at the vampire. "Do you, Spike?"

"Not even a soddin' grave," he commented, shaking his head in disgust. "That is the sorriest excuse for a dungeon I've ever seen."

Giles frowned. "Not that I doubt you," he said, "but what on earth were you doing down in the dungeons? And with Spike?"

"We couldn't sleep," she explained with a shrug. "Seemed as good a spot to start as any. Besides, we didn't even see anything. The scariest thing down there was Spike."

"Thanks, Slayer," he muttered, slouching further down into his chair. For a while there, he'd thought he'd been making headway, making her laugh occasionally while they'd been doing Sadler's work for him, taking her side when the wanker had criticized her for taking a kip during his lecture. She had actually gone four hours without one disparaging remark about the vampire. Guess it had been too good to be true.

"I really must express my dismay that you'd venture out so," Colin said. "I haven't even had the opportunity yet to direct you to the weapons cache we've created---."

Buffy's face lit up like a child at Christmas. "Weapons?" she chirped. "Where?"

"In the adjunct at the end of the hall, but…" His voice trailed off as he watched the young woman dash out of the room, his brows knitting together in confusion. "She really doesn't…listen, does she?" he mused, not speaking to anyone in particular.

"Weapons are kind of her thing," Anya commented. "Same as ringing the bell for Pavlov's dog. You know, ding ding! There goes Buffy!"

"But don't beat yourself up about it," Xander chimed in. "At least you didn't bring them up at the beginning of the meeting. Giles still makes that mistake sometimes."

"Oh my god! Giles! Come here!" Buffy's shrieking carried through the stone walls, automatically jerking her Watcher to his feet, rushing out with a frown on his face.

Spike's lips quirked into a half-smile. "Kid in a candy shop," he drawled, shaking his head, and shuffled to his feet. "But should be good for a laugh."

Exchanging a quick look, Willow and Tara quickly rose and followed the vampire out into the hall, with Xander close on their heels. Anya watched as Colin just sat there and shook his head in stunned amazement. "It's OK," she assured. "Eventually, you get used to not being listened to."

* * *

She stood in the doorway, hazel eyes ranging over the carefully assembled weapons that lined the upper part of the walls and filled the glass cases that ran along underneath. Even in the dim light that filtered in from the hall, there was no mistaking the gleam from the various metals---silver blades, both curved and straight; brass edges by finely honed craftsmen; even something gold glinted in the far corner---and the vicarious thrill of having such armaments at her fingertips sent Buffy's heart racing. I haven't been this excited about something since I got those leather boots half-price, she thought, and was just reaching for a sheathed dagger that rested near at hand when Giles and Spike came up behind her.

"What is it?" her Watcher asked, then stopped, taking off his glasses as he surveyed the room.
A low whistle came from the vampire's mouth as he brushed past, sauntering straight for a battle axe that sat in the corner. "Well, I'll give those Council blokes credit for this, at least," he said, picking it up and hefting the weapon's weight. "They know how to hold a fight in style."

"I think this is the most gorgeous knife I've ever seen," Buffy murmured, as she pulled it from its case. Its nailhead-studded grip blended effortlessly into the engraved blade, and she trailed a fingertip over the silver crests along its sheath.

"That's a traditional Scottish dirk," Giles observed. "Particularly popular among the Highlanders."

"Is it bad I really want to kill something right now?" she asked with a small smile.

"Well, there'll be time enough for that later," the older man replied and then brightened when his gaze fell upon a claw-like weapon on a lower shelf. "Oh! But remind me to work with you on that one, though," he added, crouching down to examine it further.

"What is it?"

"It's called a double flying talon. Chinese descent, used primarily for attacking horses and their riders. I haven't seen one outside of a book in over ten years."

"Cool." Buffy grinned as her friends appeared in the doorway, and held up the dagger. "Look what I get to play with."

The trio's eyes widened. "Didn't C-c-colin say they think it was just one demon that got out?" Tara asked.

"Who cares?" Spike said, coming up to the Slayer's side with the axe still in his hands. "I say we clear out the whole countryside if it means usin' some of these bad boys."

"It does seem like an awful lot just to get rid of one little nasty," Willow said.

"But we don't know what the nasty is," Buffy argued. "We need to be prepared, right, Giles?" She looked up at her Watcher for confirmation. "Isn't that the Slayer motto?"

"I thought the Slayer motto was 'Don't die,'" Xander observed.

"It does seem like an unusually large arsenal," Giles murmured as he straightened, returning his glasses to his nose.

"Well, I don't care." The blonde brushed past the group, heading back down the hall with the dirk still in her nimble fingers and Spike tagging along behind. "Now that we've got flashlights and weapons, I want a better look at that dungeon and this hole they knocked through to the Otherworld. I haven't had a good slay in two days. Maybe if I'm lucky, something will decide to poke its head through and give us a little excitement."

Spike bit back the innuendo that leapt to the tip of his tongue, ducking his head to hide his smile from the others. She could argue about it until she was blue in the face but there was no denying the fact she got off on the hunt just as much as he did. Even now, he could smell the anticipation seeping from her skin in a fragrant musk, thickening the air while at the same time hardening his cock, and his mouth watered as the memory of her body pressed up against him in her bed came rushing back. Their bed, he hastened to correct, properly bargained and traded for. 'Course, it had been kind of one-sided, his playing on her feelings of guilt and worry for her mum a little sneaky, but if it got him even that much closer to her, Spike decided it was worth it. Who could possibly get hurt from the arrangement? Well, maybe Captain Cardboard, if the vamp had his way, but that
only made the deal all that much more delicious. It would certainly show the blighter once and for all that Buffy needed a man in her life with just a little bit of bite…

* * *

They stood before the square cell, beams from the multiple flashlights criss-crossing throughout the room in golden stripes, illuminating the bare walls for the gang to see. "See, told you so," said Buffy. "Nada."

"I gotta admit," Willow said at her side. "It's kind of light on the spook factor."

"That's because we've hidden the entrance," Colin replied smugly, and pushed his way to the forefront. The group watched as he walked to the far wall, shining his light along the cracks of the stone, halting on an oblong shape about a third of the way down. He fumbled in his pockets, and Buffy frowned when he pulled out a small amulet, passing it before the mortar while murmuring under his breath.

"What's he saying?" she whispered, leaning closer to her best friend.

"I think it's Latin," Willow answered, green eyes fascinated by the sight in front of her.

Even as they watched, the stones that had seemed so solid just moments earlier began to shimmer, shifting to gossamer before fading completely away before their eyes, revealing a large gaping hole that led into blackness. Colin turned with a triumphant smile. "As you can see, we've taken every precautionary measure we can. The last thing we want is for another demon to escape."

"That's a very powerful spell," Giles commented, stepping forward to run his fingers along the edge of the entrance. "I couldn't even sense the use of magic." He glanced at his colleague with a small frown. "Are you that skilled?"

The other Watcher blushed. "Oh, no. We had a witch onsite who performed the spell for us. I merely learned how to turn it on and off, so to speak."

"Another witch?" Suddenly fearless, Willow joined the two men near at the hole in the wall. "That would be way helpful around here. Tara and I had some ideas we were bouncing around, so maybe she could give us some guidance. Is she coming back?"

"Um, no." Colin turned away, shining his flashlight through the wall. "She had something pressing…elsewhere. I'm afraid we won't have her skills as an ally during this particular… assignment."

Buffy cocked her head, noticing for the first time that the near silence of the dungeons was now shattered. "Do I hear…water?" she asked, and strode forward. Though she aimed her own light into the hole, it did little to ease the inky darkness and she felt the first fingers of trepidation begin to curtail her sense of exploration.

"Yes. You'll see. Just follow me." And with that, Colin disappeared through the entrance.

The group stood frozen for a moment, slightly surprised at their leader's boldness, and it wasn't until Spike marched up that anyone even moved. "Can't be that bad if the nancy boy's not afraid," he commented, and tossed a quick glance back at the Slayer before following after him.

Buffy stiffened. Stupid vamp's showing me up, she thought angrily, gripping her blade even tighter. No way can I let both of them look braver than me. A chipped vampire and a Watcher going in ahead of the Slayer? Mentally, she shook her head, even as she stepped through. I'm
definitely slipping. It won't do if the gang starts thinking I'm going soft.

The darkness in the cell had been deceiving. Following the beams of light in front of her, Buffy quickly found the walls growing lighter, glowing almost as if from within, and it became increasingly easier to watch where she was going, to see the intricately carved walls of the tunnel, joining Spike at its other end as she emerged into a wide cavern. The source of the water became clear as she found herself gazing at an underground stream that snaked through the grotto, meandering in its coiled bed until it vanished around a curve, its rock-encrusted banks discouraging anyone from nearing its edges.

"I'm going to guess this is the tunnel to your hollow hills," she said, and swept her now unnecessary flashlight around to look at the etchings that decorated the walls.

"It's actually quite exciting from an archaeological perspective," Colin babbled. "There've been suspicions for years regarding the actual existence of the Otherworld and now we have concrete evidence to support further investigations. We should really feel quite privileged in being a part of such an adventure."

"Tell that to the people who got killed by the demon you let out," Buffy replied, shining her light directly into the Watcher's eyes. "I'm sure they're just thrilled to pieces about your little find here."

He blinked against the sudden blindness. "Well, of course, I didn't…"

"How far have you followed this back?" she asked, walking along the edge of the stream toward the farthest bend.

"Not…too far. It's rather dangerous as you progress. The banks---."

Her hair swung over her shoulders as she turned to look back at Spike. "C'mon," she said. "Watch my back."

As he emerged into the cavern, Giles frowned, watching the retreating forms of his Slayer and the blond vampire as they headed away from him. "Buffy, do be careful."

She glanced back, smiling. "I just want to get a feel for it," she said. "And besides, if anything jumps out at me, I'll just shove Spike at him." The grin she shot the vamp conveyed her joke, and the group watched as he just shook his head and followed after her.

"You're not going to just let her go…are you?" Colin asked, worrying his flashlight between his hands.

"Do feel free to try and stop her," Giles encouraged, unable to hide his own smile. "I'm sure she'd appreciate the sentiment."

His feet automatically took a few steps in her direction, only to halt when the other Watcher's words finally cut through his consciousness. "Well, she does have Spike with her," he reasoned, and jumped when Xander came up to pat him on the shoulder.

"It's a long, slow process, my friend," the young man said. "You just gotta learn when to let her go."

* * *

Watch my back, she'd said. The Slayer. Asking him. As if it was the most natural thing in the world. She needed him, appreciated what he had to offer to the mix. No way in hell was he going to
Needless to say, Spike was chuffed to bits, his step lighter than it had been since leaving Sunnydale, the humming under his breath unconscious as his gaze darted from Buffy, to the walls, to the stream, back to Buffy, before beginning the circuit again. Why had he ever had any doubts? It was only a matter of time---.

"What is it with the humming?" Buffy complained, and there was no mistaking the annoyance in her hazel eyes as she glanced back at him. "You might as well have a bullhorn announcing that we're here."

"Sorry if I'm in a good mood," he countered. "You're not the only one who's been chompin' at the bit for a spot of violence."

"I'm not chomping. More like…nibbling."

"Semantics, Slayer. A bite's a bite."

"Because you vampires are experts on the fang thing, right?"

Spike's azure gaze flickered to her neck, lingering on the scar. "I'd say you've clocked some mileage on that as well," he said, his voice a sultry burr, and returned his eyes to her face, noting the color that had suddenly risen in her cheeks. "Angel, I get, 'cause of the whole burnin' first love rubbish, but Drac..." He shook his head. "Never did understand his appeal over the birds. Too... indirect for my tastes. I like it to be up close and personal-like. Lay my cards out on the table." Even as he said the words, he couldn't believe they were coming out of his mouth. Uh huh, yeah, right, he scolded himself. That's why she thinks you're in this for the dosh.

"He had this whole thrall thing going," Buffy argued, her sudden discomfort at the turn the conversation had taken averting her gaze back to the path in front of her. "And it's not just a girl thing, remember? He got Xander as well."

Spike rolled his eyes. "That does not help your argument, Slayer," he said. "Harris has the willpower of a gnat. Even I could get him to do my bloody biddin'." He bridled at the amused grin she shot back at him. "If I really wanted to!"

Buffy's flashlight cut a swathe across the water as she stopped in her tracks to turn and face the vampire. "You're going to stick to your word, right?" she asked. At his frown, she elaborated. "About not telling him and Anya about the not-being-useful thing."

"Oh, that," he said, relaxing. "Personally, I can't believe he hasn't sussed it out already. Your new Watcher did just about everything he could to ignore him during his little confab."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." She bit her lip. "Willow thinks we should just come clean. Then, you'd share a room with Xander and I'd be in with Anya."

For a moment, Spike panicked, his heart leaping into his throat. Lose the current arrangement? Especially to share with Harris? Not in this lifetime. "Red may be smart, but that doesn't mean she's always right," he said as calmly as he could manage. "You go tellin' him the truth now, it'll just make it worse 'cause he'll think you're feelin' sorry for him."

"That's what I thought," she said, nodding. "Though I hardly expected you to agree with me. I would've thought you'd love to see him squirm."

He pretended to be offended. "And here I thought we were startin' to come to an understanding,
Slayer." He tske under his breath as he brushed past her. "One of these days, you're goin' to open those eyes of yours and actually see what's in front of you for a change. Think you might be pleasantly surprised."

His words were curious, and Buffy frowned as she watched Spike stroll on ahead, moving his flashlight in front of him as he inspected the water and ground. She was used to his sweeping generalizations, insights into her head and her life that seemed to grind her own thinking to a halt, but, sometimes, on the rare occasion, he truly did seem to make no sense whatsoever. I'm sure it all connects somehow, she thought, somewhere underneath all that bleach. Deep, deep under the bleach.

The splashing in the stream next to her caught her attention before she could move forward, and Buffy turned, shining her light down at the water's surface. "You don't think there's actually fish in there, do you?" she asked, bending slightly in order to get a better look.

Spike turned just in time to see the black shape lunge from the stream toward her, catching her off-guard, and leapt forward to tackle it, his own safety forgotten as his fears for the young blonde's rooted in his instincts. The Slayer fell back, and she watched wide-eyed as the vamp disappeared with a thunderous spray, dragging whatever had jumped out at her down with him, the water cresting and waving as the pair sank to the bottom. She scrambled forward, edging herself to the stream's bank as close as the jagged rocks allowed, hazel eyes searching the murky depths for some sign of either of them, wondering what in hell had just happened. He hadn't just saved her… had he? Why on earth would Spike do something as…unselfish as that?

She debated for a moment about jumping in after him, but the lack of light within the cavern and her own slight inhibitions about the potential of drowning held her back, causing her to rationalize her own hesitancy. He can't drown, she reminded herself. Vampires don't breathe, so therefore they can't drown. But he could still get eaten, a tiny corner of her mind reminded her. Or it could cut off his head and finish him off that way. It didn't seem fair all of a sudden that he would do what he did and she wouldn't even try, so setting her flashlight to her side, Buffy tensed as she prepared to dive in after him.

His head broke through the surface, a white beacon amidst the black, and she saw the blood dripping from the large gash in his forehead. Automatically, she scrambled forward, heedless of the stones tearing at her trousers or slicing into her own flesh, her hand shooting forward in offering. "Here," she ordered, and only had to wait a moment before Spike's own grip met hers, pulling him out as quickly as possible to avoid as much contact with the rocks, laying him out in the path away from the rushing water.

Whatever it had been, it had put up a good fight, she thought grimly as her gaze inventoried the injuries dotting the vampire's body. Besides the cut on his face, there were lacerations up and down his arms---superficial, she decided---and a huge chunk torn out of his t-shirt, exposing a series of circular wounds almost six inches across. She leaned in closer, fingers reaching out to brush lightly across its surface. If she didn't know better, she would've almost said they looked like teeth marks.

Spike groaned, trying to sit up. "Well, that wasn't bloody fun," he muttered, only to crumple back to the ground as a wave of pain washed over his torso.

"Yes, because water aerobics with demons twice your size is always a barrel of monkeys," she retorted, ripping the wet fabric to reveal the rest of the bruises and gashes that adorned his pale-white flesh. "You know, if you'd wanted to take a swim, you should've brought your swimsuit."

He grinned in spite of the pain. "Always preferred skinny dippin' myself," he murmured, feeling her fingers dance over his skin. Getting hurt wouldn't have been his first choice in getting him to
touch him, but he'd take it any way he could get it.

"What was it? And why on earth did you go after it?"

"Dunno. All I saw was black," he said, and felt his head begin to swim as darkness threatened to overtake him. "And didn't have a choice. It was goin' after you…" And with that, the world faded away around him.

* * *

Duncan's eyes widened as he saw the American girl sweep by, the unconscious form of the man dripping in her arms. He'd heard the commotion as the group returned from the dungeons, knew something was amiss, but the incongruous sight of the two blonds took him by surprise. Not the norm, he thought. Most definitely, not the norm.

"Do you need anything?" he called after them as she headed for the stairs. "Some hot water, perhaps? Or some bandages?"

She seemed to contemplate his request for a moment, and then turned. "Both," she ordered. "Just bring them to my room. I'm going to fix him up there." When she swiveled back to face the stairwell though, she hesitated, hazel eyes glancing between the narrow opening and the blond lying across her forearms. "Xander!" she called out. "Come here and help me." The young man rushed forward, stopping at his friend's side. "You take his shoulders and go up first. I'll get his legs."

"Why don't you just throw him over your shoulder and take him up that way?" Xander asked. "Not like you've never done it before."

"Because he's not a sack of potatoes, that's why!" Her tone was harsh, and Duncan watched as she took a deep breath, seemingly to steady her nerves. "If I try this on my own on those stairs, you're going to see me on my ass and Spike hurt even worse than he is now because I've dropped him on his head. So, just help me with this, because I've got vamp blood dripping off my elbows here."

It took only a moment for the pair to reposition the wounded man, and Duncan frowned, watching as the trio vanished up the stairwell. "Should we call a doctor?" he asked the older man at his side.

"That won't be necessary," was the response. "Buffy is well trained in these matters."

The group dispersed, the energy gone from their initial descent, leaving Duncan alone outside the great hall. Less than one day, and things were already taking an interesting bend. His smile curled his lips as he turned to return to the kitchen for the supplies. Most interesting…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Spike have gone exploring through the hole the Council made between this world and the Otherworld, only to have her get attacked by something from the underground stream that runs beneath the castle. Spike intervened, saving Buffy, but got hurt in the process…

He was still unconscious. In spite of the number of people who had trekked in and out of their room over the past half hour, Spike remained down for the count, stretched out on a blanket on the floor, torso bared as Buffy went to work cleaning out the bite mark on his side. In the corner, the old-fashioned tub was brimming with hot water, the screen having been pulled away when Duncan had filled it, just waiting for her to slip in and clean herself off. Right now, though, her priority lay in getting the vampire taken care of.

No one had been more surprised than Buffy when she'd turned down all offers of aid, insisting she was all right on her own and that her tiny room couldn't afford too many visitors at one time. She'd even argued with Giles about debriefing on what had happened in the dungeon, telling him in no uncertain terms that it could wait until Spike came around so that the vamp could explain what he'd seen as well, since he was the one who'd really been attacked there, not her. That actually hadn't gone over very well.

"If there's a threat in the castle," he'd lectured, "we need to be completely aware of its capabilities in order to protect ourselves."

"Did Colin put the barrier back up over the tunnel?" she'd asked.

"Well, yes---."

"Then the threat's contained, and debriefing can wait until Spike wakes up," she'd replied, and that had been that.

But it wasn't just that, because she couldn't for the life of her figure out why she was feeling so damn protective of the stupid vamp in the first place. Though she'd only gotten a glimpse of it before it had disappeared back into the water, Buffy knew from the size of the mark on the vampire's side that whatever had bitten him was huge, at least twice his size, and wondered for what seemed the bajillionth time since dragging him out why on earth he had gone after it. What was it he'd said down by the stream? That he hadn't had a choice because it was coming after her? That made absolutely no sense whatsoever, and as soon as he decided to wake up, she was going to ask him about it again and again until she got an answer that she understood.

Sitting back on her heels, Buffy looked down at the oblong injury that now marred the alabaster flesh of the unconscious vampire, her gaze sliding irresistibly upward over the defined muscles of his chest. Twice in one day, she thought. I've known Spike for how long without seeing him naked, and now I get it in double doses. Her eyes widened in alarm. No, not naked, she quickly amended. Just semi-naked. Big---no, make that huge---difference. A huge world of difference. And before she could stop herself, her eyes had traveled back down, halting at the still-buttoned waistband of his jeans, the thought---I wonder how huge---popping into her head as if an eensy weensy devil
Buffy was whispering in her ear.

Bolting to her feet, the Slayer jumped away from him as if burned, darting around the furniture until the bed stood safely between her and Spike. Not good to be considering body parts of a male who wasn't her boyfriend. Squeezing her eyes shut, Buffy concentrated on inhaling deeply, deliberately summoning a picture of Riley to her mind. OK, this is good. Six feet plus of corn-fed Iowa goodness. Broad shoulders, goofy grin. Not a vampire. And most importantly, not Spike.

When she'd managed to hop on the Spike-is-a-hotty express, Buffy had no idea. It had to have been simply because she'd just spent the better part of the last hour touching him, taking the time to clean his injuries and having to stare at the tight definition of his abdomen without having to listen to him make snarky remarks about her or her friends. Why her acknowledgment surprised her, though, was another matter. She'd certainly learned during Willow's little spell last year what the vampire felt like under his clothes, the memories of their constant groping and kissage still managing to bring a blush to her cheeks. Truth be told, if she was one hundred percent honest with herself, she'd have to admit to even having a couple semi-naughty dreams about the blond vamp after that---before she'd hooked up with Riley, that is---so noticing him now was only natural. Especially given their current circumstances. Sharing a bed with someone, albeit platonically, was bound to stir up thoughts of compatible body parts, even if neither of one of them had any interest or desire in taking it any further. It was just…human nature.

With her rationalization tucked firmly away, Buffy's attention came back to her own body and the sickly reminder of how her top was clinging to her stomach. Glancing down, her nose wrinkled as she plucked at the blood-soaked fabric, hearing the audible squelch as it separated from her skin, and looked up longingly at the steam arising from the tub in the corner before returning her gaze to the unconscious vampire on the floor. "Spike," she said, testing to see if he'd respond only to be met by his deathly stillness. "Spike," she repeated, a little louder this time, but again…nothing.

Never letting her eyes leave his inert form, Buffy stepped around the bed to the edge of the tub, dropping her hand to allow her fingers to trail across the surface. The immediacy of the sensations was almost orgasmic, the heat creeping up her flesh in prickling waves, reminding her all too vividly that she hadn't bathed since leaving Sunnydale. She bit her lip. It couldn't hurt to just hop in for a few minutes, to get the top layer of Scottish dust and vamp blood off her skin, her patient looking for all intents and purposes to be out of it for a few more hours at least. Just to be safe, though…

"Spike!" It was almost a yell this time, but no way was Buffy going to get naked in front of the blond vamp if he was just going to wake up in the next few minutes. And still…not a whisper of a movement.

She'd never gotten undressed so quickly or so quietly in her life. Sliding herself into the tub, Buffy's eyes fluttered closed as the heat engulfed her, drowning her in goosebumps, lapping with tongues of fire against the coarse curls between her legs and sending tremors of electricity shooting up her inner walls. Though the numerous cuts and scratches on her calves stung briefly from the contact with the water, the slight pain was inconsequential compared to the bliss that rolled over her skin everywhere else, all the strain housed within her tiny form evaporating with the steam. She couldn't help the sigh of pleasure that escaped her throat. Not even sex with Riley felt as good as this.

As she stretched herself out, the Slayer's eyes opened to stare up at the ceiling, noting the lengthening shadows that the single window was playing across the stone. I'm going to have to light some candles soon, she thought, twisting slightly to see the tapers at the other end of the room, and frowned when she saw her towel sitting on the bed. Crap. Forgot to grab it. I better make this quick then, especially since I didn't put the screen back, either.
Buffy sighed. Gotta be the jet lag starting to catch up with me, she reasoned. My mind's just not working as fast as it usually does…

* * *

The first thing he became aware of was the tightness of his jeans as they stuck to his thighs, the wet denim closer than a second skin as it cinched into his hips. Automatically, Spike grimaced, reaching for the button to undo the fly, only to wince in pain as needles erupted along his side, causing his lids to shoot open as the clarity of his recent injury rooted itself in his memory. The darkness surprised him, although the fact that he was stretched out on the stone floor did not. Bitch probably just dumped me here and then went off gallivanting with her little pals, he groused, rising gingerly to his feet as his hands finished the path to his jeans. Don't mind the pathetic, chipped vampire; he'll fend for himself.

Getting out of the pants without sending waves of pain through his body was another matter, and the entire exercise took Spike too long to accomplish, all the while muttering under his breath about ungrateful Slayers. It was only when he finally stepped out of them, kicking them gracelessly into the darkness, that he heard it, freezing in his stance as he paused to listen. Complete silence, and then…

There it was, the incredibly gentle exhalation of someone's breath. No, not someone. He knew that smell, even mingling as it was with the aroma of heather soap, and if he concentrated, he'd be able to distinguish the unique rhythm of her particular pulse, thrumming into him with velvety pads. That wasn't just someone. That was Buffy.

Fuck, Spike muttered to himself, and immediately began squinting into the darkness, trying to command his eyes to adjust to the lower light level faster so that he could find his pants and get them back on. There was only one answer to the question of what the Slayer would do if she woke up and found him naked in front of her. Spike would get staked faster than he could blink.

Except the light wasn't cooperating by getting any better, the stone walls sucking up what little illumination there was to wrap him in a cloak that threatened to suffocate him. No choice but to try and find his way in the dark, which meant orienting himself in some way so that he could get to the bleedin' wardrobe and his dry clothes without breaking his damn neck. Stop and think, he thought, picturing the layout of the room in his head. Thank god there wasn't much furniture to navigate, just the tub and such behind the screen in the far left corner, the wardrobe near the door, and the bed somewhere in between. Now, assuming Buffy was asleep on the bed and that was coming from somewhere behind him and to the left, that would make the wardrobe somewhere straight ahead of him…

"Fuckin' hell!" he yelled as his shin slammed into the side of the bedframe, pitching him forward onto the mattress as he grabbed at his leg, the shooting pain through his side as he did so only adding to his irritation. Bloody bed's in the wrong place.

The splash of water hitting stone was unmistakable, and Spike realized exactly where his error had been. She's not in the bed, he thought, his head swiveling around toward the sound as he straightened, his mouth instantly salivating. She's in the bath…

"Spike?"

Her voice was still slightly groggy, but he could hear the anxiety edging it, the distinct dripping as she sat up echoing against the carved walls. The images came unbidden to his mind's eye…golden hair plastered against the elegance of her shoulders…nipples erect from the cooling temperature, poking out from the bathwater the water coursed down to the tub's surface…It was only when he
felt himself harden did he silently curse his overactive imagination. Great. How in hell was he
going to get out of this one?

"Right here, Slayer." His tone betrayed nothing, solid assurance as if everything were completely
normal and not all cocked to hell. "Guess we forgot to pay the light bill."

The long silence that followed sent his brain racing, trying to concentrate on anything other than
thoughts of a naked Slayer just feet away. Everything failed, especially when he realized that her
heartbeat had been gradually quickening, driving against his flesh in a maddening rhythm that
reverberated down his spine, straight through to the head of his now rock-hard erection.

"You're not…lying down anymore," Buffy finally said.

"Not that the floor isn't delightfully comfy, but we had a deal, pet. And I do my best recuperating
in bed."

"How do you feel?"

The query was unexpected. In the darkness, Spike tilted his head as he pondered why she would
ask, why in light of the current circumstances she would go to the bother of finding out. "It hurts,
but I'll do," he said slowly.

There was another pause, and then he heard the unmistakable sound of her laughter under her
breath. "Guess it's kind of silly to keep on pretending I didn't fall asleep in the bathtub, huh?" she
said.

"Just a tad," he replied, relaxing with his own chuckle.

"OK, here's the deal. My towel's on the bed. Where are you?"

In deep shit, he thought, but said out loud, "You know that big bang that pulled you out of
dreamland? That would've been me hittin' that same bed."

"Oh. Crap." Silence. "I don't suppose you'd go back where you were lying down?" she asked.

"Well, considerin' last time I tried finding my way 'round, I found the bed when I was aimin' for the
wardrobe, I'm goin' to say, probably not the best idea, or next thing you know, I'll be in that bathtub
with you." He almost groaned out loud from the prospect. Wet Slayer, pressed against him, sliding
up and down…This was doing nothing in making his hard-on go away.

"If you're at the bed then, maybe you could get me my towel," she suggested. "Can you find it?"

It took only a moment of blind groping to locate the terry. "Got it."

"You think you could throw it in my direction if I keep talking?"

"It's not brain surgery, pet. Think I can suss out where you are enough to toss a bloody towel."

"Hang on." He heard more splashing as she stepped out of the tub, the soft tread of her foot
followed almost immediately by her sharp hiss as her bare flesh met the cool air. Immediately, the
vision of her standing there, lithe limbs gleaming, reaffirmed his arousal. "OK, I'm ready, and I'm
talking, and I'm waiting for you to throw---." The quick flick of his wrist was followed almost
instantly with a sodden splash.

"Oh. Sorry, luv."
"It's all right," Buffy replied, audibly fishing around in the bath to drag the towel out, water spattering across the floor as she did so. "As long as I'm no longer playing Blue Lagoon here, I think I can handle being wet for a little longer while we find the lights."

"I don't suppose you thought to bring up one of those torches the Watcher got?" Spike asked, taking time with his words. Please say yes, he thought desperately. With his lighter still in his jeans, they were goin' to have a merry old time of it if she said…

"…No. Sorry."

Not as sorry as I am, pet.

"Look, Buffy, there's something I've got to tell you---."

"Can't it wait? I'm freezing here." There was no mistaking the chattering of her teeth as she spoke. "I just want to get some light so I can find my clothes and get warm again."

"It's about the light---."

"Oh, unless you don't want to play Blind Vamp's Bluff 'cause it hurts too much to move," she rushed, as if she'd all of a sudden remembered his injury. "You're not bleeding again or anything, are you?"

"No, and it doesn't---."

"You just wait there," she ordered. "I'm pretty sure I can find the door."

She began walking as she spoke, the dripping following her as she edged her way toward the door, but had only taken a couple steps when the sound changed, no longer the wet suction of her toes sliding across the stone. No, this one was softer, muffled, still wet, but most definitely not the floor. Shit.

"Spike." Her voice was low, and the vampire strained to hear what she was doing, only to come up with nothing other than not walking. "Please tell me you're still wearing your jeans."

"Well," he said with a sigh, "that's what I've been trying to tell you."

"How long were you going to just stand there in your underwear?" she demanded. "And thank you soooo much for sticking that image in my head."

He knew even before he said it that it was a mistake. "Who said I was wearing underwear?" Her sharp gasp pushed him onward. "Look," he said, "my jeans were wet, and bloody uncomfortable, and how in hell was I supposed to know you were asleep in the soddin' tub? Weren't you the one who said, 'Buffy takes a bath, Spike leaves the room?' If you were goin' to change the tune, least you could've done is taught me the new words."

"The only tune I'm interested in right now is Another One Bites the Dust," she said through gritted teeth. "Now. You're next to the bed, right?"

"We've already established that, Slayer."

"Grab a blanket and wrap yourself up in it."

He grimaced, shaking his head at his own stupidity. Fuck. He should've thought of that before this whole mess got started in the first place.
"Are you decent now?"

In spite of the tension in the air, Spike chuckled at her choice of words. "Let's just say I'm covered," he replied.

"OK. I'm going to walk over to the door now---."

"Why bother? You've got my jeans. My lighter's in the front pocket."

He heard her fumble with the fabric, and felt the adrenalin surging through her veins as the rhythms of her body pulsed into his. Well, even if nothing else, he knew he could wind her up. He seemed to be very good at that.

The single flame was enough to guide Buffy to the candle sconces on the wall, returning light to the small room, casting flickering shadows across the carvings as she turned to look back at him standing by the bed. The wet towel clung to her curves, but Spike could feel her shivering, see the goosebumps raised along her arms.

Pulling the blanket tighter around him, the vampire strode to the bedroom exit. "You need to get some clothes on, warm yourself up," he said. "I'll wait in the hall 'til you're through." Glancing back as he opened the door, he was met with Buffy's frown, her eyes riveted to the floor behind him, and he lowered his gaze to see what captured her attention so.

"I thought you said you were OK," she said.

"I am---."

"Then why are you bleeding all over the floor?" She stepped forward, grabbing his arm through the blanket and jerking him back. "Wrap the blanket around your waist and lie down," she ordered, returning to the side of the tub to get water and a cloth. Spike did as he was instructed. "Now you know why I didn't want you on the bed," she joked and knelt at his side.

Her touch was surprisingly gentle, and the vampire watched in silence as she cleaned up the re-opened wound. "Look, Slayer," he started.

"I'll make you a deal," Buffy interrupted, and he noticed she was careful not to meet his eyes. "In order to make this arrangement just a little bit easier to live with, let's say we forget about what just happened here and chalk it up to a learning experience, OK? I'll try and forget all the commando imagery, and you forget about me falling asleep in the bathtub."

"And what's got you wanting to play nice-nice all of a sudden?" he asked, his voice a mere murmur, blue eyes almost black in the dim light.

She shrugged. "Maybe the fact that I'm sitting here, staring at where some water demon tried to take a bite out of you, and realizing that you probably saved my life down there." She threw him a quick glance. "That, and that I don't want you to say anything to Giles about the bath sleeping thing. He gets a little weird about me and water ever since my death by drowning."

Spike's lips curled into a smile. "It's a deal."
Yon Wild Mossy Mountains

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike has been attacked by some creature underneath the castle, while Buffy is becoming increasingly aware of the vampire's physical presence.

As she emerged from the stairwell, Buffy heard the crystal tones of laughter drifting down the corridor, the muted voices of her friends rooting her back into the present and away from unsolicited images of pale shoulders and sculpted cheekbones. Spike still hadn't given her a satisfactory response regarding the aborted attack in the dungeon; in fact, when she'd brought it up again while re-bandaging his wound, the vamp had quite effectively side-stepped the entire issue by diverting her attention to the still-open door, commenting dryly that Giles would probably stake both of them if he caught them so casually dressed. By the time she had leapt up to close it, another offhand comment regarding dinner and feeling peckish had reminded her of her own growling stomach, and that had been that.

She wasn't sure why, but for some reason probably only known by God or John Edward, she was actually getting used to having Spike around, and in a not-so-annoying-I-need-to-stake-him kind of way. Playing slapjack with him on the plane had admittedly been a riot, and if she was being completely honest with herself, more fun than she'd had with anyone---including Riley---in months. So, OK, he'd pretty much resorted to blackmail to get out of sleeping on the floor, but he had saved her life down in the dungeon, and their chatting while they were unpacking Colin's stuff hadn't had its usual wattage of hateful remarks bandied about. When he wanted to be, Spike was proving to be entertaining company…which was probably a good thing since she was stuck with him for three more weeks.

Stuck…Her thoughts drifted back to the bedroom and the memory of Spike's face when she'd turned from lighting the candles in their room, the irressipible sensation of feeling naked in spite of the towel that had been wrapped around her. Even across the space that separated them, his gaze as it had swept over her had been almost a physical caress, and the electrical charge that had tingled across her skin had startled her with its ferocity, the sudden urge to feel his body against hers overwhelming. There had been something in his eyes---something dark, unreadable---and it was only when he'd broken the contact to walk to the door, leaving the bloody trail behind him, did she realize that she'd been holding her breath. She wasn't sure why. She only knew that for a few seconds at least, the world around her had vanished, and the prospect of his hands on her flesh had made her shiver, raising goosebumps of anticipation along her arms.

But that had been in the room. Earlier. Just fleeting hints of possibility that meant absolutely nothing in the light of day. Or the light of dusk, as the case may be. Only one thing was really bugging her now, and Buffy was fighting the urge to turn around and go back up to the room to ask the vampire to spell it out for her. When she'd woken up from her nap in the bath, the first thing she had noticed was the complete absence of light; not even the small window offered any break in the murky darkness that permeated the room. The fact that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face didn't surprise her; what did was Spike's obvious demonstration with the towel toss and the following protestations that he was just as blind in the dark as she was. For some reason, she'd always taken vamp night vision for granted; they certainly fought well enough in its absence. Maybe the complete absence of ambient light---like being in the dungeon twenty feet below
ground or in a stone-walled room with no artificial illumination---made them just as vulnerable as humans. If that was true, then Spike hadn't seen anything at all until she'd lit the lighter. If it wasn't, then…

Her lips pursed. Nope. Not going to think about the possibility of him seeing me naked. Not going there. Because then I'd have to kill him. Or tell Xander the truth so that I could kick Spike out of the room. Which might not actually be a bad thing if it weren't for the whole hurting-my-friend's-feelings part. Crap. I hate it when I have to trust vamps.

The laughter grew louder as she pushed open the door to the great hall, and Buffy's nose was assailed with the heady scents of spices, her skin prickling from the heat that suffused the large room. Her stomach grumbled audibly, and she smiled brightly she strode up to her friends at the dining table.

"Please tell me Xander left something for me," she chirped hopefully, eyes sweeping the length of the table, taking in the empty plates and mostly empty serving dishes strewn about.

"Oh, my god," Willow said with a huge smile. "You just missed the most amazing meal. I don't think I've ever eaten so much in my life when there wasn't chocolate involved."

"And you didn't come and get me?" Buffy pouted.

"We tried," offered Giles from the head of the table. "We knocked at your door, but when you didn't answer, we assumed you were getting some much needed rest."

"Is S-s-spike all right?" asked Tara.

"Unfortunately, the answer to that question is yes," the Slayer replied. "Which reminds me, I need to take something up to him before his complaining can be heard all the way down here."

Duncan jumped to his feet, and for the first time, Buffy noticed that the cook was actually in the room, firmly ensconced in a seat between Anya and Xander. "I left some in the kitchen in case you came down," he started. "I'll just go get it."

"No!" He stopped at the sharpness of her tone, and she blushed when he frowned back at her. "I mean, that's nice and all, but totally unnecessary. Spike doesn't eat regular food. He's on a…liquid diet."

"Yes," Colin interjected, rising to his own feet. "I believe I told you he has special dietary needs."

"Well, yes, you did," Duncan said. "But---."

"You won't have to worry yourself about taking care of them," the Watcher continued. "Buffy and I will handle everything when it comes to Spike's…needs."

At the mention of her name, she tossed the dark-haired cook a bright smile, nodding in agreement. "Besides, you're better off not having to deal with him. Spike can be a little…temperamental." She ignored Xander's none-too-subtle guffaw and watched as Colin began heading for the kitchen. "I'll just run it up to him when it's ready."

Duncan smiled at her as he settled back into his chair. "I do hope your boyfriend is all right," he said casually. "That was a nasty---."

"Spike's not my boyfriend," Buffy interrupted, eyes wide. "Why would you think that?"
"You're...sharing a room, and the way you two..." His words trailed off, confusion coloring his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I just assumed..."

"You assumed a huge world of wrong. We work together. That's it. I have a boyfriend back home."

"Oh." Duncan's frown eased, and his lips twisted into a bemused half-smile. "This boyfriend must be a very understanding sort to let his girlfriend share her bedroom with a male colleague then. I think I'd be jealous if I were in his shoes. Especially if she was as pretty as you are."

The compliment went right over her head as Buffy struggled with the sudden rush of guilt at the mention of Riley. Sure, he's totally understanding, she thought. In the way of totally having no idea that Spike's even here. When the kitchen door opened, she leapt forward, desperate to get away from the inquisitive stare of the cook. "Thanks, Colin," she said, taking the thermos from his hand. "I'll just run this upstairs."

"What about your own meal?" Duncan asked, swiveling in his chair to watch her almost run for the hall.

"I just remembered...I've got that...walking thing to do...right, Giles?" She looked at her mentor, hoping against hope that he understood what she was referring to. "You know, with our...walking sticks? Those sharp, pointy things that help us get out of...tight scrapes?"

"Oh. Yes. Of course." With a small start of understanding and a smile of apology, Giles tossed his napkin onto his table and pushed his chair back, rising to his feet. With a quick glance at Duncan, he turned to face Buffy and added, "I'll just gather our...walking supplies and meet you out front, all right?"

"Sounds like a plan." She smiled at the cook. "Just leave my dinner out. I'll grab it when I get back."

The exit of the two left the room in silence, broken only when Duncan stood back up. "I should probably start in with the washing up," he said, picking up his plate and reaching for the others.

Anya's hand stopped his, taking the dishes from his grasp with a too-wide smile. "No reason for you to do this by yourself," she said. "I'll help."

Xander's eyes widened, his jaw dropping to say something, only to have his words choked off when Willow and Tara both hopped to their feet. "Me, too," said the redhead, followed almost too quickly by her girlfriend's over-enthusiastic agreement. Before he could say anything, the four had disappeared into the kitchen, the girls chattering away with arms full of plates while an amused Duncan just smiled and trailed behind.

"How did he do that?" the young man demanded. "Anya never gets that excited about doing the dishes back home."

Colin shrugged. "He does seem to have a way with the young ladies."

"But that's my young lady!"

"Somehow, I don't think he minds." He glanced at the closed door. "If you're so worried, you could always go in and help."

"I'm not worried," Xander protested, but the deep line between his brows as his gaze fixed on the kitchen spoke otherwise, and he couldn't help the qualifier that came unbidden to his brain. Much...
Her feet seemed to sink into the heather, drowning her legs in scent as she stepped carefully down the side of the hill. Although the dim light from the sky did little to illuminate her path, Buffy couldn't help but wonder at the beauty surrounded her, elegant curves of the mountains dotted with the occasional wildflower amidst the brush. It must look gorgeous by day, she thought, and mentally promised herself that even if she had to sneak out tomorrow, she was going to get a good look at it in the sunshine.

"How is Spike doing?" Giles asked, and Buffy jumped at the sound of his voice. She had never known a place to be so dark or so quiet in her entire life, and his words seemed to echo throughout the surrounding land.

"Fine," she replied, keeping her own tone hushed. "Complaining too much. Being his usual annoying self just because I wouldn't let him come patrol."

"About that. Not that I'm eager to be spending even more time with Spike, mind you, but why didn't you? Your encounter this afternoon certainly proves there are dangers here. Extra fighting hands could prove beneficial, even if they are Spike's."

"Because last time I checked, leaving a bloody trail makes us surefire demon bait."

"I thought you said he was fine."

"He is. He just refuses to keep still long enough for that bite to start healing properly." No reason to go into details about why it had opened up again; Buffy was fairly certain that Giles didn't want to hear about naked vampires.

"I rather hope the two of you will be prepared to elucidate what exactly happened down there," the Watcher continued, picking his way down the slope. "His injury looks quite serious. I'd hate for one of the others to be caught unawares."

"For some reason, I don't think Nessie's our demon problem. It didn't seem to want to come out of the water, and whatever's been killing the locals, it's definitely out, about, and roaming the countryside." She smiled back at him. "Like us."

"I still think it's a threat."

"As well as any good Watcher should." Her good humor faded almost instantly as she saw the dark shape lying half-hidden in the grass ahead, and held out a hand to stop Giles from approaching any closer. The stake that had been carefully tucked away in the back of her pants materialized in her ready grip, and Buffy's muscles tensed in anticipation as she crept forward, hazel eyes glued to the inert form.

Even amidst the aroma of the heather, the decay wafted into the sky with a determination to break free of the dead body, announcing its presence only to those close enough to fight past the fragrant foliage. Though she sensed nothing demonish, the Slayer kept her weapon poised as she slowly knelt beside it, tilting her head so that she could get a good look at the face without having to actually touch it.

"What is it?" Giles asked.

"How many victims did Colin say they'd found so far?" Her gaze swept over the lined face, the saggy jowls, noting with a tinge of sorrow the age of the woman. She could've been someone's grandma, she thought. Hell, she probably was.
"Six."

"Then, meet unlucky number seven." Buffy reached out and rolled the body over, exposing the weathered face to the sky, the swarm of bugs that had collected underneath her scattering for cover. As Giles stepped forward, sweeping the beam of his flashlight across the corpse, her eyes widened at the dried blood and marks on the upper torso.

"OK, you can officially say, I told you so," she said, straightening and edging back to his side.

"Why?"

She pointed to the series of scars that marred the woman's flesh. "Because, other than the fact that there's more of them and it actually killed her, that could be Spike lying down there." Buffy met his level gaze. "The bites are identical. Whatever killed her is either the same thing that attacked me down in the dungeon, or its Cousin Joe. Either way, not good."

* * *

The cards were starting to bend from overshuffling, the edges starting to soften from overuse, and Spike cursed the fact that he'd only brought along the lone deck. Who would've thought I'd spend so much of my bloody time playing solitaire? he grumbled to himself as he laid out another tableau on the blanket before him. Plenty of beasties around to tangle with, and the Slayer puts me under house arrest. And all because of a little blood on the floor. Not even like there was a carpet to get stained and all.

What was worse, not only was he stuck inside the room, Buffy had also ordered he stay on his blankets on the floor until she got back. "I don't want to have to worry about blood on the sheets," she'd argued.

"I'm not a child," he'd countered. "I can drink my blood without spilling it."

"I'm not talking about your dinner. I'm talking about that bite." He'd wanted to argue, but the fact that he had in fact re-opened the wound just by disagreeing in the first place squashed that idea, so here he was, sprawled on the floor, his empty thermos at his side, the cold stone wall at his back. No shirt for him, not until the soddin' injury started to do some proper healin' and he didn't have to worry about bleeding anymore. With one t-shirt already ripped to shreds, he had to start being careful about his clothes. He hadn't brought enough along to be so careless with their maintenance.

It didn't even hurt that much anymore, not that Buffy was going to listen to anything he had to say after the little bath fiasco earlier. He knew she didn't completely believe him when he claimed not to have seen anything, but outside of giving her a lecture on the principles of optics and the need for at least a hint of light for eyes to work at all, Spike knew there was nothing he could say that would convince her otherwise. She was bound and determined to keep him on the not-to-be-trusted fence for as long as possible, and damn the evidence to the contrary. Fleetingly, he wondered just how many times he was going to have to save her damn life before she started believing he didn't want anything bad to happen to her.

The sharp knock at the door caused him to jerk, fumbling with the cards in his hands so that they went scattering. "Bugger," he said under his breath, and tossed the remaining cards down before barking out, "Who the hell is it?"

The heavy door swung open, revealing Xander standing in the hall. Spike's eyebrow cocked. "You must be either really bored, or I'm having another of those basement nightmares," he drawled.
He watched as the young man pressed his lips together, physically restraining himself from the retort that automatically sprung there. "Can I come in?" he asked instead, his voice tight with control.

"Not like you need an invitation," Spike replied. "Bein' all human and everything."

"Look," Xander said, shutting the door shut behind him, "I'm really in need of some male perspective here, and Giles is out patrolling with Buffy---."

"She let the Watcher go with her?" he asked incredulous, straightening in his seat.

"Yes, but---."

"Even with a chunk out of my side, I can still slay better than Rupes," Spike continued, shaking his head. "I can't believe---."

"Hey! Can we focus, please?" Xander sat down on the edge of the bed. "This isn't about you. I'm serious. I need to talk to another guy about this, and with Giles gone, that leaves you as my only option."

"What about the other Watcher? The one that makes Rupert look like Sid Vicious?"

"Nah, he's no good. Most of the time, he acts like I'm not even there. So, as much as I hate to say it, you're my only choice."

Leaning back against the wall, Spike smirked as he watched the other man shift uncomfortably in his seat. "Havin' lady problems?" he asked. "Need some advice on how to keep the little missus happy in the sack? Know a right dandy little trick involving a long paintbrush and---."

"This isn't about sex! Anya and I don't need---." He stopped, suddenly oddly intrigued. "A paintbrush? And what?" He held up his hand before the vampire could respond. "Wait. Never mind. This is so not about that."

"So what's got you in such a lather then?"

"Not what. Who. What do you think of that Duncan guy?"

The mention of the cook's name elicited a snort of derision from the blond vamp, rolling his eyes as his shoulders tensed. "Do I have to?" he said. "Bastard's a wolf in chef's clothing. Made me sick watching the Slayer fawn all over him at breakfast."

"Thank you!" The relief on Xander's face took Spike by surprise. "I was beginning to think it was just me. I mean, Anya just won't shut up about the guy. It's all, Duncan said this and Duncan did that. He's even got her down there doing the dishes for him right now."

"Surprised Buffy didn't volunteer for dish duty."

"Well, she kind of had the whole patrolling thing to do, but..." He ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it even further. "He's even got Will and Tara going all googly, and they're not even supposed to like boys! I just don't get it."

"Maybe we should have a little chat with him," Spike offered, eyes gleaming at the possibility. "Tell him in no uncertain terms we don't like whatever game he's playing."

"OK, first of all, nooo. Even I know it's not a good idea to go pissing off the guy who's cooking
our food. That way, leads rat poison badness. Trust me on this. And secondly, have you forgotten already about that chip in your head? Duncan's not a demon, so unless you're jonesing for a whopper of a headache, violence is not the answer here."

"Who said anything about violence? I could just make with a couple well-timed growls, maybe a little fang action. I'm sure he'd get the hint and back it off."

"That's not a hint. That's a death warrant for both of us if Buffy finds out." Standing, Xander began pacing around the room, hands working in front of him as he spoke. "I'm thinking the girls aren't being too logical about this Duncan guy, so it's up to us to keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't cross the line. I figure between the two of us, we can pretty much keep him covered. I know we'll find something. The guy just rubs me the wrong way." He stopped in his tracks, pointing a warning finger at the vampire still slouching on his blankets on the floor. "But we can't let Buff find out what we're doing until we've got something concrete. With his mojo, I'm not one hundred percent sure we'd come off as the good guys in this. And I cannot believe I just referred to you as one of the good guys."

"You want me to keep a secret from the Slayer?" Spike couldn't help the amused smile that spread across his face. "An absolute dodder. And you're goin' to have to trust me on that. But," his smile faded, eyes narrowing, "humor me here, Harris. Why in hell are you askin' for my help? We're not exactly best mates, y'know."

Xander's hand dropped to his side, and he straightened, trying to appear more confident than he felt. "Because I got no one else to ask," he said simply. "I'd go to Giles, but he's only here half the time, and since I'm not even a blip on that Colin guy's radar, you're the only other one around who seems immune to the whole Duncan mystique. And I can't do this by myself, much as I would like to."

Spike nodded. "Fair enough." His face remained calm, but inwardly, the irony of the whole situation tickled him pink, and it was all he could do not to laugh in the young man's face. Secret, secret, who's got the secret? The way this ride was going, the only one who'd be left without a secret to tell was going to be Colin…
What Can a Lassie Do with an Old Man

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has found a dead body out on the mountain, while Xander and Spike have made an alliance to keep an eye on Duncan…

As he laid there staring up at the ceiling he couldn't see, Xander was grateful for his girlfriend's ongoing paranoia about sleeping with lit candles in the room. This way, she couldn't see the grimace that distorted his even features…and he didn't have to see the animation that bubbled her voice.

"He went to Oxford, you know. They wanted him at Cambridge, but he turned them down because he didn't think their curriculum was challenging enough. Smart move, I think..."

"Anya…"

"…and did you know, he has never left the UK? Of course, you'd never left America until this trip, but that's a little different considering that this country could pretty much fit in California. I just think it's amazing how cultured he seems when he's never taken the time to travel. That doesn't stop him from learning the languages, though. He told Willow that he spoke six different ones, and then they started babbling away in French, which, if you think about it, really isn't fair. I mean, I speak about a zillion demon languages but do I get to take any credit for that? Noooo."

"Ahn…"

"I just can't believe he doesn't have a girlfriend. He's so good-looking, and well-spoken, and he's not even gay or anything---."

"Anya!

The sharpness of his tone made her stiffen, and Xander felt her turn her head in his direction. "What?" she asked, oblivious to his peevishness.

"Is it possible to just maybe save the Duncan Davison lovefest until tomorrow? You know, for when we're not trying to sleep."

"Oh, sure, of course. G'night."

He heard her make that little noise she always did as she settled down to sleep, not quite a sigh with just a hint of a moan, and let his own eyes flicker shut, grateful for the silence. He may love her to death, but sometimes the talking thing got just a little too much, especially if it was nonstop gushing about a guy who wasn't him.

He was almost asleep when he felt the first touch on his thigh, that firm pressure that was sure indication of Anya's desire for sex, growing more insistent as it traveled to the waistband of his sweats. It jerked him instantly from the shadows of the dream that had already started to flit across his mind's eye, and when he felt her fingernails scrape across his stomach as they slid underneath the thick elastic, Xander reached out and grabbed her wrist. "You're kidding, right?" he asked, amazed. "You are not thinking we're going to have sex."
"Why not? I'm awake, you're awake, I'm horny, you're---."

"Flabber with more than just a touch of gasted that you're even suggesting it!" Pushing her hand away, he sat up and leaned over to reach for the flashlight on the nightstand, flicking it on to swing it around and aim it in his girlfriend's face. If he'd had any doubts as to her excitement, the color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes, not to mention the fact that she was busy pulling her top over her head, dispelled them with a fast shove.

"Is it because you're still jet lagged?" she queried as she climbed over to sit on his lap, straddling his hips as she began pulling at his t-shirt. "Because if you are, that's OK. I'll do all the work. All you have to do is lie there."

With his one free hand, Xander batted her fingers away, leaning back to place the flashlight between them, directing it into her eyes. "How do you expect me to be in the mood when you've just spent the last half hour talking about the hired help like he's the second coming?"

"Don't tell me you're not in the mood." She wriggled against his hips, her lip caught between her teeth. "Little Lavelle seems plenty awake to me."

Mentally, Xander cursed the overactive hormones of twenty-year-old males and tried desperately not to think about his growing excitement as Anya proceeded to slide her hands up inside his shirt, leaning down to begin nibbling at his neck. Using the flashlight that was now trapped between them, he squinted and nudged at her chest, trying to break the contact, the beam that was now faced at him alternately blinding him as it swept across his face. "Hard evidence aside," he said, "the fact that you're only in the mood right now because of Duncan does not make me a happy Xander. I'd prefer for us to…make love…when it's because you want to be with me, not because you've been daydreaming about flipping burgers with the cook."

"Oh, my god," Anya said, sitting back up to look down at him. "You're jealous."

"And can you blame me?" He propped himself up on his elbows. "At least Dracula, I kinda understood. But this guy…"

"…is totally a non-threat," she finished. "OK, so maybe my timing wasn't the best, but you're the one I want to be with, not him. Otherwise, I would've volunteered to walk back with him to the village and jumped him along the way." The last was said in jest, but Xander tensed anyway at the sudden image of his girlfriend straddling Duncan in the middle of the heather. Anya shook her head, rolling her eyes as she took the flashlight from his hand and returned it to the nightstand, climbing off his hips at the same time. "How about we just cuddle?" she said, drowning them in darkness yet again. "Sometimes, cuddling can be just as fulfilling as having sex, albeit not quite as much fun. And this way, you don't have to worry about me inadvertently calling out another man's name in the throes of passion."

"Not helping, Ahn."

She slapped at his chest as she rested her cheek against it, burrowing herself into his side. "Lighten up, Xander. I'm just kidding."

He listened as her breathing slowed, the palm of her hand warm against him, her hair tickling where it feathered against his cheek. Non-threat, huh? Her protestations aside, Xander wasn't so sure. The timing was not a coincidence, too off to not be something more. Or maybe he was just being insecure. Wouldn't be the first time. Maybe this Duncan guy wasn't up to anything after all.

Except Spike didn't like him either, and if Xander knew anything about the bleached vampire, it
was that he was very rarely wrong in his instincts. There may be a world of wrong in everything else about him, but when it came to his assessment of people, unfortunately, Spike was usually right on the money.

* * *

Buffy grimaced as the squeak from the door reverberated down the corridor, freezing in mid-motion as she peeked through the crack to see if it had disturbed her injured roommate. From her vantage point, she could see that he was still lying on the floor, pale shoulders almost golden in the candlelight that flickered within, but whether or not he was asleep, she couldn't tell as his head was turned away from her, lost in the deepening shadows of the room. It was really late, or rather, really early, and she'd put off coming up to bed for as long as possible, dallying over her cold food in the great hall, playing in the weapons cache, until exhaustion threatened to render her useless for even navigating the narrow stairs. Even now, she was fighting back the yawns as she pushed at the door some more, opening it just enough to slip inside before latching it firmly shut again.

Before taking a step further, the Slayer slipped off her boots, knowing the hard heels would clatter against the stone, and began tiptoeing toward the bed. Don't wake him up, she thought. Don't have the energy to deal with Spike right now.

"Appreciate the sentiment, pet, but don't be quiet on my account."

She stopped, glancing over at the blanket, and saw him watching her, one arm now tucked behind his head, stretching the line of muscles down his side in a glorious curve that seemed to accentuate the definition of his chest. The bandages on his side were still white, which meant the bite hadn't bled anymore, and she allowed her own gaze to dart back to his face, taking in the wry amusement that twisted his mouth.

"So, are you really feeling better, or did you just change the dressing so that I wouldn't give you hell again?" she asked.

"Why don't you take a look at it up close and personal-like, and see for yourself?" The dare tinged his voice in red, and Spike found himself swallowing as his mouth suddenly watered at the thought of her hands on his bare flesh. It was bad enough he was already responding physically at the scent of light sweat that emanated from her skin; anything else, and he'd never get any sleep tonight.

"Let's do us both a favor and say I take your word for it this time," Buffy replied, and dropped her boots onto the floor. It was then that she noticed the screen in the corner, and frowned, hazel eyes darting back to the blond vamp on the floor.

He shrugged. "Got bored," he said. "Figured you'd rather not have a repeat performance of the bathtub incident and moved it back so you wouldn't have to bother with it when you got in."

"Oh." Her face softened. "Thanks."

"So, you smell like you've been fightin', Slayer," Spike called out as she stepped to the privacy behind the screen. "That mean you've already bagged your beastie and I missed all the fun?"

"No, it means I was playing with some of the toys down in Colin's arsenal," she answered. "For being such a geek, he sure has good taste in weapons."

The soft swish of fabric hitting the floor was enough to bring Spike to a sitting position, the strain across the front of his jeans lessened by being more upright. "I can't believe you took Rupes out on patrol and made me cool my heels here," he complained. "If there was something out there, I
could've sniffed it out for you."

Buffy emerged from the rear of the screen with a tiny line wrinkling her brow. As his eyes drank in the sweats and t-shirt combination, Spike found himself wistfully wondering what she would look like in one of his, the black hem stopping at the top of her bare thigh, her scent mingling with his so that whenever he wore it afterward, he would smell of her.

"How'd you know Giles went with me?" she asked.

He broke himself from his reverie. "Harris said so."

"You talked to Xander?" There was no hiding the alarm in her voice. "I thought we had a deal---."

"And we do, so long as you keep up your end of it." His mind raced, trying to come up with some plausible excuse for the young man to have been in the room, kicking himself for letting it slip already. An absolute doddl, he'd said. Right. As long as he stopped letting himself be distracted by his own libido, or by Buffy's mere presence, or by the way the candlelight picked out the gold in her hair, or the scent of her skin…Fuck. What was it he'd been thinking about again?

"Patrolling was a bust anyway," she was saying, and Spike inwardly thanked her for moving on with the conversation, releasing him from the need to explain an awkward situation even further. "Well, except for the dead body. That'll probably be useful. It had the same bite marks on it that you've got."

"I don't remember there bein' any water around here on the Watcher's maps," he mused with a small frown. "Ceft for what's underneath the castle, that is. You're sure they're the same?"

"With as much hands-on experience staring at your chest as I've had to do lately, yes, I'm pretty sure they're the same." She turned away before he could see the blush that crept into her cheek. Damn. That had sounded way more sexual coming out of her mouth than it had in her head. She could only hope Spike hadn't noticed.

He had. The satisfied grin lifted the corner of his mouth as he rose to his feet, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "And here I thought you didn't care," he joked.

Desperate for an air of nonchalance, Buffy rolled her eyes, climbing onto the bed and under the blankets. "Get over yourself, Spike," she said, avoiding his face as she rolled over onto her side and away from his lithe muscles and arrogant smile. She waited for his weight to settle behind her, steeling herself to his nearness while thankful for her own exhaustion; at least it wouldn't be hard to fall asleep this time.

It never came. After a full minute of staring at the wall and waiting, she rolled back over to see him standing there, head tilted as he watched her in the bed. "What's up?" she asked.

"Deal's a deal, Slayer."

"I know. So get in. I'm not stopping you."

"Actually, you are."

Exasperated, Buffy sat up and sighed. "OK, I'll bite. How exactly do you come to that conclusion? I'm on my side. I even invited you in. Sounds like non-stoppage to me."

"There's not enough room for me. You're goin' to have to get out." He couldn't restrain his chuckle of amusement as her jaw dropped.
"Are you kidding me?" Her hazel eyes flashed. "There was plenty of room last night for both of us."

"That was before I got this," Spike replied, pulling a hand out to indicate the bandage on his side. "If you don't want blood on the sheets, only safe way for me to sleep is on my back."

"You could sleep on your other side."

He shrugged. "Tried that while you were gone. Ended up pulling it open and bleedin' like a stuck pig."

"So you did change the bandage."

"Never said I didn't."

Buffy's face fell. Crap. As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. Her gaze scanned the narrow bed, the mental measurements she kept repeating refusing to change, and realized there was no way they were going to be able to repeat the same arrangement from the night before. The bed was just too small for two if one of them was lying flat, not without some major body draping, and there was absolutely no way she could let that happen. Double crap.

"Fine," she finally grumbled, grabbing the blankets as she rose from the bed. "You win. I'll take the floor."

"Y'know," Spike said as he stepped to the edge of the bed, "I kinda like the sound of that. Don't get to hear that out of the Slayer's mouth that often. You win." He nodded. "Got a nice ring to it."

Wrapping herself up in her blankets, Buffy settled herself onto his makeshift space on the floor, turning just in time to see him crawl up the bed, deliberately covering as much of the mattress as he could, casting a sly smirk back at her as he reached the head. "Don't get used to it," she warned. "You should be plenty healed by tomorrow night not to get away with this again."

"Then I should probably enjoy this while I can," he replied, blue eyes never leaving hers as he crossed his ankles, camouflaging his erection from her sight while at the same time propping himself up on his elbows. "Night night, Slayer," Spike drawled. "Don't let the bed bugs bite."

As she buried her head into the thin pillow, all Buffy could hear was the vampire's deep laughter rumbling throughout the room.

He had to give her credit. In spite of the cold, or the fact that she couldn't contain the chattering of her teeth, Buffy was sticking it out on the floor with the same determination that had always made her the most interesting of all his adversaries, and Spike felt his pride swell at the thought of the young woman's strength. That's my girl, he thought, even if she wasn't. It was just another of the reasons he'd fallen in love with her in the first place.

Still...he frowned into the dim light as he listened to the evidence of her chill. It had been at least forty-five minutes and she was still awake down there, her yawns tiny reminders of her current state, and he knew it was because of the cold that permeated the room. She wasn't going to be of any use to anyone if she didn't rest. And the fact of the matter was, it was eating him alive knowing she wasn't comfortable.

"Slayer."
He knew she heard him, heard the faint catch in her breathing as she recognized his voice, but after a minute had passed with no response, Spike found his irritation beginning to needle. "Slayer," he repeated, louder this time, his voice edged with impatience.

"What?" It was muffled through layers of cotton, but still clear, the fact that she was wide awake honed in annoyance.

"Stop bein' such a silly bint and get your ass up here."

That got her attention. "What're you talking about?" Buffy said, sitting up. Her skin was pale, the shadows deepening under her eyes, and Spike felt his exasperation dissipate. "We both know you're not sleeping," he said softly. "At least up here, you don't have the draft and the mattress'll help keep you warm so you can get some rest."

"I thought you wanted the bed," she said warily.

"No reason we can't share so long as you're willing to curl up into my side." He saw her eyes widen, and hastened to add, "It's not anything to get yourself fussed about. You don't think I know you'll stake me if I even lay a finger out of line? Give me a little credit for self-preservation instincts. Besides, I've got a chunk outta my side and my bloody jeans still on. Hardly much of a threat."

She wanted to argue with him, to tell him to go to hell and just stick it out on the floor, but the possibility of warmth and most importantly sleep called with a siren's voice, urging her to accept his offer and just pack it in. What could it honestly hurt? It was only for one night, she reasoned, and Spike was smart enough not to let anything happen that might get him seriously hurt, more so than Nessie had already inflicted.

"Fine." Her voice was resigned, and he saw the slump in Buffy's shoulders as she struggled to get to her feet with the blankets still around her. In a flash, he was up and at her side, using his good side to help support her as she tripped her way to the bed. He could feel her confusion and felt his resolve weaken. This wasn't about winning. This was about need, and when Buffy collapsed onto the bed, a tiny sigh of relief escaping her throat, Spike found himself hanging back, watching as her face softened. Her need. And he was being a selfish bastard in even considering otherwise.

"Where are you going?" Buffy asked as she saw him turn away from her.

"I'll be right as rain on the floor," he said, glancing back at her. "You go ahead and get some sleep."

Their eyes locked, and she felt an unfamiliar pang of compassion for her unwanted roommate. "No reason for both of us to be miserable in the morning," she countered softly, and carefully edged herself as far to the edge of the mattress as she dared, the unspoken invitation there between them like a velvet gauntlet on the floor.

The flare of hope straightened his shoulders, and though Spike knew she was only offering out of that sense of fairplay he never quite understood, he didn't care, grasping the lifeline she extended with a duck of his head as he moved to the other side of the bed. He could feel her confusion and felt his resolve weaken. This wasn't about winning. This was about need, and when Buffy collapsed onto the bed, a tiny sigh of relief escaping her throat, Spike found himself hanging back, watching as her face softened. Her need. And he was being a selfish bastard in even considering otherwise.

The scent of her hair filled his nostrils with heather, the light within the room suddenly more golden, and he had to physically restrain himself from reaching up and stroking the tendrils that
curled against his cheek. For such a small thing, she was warmer than he'd ever imagined, a living
flame that threatened to extinguish him with its heat, and the arm she rested against slowly curved
to follow the line of her back, touching but not, a feather away from a real embrace but distant
enough to not get him staked. His other hand gripped the sheet, as if by holding on he could ensure
she wouldn't vanish, and he listened to the rhythmic cadence of her breath, feeling it pulse against
his bare chest in a steady assurance that ripped forth every protective instinct he had. Infinitely
better than the floor, he decided. No bloody comparison.

In spite of her reservations, the familiarity of ice against her cheek brought a whirlwind of
memories to Buffy's inner eye, and she couldn't help but flash on the countless times she'd fallen
asleep on Angel's shoulder. It was the same, but different, the touch lighter…leaner, the scents of
leather and smoke pervading his skin even in spite of recently being washed. There was no sense of
being overwhelmed that she sometimes got with Riley. Instead, she felt…matched, her body fitting
into Spike's almost too well, and though there was no mistaking his tension as he held himself rigid
beside her, it was oddly comforting, slowly easing her own stiffness until sleep actually seemed
like a possibility and not some farfetched dream. Her eyes fluttered shut. This was workable. This
was probably not the smartest thing she had ever done, but, this was…nice.

As her breathing slowed and she slipped into slumber, Spike allowed himself a sigh of
contentment, his muscles relaxing back into the mattress. Regardless of what happened over the
next few weeks, he was going to be returning to the Hellmouth knowing one thing. For one
glorious, too-short night, he had held bliss within his arms, and her name was Buffy…
Fickle Fortune

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy found a dead body, Xander made a deal with Spike, and the female Scoobies seem infatuated with Duncan. Meanwhile, Buffy and Spike have reached a truce regarding the bed and his wound…

There had been dreams. Though the details now escaped her, the sensations remained…rhythmic rocking…humming, a low, masculine rumble…the tang of salt on her tongue as it slid against something smooth. She woke, parting the veils of slumber, to find herself cocooned beneath the blankets, her face buried in the curve of Spike's neck, her hand splayed across his chest, her leg bent and draped over his thigh. The pressure of his cheek resting against the top of her head was mirrored by the weight of his arm across her back, and his fingers curled around the line of her pelvis as if to hold her in place. For those few moments when she floated between sleep and consciousness, Buffy savored the peace that seemed to infuse her body, relaxing it against his in a semblance of normalcy that had been missing from her life for years.

He felt the change within her body, the breathing that quickened just ever so slightly as she awoke, the tiny sighs that escaped her throat, and knew she was waking, wondering just what her response was going to be when she did. As for himself, Spike had only been alert for a minute or so; up until then, he had been lost in a more restful sleep than he'd had in ages, dreaming of playing pool with the Slayer, leaning over her as he taught her how to line up her shots, guiding her hand as it curled around the cue. It had really been a shame he had to wake up.

Now, though, the question remained as to what he should do. She was up, but what was going through that blonde head of hers? Was she aware of just how much of her was touching him? God knew, he certainly was. For that matter, was the fact that he held her more intimately than when they'd fallen asleep going to turn him into stake fodder? She wasn't moving, but that didn't mean she was actually enjoying it, that she wasn't at that very moment contemplating the best way to get rid of him once and for all, so, rather than have to face a rejection that would most likely shatter his blissful mood, Spike loosened his grip on her hip, allowing his hand to slip down to the mattress, offering her the escape she had yet to ask for and desperately hoping she wouldn't take it.

In all honesty, she didn't want to move, but Buffy did so anyway, pulling back slightly as she retracted her leg. When her gaze flickered up to his face, she saw him watching her, and blushed. "Sorry," she murmured, and slid from under the blankets, rising to her feet and stretching in the dim morning light that filtered through the window. Just like the day previous, the floor was ice beneath her, and silently she thanked whatever god last night had reminded her to go to bed with her socks on.

Spike frowned. "Sorry for what?" Apologies from the Slayer were the last thing he was expecting; she'd done nothing wrong. Carefully, he propped himself up on his elbows, still mindful of the wound in his side, and watched as she did everything to avoid his steady gaze.

"For the…getting too comfortableness, and the…leg touching, and…" She smiled weakly. "I'm not usually that big on the body drapage. Not that I'm against it or anything. Just that I'm usually the drapee, not the…draper. And this is probably waaaay too much information, so shutting up now."
"Oh." His brow eased as his tongue ran along the inside of his teeth. Just how aware was she of what she'd just admitted? he wondered. She couldn't be, and not still be standing there, finally looking at him, staring like she was genuinely apologetic. "But you slept, right?" he couldn't help but query, unable to hide the concern from his voice.

Buffy was quick to brighten. "Oh, yeah," she affirmed. "We're talking forty winks and then some. In fact..." She took in an exaggerated deep breath. "I'd venture to say my jet lag has officially skedaddled."

The knock at the door stopped Spike from replying, and he watched as she quickly strode to answer it, a spring in her step that had definitely not been there the previous day. She may not say the words, or admit to the implications, but there was no denying their shared night together had given her the rest she'd needed, or that his presence had actually contributed to her present state of relaxation. What exactly that meant was still up in the air, and as he carefully raised himself into a sitting position, he realized that for the first time, he actually believed he stood a chance with her.

"Hey, Will," Buffy chirped as she opened the door.

The redhead's smile was bright. "Didn't want you sleeping through another meal," she said, stepping into the room. Her face froze as, out of the corner of her eye, she caught the sight of a semi-naked Spike in the bed, as in under-the-covers in the bed, and her eyes widened as she glanced back at her friend. "Did you...have a good night?" she asked. "Not that you wouldn't have a bad night, but with the patrol, and the..." Her gaze slid back to Spike. "...vamp sitting...I was just...wondering, you know...was it...good?"


Willow's smile faded, to be replaced by a tiny line between her brows as she began to gnaw at her lip, and it was all the vamp could do not to laugh out loud. Buffy was oblivious to the impression she had just given the witch, walking over to the wardrobe as if she didn't have a care in the world, and his blue eyes danced as he met the redhead's gaze.

"What about you, Spike?" she asked. "Did you get some quality healing done?"

"You know me, Red," he drawled. "Can't keep a good vamp down."

"You look a lot better today than you did yesterday, Will," Buffy commented as she pulled out a pair of jeans. "You obviously got more sleep."

"I think the time zone thing finally caught up with Xander and Anya, because we didn't hear a peep out of them all night." Her frown deepened. "Unless they were using some sort of gag as a sexual thing, in which case, no, they haven't adjusted, and I really have to stop this train of thought before it crashes from the imagery that is now running through my head."

"What about Giles?" The Slayer didn't even look back as she crossed the room to the screened-off corner. "He here yet?"

"No, not..." The breath caught in her throat as Willow saw the t-shirt Buffy had been wearing get tossed over the top of the screen, and heard the chuckle come from the vampire on the bed. "...yet."

"We found a body last night." The sweats found their way over the t-shirt, only to slip and fall to the floor on the opposite side. "It looked like it was attacked by the same kind of thing that took a bite out of Spike, so we're going to go out and take a look at it in the light to make sure." The sound
of a zipper being pulled up preceded Buffy's emergence from behind the screen. "Wanna come?"

"As much as I'd love to play Quincy," Willow replied, "I can't. According to Colin's schedule, Tara and I are supposed to be on ritual research."

"Am I on that schedule?"

"You and Spike are supposed to be investigating the dungeons some more." The redhead's gaze flickered back to the vampire.

"Well, that's not happening. Not as long as he's still the English patient." As she reached for her boots on the floor, Buffy looked at her roommate. "You going to come down for breakfast or do you want me to bring it up here?" she asked, slipping them on.

"No reason I can't be social," he said, tossing back the blankets. "Anything's got to be better than bloody solitaire for hours on end."

"Do you need help with the bandages?" she offered.

He shook his head. "It's healed up enough so I can manage myself, thanks."

"Well..." She pulled her blonde hair up into a tight ponytail as she headed for the door. "See you downstairs, then."

As Buffy disappeared into the corridor, Spike's lips curled into a smile at the confused green gaze of the witch. "Need somethin, Red?" he asked, affecting an air of innocence that he knew would only perplex her further.

"Ummm...no. Nothing. No need for me." She hastened after her friend. "See you at breakfast."

As much as he didn't like not being onsite with Buffy, Giles had to admit the comforts of the bed and breakfast more than made up for his injured pride. Granted, the excessive floral prints that decorated the Victorian cottage reminded him all too much of his nan's tiny house when he was growing up, and the British predilection for net curtains still managed to amaze him, but the house was calm and cozy, with a hostess who had proven at the previous day's breakfast that her sterling reputation for her baked goods was more than well-deserved.

As the warm scents of fresh bread wafted through his open door, Giles heard the distant ring of the telephone, followed almost immediately by the murmur of Ibbie MacDonald's voice as she answered it. Must remember to ask Colin about mobile phones for the gang, he thought. They could surely come in handy, seeing as they are out in the middle of nowhere with no other connections to the outside world.

"Mr. Giles?" Her voice drifted from the bottom of the stairs, and the Watcher stepped out to look down at her upturned face.

"Yes?"

"Telephone."

"For me?" He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "Are you sure?"

Ibbie's blue eyes crinkled as she smiled. "Fairly. My other guest is a woman."
He couldn't help but frown as he picked up the receiver. There weren't any phones at the castle, and the only other person to have this number was Joyce; he'd called and left it with Dawn when he'd first arrived. I do hope nothing is wrong, he thought worriedly before saying, "Hello?"

"Mr. Giles?"

A woman. Not Joyce. "Yes, this is Rupert Giles."

"I didn't think I was going to catch you. I wasn't sure when you'd be leaving to join your friends."

Whoever she was, she was Scottish, which narrowed his options even further. "I'm sorry. May I ask who's calling?"

A dog barked on the other end, and he heard the woman fumble with the phone. "Billy!" she called out. "Get away from that bin!" More fumbling, and then, "So sorry, what was that again?" When he repeated his query, she laughed. "When you live your entire life in one place, you forget that not everyone automatically knows who you are. I'm Fiona Davison. My nephew Duncan---."

"Oh, yes, of course. What can I do for you, Mrs. Davison?"

He was only half-listening as he noted the older woman's instructions, scrambling halfway through for a piece of scrap paper and a pencil to write down the specifics, wondering why exactly the young cook had dispensed his particulars to his aunt. When he replaced the receiver, his hostess appeared out of nowhere, smiling up at him with an affable grin. "Is porridge all right again?" she queried. "I've made some fresh scones to go with it."

"That would be lovely, thank you." He squinted at the scrap of paper in his hand. "I don't suppose you could show me how to get to Rectory Road after breakfast, could you?"

Ibbie's eyebrows lifted. "You need to go see Fiona?"

He nodded. "Apparently, Duncan forgot something when he left this morning," he explained. "She's asked me to take it to him."

"That boy would forget his own head if it wasn't attached," she commented as she turned to head back into the kitchen. "Always has his head in the clouds, that one."

Giles trailed after her, sliding the paper into his pocket as he walked. This was going to make him late, he knew. He just hoped Buffy would wait for him to arrive before going out.

* * *

"And you're certain they're the same marks?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and sighed. "For the last time, yes. They were the same the first time you asked ten minutes ago, and they're still the same. I'm beginning to wish I'd taken a camera just to prove it." She watched as Colin scribbled some more notes onto his writing pad. "Look, as soon as Giles gets here, we'll go and you can check out Grandma for yourself."

His pen stopped, and the Englishman looked up to gaze at the young woman, a small frown worrying his brow. "Grandma?"

She shrugged. "She looked like a grandma. You know. Old. Wrinkly. Funny smell. Except that was probably the whole being dead thing, but you know what I mean."
"Were there any other distinguishing marks? Scars, perhaps? Or unusual facial features?"

"To be honest, I kind of got distracted by the bite," Buffy admitted. "But we can check it out when we go see her." She glanced over at the closed door of the great hall. "I wonder what's keeping Giles. He said he was going to be here right after breakfast."

"I'm sure he'll be along shortly." Colin chewed at the end of his pencil as he slowly closed his pad. "Why don't you help Willow and the others with the research until he arrives? I have some… business I should really attend to."

"Research?" Her nose crinkled. "I was thinking I'd go wait by the body for Giles to show up." Even babysitting corpses was better than research.

The Watcher rose to his feet, his pad tucked beneath his arm. "I understand you're accustomed to… being your own Slayer, so to speak," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I can even appreciate your… ability to lead. But, I really don't think it's wise to go out into the countryside without Mr. Giles or myself to accompany you. There are perils you may not expect, and if you should get lost…" His voice trailed off, blushing at the smile of amusement on her face. Another tactic, perhaps, he thought. "If you're not eager to aid in the research, then, I think it might be a good idea for you and Spike to go take another look in the dungeons. Not to venture into the tunnel, of course, but merely to scout around, see if you find anything of note that we might have missed."

"OK, let me get this straight." Her hazel eyes twinkled as she tilted her head, leveling her gaze at the Watcher. "You don't want me to go out in the beautiful albeit cold sunshine because of the potential danger involved, because you'd rather I go poking around in a dark, smelly dungeon that's most likely the home of a really big water demon that just yesterday tried attacking me. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Colin's blush deepened. "Well…yes," he admitted, then hastened to add, "Only until Mr. Giles arrives, of course."

Buffy stood up. "OK. I was just checking." Glancing around at the empty room for Spike, she said, "I wonder where he took off to."

"I believe I saw him leave with…" Damn it, why could he never remember that boy's name? "… your male friend when the girls went to help Duncan wash up."

Her head whipped around. "He left with Xander?" She didn't wait for a reply, but instead bolted for the door, allowing Colin to quickly grab his pencil and scribble onto his writing pad. Xander. There. He wouldn't forget again now.

* * *

"For someone so worried 'bout his girlfriend getting too cozy with another bloke," Spike said, folding his arms across his chest as he watched the other man pull open another cupboard, "you don't seem too fussed about leavin' her alone with him."

"She's not alone. She's got Willow and Tara with her, plus Buffy and Colin are right in the next room, so I'm thinking, all's safe on the Anya front." Xander glanced over at where the vampire lounged against the doorframe. "And, just so you grasp the concept, you're supposed to be my lookout, which usually entails actually going and looking out, as opposed to watching the guy you're supposed to be doing the looking out for."

Spike shook his head. "This is a bloody waste of time. The man's not goin' to be hidin' his secrets in
"It's called being thorough. He comes in here all the time. Who knows what he may have tucked between his perky colors and fresh whites?" All of a sudden, his hand jerked back, and he hastily stepped away from the cupboard, causing his partner to straighten.

"What is it?" Spike asked. "You find somethin'?"

Xander glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Spider," he finally said, his voice clipped, the hand he'd just removed rubbing across the top of his thigh like he was trying to wipe something from it. "Just a…big…hairy…creepy spider."

The vamp chuckled, relaxing back against the door. "You ready to pack it in then? Or do you fancy another round? Maybe the pantry this time. No tellin' what's lurking in with the Weetabix."

"Ha ha, very funny. If you didn't want to---." 

"Hey, guys." Buffy's sudden appearance cut Xander off in mid-sentence, and she smiled brightly at the pair. Too brightly. "Whatcha doing?"

"Towels," Spike offered, much to the relief of the other man in the room. "Thought I'd get us some extras, seein' as how someone used up all the ones we had yesterday…" He let the words trail away, quirking his lips as he gazed down at the blonde beauty.

"Yeah," Xander jumped in. "I was just showing him where Duncan's keeping everything."

"Chuck me one, would you?" the vampire asked, his smile widening at the alarm that spread across Xander's face, his brown eyes darting back to the cupboard he'd just moved away from.

"Actually, we don't have time for that," Buffy said. "Giles isn't here yet so Colin wants us to do some more poking around downstairs." 

His eyes danced, irises darkening, and there was no mistaking the lean of Spike's body as he looked down at her. "Just…poking?" he said. "Thought you said I wasn't fit enough to be doin' any more…poking down there just yet."

It was only then that Buffy realized what exactly she said, and she hastily backed away from him, all too aware suddenly of the curve of his arms under the black t-shirt. "It's only until Giles shows up," she defended. "And we probably won't find anything anyway. And if you don't want to come, you don't have to."

"Oh, no, I think I most definitely want to…come, pet," Spike drawled. "I'm always up for a bit of the rough and tumble." He glanced over at Xander. "Toss me a towel anyway. No tellin' what'll happen when we get down there. Might end up taking another swim in the stream."

"Because I'm going to push you in myself," Buffy muttered. Only the vampire heard her, and she quickly stepped back into the hall and away from his mocking gaze.

* * *

Perhaps it will be better outside, Colin thought, staring at the display on his phone as he scurried to the front door of the castle. He had been warned about the intermittent receptivity here in the Highlands, and truth be told, he really hadn't considered that he was going to need the mobile all that much. Of course, now that it was urgent, the blasted thing couldn't find signal if its life depended on it. Which it probably would because he was going to throw it against the wall in about
Ah, he thought as he stepped into the cool air. That's better. The bars on the LCD jumped,
indicating full capabilities, and Colin quickly pressed the pre-programmed number, lifting the
phone to his ear as he glanced nervously behind him. It wouldn't do for any of the others to see
him, and he fervently hoped Mr. Giles wouldn't show up in the middle of his call. That might be
difficult to explain.

It was answered on the first ring. "Hello?" came the brisk female voice.

"Quentin Travers, please."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Travers is in a meeting at the moment. Can I take a message?"

Colin cursed his bad luck. "Most definitely," he rushed. "It's rather critical that I speak with him as
soon as possible. This is Colin, Colin Sadler. I'm the Watcher assigned to the Dall Rath
excavation---."

"Oh, Mr. Sadler. I have instructions to put you right through in the event you rang. Please hold."

As he heard the faint click on the other line, he exhaled loudly, grateful for at least one thing going
right this morning. Between attempting to keep some sort of rein on the Slayer and ensuring the
witches didn't discover more than was necessary, Colin was beginning to wonder if requesting this
mission had been folly on his part. He had little field experience, and absolutely none that involved
young, headstrong women. It was going to take all his training to keep the project on schedule…
Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Giles is late getting to Dall Rath, so Colin has sent Buffy and Spike off to the dungeons to do some more investigating, while the others begin on the ritual research.

"Are you s-s-sure this is the ritual Colin was talking about?" Tara asked, pushing a strand of hair off her face as she turned to look at the redhead sitting next to her.

"Yeah, pretty sure." Willow frowned, looking up from her book. "Why?"

"I thought they said we couldn't do it until the end of the month."

Anya and Xander looked up from their own texts as Tara set hers down on the table, allowing her girlfriend to lean over and begin scanning the words. "What does it say?" the ex-demon asked.

"Maybe they have other references that refute this," Willow murmured.

"Then why w-w-would Colin give us this to study?" Tara queried.

"What does it say?" Anya repeated, her voice a little louder, her words slightly more articulated.

"It could be it has other ritual-type stuff in it that's supposed to help," the redhead said.

"It does have this nifty appendix on Celtic charms."

"And he did give us a lot of books to go through. Maybe this one got mixed in by mistake."

The loud crash from the other end of the table startled both witches into looking up. Smiling innocently, Anya ignored Xander as he stood to retrieve the book on the floor beside her, concentrating instead on the two girls. "What does it say?" she asked brightly, as if it was the first time she had posed the question.

"Oh." Willow sat back in her chair. "Remember how Colin said we had to wait to do the ritual because of the moon? That its success was determined by the moon's cycle?"

Anya waved a hand in dismissal. "Vaguely. Wasn't that the chart Xander started doing the moo noises with?"

"Yes," the redhead replied, turning annoyed eyes to him as he returned to his seat. "Which was a little rude, by the way."

"Aw, c'mon, the cow jumped over the moon? What's not funny about that?" He reached for one of the scones on the plate in the middle of the table. "Besides, it was his fifteenth flow chart. We needed something to liven up the show a little."

"Anyway," Willow continued, "according to this book, the ritual is dependent on the moon's cycle but not like how Colin described. If this is right, there's no reason why we can't try the ritual
tomorrow. We could be back in Sunnydale by the end of the week."

"Really?" Anya frowned. "Is that what we want?" She stiffened when all three turned to stare at her in amazement. "I'm just saying, think about it for a second. We've only just got here. We're only just starting to get over our jet lag. Do we really want to have to go through all this again by going back so quickly?"

"Don't you want to go back?" asked Tara.

The ex-demon shrugged. "It's nice having a vacation," she said. "I used to travel all over the world before I lost my powers. Sometimes, I miss that."

"You miss drafty old castles and no central heating?" Willow's eyes were wide. "I mean, not to be the pooper of parties or anything, but this hasn't exactly been a Carnival cruise here."

"I only meant, it makes a nice change…" She stopped, all of a sudden straightening in her seat, and Xander turned his head to see the other girls doing the same, three sets of eyes glued to the kitchen door that had just swung open.

"So sorry," Duncan apologized. "I don't mean to interrupt---."

"No, please, interrupt away," Willow chirped.

"This is really quite embarrassing," the young man started, his hand coming up to run through his dark curls.

"Ah, no, really? That's too bad," responded Xander in mock sympathy, only to wince when his girlfriend slapped his knee under the table, his fake smile dissolving back into the scowl he normally wore around the cook.

"What's wrong?" came from Tara.

"It was supposed to be a surprise," Duncan continued, as if he'd never been interrupted. "Mr. Sadler was quite adamant about that. He asked if I could possibly fix an all-American tea for you, as a small reminder of home, seeing as you're so far away."

"What's so hard about tea?" Xander challenged. "Some hot water, a little baggie with a string, and voila. All done."

"He's talking about supper, dufus," Willow chastised.

"Oh." He slouched down into his chair.

"Regardless, I'm afraid I've gone and mucked things up and I don't believe if I were to continue, it would be what he had in mind at all." Duncan's brown eyes darted between the young women, studiedly ignoring meeting those of the other man in the room. "I don't suppose any of you might consider coming in and telling me where I went---?"

He didn't even have time to finish the request before Willow was on her feet. "I can help," she offered. "I'm about as all-American as you can get."

"Me, too," said the other witch, rising to follow her girlfriend to the cook's side.

"Well, me three," Anya said, and before Xander could stop her, she was up and across the room, disappearing into the kitchen before the young construction worker could speak up.
"What about research?" he called after the closed door, then slumped into his chair. He didn't know how the guy did it. Just a few words and they ran like rabbits, and sure, given the choice, he'd vote for food over books any time, but this was just plain wrong. Memo to self, he thought as he picked up the text on water demons again. Learn how to cook.

* * *

Having the flashlights didn't make a bit of difference, she grumbled as she caught the heel of her boot in yet another unseen cranny in the floor. Not that she had really expected to find anything more than they had the first night she and Spike had come exploring, but it would've been nice if she could go six feet without turning her ankle. Gotta remember to wear flat shoes next time we come down here, she mentally noted.

Ahead of her, Spike's beam swept across the cold stone, revealing the same featureless walls, the same lack of detail that had been so not thrilling during their previous visits to the dungeon. Though they had exchanged few words since coming down, there was an ease between them that hadn't been there before, some unspoken familiarity that Buffy found both a relief and a puzzle, and she found herself watching the vampire's back as he walked along, almost wishing he'd turn around and say something rude or offensive so that she could go back to being annoyed at him. That had to be easier.

Rounding the corner of the corridor, an unexpected outcropping of stone caught Spike along his side, and Buffy heard him hiss slightly as his torso skittered away from the wall, his shoulder lowering as he bent into the pain. "Are you OK?" she asked, the question popping out of her mouth before she could stop it.

His face was hidden in shadows as he glanced back at her, and she found the only distinguishable feature she could see was the curve of his mouth, lips slightly parted as the tip of his tongue ran along the edge of his teeth. "Doesn't exactly tickle," he said, "but I'll do."

Before he could move further, Buffy had marched forward, shining her flashlight onto his side as she lifted the edge of his t-shirt to examine his bandages. Her fingers skated over the tape that bound them to his skin, watching as if in anticipation of the crimson stains she expected to spring onto the gauze, and Spike froze as the heat of her hand sent tiny shivers of electricity skittering across his stomach.

"This is never going to heal if you keep bumping it," she said, and though the blood she'd foreseen didn't show up, her touch lingered, drawn to the carved muscles by some inexplicable force. Now was the time for her to ask, now that there was this weird truce thing happening between them, but for some reason, Buffy was finding it difficult to get her mouth to start working. Or, for that matter, her lungs.

Carefully, Spike edged away, distancing himself from her hand so that his shirt slipped back down. Her fingertips were almost vibrating from the intensity of her pulse, and the corresponding shocks it was sending through his own system made continued contact a really bad idea, not if he wanted to maintain some leash on his self-control. "It's all right," he reiterated, and turned away, ready to return to the waste of time the Watcher had planned for them.

"Why'd you do it?"

Her voice was a mere murmur and when he looked back, her hazel gaze was still fixed on his side. "I've done lots of stuff, Slayer," he said, keeping his own tone low. "Can't really go explainin' myself unless I know what it is you're referring to."
Damn it, he was going to make this hard for her. She took a deep breath. "Since when did Slayer-saving become the recreation of choice for William the Bloody?" Buffy asked, this time lifting her eyes to meet his. "I just don't get why you played interception guy with Nessie yesterday."

Moment of truth, Spike thought, staring down at her. Perfect opportunity to tell her how you feel. Stop pussy-footing around the issue and just lay it on the line. And kiss goodbye to what little ground you've gained. "Told you," he said. "It was goin' after you. Since water's not exactly your thing, I figured rather than have to endure the rest of this little holiday minus the one person who actually makes it interesting, I'd take a little swim and see if I could help. End of story."

"No, not end of story," she argued. "Because I still don't get it. What have you possibly got to gain from saving me?"

His lips pursed. "Now, I understand. I can't just do something 'cause I want to. I've got to have some ulterior motive. Is that what you're saying?"

"Hello? You're a vampire, remember? Slayer-saving, not really part of your job description, Spike." This was better, familiar territory, and Buffy felt the fire flare in her voice. "Your whole existence is about ulterior motives."

He turned and started to walk away. "The song's gettin' old, Slayer. Let me know when you're ready to change the tune."

Her iron-grip around his arm was the last thing he expected and Spike found himself flung against the wall, the flashlight in his hand cracking against the stone and immediately extinguishing, cutting their illumination in half. The sharp stab in his side was instant, and the vampire grunted in pain, clutching at the wound as he whipped his head around to glare at the young woman.

"Why do you make me do this?" she demanded. "Why can't you just give me a straight answer for once?"

"Don't believe the words, 'Throw me into the soddin' wall' came from my mouth, pet," he snarled, and felt the familiar seep of blood begin to wet his fingers. Fuck. Bitch opened it up again.

"I knew you being normal was too good to be true," Buffy continued. "All I wanted was you…" She stopped, frowning as she saw him holding his side. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that I'm most likely goin' to have to do some shopping to make up for all these shirts you keep ruining," he said.

Just as quickly as she'd thrown him, she was standing in front of Spike, yanking up his t-shirt to shine her light on the scarlet stain now appearing, hazel eyes darting between that and the blood that colored his fingers. "Shit," she muttered, and felt the pangs of guilt begin to stab at her stomach. She hadn't expected her reaction to his walking away---it had been reflex more than anything else---and now, knowing that she'd caused his injury to re-open, she felt even worse.

The dissipation of her anger was almost palpable, and Spike winced as she peeled the bandage away, exposing the oozing bites to the chill dungeon air. "Sorry," she murmured, and then looked up, eyes dark. "Really."

He watched as she used the edge of the gauze to dab at the running blood, taking every care not to make it hurt worse. Her mercurial moods were a mystery to him; he wasn't sure what caused the hot and cold to run so erratically, but he could only hope that he might be able to have enough time around the beautiful Slayer to figure it out. Spike swallowed. "Didn't want you gettin' hurt,
Summers," he said softly, and saw her hands hesitate. "Don't think I could bear that."

Not what she'd been expecting to hear, but surprisingly enough, the sincerity behind his words rang true to Buffy, and she found herself looking up into the vamp's cerulean eyes, feeling her heart begin to race within her chest, the air suddenly too close around her. It was there as well, reflected in the enigmatic depths, and the sensation of falling into them, drowning in the sea of blue, suddenly overwhelmed her.

"Buffy?"

Her head jerked at the sound of her Watcher's voice, the ends of her hair flickering across Spike's chest, and he cursed Rupert's inopportune timing. Some wall between them had come down---he'd practically heard it crash---but now he was afraid that Buffy would find some excuse to put it back up again.

"Right here, Giles!" she called, stepping slightly away from the vampire.

The beam of light appeared around the corner, and the pair squinted as the Watcher stopped, his eyes flitting between the two. "Colin said you were down here. Is everything all right?"

Spike heard her inhale to speak, but inched forward, cutting her off. "Just me bein' my not so graceful self," he said dryly. "Snagged my bandages and started bleedin' again, is all."

She was grateful her face was in shadow as she glanced up at him, the frown clouding her eyes. Why was he lying? And why was she letting him?

"Oh. Well, I was rather hoping you were ready to go examine the body, Buffy. I'm afraid my tardiness has already cost us a good portion of the morning, but we can still be back before lunchtime if we hurry."

"Just give me ten, Giles. That should be enough time for me to get Spike cleaned up."

It was his turn to look upon her with curiosity, his head tilted as he caught her eyes. The charge that passed between them reminded her of that moment in their bedroom when she'd first lit the lighter, and Buffy felt the world around her slip away. This was her fault---he was bleeding now for her---and she wanted him to know that right then, she needed for him to be OK.

"You've got work to do, Slayer," he said quietly. "I can take care of this myself."

"Are you sure?"

This time, he was positive he heard the concern in her voice, coloring it in orange and red, and his smile softened. "Sure."

She could feel him watching her as she walked past him to join Giles as he turned to go back upstairs, and had to resist the urge to look back, to give him one last smile of apology before disappearing on him. Duty first, she reminded herself. I'll give him the full I'm-sorry routine later. I have to.

* * *

She hung back as the three men bent over the body, the two Watchers in the front, the doctor from the village just behind. Buffy had been surprised when they'd emerged from the castle to find him waiting for them; it was only after Colin had explained they would need someone local to both
identify the body and to arrange for family to be contacted that his presence made any sense.

"So, do you know who she is?" Giles asked, pushing up his glasses as he straightened.

The doctor nodded. "Peg Calvock," he replied, his Scottish accent so thick Buffy almost didn't understand what he'd said. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped at his grizzled face, stepping back and exhaling loudly as if to clear his lungs. "Such a shame."

"I suppose you'll need to contact her family," Colin said. "Please express our condolences when you do."

"Thank the Lord, but I won't have to do that this time." His watery eyes met the puzzled gazes of the Watchers. "Peg's been without family in these parts for years. The last of her clan, you could say. I'm afraid it'll be naught but friends at her funeral." He scratched at his balding head. "I can't say that I've seen anything so large in these hills that could do such a fair amount of damage as that, though. I don't suppose you've seen anything out of the ordinary at the castle?"

Colin shook his head. "Everything has been quite peaceful," he lied. "We really have no idea what could've done such a thing."

Buffy's lips thinned. Oh, they knew all right, but trying to explain underground water demons that were ten feet tall and had somehow escaped into the countryside seemed like more than this quaint village doctor could take. Just as she had thought last night, seeing the body in broad daylight had only confirmed that the bites were identical to the ones on Spike, only more savage, since this woman had obviously not the power to fight off the attack like the vampire had. Whatever it was, it could prove lethal to those unable to defend themselves, and the Slayer had the sudden urge to return to Dall Rath and confirm that her friends were OK.

"Are we about done here?" she asked. "Because my stomach is telling me it's lunch time, and I am starved."

Giles nodded. "I think we've done about all we can."

Reaching into his wool jacket, the doctor pulled out a small mobile phone and began punching in numbers. "I'll just stay here until they can pick Peg up," he explained. "And thank you again for bringing this to our attention."

"If there's anything you should need---," Colin started, only to be cut off by the doctor's hand.

"I know where to find you," he said. "Now go eat. Duncan's not a patient boy. He won't be happy if you're late for one of his meals."

As the trio walked away, the doctor glanced back down at the body lying in the heather, quickly scanning the bared torso and the marks that were witness to its death, and raised the phone to his ear. Almost immediately, the other end of the line was answered and he heard the clipped tones of the receptionist. With one last look at the others to confirm they were out of hearing distance, he spoke quietly into the phone.

"This is Hornbrook," he said, the Scottish accent suddenly gone, replaced with the more genteel tones of London. A longer pause as he was put through, and then, "It's her. I'm going to need a removal team here as soon as possible."
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The body on the mountain is being taken care of, while the gang is starting to focus in on research. Spike has inadvertently re-opened his wound when he and Buffy were having another look through the dungeons.

One shirt ripped to shreds, another one semi-soaked with blood. Felt like home.

The injury still hurt, but Spike was oblivious to the pain, the memory of the look in her eyes refueling his good mood of earlier. That had been genuine concern for his well-being, he thought, as well as apology for being the cause of it, and no way was he going to let that go. Coming from the Slayer, that was a first. Doing the I’m-sorry thing was just not her style, at least, when it came to him. What that really meant, though, he had no idea. Could mean she was finally starting to see him as someone real, not just some bothersome demon she was forced to have to deal with on the odd occasion their paths crossed. Could be their cramped circumstances were making her re-evaluate their relationship, making her admit that when the walls were down, she and Spike actually had lots in common, enough certainly to at least base a friendship on. Could be she might even be feeling something even more for him.

Personally…he was holding out for the more.

As he stood before the wardrobe suddenly lost in the decision of what to wear, music was filling his head, and Spike found himself nodding to the tune that began to reverberate in his throat, filling the bedroom with his humming as he looked past the folded t-shirts to sort the various ones on hangers. Wonder what Buffy would like, he mused. Not that it really made a difference. He sincerely doubted she’d ever paid two figs of attention to what he was wearing, outside of his leather. For that matter, he probably wasn’t going to see her before teatime anyway, not with Giles now on the scene and research to be done. Slayer duty called, and all that rot.

“She’s a sensation…” The lyrics came from his lips, the song unable to contain itself anymore, and Spike reached for the nearest shirt, consciously deciding not to deliberate any longer on Buffy’s choice, or Buffy’s favorite color. “She’s a sensation…” ‘Course, he’d be barmy not to make sure he at least looked presentable. Didn’t need to go throwing water on any fire that might just be starting up in the Slayer. “Good enough to eat…”

* * *

Her heels clicked against the stone floor as she emerged from the stairwell, the sounds echoing around her, and Buffy wondered again about how the castle seemed to take up all the noise and swallow it whole, almost as if it was starving for any sign of life. Maybe it was her mood, but she wasn’t as intimidated by the old building as she’d been when she’d arrived. In spite of its lack of amenities, she was starting to see some of the charm Tara had been going on about at breakfast; the smells that now drifted up from the kitchen certainly didn’t hurt, either.

Though she was starving, Buffy wanted to get this apology to Spike done and out of the way before she’d allow herself to eat. Guilt had plagued her the entire time she’d been out on the mountain, flashes of the blood on his hand interspersing with the look on his face after she’d lashed out at
him lingering on her mind’s eye until even Giles was commenting on her distance. She didn’t know where it was coming from---she’d certainly taken her frustration out on the chipped vamp before---but as soon as she’d stepped foot back into the castle, the Slayer had excused herself, almost running for the stairwell in her hurry to assuage her feelings.

As she reached for the door, she heard his voice filtering into the hall, and frowned. Who could he be talking to? Everyone else in the castle was downstairs in the great hall, either already eating or about to, which meant either Spike had spent so much time alone he was now finding himself the best company, or there was another presence in Dall Rath that had somehow stumbled into their room. At the moment, she wasn’t sure which she preferred.

Buffy pressed her ear to the door, straining to make out the words, and it took only a moment to realize he wasn’t talking. She stifled the giggle that rose to her lips. Spike was singing.

“No matter what you do…I give my heart to you…And oh, oh, baby, I will give it to you…”

She didn’t recognize the lyrics, but knowing the vamp, it had to be something punk; he’d certainly made no secret of his affection for the genre. But it was so...bouncy. Buffy’s smile widened. If she didn’t know better, she’s almost say it could’ve come from a John Hughes soundtrack, one of those Molly Ringwald movies that she occasionally caught on cable. Who knew Spike had a secret taste for sappy love songs?

* * *

Stick with the tried and true, he believed, and slipped his arm inside the black cotton sleeve. “No matter what they say…” he sang, his voice unapologetically rough. “Yeah, we can find a way…And oh, oh, baby, we can find a…” He froze as the door opened, the Slayer standing in its entrance, her amused grin a broad testimony that she had heard enough of the impromptu concert to make Spike duck his head in embarrassment. Shit. Too lost in his own good mood. Didn’t even hear her walk up.

“No, really, don’t stop on my account,” Buffy said, stepping inside and shutting the door behind her. “This is great blackmail material.”

He finished putting on the shirt and dropped his hands, allowing the buttons to remain undone while he surveyed the young woman. “If that’s the best stuff you can get,” he drawled, “I’ve got nothin’ to worry about.”

Doing her best not to pay too much attention to the semi-bare chest before her, her gaze fell to rest on the edge of the bandage that was visible under his shirt. “How’s it doing?” she asked. “I assume since you seem to be all absorby in the vocal stylings at the mo, that it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Hurt’s all relative,” he replied. “‘S’long as you don’t go throwing me up against any more walls, it should heal up just fine.”

Her smile immediately disappeared, her guilt returning with a surge through her chest. “Look, about that,” Buffy started, and took a step closer. She sucked at the whole word thing, and wished more than anything that she could get out of this without having to use them, let him know how she felt about what had happened in the dungeon with something other than the usual verbiage. But other possibilities escaped her at the moment, so, inhaling deeply, she raised her head to look directly into his eyes.

“You already said you were sorry, ducks,” Spike said before she could even open her mouth to speak. “No sense in wasting energy in repeating yourself.” His lips curled into a grin. “Even if it
She blinked. He had not just beaten her to the punch. Why was he letting her off the hook like this? C’mon, she wanted to say. Milk this for what it’s worth. This is supposed to be the kind of thing you eat up with a spoon. Slayer at the mercy of the Big Bad…this is what you live for, right? Instead, she found herself caught like a deer in headlights, watching the way he was running his tongue along his teeth, blue eyes narrowed slightly as he waited for her to respond. “I…over-reacted,” she finally managed. “You gave me your reason, and I should’ve just let it go.” Look away, damn it. Make this a whole world of easy for you by not staring at him like he’s lunch.

“Probably half my fault anyway,” he replied. “Any vamp worth his salt knows better than to turn his back on the Slayer.” The music in his head was gone now, replaced with an ever-quickening rhythm that echoed against his skull. A quick glance down at the hollow of Buffy’s neck confirmed what he could already feel with his skin; her heart was racing like a thoroughbred in the last stretch. “Baaaad Spike,” he drawled, the timbre of his voice dripping in melted caramel.

His obviousness should’ve pissed her off, should’ve made her haul her arm back only to drive it into his jaw, but it didn’t. If anything, it was an addictive magnet, her fingers inching forward to grasp the edge of his shirt, pulling it aside to expose the musculature that she was coming to know so well. Buffy’s eyes lowered to the wound’s dressing, remembering the hurt anger in his own aspect when she’d made him bleed yet again, and swallowed. “You think you might be up to patrolling with me tonight?” she asked. Change of subject. Good. Plus, offer him something he wants. Always helps to ease the guilt.

“That what you want, pet?”

How was she supposed to answer that? “Only if it’s what you want,” she countered. “And as long as you’re up to it.” There. Ball was back in his court.

He sighed, more for effect than anything else. “Is it really that hard to make a choice, Slayer?” he asked softly. “It’s not like we’re talkin’ a life and death situation here. Me, I can take anything the local nasties want to dish. The question is, do you want me there?”

Damn. How did he do that?

She let the fabric fall from her fingers, her pulse pounding in her ears, and took a step back, lengthening the distance between them as if the additional space would help clear her head. Since when did dealing with Spike get so hard? Or so…distracting? Business. Focus on business. That’s what this was about. “You’re always an asset in a fight, Spike,” Buffy said as calmly as she could. “If something goes down, then yes, I’d want you there.” She smiled, trying to turn it into a joke. “Plus, no walls to go bumping against. That’s gotta be a bonus.”

His eyes were dark as his shoulders relaxed. He couldn’t really be expecting any miracles, now could he? She’d invited him, and in spite of her rather circuitous response, she wanted him there, and bugger if he was going to turn that down. “I’ll be there with bells on,” he said, and reached up to begin fastening the buttons on his shirt. “Though I still think you should’ve let me go last night.”

Buffy smiled, grateful for the return to normalcy his words conveyed, and started to turn for the door only to stop and glance back at the vampire. “What’re you doing about lunch?” she queried. “You want me to bring a thermos up?”

“Actually, I rather fancied something a little more solid.” He smiled at her lifted brows. “What? You’re the one who let the bloody smells in the room. Not my fault it smells like it might actually be more than edible. Even if the pillock did cook it.”
Tilting her head, Buffy gazed quizzically at her roommate. “Don’t you like Duncan?”

Spike snorted. “About as much as I liked havin’ this chip shoved up my head.”

“I think he’s nice.”

“And I think he’s an over-educated prat who probably has problems keeping his pants up whenever a piece of skirt walks by.” He shrugged at her look of amazement. “You asked.”

She was halfway out the door before she spoke again. “Doesn’t mean he can’t cook, though.”

“Never said it did, luv.”

* * *

Buffy almost groaned out loud when the door to the great hall opened and a large whiteboard on wheels appeared, quickly followed by the guiding hands of Colin and Xander. “You know,” she said, “for being out in the middle of nowhere, you sure have a lot of crap in this place.”

Colin’s gaze was steady as he helped push the board to the head of the table. “I didn’t hear you whinging when you saw the weapons cache,” he commented archly.

Buffy smiled, her eyebrows raised. “Well, well, well. Certainly didn’t take long for you to get into the holding of your own around here.”

In spite of his desire to maintain his composure, the Watcher blushed at her amusement, turning at the last minute to avoid seeing her laugh at him, the chuckle from the vampire in the corner undeniable. “I haven’t decided yet if your forthrightness is due to your being American, or due to your being the Slayer,” he said.

“Oh, that’s rich,” Buffy said. “Seeing as how you’re the only vampire in the room.”

“Like I’d even try to eat any of you. Probably give myself a tummy ache.”

“Yeah!” All eyes turned to look at Buffy, as she folded her arms across her chest in mock indignation. “Still in the room here.”

“Yes, and we still have much to accomplish today.” Colin reached for the tray of markers on the table and carefully uncapped both the black and red pens before turning back to the white board. “I want to discuss our dungeon guest first,” he said as he began writing.

Spike snorted. “Since when do guests try to eat each other?”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Buffy said. “Seeing as how you’re the only vampire in the room.”

“Like I’d even try to eat any of you. Probably give myself a tummy ache.”

“Well, you did try to bite me that time after the Initiative chipped you.” This came from Willow.

“And how many times have we heard how you’d kill any of us if you didn’t have to worry about blinding pain in the above-the-neck region?” quipped Buffy.
The vamp rolled his eyes. “Kill does not necessarily equal eat, Slayer.”

“People!” Colin’s voice was sharp, gathering back their attention at the head of the table. “Focus here. We’re discussing the demon in the dungeon now. What possibilities have we come up with in our research?”

“Not a whole lot,” Willow admitted, reaching for her own notepad. “The most obvious one is the kelpie—–.”

“Ah, yes, the kelpie, of course.” Colin began scrawling across the board.

“Sounds like a baby fish,” Buffy commented. “Not like what went after Spike.”

“Actually, they’re purported to be quite malevolent,” the Watcher explained. “They’ve been known to lure unsuspecting humans into deep waters with the intent to kill them.”

“Didn’t look like luring to me,” the Slayer said. “It looked more like grabbing.”

“I don’t think we’re looking for Trigger here anyway,” the vampire offered. “Not unless these kelpies can grow hands.”

She turned in her chair to look at him. “Trigger? What’re you talking about?”

Spike settled his gaze on her. “Kelpies are horses. You know…ride ‘em, cowboy, kind of demons.”

“That’s not entirely t-t-true.” Tara picked up the book in front of her and handed it to Colin. “Kelpies are shapeshifters. It’s just that their shape of choice happens to be a horse.”

“Plus, they’re Scottish,” offered Anya. “So, you know, local.”

“How do you kill them?” Buffy asked. “Anything special about it?”

The two witches shrugged. “Not that we could find, but we’ll keep looking.”

“Which begs the next question.” Giles sat up, leaning forward to address the group. “How many are we dealing with?”

“I’m going to say two,” said the Slayer. “The one in the dungeon that came after me and Spike, and the one out in the real world that’s been having the locals for lunch. Unless there’s another way out of the castle that we don’t know about, there’s no way for the one downstairs to get out without one of us noticing.” She smiled. “I mean, we barely fit in the stairwell, let alone a ten-foot water demon.”

“It’s safer to assume two, as well,” Colin said. “If we were to kill one and then relax our guard because we believed to be done, we could very well be faced with a nasty surprise.”

“Hopefully when Spike and I patrol tonight, we’ll find it and narrow our most wanted list to just one.”

Both Giles and Colin frowned, turning to look at the vampire as he slouched in his normal corner chair. “Are you ready for that?” Giles asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Didn’t fly halfway across the world to cool my heels while the rest of you get to have all the fun.”
“So, what happens when Buffy and Spike are done playing rodeo?” questioned Xander.

Colin’s answer was firm. “We wait until the end of the month to perform the ritual that will seal the rift back up.”

“Um, yeah, about that.” Willow’s frown was immediate as she picked up the book from earlier. “I don’t think we have to wait that long.”

“Yes, we do,” the Watcher argued. “I’ve explained—.”

“Moon cycles, yeah, I know.” Flipping through the text, the redhead scanned the pages until she found what she was looking for, then handed it to the man at the head of the table. “Isn’t this the same thing you want us to do?”

His gaze skimmed the words, his brow gradually wrinkling in consternation, until finally he flipped the book closed, using his thumb to mark his page, his eyes quickly reading the title on its spine. “Where did you get this?”

“It was in the stack you gave us to read this morning.”

He shook his head. “I’ve never seen this particular text before.” There was no mistaking the confusion in his eyes, and he seemed only half-aware when the other Watcher took the book away to glance through it himself.

“There are a lot of books,” Buffy said. “Maybe it just got put in by mistake.”

“Did you pull the resources from the Council’s library yourself?” Giles queried.

“Mostly. There were some here from the original team, prior to the events of Samhain.”

“Then it’s most likely one of theirs.”

Colin took the book from his proffered hand. “But this is the same ritual I was referring to earlier,” he argued. “And this affords a different interpretation of its efficacy.”

Buffy leaned into her best friend. “It’s what-cacy?” she whispered.

“Effectiveness,” came the whispered response.

“So Will was right,” said Xander. “We can do the ritual tomorrow night.”

Colin shrugged. “I see no reason why not.”

From his vantage point, Spike listened to the discussion continue as the gang finished sorting out the details of the upcoming days, but his attention wandered, the disappointment at his shortened time with the Slayer a stone weighing in his stomach. So much for opportunities, he thought. Not when they’d be picking up stakes and moseying back to the Hellmouth so soon. ‘Course, he had more than enough fodder to sustain his imagination and dreams for years to come, but suddenly, that didn’t seem like quite enough, not when he’d had the real thing in his arms, even if it had been for only the briefest of nights.

Absently picking at his nails, he watched her through hooded eyes, her smile and laughter softening his resolve, eliciting long-forgotten words of passion in damning rhyming couplets, and the music he’d been unable to shake since the bedroom came filtering back, playing itself inside his skull even as he fought to keep himself from humming it again. “And I don’t care, what the
neighbors say...I always will be true...I always will love you...”

What the hell...even if they did do the ritual the next night, that still gave him at least forty-eight hours with her. Who knew what would happen...
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has asked Spike to go patrolling with her, and the Scoobies have started to make a dent in the research, coming up with some good possibilities for their resident demon…

His fingers lingered over the leather-spine, tracing the gilt lettering in abandon, oblivious to the deafening quiet of the castle as he contemplated the book. Although Rupert’s explanation regarding its origin—that it was actually left by the first Council team to handle the expedition—made a certain sense, Colin was very doubtful as to its veracity, knowing as he did that the initial entourage had catalogued every text they’d deemed necessary for the affair, and this particular title had not been included on the list. It didn’t mean it couldn’t have appeared in that way; it just made its likelihood extremely slim.

The afternoon had been incredibly productive, and, in spite of the jocularity between the young Americans, Colin had found himself relaxing into their presence, even occasionally volunteering his own bit of whimsy when the opportunity arose. The young man—his gaze darted to his notebook—Xander, was actually quite entertaining, even if the Englishman only understood a third of his pop culture references. Really must watch more television, he thought.

Perhaps it was the growing sense of camaraderie that was creating the feelings of guilt in the Watcher now. He’d been so eager for this assignment, had trusted himself to be prepared for it, but now, in the face of such earnest belief as he was now witnessing in the Slayer and her friends, he was beginning to regret not being completely upfront with them. Mr. Travers’ voluble support of Buffy was beginning to make sense, even if Colin didn’t understand her rather flip attitude toward authority or her casual acceptance of Spike within the fold, and though he held that the information she didn’t have was really of no value in completing the project, he couldn’t help but wonder how she would react should she know the whole tale. Probably violently, knowing her tendencies. Violence directed toward him. He really hoped she never found out.

The door to the great hall opened, and Colin looked up to see Giles standing in the entrance, his coat dangling from his fingers. “Heading back to town?” he asked.

The other Englishman nodded. “No reason to linger, I don’t think. Everyone’s retired, well, except for Buffy and Spike, that is.” He began walking toward the kitchen. “I just thought I’d check to see if Duncan wanted a ride.”

“Oh.” Colin frowned. “I believe he’s left already.”

Giles stopped in his tracks and shook his head. “I’ve been in the States too long,” he murmured. “I keep forgetting people actually walk here.”

“I really don’t know how you’ve done it.” The admiration was evident in his voice as he regarded the older man. “She’s very…spirited. I think I probably would’ve requested a transfer within a week if it had been me.”

“Being a Watcher isn’t like working in an office. There is no interdepartmental juggling when one
has difficulties.”

Colin blushed. “Oh, I didn’t mean…I mean, Miss Summers is exceptional…as the Slayer, of course. Not in a…non-Slayer capacity.” In his fluster, he turned back to the table, unnecessarily straightening the books that still dotted its surface. “Which must be due to your influence, I’m sure. Being her mentor. I’m just not sure I could’ve done the same job if I was in your place.”

“You’re doing remarkably well,” Giles offered, but when he was met with a raised eyebrow, he ducked his head. “Considering.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Rupert, even if I am convinced you’re lying through your teeth.” The two men chuckled. “Just as well, I suppose. Provided they’re able to catch the demon tonight, and the ritual goes as planned tomorrow, everyone can go back to their lives as normal by the end of the week.”

“Funny, but before coming here, I’m not sure I would’ve considered returning to the Hellmouth as life as normal.” Giles’ smile was small, and he gave his colleague a brief nod before turning around and walking back to the room’s entrance. “See you tomorrow, then.”

The return of silence catapulted Colin’s mood back to sobriety, and he settled himself heavily into the nearest chair, his hand reaching out aimlessly to stroke the books at his side. He sincerely hoped Buffy would find and kill the demon that had been loosed onto the countryside; then, when the ritual was completed the following evening, he could begin to relax again, knowing that the worst would then be over.

* * *

Every breath hung in the air like a crystal fog, the chill punctuating her lungs, each inhalation an avid reminder of her own body. In spite of the cold, it was a beautiful night, with a large moon that hung low on the horizon, casting silver stripes across the heather in its icy embrace, and if it wasn’t for the all-too real weight of the knife sheathed at her side, Buffy could’ve almost imagined for a moment that she wasn’t the Slayer, or that she wasn’t currently in search of a demon that didn’t belong in her world.

Spike strolled ahead of her, his duster swirling around his legs, oblivious to the encroaching cold. She could hear his faint humming, the tune the same as the one she’d caught him in earlier, and smiled, shaking her head at the same time. “You know,” she said, “you have got to be one of the happiest vamps I have ever met.”

He stopped, looking over his shoulder with a curious glint in his eye, his lips crooked into a grin. “Think it’s a matter of perspective, pet,” he replied. “How many vamps do you actually take the time to get to know before you give them the ol’ stake treatment?”

Buffy ducked her head in embarrassment. “OK, so I could probably count those on one hand, but still…I mean Angel--.”

“You are not about to compare me to the poofster,” Spike snorted. “Wanker was never about the fun, and him gettin’ that soul only made him even more depressing to be around.” His eyes narrowed. “Always wondered what you saw in him, though I s’pose that whole tall, dark, and potentially dangerous thing he cultivates really revved your little Slayer heart into overdrive. Certainly worked its number on Dru.”

“Whoa!” Before he could blink, she had closed the distance between them, her finger up and hovering over his chest, almost as if she was desperate to start poking him in anger. “Don’t even
think about comparing me to Insano Girl. Outside of Angel and an unfortunate association with you, I’ve got nothing in common with her.”

It was happening again, that pounding in her ears as her heart rate accelerated, the tunneling of her vision as Spike suddenly seemed too very much there, an intoxicating blend of leather and smoke, black and blond, and Buffy swallowed as she stared up at him, her eyes flashing from the illumination of scattered moonbeams. His lips seemed to take forever to form his next words, and she felt the world around her begin to swim as he spoke.

“No, s’pose you’re right about that,” he murmured, his own gaze shadowed in ebony as it swept over the undeniable color in her cheeks. “She can’t really hold a candle to you.” His smile was slow, deliberate. “Not that she would, of course, seein’ as how that would be virtual suicide. Open flame, and all.”

The admission from the vampire was almost a caress, reaching around to the small of her back to trace invisible fingers up her spine, and Buffy’s mouth worked in gaping silence as she fought to find the words that would make sense of the emotional gamut wreaking havoc through her body. He wasn’t kidding this time. Though his smile remained, it wasn’t the usual mocking leer that twisted everything that came out of Spike’s mouth. He honestly believed what he’d just said, even if he had tried to hide it behind a joke. What exactly did that mean? And why would he go that far?

“Fire…” she breathed, unsure as to just what she could say. “…usually…you know…bad…” OK, now she wasn’t making any sense at all. Just go and slap a Rainman sticker to my forehead, she thought. Step up and see the idiot girl. Listen as she babbles on about nothing. Watch as she tries to stare away her attraction to the vampire.

Her eyes widened. No, I did not just think attraction, she struggled. Except she had. And she was. And it was making parts of her body she’d never associated with the vampire before begin to tingle in anticipation.

“Not always.” This was dangerous ground, and he knew it, but the sultry pull of the living flame before him was too beguiling for him to resist, and Spike’s hand reached up, a single finger brushing a stray lock of hair from her temple. “I’m certainly not complaining about the fire that was snuggled up against the Big Bad last night. That’s just the right sort of burn.”

“It wasn’t…snuggling…” But there was no conviction in her voice, and Buffy suddenly realized it wasn’t cold outside after all. It was, in fact, too warm, and growing steadily warmer, even as his mouth seemed to draw closer to hers.

“What would you call it?”

Replying would mean speaking and the sudden lack of moisture in her mouth made that impossible, so when her tongue darted out to run over her lips in an attempt to make speech achievable, the last thing she expected was the flash of gold in Spike’s eyes, or the low growl that rumbled from his throat.

“What’s wrong, Slayer?” he murmured. “Talkin’s not so hard. Not like you don’t have the right… body parts for it.” His gaze lowered to her mouth while his thumb came up, feathering over the full bottom lip once…twice…a third impossible time before floating over the hollow of her cheek to the sharp line of her jaw. Now came the moisture, the inside of her mouth springing to life as it itched for something more than his touch, and the involuntary turn of her head into his hand made the vampire chuckle as he dropped his arm.

She wanted to step away, to move back from the proximity of deft fingers so skilled in finding
those points on her body that craved attention, but found her feet unwilling to obey, fixing her to her present position in a silent cry for more. Run, she wanted to scream at herself. Get out of there as fast as you can. Vampire, remember? Been there, got the t-shirt. Plus, boyfriend back home. Not like you don’t already have a very active sex life. You don’t need this kind of problem in your life.

It was a hollow argument, and she knew it. Active, yes. Fulfilling? Not for awhile. And though sex with Riley was certainly…nice, it wasn’t…enough. She was always wanting more. Not necessarily more sex…just something…more. Yet here she was, standing in the middle of a field in Scotland, letting a vampire---Spike, of all people!---caress her in ways that felt more intimate than anything any lover had ever done to her, and Buffy couldn’t get enough of it. In fact…and she almost blushed with the truth of it. She wanted his hands on her, wanted to feel those lips crushed to hers…taste him and devour him and hold him until she had no sensation left in her body…only memories of him etched into her skin, and right or wrong be damned…

He leaned forward, and for a brief hysterical moment, Buffy thought he was going to kiss her, immobile as the possibility became more imminent, only to watch his head tilt, his tongue dart out to retrace the path his thumb had taken over her cheek just moments earlier, sending fiery shivers down her spine with each inexorable inch. His mouth ended just beside her ear. “So…you still haven’t said, luv. What do you call it?”

It was a husky whisper filled with dark promises. I call it crazy, she wanted to say, but the blood pounding through her veins silenced her doubts, swirling the world around her in crimson. He wasn’t moving, just holding himself there…his cheek touching but not…the body infuriatingly near yet impossibly too far away…and it was no longer enough, her neck twisting so that her own lips skated across his pale skin, everything slipping away until it was just her…and him…

It didn’t seem real that the distant jingle could actually be there, but as the clarion call grew more insistent, Buffy realized it wasn’t in her head and tore herself away from the vampire, chest heaving as she fought to regain her breath, darkened eyes scanning the countryside for the source of the ringing bells. It was only then that he noticed the sounds as well, and Spike silently cursed whatever distraction it was that had disrupted the moment, his gaze blazing in shades of blue and gold as he joined the Slayer in the search.

It was coming from in front of them, and, refusing to meet her partner’s face, Buffy brushed past him to follow it, hurrying to the hilltop’s crest to survey the ground below. The moonlight was stronger here, bathing the valley with hoary illumination, and she froze as she saw the outline of the animal at the hill’s base, its proud head thrown back, a midnight mane caught in what little breeze there was. “Spike…” she whispered, afraid to speak louder lest she spook the horse, and felt him join her at her side.

“Now that’s taking the bein’ there with bells on thing just a little far,” he drawled, and decided then and there that he hated whatever it was. Couldn’t have waited, he thought irritably. And if this buggers up any chance I’ve got with the Slayer ‘cause she’s now got time to think about what she’s doin’, you can guarantee I’ll be back to hunt you down.

“Too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?” she asked, still unwilling to look up at him. “We found that lady’s body not too far from here.”

It was then that he realized she was again asking him his opinion---like it mattered---and his irritation eased, his euphoria from moments earlier returning at a gentler ebb. “Well, it doesn’t look like what came after you in the dungeon,” he said, “but if the witches are right, this thing can change to look like whatever it wants to.”

“I suppose it could be a real horse,” she mused.
Spike snorted. “Wearing a bell harness in the middle of soddin’ nowhere? Not very likely, Slayer.”

The beast’s head turned then, its long nose facing the pair that stood above it, and Buffy pursed her lips as its eyes gleamed golden in the moonlight. “OK, not a real horse,” she acquiesced and slowly reached for the weapon at her side.

In a flurry of liquid movement, the kelpie bolted, its hooves pounding silently into the earth, fleeing in the opposite direction of those who watched it, and the Slayer’s instincts took over, her feet springing to life beneath her, her body whipping down the hillside as she took chase. This was better. This was work. This wasn’t thinking about kissing Spike. She could deal with this. Catch the evil horse. Kill the evil horse. Except not really a horse. And she’d been seriously considering actually kissing Spike…

Rolling his eyes, the vampire followed, his pace slower as his recent wound twinged in a reminder of its presence. Not that it was going to make a difference, he thought. This was Buffy’s kill. He was just along for the ride.

They were a trio of grace as they raced through the heather, the distance between the girl and the kelpie closing with each step. At one point, she saw it falter, veering heavily to the left, bringing it closer to her than it had been since she’d started, and she took a risk, the knife in her hand carving a deadly path through the air as she flung it at the beast, her smile triumphant as she saw it embed itself in the animal’s throat.

Its whinny pierced the air, stumbling to its knees, and Buffy put on an extra burst of speed, her delight in slowing it momentarily distracting her, diverting her from the hidden hole in the ground that grabbed at her ankle just moments later. She went flying forward, her foot trapped, and felt it wrench sideways, the sudden stab shooting up her leg forcing her to cry out, more in frustration than in actual pain, and the Slayer could only watch from her vantage point on the frozen ground as the kelpie regained its balance and continued its flight.

Though he saw the demon fleeing, Spike’s only concern was the prone form of the young woman, and he stopped as soon as he reached her side, kneeling to allow his hand to rest on her ankle. It was rooted in the small hole, and he could already feel the flesh around the joint beginning to swell, pulsing in a furious rhythm that he knew matched her heart. “This might hurt,” he said, wrapping his fingers around the limb, and gently twisted it free.

“Don’t just sit there,” Buffy barked as soon as he let her go. “Go after it.”

His eyebrow lifted. “Are you totally daft?” he shot back. “You’re hurt. I leave you here, and no tellin’ how many of Mr. Ed’s friends’ll show up and decide to have a Buffy buffet. No way am I goin’ to have to explain to Rupert how I let his Slayer get eaten in the line of duty.”

“Fine.” She struggled to her feet. “I’ll just go myself.” Her frustration fuelled her body as she stood up, but as soon as she applied her weight to her ankle, it gave underneath her, causing her to lurch sideways.

Spike caught her before she could fall to the ground again, his hand sliding around her back as he swung her up into his arms. “Riiiight, Slayer,” he said. “Only place you’re goin’ is back to the castle.”

The sudden force of meeting the wall of his chest sucked the air from her lungs, and Buffy stopped fighting, all thoughts of the pain in her foot dissipating, to be replaced by even more confusing ones, the inscrutable look in his eyes forcing her to avert her own. “You’re not really going to carry me all the way back there,” she accused as harshly as she could manage. She wanted to fold her
arms across her chest in protestation, but the way he was holding her prevented it, and she found herself gripping his sleeve to keep from tumbling to the ground. “You’re going to open that bite back up again.”

“First off, I’ll be fine as long as you don’t go playing wriggly worm.” She immediately stopped moving, unwilling to be the one responsible for his continued bleeding. “And secondly, unless you’re about to tell me that you can sprout wings and fly yourself back, yeah, I am goin’ to carry you.” He grinned. “That is, unless you can think of a good reason for us to hang out here for a little longer…”

Her eyes widened as she felt his thumb begin caressing the back of her thigh, the corresponding shivers across her skin almost sending her flying from his hold. Instead, she stiffened, and deliberately turned her face away. “No,” she said firmly. “There’s absolutely no reason for us to stay out here if you’re not going to go after the kelpie.”

“Just as well.” Spike’s loping pace as he began the trek back to Dall Rath rocked her gently against him, vibrating both of their flesh to near distraction. “More in the mood for a bed anyway.”

* * *

None of it was any clearer by the time Spike pushed open their door, and Buffy sighed as he kicked it shut behind them. What had she been thinking out there? She had a boyfriend back in Sunnydale, a very loyal boyfriend who loved her very much, and here she was, wrapped up in thinking about the sexual stylings of another guy. No, correction. Another vampire. Who Riley happened to hate with a passion. Who Riley would dust in a heartbeat if he thought he was any kind of threat to her. Who Riley didn’t even know was here because Buffy had been too afraid to tell him. Crap.

Yet, even as he gently lowered her to the edge of the bed, she couldn’t deny the very real way her body was reacting to Spike…the way her mouth watered at the thought of his lips on hers…the butterflies that flitted from stomach to throat and back again every time she felt his cool touch on her bare skin…the unmistakable moisture between her legs at the thought of something more than a vigorous kiss from the vamp. Some of it had been there before tonight---she’d be lying if she said otherwise---but it had always been manageable, something she could cope with, to comfortably categorize before locking it away under those unexplainable things that weirded her out, better not thought of or dealt with. What, then, had changed?

As she watched him pick up the first aid kit that sat on the nightstand, Buffy knew the answer to that, even if she wasn’t ready to fully believe it. The thing that had changed was her. How she saw him. He wasn’t just a body anymore. He wasn’t just a vampire anymore. He wasn’t even just an annoying pest she had to worry about on the fringe of her Slayer existence. Spike was a person, with moods---albeit strangely uplifting and unpredictable moods---and feelings, and oddly disjointed jokes that somehow still made her laugh, and a sense of concern for her that was even more confusing than her own reaction to him. And that was why she’d let her guard down.

He stood before her, the ace bandage dangling from his fingers. “Normally, I’d say no talkin’ from the Slayer was a good thing,” he joked, crouching down to lightly grasp her swollen foot. “Mainly because I always seem to be on the wrong end of that tongue in ways that usually end in some part of me bleedin’.” His azure gaze darted up to look at her drawn face, his strong hands sliding off her boot. “But after what happened out there…” He let the thought trail off, deftly baring her toes to the cold, silently challenging the young woman to finish his sentence as he began to wind the bandage around her ankle.

You can do this, she thought. Be nonchalant. “It was nothing,” she said as lightly as she could manage. “No big.”
His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “No big?” Spike repeated. “Sorry, pet, but it felt bloody huge to
me.”

“Don’t know why.” Buffy shrugged, keeping her eyes down, locked on the work he was doing in
wrapping her injury. “These things just happen sometimes. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Look at me.” There was a command in his voice that she wanted desperately to ignore but
couldn’t, dragging her hazel gaze up to meet his. The muscles in his jaw were tense, belying the
softness of his brow. “Say that again,” he said softly. “Only this time, you look me in the eye when
you do it.”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” she repeated, but even as the words tumbled from her mouth, she knew
they weren’t true, even as he did, and found herself swallowing as Spike leaned forward, her now-
bandaged foot sliding from his grasp.

“Even if you’re not itchin’ to come clean with it,” he murmured, “I’ve got nothin’ to lose anymore,
specially since I think I made myself pretty clear out there before we got so rudely interrupted.”
His hands balled into fists and he placed them on either side of her legs, using them to support his
weight as he leaned in, his tongue darting out to trace the outer curve of the lobe before his mouth
settled just millimeters away. “It meant the world to me, luv,” he murmured, and heard the sharp
intake of her breath. Not the words he wanted to say, but as much as he thought she could handle
right now. Anything more and she’d be bolting from the room, or worse, reaching for her weapon.
As it was, he still wasn’t sure she wouldn’t.

An eternity seemed to pass as both remained motionless, each of them lost in the confusing
amalgam of their emotions, before Buffy finally turned her head away from Spike, inching herself
back onto the mattress so that there could finally be some space between them, breaking the spell
his words had woven. The vampire’s eyes briefly closed as he stood, and he squared his shoulders
as he stepped away from the bed.

“Right,” he said, his tone brisk. “So we’ve still got a deal then, Slayer? Think I’m past the point of
being Old Faithful, so no reason we can’t go back to our original arrangement.” He didn’t even
look at her as he walked toward the screened corner. Not going to give her the satisfaction, he
thought. Not going to let her think she won this round. “I’m just goin’ to---.”

“Spike…”

The soft brush of her voice caused him to hesitate, and Spike glanced at her out of the corner of his
eye. Though he was sure she probably wished otherwise, the flickering light from the candles
they’d left burning etched the plea across her features in shades of gold, and he marveled yet again
on just how beautiful she really was.

“What?” he asked, hoping for righteous indignation but settling for the curious sigh.

She didn’t know what to say. She only knew that she hadn’t wanted him to go so cold on her, to
turn his back like nothing had happened—even if she had been the first to pull away. Damn.
“You…don’t have to sleep on top of the blankets,” she finally said. “If you don’t want to, that is.”

His blue eyes narrowed as he studied her. Never in a million lifetimes would he ever completely
suss her out, Spike decided. Hell, he wasn’t sure she could suss herself out. But…it was something.
It was all he needed. For now.

“Thanks,” he murmured, and turned to retreat behind the screen, wondering how in hell he was
ever going to go to sleep now…
I Do Confess Thou Art So Fair

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Spike chased the kelpie out on the mountain, wounding it before she twisted her ankle and had to be carried back to Dall Rath, to face the vampire’s questions regarding the near-kiss they had shared while they were out…

They had both been wrong. Even as Spike was sliding himself under the blanket, his back to Buffy, he’d firmly believed that there was no way he was going to get to sleep, not with her so close, not after confessing what he had to her, and certainly not after what had almost happened out on the mountain. The radiant heat of her body beneath the comforter was enough to sear the inside of his eyelids as he closed them against the flickering light, but it did nothing to block out the images of the Slayer staring back at him as he’d leaned in to taste the salt of her cheek. The wide hazel eyes almost completely overwhelmed by black…the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing quickened…the quiver of her bottom lip as his mouth had danced over her skin…Though his arousal was immediate, deafening within the confines of his flesh, the quiet metronome of her even exhalations behind him soon defied his body's intentions, and lulled him to sleep.

It was even swifter for Buffy. Exhaustion mingled with pain, with a dash of confused hormones for flavor, and she was out of it before Spike had even emerged from washing up behind the screen, her lashes dark against her pale cheeks. She didn't consciously feel his weight settle behind her as he climbed into bed, or sense the slight tilting of her torso as it leaned toward him, her shoulder resting lightly against his, the curve of her hip nestling into him in spite of the denim and cotton that separated them. The only movement of her body was the minute undulations over her eyes as they darted around behind their shutters.

And so they slept…

* * *

As she finished the last of her stretches, Buffy felt the sizzle within her legs as the muscles warmed, ready for the next challenge the teacher at the front of the room would present. She was surrounded by half a dozen other girls, none of whom she recognized, while on the opposite wall, the same number of men mingled, waiting as she did for their next instruction. Everyone was dressed similarly---the women in tights and leotards, the men in tight trousers and matching t-shirts---and she knew without knowing why where she was. A dance studio.

"I know you hate doing them," the teacher was saying. "But these technical exercises are the foundation for becoming a graceful, accomplished dancer. Think of them like practicing your scales. Boring and repetitive, but essential." Her gaze swept over the group, and she smiled. "Dancing is about the magic of the moment, and while knowing the basic steps gives you the tools to create the magic, they are not the magic themselves. Which brings us to why most of you are here, of course."

Buffy could feel the anticipation begin to course through her system, unconsciously bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet in her excitement. The teacher was right; this was why she was here. And for some reason, it felt like it was going to be the best time of her life.
"Contrary to what you may believe," the teacher said, beginning to walk down the middle of the room between the two groups, "this is much more than any one dancer's virtuosity. No matter how good you may be individually, the most important thing you can learn is how to dance with a partner, because otherwise, what's the point? Why bother coming here at all? Just stay locked away in your little room at home and practice your exercises until you've got them cold. But, if you do that, you'll never be a real dancer."

As she reached the wall, the teacher turned to face them again. "I'd like to start with a demonstration first." She turned her gaze toward the women. "Buffy, could you come here, please?"

The blonde blushed as she stepped through the girls and crossed the room under their jealous stares, finishing at the instructor's side. They all thought she was the teacher's pet, and it was discomforting, even if it was mostly true.

"Now, she's going to need a partner---."

"I'll do it."

Buffy smiled as she saw Riley eagerly step forward, wondering why she hadn't noticed him earlier, only to have it dim as she caught the teacher shaking her head out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh, Mr. Finn, I am sorry, you really are more than…able, but I'd rather Buffy had a partner that, well…matched her capabilities. You do understand, don't you?"

"Oh…sure," Riley mumbled, his shoulders slumping in good-natured disappointment as he returned to his place in the line.

The instructor turned to the young girl at her side. "Why don't you pick someone, Buffy?" she asked. "You've seen them dance. Who do you think would be able to match you?"

Hazel eyes swept over the remaining men, coolly assessing one before flitting to the next. It was the last, though, standing slightly apart from the others, arms folded across his chest, that captured her, causing invisible butterflies to begin to beat their wings against her spine.

"Spike," she said softly, and watched as the corner of his mouth lifted, the twinkle in his eye unmistakable.

"Excellent choice," the teacher murmured, just loud enough for Buffy to hear, as the blond sauntered to join them at the wall. Louder, she told the pair, "Take your positions, please." She turned to face the rest of the class. "Watch and learn, people."

Everything else seemed to fall away as Spike stopped in front of her, his eyes uncharacteristically dark as they met with hers. His black uniform left little to the imagination, outlining every muscle in his arms, his chest, hugging his slim hips in ebony fire as he held up his left hand. "You sure you're ready for this, pet?" he asked, and it was as if someone had soaked each word in molten lava…dark, daring, and most definitely dangerous.

"Sure," Buffy breathed, and took his hand in hers, keeping her shoulders straight as his right slid around to fold over her shoulder blade. The Latin music seemed to start from nowhere, the percussive beats tattooing through him, into her, counting out their start as the couple locked gazes, waiting…anticipating…and then moving in startling syncopation, their feet gliding in unison across the tiled floor.

It was as if they'd done it a thousand times. For each step he would take, she would counter,
allowing him to guide her through the revolutions, his grip firm but light, matching his feline grace with her own elegant lines until even the remaining women were sighing from the beauty of the display before them. Buffy felt her muscles sing, an exhilarating aria that begged to be a duet, and found herself deliberately executing moves that would brush her body against his…the curve of her calf around his tight thigh as he pulled her against him for a winged dip…the press of her palm against his chest as she danced around him, her breasts lightly brushing across his back as she circled, returning to her stance within his arms. Following the rhythm was instinctual…intoxicating…and so very, very right.

The music ended with his arm around her back, holding her firmly in place as she stared up at him. She could feel the beads of sweat dripping from her jaw, down her neck, and watched as his eyes finally slid from hers to follow their paths downward. When his head lowered, the shock of his tongue lapping at the tangy salt forced the air from her lungs, and Buffy's fingers curled tighter around his.

"Everyone else partner up," the teacher called out. "We're going to do this again." She walked over to the young couple who had just been the center of attention. "If you two would rather sit this one out," she told them, "that's all right. That was more…intense than I expected."

Spike straightened, pulling back from his partner's torso as he gazed down at her. "Well, pet?" he queried softly. "Do you want to stop?"

There was no doubt, no hesitation. "No," Buffy replied, and stepped back into the circle of his arms…

* * *

The moan escaped her throat as she rolled over in her sleep, the blankets shifting slightly as Buffy pressed herself against Spike's back. Both still slept, her accelerating breathing the only sound within the dimly lit room, but the flickering behind her eyelids had stopped, as if within the world of her dream, her gaze was fixed on the one thing directly in front of her.

For several minutes, the only movement within the room came from the wax slowly dripping down the candles, scorching wet sliding down the hard pale columns in agonizing lethargy. Then…a soft sigh from the bed, followed almost immediately by Buffy's arm stealing around the curve of her roommate's chest, her breasts flattening against his shoulder blades as she pulled him ever closer. The inarticulate moans coming from her throat were almost continuous now, and she lifted her leg to drape it over his thigh, her slim foot sliding down over his knee in a raspy caress before entwining around his calf.

They held this position, each locked away in the realm of slumber, as even more time drifted away, every passing moment leading them closer to dawn. When the spell was eventually broken, it was Buffy who shattered it, burrowing her face into Spike's shoulder as her grip tightened, her lips quietly parting to kiss the pale join of his neck…

* * *

He had been dreaming, of that he was sure, but its elements escaped him, scattering like dust as a heat yanked him back to consciousness, sudden and wet in its intensity as his mind sharpened to his surroundings. It took only a moment for him to realize that Buffy had adopted a position similar to that first morning in Dall Rath, her hand moving infinitesimally across his bare chest while her leg powered his lower half to hers. It was almost expected, considering the narrow confines of the bed, and Spike's recently acquired knowledge of how well the Slayer slept when in contact with another body. In fact, if he'd woken up and found out that she hadn't turned around in her sleep, he probably
would've been disappointed. No, it wasn't the singe of feeling her flesh pressed against his, even through the cotton of her t-shirt, that had woken him up.

It was the unmistakable feel of her mouth on his neck. Kissing him. His eyes shot open. Correction. Sucking him.

Must be a helluva dream, Spike thought, realizing for the first time since waking that his own arousal was pulling his jeans uncomfortably across his hips. And as much I'd love to play centerstage to it, I'm not so daft to think that it's me she really wants. The memory of her murmuring Soldier Boy's name that first morning still rankled---the last thing he ever wanted to be was second-best---and so he reached up, ready to extract himself from her embrace, his hand closing over the fine lines of hers.

When she curled her fingers into his, interlacing them in some weird reverse handhold, the vampire froze, tilting his head enough to look down at the outlines of their arms. If he didn't know better, he'd've sworn she didn't want him to go…but that was ridiculous. She was dreaming. About Finn. It was Finn she was holding onto, not him.

The movement of his head was enough to break the seal of her mouth on Spike's neck, and Buffy automatically snuggled deeper into him, her lips skating across the arc of his shoulder in an absent caress. As her breath fanned in alternating blasts across his skin, he felt her mouth open, heard her preparing to speak.

"Spiiike..." she sighed, almost groaning, the slightest bit of a whine coloring it as she held him tighter. "Wanna…dance…"

His brows shot up, and it would've been followed by his body leaping from the bed if the Slayer's embrace hadn't been a vise around his lean form. She'd said his name. His name. Not Finn's. Bloody bird was dreaming about him.

Carefully untangling his hand from hers, Spike began turning his body into her, feeling her instinctively shift to allow him clearance, only to return to cover him as soon as his back hit the mattress. It was the first time he could see her face, and though part of him fervently wished that she was awake---OK, make that most of him---he wasn't surprised to see the closed eyelids as she buried her face in the hollow of his neck, her mouth returning to its feather exploration over his skin.

Lowering his shoulder let him slip his arm beneath her body, reaching around to gently cup the curve of her buttock, and the vampire closed his eyes, momentarily debating the wisdom of getting caught up in her dream. He supposed he really should do the right thing and wake her. She wasn't aware of what she was doing, and though he could smell the scent of her arousal, had heard her murmur his name, was at this very moment being peppered with tiny Slayer kisses…

Sod it. He was bloody well going to enjoy this while it lasted.

The small hand that had been pressed to his chest now slid down his side, nails raking slightly as her fingers tucked themselves beneath the waistband of his jeans. The added thickness caused them to tighten even further, and Spike gritted his teeth at the strain of the denim against his bare cock, the rough seams that normally afforded such pleasure when he got hard, now cutting into the velvet skin with a harsh grate. With no thoughts but to alleviate the pressure, the vamp had reached down with his free hand, popping the button and easing down the zipper in audible liberation.

The relief was instantaneous and he sighed in pleasure as the chilly air met the moist head of his erection, his arm falling back to his side. This was better. He just had to remember to do himself up
before the Slayer woke---.

It seemed to be the only invitation she'd needed, the sudden freedom to move allowing Buffy's hand to roam free across his pelvis. As he turned his head to brush his lips across the top of her hair, Spike felt her smooth arm dance across the tip of his cock as she pulled her arm toward her, and growled as his arousal jumped, his own muscles twitching in kind. His grip tightened on her ass, his lips lowering to her temple, tasting the savory zest of her skin before continuing downward. Just one kiss. Couldn't hurt. She wasn't even awake. And somehow, he didn't think sleeping Buffy would mind…

* * *

The music had changed, slowing until they were barely moving, the other dancers in the class disappearing until it was just her and Spike, alone on the floor, no longer truly dancing as much as swaying in rhythm. He had tried stopping at one point, pulling away as the second song had stopped, but Buffy had grabbed him back, melding her hips to his as she gave up the pretense and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Wanna dance," she'd whispered, and began exploring the clean line of his collarbone with her tongue, oblivious to the cotton that separated her from the satin of his skin. He'd hardened almost immediately against her, and her body had responded in kind, the tingling in her clit beating in time to the almost non-existent music that still swirled faintly around them. Her arms had lowered then, gliding down his back before slipping between them, fingers inching even further to outline his cock through his trousers.

Spike had jerked then, his eyes blazing, then lowered his head to hers, lips meeting hers in the lightest of contacts, parting them with a firmness that belied their gentility, exploring her depths with a ravenous need that demanded he savor every second…

* * *

She moaned into the kiss, and Spike tightened his hold, forgetting that the Slayer still slept, lost in the disbelief that clouded his inner eye as his mouth grew more insistent, tasting and devouring and lingering much longer than he'd originally intended but oh, just one more moment wouldn't hurt…

He knew the instant she woke up. Before her eyes opened to see his face just inches from her. Before the slither of her hand stopped mid-caress. Even before she froze within their kiss. Spike could tell Buffy was awake the moment her heart rate began to accelerate. He knew the music of her pulse better than his own body.

She was lost between the vividness of her dream and the reality of his azure gaze staring back at her, and realized almost immediately what she had been---still was---doing. Kissing…and touching…and stroking…and, oh god, where was her hand?...and he had felt so good…tasted…like nothing else she'd ever…and was that his hand on her…but she wouldn't…she'd resolved, damn it…this was Spike…mortal enemy…and he felt of silk beneath her skin…

As her mouth pulled away, the lack of contact with his was almost painful, and Buffy's breath began to come in short, sharp bursts, her mind racing as she tried to grasp onto some kind of plan…anything to make this…stop?...no…and she was still holding his erection within the circle of her fingers, the wetness of its tip instantly recognizable…

"Buffy…" Spike murmured, a husky rumble that ached with want.

The sound of his voice startled her, reflexively constricting her grip, and heard him groan in
"For God's sake," he growled, and she saw the glint of gold within the depths of his eyes, "either kiss me or kill me, but make up your bloody mind, 'cause this holding pattern just isn't cutting it anymore."

And there it was, the choice---her choice---the one she'd been avoiding since the possibility had initially arisen. Waiting these few days hadn't made it any easier; he was still a vampire and she was still the Slayer, with a life back in Sunnydale that didn't include him, not really. And, yes, she wanted him, no point in lying to herself about it, not when every silent protestation was met with a spark of electricity that caused her skin to vibrate in tune with the memory of velvet lips and mouth-watering leather. But it wouldn't work…couldn't work…they didn't have anything in…

But that was wrong, and she knew it before it even finished, brushing it away with an imaginary hand to face the truth that stood just behind. It was easy. The choice had already been made, irrevocably, incomprehensibly, and---she had a funny feeling---inevitably.

She didn't close her eyes as she brushed her lips across his, holding his gaze locked with hers so that he would understand she knew what she was committing herself to. Ever so slightly, Spike's eyes narrowed, the line between the heavy brows deepening, questioning as she pulled back, searching for something---doubt? distrust?---before letting his face soften, the corner of his mouth beginning to lift in a hopeful smile.

"Buff---." 

She drowned him out with the force of her lips back on his, demanding a response this time, continuing the caress that had greeted her upon waking, while matching it with a very determined slide of her hand down the length of his arousal. This was what she wanted, had known it even if she hadn't been able to admit it to herself before now, and held the question of his earlier declarations for after. There would be time enough for talking later, she thought, and slowly pumped her arm back up, her thumb brushing tantalizingly across the head. 

That was all it took for the vampire. With a growl, he let his other arm encircle her, pulling her across his bare chest, trying his best not to allow the sudden spasming in his pelvis to distract him from the glory of her willing mouth on his. No longer a dream. Real. And glorious. And her.

He came all too quickly, the combination of the kissing and the heat of her flesh burning into him and the slick sliding of her hand along his cock eddying to a climax that bucked his body beneath hers, ripping his mouth away as the veins in his neck bulged.

Beside him, she lay rigid, watching as the convulsions slowly relaxed his body, his blond head turning to see her smiling wryly into his blue eyes. "Either I'm really good," she said, "or all those stories about vampire stamina are just myth."

With a crooked grin, Spike used his body to slide her back onto the mattress, propping himself up on either side of her so that he could look down at her swollen mouth. "Not a myth," he murmured, leaning to nip at the point of her chin, then going higher, his lips hovering while he nudged the tip of his nose gently against hers. "Goooood."

Buffy surprised herself by giggling, a light, airy sound that floated in the air above them, dancing on satisfied wings. All of a sudden, she seemed too aware of her own skin, shimmering in waves of fire as Spike's mouth began its own study of her neck, his hand sliding down her stomach to tuck inside the waistband of her sweats. "What're you doing?" she breathed with widened eyes, squealing as his lean fingers lightly pulled at the coarse curls it found. Part of her wanted to slap
his hand away, to tell him to play nice, but a bigger part---much bigger---was eagerly anticipating
his wintry touch between her thighs, and she parted them, allowing the vampire easier access to her
wetness.

Spike chuckled. "I figure turnabout is fair play," he replied.

She gasped as his hand parted the outer lips, outlining the inner even as his thumb flicked across
her clit. Out of nowhere, he seemed to have sprouted extra fingers…the one that continued to circle
the hard nub of her arousal…the ones that managed to separate her folds to allow the rest to
expertly penetrate her slick channel…all as his mouth and tongue returned to nibble and lick and
worship at the sinew of her shoulder.

Restraint was not his strong suit, especially since the reality of Buffy's body trembling beneath his
touch far outstripped any dreams he'd ever had about her. However, as he sucked at the delicate
flesh of her neck, he deliberately bridled his own returning arousal to concentrate his efforts on
pleasing her. He'd had his; now it was her turn.

"Spike…" she whimpered, letting her hands come up to tangle in his hair. "God…please…"

He didn't actually need the encouragement, but hearing her ask, knowing she wanted him, lit the
vampire from within, and he redoubled his touch, sliding his hand in and out of her even as he felt
her muscles clench to keep him inside.

It was building, and she could feel it, and though his mouth felt wonderful on her neck, she wanted
to taste him further…And so she tugged at his shoulder, sliding herself just far enough away so that
she could press her lips to his, all the while riding the crest of his pumping…until it washed over
her, arching her back even as she cried out into his mouth, her hands clutching at him in
desperation, his one free arm cradling her to him as if afraid to let go.

As her orgasm ebbed, Buffy sank back into the mattress, hazel eyes staring solemnly at the blond
lingering above her. It almost didn't feel real, yet the weight of his body pressing into hers spoke
otherwise, as did the soft aspect of his gaze as it flicked over the contours of her face. Her breath
cought as he extracted his arm from behind her, his hand brushing the hair away from her forehead,
a single finger wiping at the faint sweat that gleamed along her brow.

"So beautiful…" Spike murmured, and brushed his lips over her temple before rolling himself over
onto his back, pulling her with him so that she lay across his bare chest.

Nestled in the crook his shoulder, Buffy tugged absently at the blankets that had slipped to the side,
grateful when Spike grabbed the hems to help her return them over their bodies, and smiled
contentedly as her eyelids began to droop. "What do we do now?" she asked quietly, her voice
almost completely lost within the contour of his skin.

There was more than one way to answer that question, and he suspected she wished for some
metaphorical response, something that would satisfy her expected confusion regarding their…
unconventional relationship. But, as he felt her chest slowly rise and then fall with the returning
vestiges of exhaustion, he softly smiled, rubbing his cheek against the top of her hair as his
embrace tightened around her. "Sleep, luv," he murmured. There would be time enough for talking
later.

* * *

The moon was almost gone now, leaving the mountain in near darkness as he stared down at the
creature on the ground. Its breathing was audibly labored, the blood running freely from its wound,
and the man sighed.

"It didn't have to be this way, my friend," he said, and knelt down, one hand reaching out to grasp the dagger that was still embedded in the kelpie's neck. With one vicious twist, the blade sliced through the flesh, permanently silencing the beast's efforts, sliding from the bleeding wound to gleam dully in the moonlight. A cursory glance at the weapon confirmed what he already knew; it was from the weapons cache, which could only mean that the Slayer had done this. Why she hadn't finished the job herself, though, he had absolutely no idea.

Tossing the knife aside, his lips lifted into a small smile as what little moonlight remained jumped to the strand of bells that hung from the demon's inert neck. The greed burbled in the man's throat as his hand reached to grasp it, breaking the clasp with a firm yank so that it came free to dangle with a clarion call to the emptiness surrounding him. It would've been better without the unnecessary death, but he would take it any way he could. It was most definitely worth it…
The Day Returns

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: After wounding the kelpie on patrol, Buffy and Spike returned to Dall Rath, where Buffy finally gave in to her attraction to Spike.

When he’d been human, being an Englishman in Scotland was begging for trouble; for some reason, the bloody Scots were still a little miffed about the whole Bonnie Prince Charlie debacle, conveniently overlooking the fact that they had lost their bid for independence in the soddin’ eighteenth century. So, considering Angelus’ barmy notion of keeping a low profile, Spike had never really spent a great deal of time in the northern country prior to the Council’s recent holiday offer. It was just as well. Most of the time, the place was colder than a witches’ tit, with a local menu that left a lot to be desired---outside of the actual locals, that is---and if a vamp wasn’t interested in the scenery, there wasn’t a helluva lot left.

Not anymore. As of last night, Scotland was officially Spike’s favorite place on this entire planet, for one simple reason; the Highlands had given him Buffy.

Well, not given, he quickly corrected as he stared up at the stone ceiling, hands folded behind his head. Not like anyone could ever actually own the Slayer. More like…offered a place at her side. In her bed. In her.

OK, so not actually in her yet. But after feeling her come apart around his fingers, hearing those satisfied little sighs she kept making while she’d slept on his shoulder, Spike didn’t doubt that that would soon be rectified, that tonight after the ritual, the pair of them would continue their little dance to its natural conclusion, and that once they got back to the Hellmouth, Buffy’d be dumping her little Soldier Boy faster than he could say, “Bite me.” God, did he want to be there to witness that. Serve the smug bastard right.

He’d only seen her briefly today, when he’d woken as she was heading down for breakfast, but he wasn’t fussed about it, the fact that he’d drifted back off, not fully waking until well past mid-morning, more than enough reason for her not to stay there. After all, she had a job to do. The Slayer couldn’t very well be lollygaggin’ about when evil was afoot.

Spike snorted. She was goin’ to turn him into a bloody Scooby yet, he thought, he could just feel it. Already thinkin’ in terms of afooting evil, and helping out, and…wait a minute . He frowned. He was goin’ to be seein’ a helluva lot more of those little friends of hers, which meant she was probably goin’ to make him treat them nicer. The witches were a bit of all right, and Anya was an ex-demon so at least interesting to talk to if a little long-winded, and it wasn’t like he hadn’t actually lived with Rupes for a while there…Maybe it wouldn’t be such a tough gig after all. Provided he didn’t end up throttling Harris. That might be bad. Buffy probably wouldn’t like that much.

Tossing his legs over the side of the bed, Spike stood and stretched, feeling for the first time since getting attacked in the dungeon that he was finally mending properly. The wound didn’t hurt any longer, though if that was due to actual healing or his flying good mood, the vampire didn’t know. Didn’t really care, for that matter. What mattered was the final result, and the result was…he felt good.
And hungry. Time for a trip downstairs.

* * *

More than anything, she wanted to be upstairs right now, not sitting here staring at another of Colin’s flow charts, wondering just how much longer he was going to discuss the trail he and Giles had uncovered on their early morning excursion out on the mountain. After hearing about her encounter with the kelpie the previous evening, the Watchers had gotten excited about the possibility of catching it alive for the purposes of further study, taking notes about where she’d been so that they could go out after breakfast to see if they could track it down. Hello! she’d wanted to shout at them. Am I the only one who remembers the Initiative last year? You’re supposed to kill the demon, not study it. Especially if it’s eating the local population.

Calling all pots, calling all pots, came a small voice in the back of her head. This would be the kettle speaking. Spike’s a demon, too, and you’re doing a lot more than just studying him.

Buffy scrunched down in her seat, her pencil doodling aimlessly across the top of her notepad, hoping no one would see the blush that suddenly heated her cheeks. A lot more was an understatement. Though she’d certainly thought about the possibility of maybe kissing Spike---especially after his little game out on patrol---she’d not really considered that it might go any further than that, or that she’d wake up from her dream wanting him so badly that she felt hollow without him in her arms, or that his mere touch would feel like ocean waves breaking over her skin…powerful, exhilarating, and most of all…right.

The hardest thing she’d had to do was leave him there this morning on his own. When she’d woken, her first response had been to look up at him, and she found herself caught in the pale craftsmanship of his still face. It wasn’t perfect---the nose was too big, his brows too heavy---but that only added to its beauty, and the urge to trace the line of his cheekbones with her fingertips had been irresistible. Her touch had been feathers across his skin, because, though she wanted him awake, Buffy didn’t have the heart to disturb him when he looked so peaceful, settling instead to watch him for the few moments she was allowed.

It was only when she remembered Willow’s wake-up call the previous day, and the look on the redhead’s face when she’d seen Spike in the bed, that Buffy scrambled to her feet, hurrying to get downstairs before someone showed up to see the definite lack of a pallet on the floor, or the semi-naked vampire asleep where the Slayer should’ve been. She couldn’t really use his injury as an excuse anymore, and though she held no regrets regarding her choice, she wasn’t ready to have it out in the open with her friends just yet. After everything that had happened with Angel, she didn’t think another vampire boyfriend was going to fly too high with Giles and the rest of the gang.

Just as she’d been about to walk out the door, Spike had stirred, calling out her name in a fuzzy rumble. Buffy had stopped, turning to see his blue eyes blinking groggily at her, and smiled. “Go back to sleep,” she’d said, returning to the side of the bed to pull the blankets up around him.

“No…tired…” he’d mumbled, and made a half-hearted attempt to grab her wrist as it brushed past his face.

“Uh huh, yeah, right,” she’d said softly. His eyes had flickered shut again, and she couldn’t resist leaning over and brushing another kiss across his lips, feeling him smile in contentment as her mouth lingered on his.

No. Definitely no regrets.

But that didn’t mean it was going to be easy. There were so many things to consider…how the
Scoobs would feel about Spike being one of them when it hadn’t been that long ago he’d tried turning them against each other…Giles’ disappointment that she was pursuing another relationship with a vampire. And what about Riley? Everyone thought they were marvelously happy, even if she knew it wasn’t completely true; what would be their reaction to find out she was messing around with Spike behind his back? No, she was going to have to talk to Spike, to convince him they needed to keep this thing between them under wraps until they got back to Sunnydale. Then, she could officially break it off with Riley, and bit by bit, integrate the vamp into the Scoobies so that when it came out about them sleeping together, it wouldn’t be a major shocker.

And it wasn’t as if he was going to have wait very long. Though Colin and Giles hadn’t found the kelpie’s body in their trek, they had discovered significant amounts of blood, indicating that it was wounded quite badly, so both Englishmen figured it was just a matter of time before the demon’s dead form actually turned up. Which meant after the ritual was done tonight, they’d be packing up and home in less than twenty-four hours. Even Spike could wait a day and a half…couldn’t he?

A sharp poke in her ribs caused Buffy to jump, straightening in her chair as she dropped her pencil onto the table, and she turned to see Willow nodding toward the Watcher at the head of the table.

“I was asking, Miss Summers,” Colin said, carefully enunciating his words as if speaking to a child, “whether there were any other details from last night that you’d like to share before we break for lunch.”


“I still don’t understand why Spike didn’t go after it,” Giles asked.

“You’ll have to ask him that,” she replied. “I told him to, but he listens to me about as well as Dawn does.”

“Well, you were hurt,” Willow offered. “And you said you couldn’t even walk last night. It probably wouldn’t have been very smart to just leave you out there.”

Buffy glanced at her friend curiously. “Yeah, that’s what he said,” she mused. “But I still think it was a cop out. He could’ve caught it in no time. That thing had my knife sticking out of it, it was leaking blood all over the place, and with that bell harness, there was no way he could’ve lost it in the dark.”

The table went silent as everyone in the group turned to look at the Slayer, and she felt herself grow uncomfortable under their stares, her skin crawling as her gaze flicked from person to person. “What?”

“Bell…harness?” Giles prompted.

“Yeah, that’s how we heard the kelpie in the first place.” Her cheeks flushed. “Did I…forget to…mention that part?”

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“Uh, yeah,” said Xander, and turned to the Watchers. “If it had a harness, does that mean it’s got a rider out there roaming around, wondering where his friend Flicka is?”

“Doubtful,” Colin replied, his brow furrowed. “Kelpies are notorious for being untamable.”

“Wait a minute.” The group stopped as Willow reached forward to grab a book from the middle of the table, thumbing through it quickly until she found the page she wanted. “According to the
legends, putting a harness on a kelpie is how you control it, that while it’s wearing one, it can’t hurt humans or do the luring to the death thing. That you can even ride them.” She frowned. “Of course, it’s supposed to be an actual work-em-ride-em sort of harness. Not usually the musical variety. What did the one you saw look like, Buffy?”

“Well, it was kind of goldish, although I guess that might’ve been the moonlight, but it definitely had this shiny, metallic aspect going for it. Oh, and it had the bells. It was quite pretty, actually.” She laughed. “Spike made this joke about it when we saw it, something about being there with… bells on…” Her voice trailed off, her smile fading. “But I guess you had to be there to appreciate it.”

“We’ll do more research this afternoon,” Colin said firmly. “See if we can find anything about this--.”

The clearing of a throat behind them cut off his words, and the group turned to see Duncan standing just inside the door to the kitchen. “So sorry to interrupt,” he said. “But lunch is ready. Would you like it now, or would you rather I wait?”

“Oh, now is fine,” the Watcher said and began wiping down the white board behind him.

Tara jumped to her feet. “I’ll help you bring things in,” she said with a smile as she scurried to Duncan’s side.

“Me, too,” said Willow, followed almost immediately by Anya’s own exuberant offer.

Xander glowered as the three girls left the room, leaning forward to address Buffy quietly. “How long do you think he was standing there?” he whispered. “Do you think he heard anything?”

The Slayer shrugged. “I dunno. Does it matter?”

His brown eyes widened. “Does it matter?” he repeated. “How can you ask that? We’re sitting in here talking about demony things. What happened to our Slayer code of silence?”

“I didn’t realize we had one,” Buffy laughed. “And actually, we were talking about horsey things, so I think it’s OK.”

“But what do we really know about this guy?” Xander pressed.

“Well, we know he can cook, which is what he’s supposed to be doing, remember?” She was about to continue when the door to the hall opened, and Spike came sauntering in, lips pursed in a whistle.

“Mornin’, all,” he said, and let his cerulean gaze settle on the remaining female in room as he ignored his normal safe chair in the corner and crossed to her side, pulling out the seat Willow had just vacated to straddle it himself.

“It’s lunchtime, Spike,” Xander said, oblivious to the tension in his friend as she suddenly became interested in her pencil. “So technically, no longer morning.”

“Is for me,” he replied, and tilted his head to look at Buffy’s profile. “How’s the foot doin’? Feelin’ better?” His voice was softer, his concern for her plain to see, and she felt her fear rise in her throat, a hard lump that blocked off all but the smallest passage of air. Crap. She wasn’t even going to be able to look at him without giving everything away. How in hell was she going to keep this under wraps with him so near?
“Fine,” she said, too brightly, busying herself in straightening her pad and the books in front of her. “Gotta love that super Slayer healing.” When she felt his boot nudge the side of hers, she hesitated only briefly before pressing back, allowing the tip of her shoe to run along the side of his foot before curling itself for a lingering moment around his ankle. Can’t look at him, she thought desperately. Xander will know for sure that’s something up. I just hope Spike gets why.

When she saw him lean toward her, his arm rising to lie across the back of her chair, Buffy’s brain screamed out, “Too much! They’re going to know!”, and she leapt to her feet, her chair skittering behind her. “I think I’ll just go help Duncan and the others,” she said out loud, and practically ran for the kitchen door, leaving behind a frowning Spike and a furious Xander.

“She’s a bit…skittish this morning,” the vampire commented as he slowly turned to face the other man. “Sadler been playing with his flash cards again?”

It was as if he hadn’t even spoken. “Did you see that?” Xander hissed. “All four of them, in there like his own Stepford harem. How’s he doing it?”

“Who?”

The young man rolled his eyes. “Duncan, remember? Mr. Magneto? The reason we’re playing at I Spy?”

“Oh. Right.”

“We’ve got to do some more digging on this guy,” Xander continued, keeping his voice down so that the two Watchers at the end of the table couldn’t hear him. “So I was thinking, when we all go into town this afternoon, you come down---.”

“You’re all going into town?”

“Yeah. Colin can’t find some of his supplies for the ritual tonight so when he said he was going to check out the local market for substitutes, Buffy suggested---.”

“It was the Slayer’s idea?” He couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice. Though he hadn’t expected her to be Little Miss Cheerleader about the changes between them, being left out in the cold hadn’t crossed his mind either.

“Yes, she said she wanted to call Riley, find out how her mom and Dawn were doing.”

And the fun just kept on coming. The muscles in Spike’s jaw twitched as he turned his darkened gaze to stare at the closed kitchen door. Asking after her family made some sense, but not the calling Soldier Boy part. What exactly was she playing at? Running almost as soon as he showed his face…making excuses to be out of the castle during the day, knowing he couldn’t follow…not even looking him in the eye when he’d asked after her ankle. OK, the footsy thing had been nice but still…

He slumped in his chair, folding his arms over his chest as he ignored Harris’ continued prattling. Something was going on with Buffy. And if it involved Finn, it couldn’t be good for Spike.

* * *

“You’ve got it?”

Spike sighed, looking at Xander in annoyance. “It’s a bloody waste of time,” he said. “According to the Watcher, we’re goin’ home tomorrow anyway. What’s the point in goin’ after the cook,
other than the fact that he’s a prat and probably deserves a good roughin’ up?”

“It’s a…contingency plan,” Xander replied. “In case we don’t end up going home. Or maybe, he’s evil and secretly plotting to mess with the ritual. Don’t you think we should know that before we, you know, actually do the ritual?”

“If he’s so soddin’ evil, why are we even still here?” Spike countered sarcastically. “Bugger could’ve poisoned any one of us at any time. Well, you lot, anyway. And you were the one who pointed out the advantage to bein’ the cook when you’re tryin’ to kill your enemy, remember?”

“I just said, maybe he’s evil,” he defended, then hurriedly stepped away from the vampire as Buffy and the others rounded the corner of the corridor, approaching the pair where they stood by the front door of the castle.

“Ready, Xan?” she asked, carefully evading Spike’s probing stare.

The young man nodded and held the front door open as the girls and Watchers filed out, leaving Spike alone in the castle, his blue eyes blazing. His mood was blacker than his t-shirt, all remnants of his good humor entirely banished by the Slayer’s continued denial in acknowledging his presence. When she’d returned with lunch, she’d deliberately opted for a different seat, only answering him with the most perfunctory of responses whenever he spoke up, barely bothering to look him in the eye when he did address her directly. She’d been the first to excuse herself from the table, but when Spike had tried to follow, he’d been stopped by an impromptu interrogation on the part of the Watchers, as they inquired into the events of the past night to get his perspective on the whole matter.

He was so pissed off at her cavalier attitude that he almost told them what the highlights of his night really were, how Buffy had practically jumped him in his sleep and how he’d gotten her off without even having to go as far as to properly shag her. It was only remembering the look in her eyes when she’d kissed him—that first, proper kiss—that stopped Spike, forcing him to stay in his seat while he’d answered their questions as quickly as possible.

It still didn’t seem feasible he could’ve misinterpreted her thoughts so badly; he’d given her an out and she’d refused it. And the signals her body was sending certainly didn’t match the Ice Queen persona she’d adopted since coming back into the great hall for lunch. She’d spent the entire meal in a heightened state—heart racing, the slight sheen of sweat on her forehead—and though at one point their eyes had met, it had been fleeting, with it impossible for him to read her thoughts in light of the distance she forced between them.

None of it made sense, and with Captain Cardboard thrown into the mix…

With one last glance at the closed door to the great hall, Spike snorted and went stalking toward the stairwell, his boots loud against the stone floor. Bugger Harris’ plan, he thought. Not goin’ outta my way and riskin’ a bloody headache when we’re not even goin’ to be here tomorrow. The way my brain’s goin’ right now, I’d be halfway to killin’ the wanker before I’d get a word out of him anyway. The thought actually made him hesitate for a moment at the bottom of the stairs—could be a good way to get out my anger—but it got shoved quickly aside as practicality returned. Cook’s not worth it, he decided, and stomped up the two flights to his room.

His face was thunderous as he shoved open the door, and he was two steps over the threshold before he saw the man rise from the bed. “Who the hell are you?” Spike barked, blue eyes quickly scanning the grizzled face and portly form.

“I was looking for Spike,” the man said, his Scottish accent so thick the vampire almost didn’t
recognize his own name. “I was told this was his room.”

“Yes, that’s me.” He folded his arms across his chest. “That still doesn’t tell me who you are, mate.”

The man motioned toward the still-open door. “Do you mind?” he asked. “This would be better if we were private.”

Without turning, Spike reached with his foot and kicked the door shut, the slam echoing through the tiny room. “Now,” he said, “you goin’ to tell me what this is about?”

The man smiled. “My name’s Hornbrook,” he said, all signs of his accent gone. “And I’m here to offer you a deal…”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike and Buffy haven’t had a chance to be truly alone yet since their night together---she wants to keep it quiet until they get back to Sunnydale, while he has misinterpreted her distance to mean it didn’t mean anything to her---while the Scoobies are beginning the final preparations for the ritual.

“You really shouldn’t have suggested it, Buffy,” scolded Giles as he slowed the car to a stop before the castle. “If your ankle is bothering you that much, you should’ve just said so.”

“I know,” the blonde said, not even looking at her Watcher as her hand hovered over the door handle. “My bad.”

“I’m serious.” Shifting the car into neutral, he frowned as he studied her through his glasses. “You’re not taking this entire project very seriously. I realize that it’s rather distracting being in a foreign country and all, and perhaps my casual attitude toward Colin isn’t exactly conducive to instilling confidence in you, but tonight’s ritual is really the crux of the entire problem here at Dall Rath. You really must be in top form.”

Buffy flashed him an apologetic smile as she pulled the door handle. “And I will be,” she assured. “That’s why I insisted you bring me back so that I can rest some. I want this to work just as badly as you do.” She eased herself out of the car and stood, taking extra care not to put any unnecessary weight on her injured foot. Well, not so much on the injured side. More on the faking it hurts so she could get some alone time with Spike side. “I’ll be fine. Go shop. Have fun. Buy yourself a kilt or something.”

Giles shook his head as she slammed the door and began hobbling toward the entrance. She was pushing her body too hard and it was making her sloppy. It wasn’t her usual style, but he supposed that the novelty of being away from home was the culprit in sidetracking her so. Nothing else could really explain it.

As the car ground into reverse, Buffy glanced over her shoulder to see her mentor steer the vehicle back onto the narrow lane that led to the castle, hesitating as she watched it disappear around the bend. It had almost been too easy. Suggesting everyone go into town this afternoon for some shopping had been like offering Anya free money after a year’s supply of sex; convincing Giles that he didn’t need to babysit her while she rested from the mysterious return of her sore ankle had not. But, it was done now. She was here, the gang was in town, and all she had to do was get upstairs and sort things out with Spike.

She wasn’t one hundred percent sure what to expect when she got up there. Though she’d tried to keep things as casual as possible during lunch, Buffy suspected that she might’ve taken it a little far, if the look on the vampire’s face when she’d walked out with Xander was any indication. Definitely not the face of a happy camper. She’d tried to catch his eye a couple times, and she’d done the footsy thing before skipping out to help with setting the table, but somehow, she didn’t think it had been enough. Most likely, Spike was going to be just a little cranky until she explained everything to him. Then, he’d get it. And if he still didn’t believe her, then she’d just have to show him what he meant to her.
She’d barreled into him before she’d even realized he was there, her hands coming up to brace herself against his chest as Hornbrook stepped through the front door. “Oh, sorry,” she said automatically, then blinked as she realized who she was addressing.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” the man assured, smiling widely. “No damage done.”

“You’re the…doctor, right?” Buffy asked, eyes narrowing slightly as she looked over his portly form. “The one who came out about the…body we found?”

“That would be me,” he agreed. “I stopped by to talk to that young Mr. Sadler about the arrangements that have been made for Peg. He’d expressed some interest in knowing.” He scanned the area behind Buffy. “He’s not with you, by any chance? The only person I could find inside was young Davison. He said the group of you had stepped out.”

“Right. Everyone’s back in town. Colin probably won’t be back until close to supper.” She frowned and turned to look at the empty drive. “How’d you get here?”

Hornbrook laughed, brushing past her to get outside, tightening his coat around him. “You Americans,” he said. “You’re a funny lot, you.” As he began walking away from the castle, hands thrust deep into his pockets, he shouted back, “Just let Mr. Sadler know I stopped by, lassie, will you?”

“Yes.” She waited until he was gone, then bolted inside, almost running for the stairwell at the end of the corridor. Gotta get this done, she thought.

“Spike!” she called out as she pushed open the door to their bedroom, her heart thumping in her chest. Her feet stopped on the threshold as she stared into the empty space, the unmade bed mocking her from its position on the opposite wall, and her forehead wrinkled as she quickly scanned the room. He wasn’t there.

“Spike?” Buffy said again, crossing to the screen, hesitating only a moment before sneaking a peek around its corner. Nope. Not there either. As her shoulders slumped, her mind began poring over the possibilities. It was daytime, so he couldn’t have gone far. He had to be somewhere inside the castle. It was just up to her to figure out where.

* * *

The beam from his flashlight wavered as he tucked the torch under his arm, pulling the string on the leather pouch so that he could dump the amulet into his open palm. The folded piece of paper that had been wrapped around it fluttered to the floor, and Spike cursed under his breath, stooping to pick it up. Not like I’m actually goin’ to bloody well read the thing, he thought. Not that daft. Just…curious is all.

The amulet itself was unremarkable, a small silvery blob that more closely resembled a lump of hardened quicksilver than anything else, but that Hornbrook had seemed pretty certain it was the thing to do the job. At the moment, Spike was wishing he’d gotten a better gander at the Watcher’s when he’d done his little open sesame trick; a little confirmation could go a long way, right about now. Still, according to his Scot/not a Scot visitor, it all worked on the same principle. Read the incantation, pass the amulet over the wall, unseal the opening to the tunnels. Simple.

The vampire shook his head. Not so simple. Shouldn’t even be down here in the first place. Buffy was goin’ to stake him for sure if she found out he’d been messin’ around with this stuff. ‘Course, that would mean the bitch would actually have to be here.
The thoughts were just lip service. He wanted to be mad at her. In fact, he’d worked himself up into a pretty good lather just considering the things she was probably whispering to Soldier Boy at that very moment. Little love words she’d refrained from saying to the vampire during their little romp under the sheets last night. It wasn’t as if Buffy had ever actually come out and said anything that he could’ve construed as legitimizing what had happened between them. “God, please,” was just a request for more of the same at that moment in time, not a declaration of her unending love. He didn’t know why he really expected otherwise. He hadn’t come out and announced his feelings in so many words, and she hadn’t pressed the issue to find out exactly what he’d meant, so the vamp could only assume she didn’t care.

So, he wanted to be angry with her. He really did. Problem was…he wasn’t.

Spike was hurt.

It had felt real, damn it. She had looked him in the eye and kissed him when he’d given her the choice to just say no. She had touched him, and curled into his arms, and slept on his shoulders, all like it had meant something. Even this morning, she had tucked the blanket around his shoulder, kissed him one last time before heading off to work, like she bloody well cared.

And then the mixed signals in the great hall. OK, to play footsy with…not OK to actually deign to talk to. Good enough to mess around with…not good enough to actually be allowed to join into the conversations like an equal or anything.

He wasn’t interested in being the Slayer’s little vamp toy that she kept hidden on the side, not while Captain Cardboard got the benefits of working alongside her, hearing her laugh at his stupid farmboy jokes, holding her in his arms when she needed the support. Sure, the sex would be pretty much phenomenal---even the hints of it that she had offered upstairs had rocked his notion of intimacy, those muscles squeezing around his fingers offering promises that aroused him just thinking about---but after seeing that look in her eye, Spike wanted more.

He grimaced. Wrong, he chastised himself. You want more because of what you thought you saw, not what you actually did, ‘cause if it was real, she wouldn’t have bloody well run off to phone home leaving you in the lurch, now would she?

It was then that he heard the door to the dungeon open and close, the distinct sound of footsteps descending the stairs alerting his senses. “Fuck,” he muttered, and shoved the amulet back into the little bag, pulling its string before he realized he was still holding the piece of paper.

“Spike?”

The vampire stiffened at the sound of Buffy’s voice, his head jerking up to stare at the open door. What was she doing here? They couldn’t have been gone for more than forty-five minutes on the outside; it made no sense for her to be roaming around in the bowels of the castle.

“Spike?”

She was closer now, and he could see the swathe from the beam of her flashlight as it bounced down the hall outside the small room. The realization that she was going to ask why he was down here gripped him in panic, and quickly, he shoved the leather bag into his pocket, losing his hold on the torch at the same time so that it fell with a clatter to the floor.

“Spike?”

He blinked into the sudden glare as she aimed her flashlight directly at him, holding up his hand to
“What’s the matter, Slayer?” he asked wryly. “ Couldn’t find the local Bloomies?”

She ignored his question as she lowered the light to his chest, allowing him to look at her directly. “What’re you doing down here?”

Spike shrugged. “Got bored. Figured, didn’t get invited to your little party, might as well have one of my own.” Casually, he leaned over to pick up the flashlight as he slid the paper into the same pocket with the bag. That’s right, he thought as he straightened, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the wall behind him. Don’t draw attention to it. Not yet.

Moving her light had left his eyes hidden in shadows, and Buffy bit her lip as she fought the urge to shift it back, to illuminate those blue-grey depths so that she could see exactly how pissed off he really was. The nice thing about Spike was that he wore his emotions on his face like a fashion accessory; as long as she could look into his eyes, she was pretty sure she’d always be able to figure out what he was feeling or what he was thinking. But his aloof attitude prevented her from doing that right now; somehow, it almost felt like an invasion of privacy.

“I came back so that we could talk---.”

His snort of derision seemed to echo in the empty dungeons. “Didn’t think talkin’ was what you wanted from me,” he snapped. “Or wasn’t Soldier Boy around? ’Cause gotta tell you, pet, I spent more than my share of years doin’ the second fiddle gig. ‘Bout had my fill. The whole business leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“What’s Riley…?” She stopped, her mind whirling as she tilted her head to stare at him. “How’d you know about that?” she asked.

“Harris said---.”

“Xander told you?” She took a step closer, daring him to step away, relieved when he didn’t back down. “That was an excuse to get out of the castle,” she said. “That’s not why you’re so pissed at me, is it?”

“As good a reason as any. But if you’d rather the full-blown, alphabetical list, I’d be more than happy to oblige you, Slayer.” Spike squared off with her, shoulders back, staring at her coldly, grateful for the mask the darkness allowed him to wear. He could do this. Wasn’t like the pair of them hadn’t had this little confrontation before. Just had to be strong. Don’t think about last night. Don’t remember how she felt…

Buffy felt the air of the dungeon suck in around her flesh, constricting her torso in anxiety as she heard the ache behind his words. She had anticipated anger, could deal with Spike storming around the castle, ranting and raving about how he always managed to be the one to get shafted in the mix, but this…this ran deeper. The hurt in his voice hinted at knives that had sliced through major arteries, but why exactly…she had no idea. The only thing she did know was that she somehow had to make this better.

“Look,” she started again, deliberately steadying her voice to as calm a decibel as she could manage, “I realize I handled lunch pretty badly, but I’d like the chance to explain.”

“Think skipping off to let your fingers do the walkin’ is explanation enough.”

“Are you hearing anything that’s coming out of my mouth here? I told you, that was just a cover.”

“You expect me to believe that you lied to your little friends?”
“Yes, that’s exactly what I expect.” She took another step. “I had to get everyone out of the castle so that I could come back and talk to you in private.”

“Well, aren’t I Mr. Popularity today,” Spike drawled, and then wished he hadn’t. She would ask questions that he wasn’t sure he was in the mood to answer; hell, he wasn’t sure she deserved to know the answers after the way she’d treated him. Change the subject. “Well, you’ve got my back up against the literal wall here, ducks, so why don’t you just say your piece so you can run off and join your little pals.”

“If I wanted to be with them, I wouldn’t have come back here, now would I?” She bit her lip. Even she thought that sounded harsh. Try again, softer this time. “I thought…you know…last night…” God, she sucked at this. “It meant a lot to me. You should know that.”

For a long minute, the pair just stood there, each wishing the other’s face wasn’t hidden in black shade, neither willing to say the words that so desperately needed to be said. Finally, Spike turned his head, staring off at the wall, anywhere but at Buffy herself. “Y’know what I hate?” he asked, his voice so low she had to strain to hear him. “I hate the fact that you can play me, Summers. No, I hate the fact I let you play me.”

“What makes you think I’m playing?” Yet one more step. “I’m not. I thought I made that clear.”

“As clear as mud.” He could feel her heat as she crept closer, heard the silent strum of her pulse as it kindled under her skin, and cursed his own traitorous reaction, the impulse to reach out and hold her battling with his pride. “Second thoughts should’ve been checked at the door, pet. Save us both a lot of headaches.”

He wasn’t getting it. How could she make him get it? Slowly, Buffy turned off her flashlight and set it on the ground, watching as he turned to stare at her. “Turn it off, Spike,” she said softly.

The room was in darkness just a moment later, and the soft click as the plastic came to rest on the stone floor was perceptible to both of them. “Please tell me there’s a good reason I--,” the vampire started, only to cut himself off as he felt warm fingers gripping his forearms, her hands sliding up to rest on his shoulders, her breasts suddenly very much pressing into his chest.

“See?” Buffy’s voice was a breath against him, and he felt the tremor in her skin as his arms automatically came up, his fingers curling lightly around her waist, ready to either pull her closer or push her away based on the selection of her next few words. “I don’t need lights to find you. What do you think that means?”

“I think that means you’re the Slayer,” he replied slowly. “It means you’re good at your job.”

“You’re not a job, Spike. Not anymore.” He actually heard her swallow before taking in a deep breath to continue. “You’re a choice. My choice.”

Though her words reached into his gut and relit the flare of hope he’d allow to die down, Spike steadied himself for the worst, relaxing his grip even as he felt hers climb around his neck. “The choice you shoved to the curb in front of your friends,” he said.

“I know.” It almost wasn’t audible. “I’m sorry. I should’ve explained about that.” One finger began tracing the hollow that started at the base of Spike’s skull and ran down the back of his neck, only to lazily climb upward again as Buffy spoke. “This is about me being totally selfish, which, I know, isn’t fair to you, but it just seemed like the best way to spring this on the gang was… gradually...after we got home...” She sighed. “Which, in retrospect, seems a little lame, but that’s what was going through my head. And I just didn’t get a chance to let you in there as well.”
“It h…” Spike’s voice choked on the next word. There were two ways admitting it could go, and he wasn’t sure he was prepared for either.

“…hurt,” Buffy finished, and rested her cheek against his chest. “And again, I’m Apology Girl here. I just want this to be as…painless as possible. For everyone. Giles and the others…it gets…complicated.”

“What about Finn?” he asked quietly, unable to keep it contained. His grip had tightened, his body responding in fire to the gentle caress of her touch, and suddenly the scent of her skin seemed overwhelming.

There was a long silence. “When we go back to Sunnydale tomorrow,” she finally said, “I’m telling him everything. He deserves better than me. Someone who can commit to him one hundred percent. I haven’t been able to do that for a long time now.”

His internal debate lasted only a moment. “What if we don’t go back to Sunnyhell tomorrow?” Spike queried.

Buffy’s hands stopped as his words sank in. “Why wouldn’t we go back?”

“Better turn that torch back on and have a seat,” he said. “’Cause I’ve got a doozy of a story to tell you.”

* * *

She stared at the amulet in her hand. “You have got to be kidding me,” she said, hazel eyes flicking up to gaze into the vampire’s face.

“Wish I was,” Spike replied. “I’m kinda lookin’ forward to gettin’ my feet back on California soil. See, there’s this girl…”

Buffy rolled her eyes at his put-on leer, half-smiling as she scrambled to her feet. “Maybe that Hornbrook was lying,” she said.

“Could be. Only one way to find out.” It took only a moment for her to nod in affirmation, and Spike pulled the loose paper from his pocket, joining her on his feet, the pair of them turning to face the wall. As he read the Latin text, Buffy passed the amulet over the stones, hoping she was remembering Colin’s placement correctly, and together, they watched as the wall disappeared before them.

The Slayer stood back, her lips tightly pressed together, the hand with the amulet dropping to her side. “I am sooooo going to kill that little weasel,” she said grimly.

* * *

Her voice was a murmur as she slowly read over the words in the book, her green eyes squinting against the failing afternoon light. “Y’know,” came a voice from beside her, “if you read it backwards, it spells out the lyrics to Stairway to Heaven.”

Willow looked up from the tome to glare at Xander, watching as he played with the sprigs of herbs they had purchased in the market. “I’m practicing,” she said firmly. “I don’t understand a lot of this Gaelic and some of the words are kind of hard to pronounce. I just want to get this right.”

“You’ll be OK.” He used the sprays in his hands as puppets, bouncing them along the page of her text. “Yes, you will, o mistress of magic,” he singsonged, stopping in mid-dance as the redhead
turned her annoyed face to stare at him. “You shouldn’t be reading in the dark anyway,” he grumbled.

With one last glance at her friend, Willow returned to the words before her, carefully selecting the phrases that were affording her the most difficulty, repeating them over and over under breath. She didn’t notice when Xander reached down for the bag at his feet, but when the car bounced over a rut in the road, she lurched against him, and heard the glass shatter on the floor.

“What was that?” Colin asked from the front seat, his eyes darting to the rearview mirror to gaze at his backseat occupants.

“Nothing,” Willow and Xander said in unison, and together they leaned over to begin picking up the shards that were now scattered over the young man’s foot.

“I told you not to play with the supplies,” she whispered.

“Tell Mario Andretti up there to take it easy then,” he hissed back, and grimaced as some of the container’s fluid stuck to his fingers, using the side of his shoe to try and get it off. “Do I want to even know what this stuff is?” he asked.

“Um, no. Probably not.” She grimaced as she snagged the herbs from his hand. “I knew I should’ve made you ride with Anya in the other car.”

“She wouldn’t let me,” Xander admitted. “She said I smelled funny after playing with those sheep.”

As they sat back, they saw the looming form of Dall Rath outlined against the dusky horizon, and Willow frowned as the Slayer stepped from the entrance to approach the oncoming cars. “Guess Buffy’s foot is feeling better,” she commented, closing her book and sliding it back into the bag at her side. She was halfway out of the car when she saw the blonde stride determinedly up and yank a startled Colin from behind the steering wheel, turning him around to slam him against the hood.

“Buffy!” Giles’ voice was sharp as he leapt from the other car. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

The gang just watched as the Slayer twisted the Watcher’s arm around his back, holding him down as he winced in pain. “Have fun shopping for the supplies for the ritual?” she asked Colin brightly, ignoring the shock on her friends’ faces.

Giles hovered at the front of the car. “What’s going on?” he quizzed.

“You’re asking the wrong person.” Tugging him back to an upright position, Buffy turned Colin to face her mentor. “I think you should be talking to Benedict Arnold here.” At everyone’s confusion, she gave him a little shake. “C’mon, Col, let’s chat about magic.”

“Miss Summers, I really don’t---.”

She tightened her grip on his arm, causing him to yelp slightly. “I am so tired of people lying to me. You’re just lucky I’m not taking Spike’s advice and beating you up first. He seems to think teeth are an optional accessory for people who are getting interrogated.”

“Actually,” Anya piped up, “he would be right about that. I always found---.” She cut herself off as Giles turned to glare at her. “No, beating up Colin would be bad,” she said simply, and stepped back.
“Buffy, really…” Giles inched cautiously forward as if trying to catch a rabid animal. “Why don’t you just tell us what this is all about?”

Sighing, her hazel eyes met his worried ones. “This is about rituals that don’t really do what we’ve been told they do.” Her gaze flickered over the waiting group. “The Council isn’t interested in closing these tunnels. They’re interested in controlling them.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: After being approached by Hornbrook about a deal, Spike has told Buffy, who has cornered Colin upon his return to the castle…

His eyes darted from the stiff form of the Englishman in the chair, to the grim American girl standing before him with her arms folded across her chest, to the remaining guests of Dall Rath scattered around the table, before returning to Colin’s face again. “You’re sure you won’t be needing me?” Duncan asked. “Because I’m more than happy to---.”

“We’re sure.” The assertion didn’t come from the man, but from Buffy, her gaze level as she stared down at the Watcher.

“Everything is already prepared,” the cook explained as he backed his way toward the exit. “You’ll just have to…warm it, should you…leave it for too long.” He glanced up at the bleached man holding the door open for him. “It’s much better if it’s warm,” he repeated.

“Right. We’ll remember that.” The blond looked pointedly out the door, his exasperation painted across his face, and Duncan smiled in farewell to the remainder of the group.

“See you in the morning then,” he said, offering them a little wave before disappearing from the great hall.

Spike watched him for a moment as he walked down the hall, his brow slightly furrowed. It was the first time he’d ever been really close to the cook. Something…didn’t sit right with him. Mentally, he shrugged, shutting the door. “Thought the annoying git would never leave,” the vamp said to no one in particular.

“Now that we’re minus an audience,” Buffy said, “I think it’s time to start the show.” She held out her hand to Spike as he sauntered to her side, waiting as he placed the leather bag in the center of her palm. Carefully, she extracted the amulet and held it up for Colin to see.

“Where’d you get that?” he blurted, his eyes wide. Though his body was rocking in tiny sways back and forth, his desire to reach out and take the talisman from the Slayer was curbed by his overriding fear of retribution, and his knuckles grew white as he gripped the armrests of his chair. “How dare you go through my things!”

“Did you come back just to rifle through Colin’s belongings?” Giles asked, his voice incredulous, disbelief slacking his jaw. “Really, Buffy, if you didn’t trust him---.”

“It’s not Colin’s.” Her eyes never left his face. “This one belongs to your pal Hornbrook.”

The room was silent while everyone waited for the Watcher to respond. Finally, Xander shifted in his seat. “Who’s Hornbrook?” he whispered to Willow beside him, just loud enough for everyone else to hear.

“Wasn’t that the name of the local doctor who examined that woman’s body?” queried Giles, frowning as he gazed at his charge.
“Yep,” she replied. “Except he’s not a doctor and he’s not local, is he, Colin?”

“I…wasn’t sure,” he murmured, and pressed himself back into his chair as if the added distance would keep him safe from the young woman before him. “I wasn’t…told…what was going to happen.”

“And what exactly is happening?” asked Xander. “Because color me confused here.”

Buffy turned to look at the vampire at her side. “You want to start?”

Their eyes met, locking for a long moment before Spike’s lip curled. “Right,” he said. “Seems as soon as you lot left, I had me a little visitor. This Hornbrook chap. Worked for the Council, he said. Was there to offer me a deal, and for some reason, thought I’d be the most open to their little plan.” He couldn’t refrain from chuckling as his gaze swept over the group. “Guess they figured I was the most corruptible choice they had.”

“That’s because you are, Spike,” Giles said wryly.

The vampire shrugged. “Probably.”

“What did they want?” asked Willow.

“There’s something in the tunnels that’s captured their fancy. They wanted me to go in and fetch it for them.”

“In exchange for what?”

Spike grinned, catching the tip of his tongue between his teeth. “Believe it or not, in exchange for services rendered, they’ve offered to do something about my little chip problem.”

The room exploded, a chorus of “What?” and “Huh?” and one “Bloody hell” bouncing against the walls. Even Colin’s face went white, though the stern shape of the Slayer in front of him kept him from speaking.

“That’s impossible!” Giles said harshly. “They wouldn’t do such a thing.” He took a step toward the small group at the head of the table. “As much as I’ve not approved of their methods in the past, it’s ludicrous to think that the Council could ever deliberately choose to unleash a dangerous creature such as yourself back onto the world.”

Buffy’s mouth was tight. “I think they’ve already proven they’re not too worried about what they let loose with this kelpie business, don’t you think?” She waited for some type of response from her Watcher, but getting none, nodded toward Spike. “Go on.”

“Not much more to tell,” he drawled, perching himself on the edge of the table. “I thought it was just a bunch of cack at first, and told him so. Asked him why they were bothering sealin’ up the tunnels in the first place if they were just interested in some good old-fashioned pillaging. Not that I’ve got anything against that. I’ve certainly done my fair share of plundering the spoils and all. It just didn’t make sense.” He directed his smirk to the Englishman in the chair. “That’s when he told me the ritual doesn’t actually close it up.”

“Yes, it most certainly does!” Colin shot up, only to shrink back in his seat as the group turned to look at him.

“You’re not seriously trying to get me to believe Spike’s lying about this, are you?” asked Buffy, a dangerous tone edging her words. She held out the amulet. “Because this pretty much says you’re...
a big fat liar, so the sooner you decide to come clean about the ritual and why we’re actually here, the fewer body parts you’re going to have to worry about not working when we’re through talking.”

Stepping forward, Giles took the amulet from her fingers, turning it over in his hands as he examined it. “And he just…gave you this, Spike?”

“Sure, after I said I’d do it for him.”

The Watcher turned narrowed eyes to the vampire. “And you expect us to believe that you’re telling us all this out of the goodness of your heart?”

Spike cocked his head, regarding the other Englishman in amusement. “Well, now that you mention it, I don’t think it’d be bang out of order if a little compensation made it my way. Y’know, let me go back to the Hellmouth with a little more than I came with. Dosh, I mean.”

Buffy’s cheeks flamed as she edged herself between the two men, the vamp’s innuendo not lost on her, even if it did go over the heads of the others. “Spike’s a member of this team,” she said firmly, and felt the vampire’s knee press into the back of her thigh, holding her position as she leaned just slightly into it. “He did what had to be done.”

“I just don’t see why we should trust him on this.”

“For one thing, because the amulet actually works,” she countered. “We tried it.” Her gaze slid past Giles to look at Colin. “And you Council guys are the only ones who know about it, right?”

“Right.” His voice was faint, his breathing shallow, and he looked for all intents and purposes that he was going to throw up. Colin swallowed hard. “But I honestly didn’t know about the ritual. I was instructed that it was for the closure of the tunnels. Why would I lie to you?” His eyes darted to Willow at the table. “You’ve read the spell, Miss Rosenberg. Tell her. It just closes them.”

All turned to look at the redhead, who blushed as she squirmed in her seat. “Just because I’ve read it, doesn’t mean I understand it completely. My Gaelic’s a tad on the sucky side.”

“Lucky for you, mine’s not,” said Spike, much to everyone’s surprise, and held out his hand. “Give it over, Red.”

He waited as Willow reached down to pick up her bag, rummaging through it as she brought it up and into her lap. When she pulled out the book, she quickly thumbed to the page and held it out to the vampire, keeping it open so that he could read it over. His brow furrowed in concentration, eyes carefully scanning the text before finally lifting to settle on Colin. “Looks like it’ll close it to me,” he commented.

“May I see it, please?” the Watcher asked, tentatively holding out his hand.

Spike looked to Buffy for confirmation, who shrugged. “Let him have it,” she said. “He’s only stalling the inevitable.”

Colin frowned as he took the book from Spike, reading over the text even more slowly than the vampire had, before closing the book to look at the cover. “Isn’t this the book you found the information about the moon cycles in, Miss Rosenberg?” he asked, looking up.

She nodded. “That’s the one I’ve been practicing from. I figured since it had the schedule we were using, I’d just stick with it.”
“Why?” Buffy quizzed the Watcher.

“May I?” He gestured toward the table, asking the young woman before him for permission to stand, only doing so when she nodded. Quickly, he picked up another of the books there, flipping the pages until he found what he was looking for, laying the two texts side by side while his gaze jumped between them. “Spike,” he finally said. “Do come here and tell me what you think.”

The vampire stood and sauntered around the edge of the table to stand beside the Watcher. “What am I lookin’ at?” As his blue eyes flickered over the pages before him, his forehead wrinkled, brows knitting together as his gaze moved faster, going between the spells even as he began to lean in order to get a better look. “Huh,” he finally said, and glanced curiously at Colin at his side.

“What is it?” Buffy asked.

Spike lifted his head to meet her gaze. “They’re not the same spell.”

“You said they were,” accused Willow, rising to her feet to join the two men in looking over the books.

“They’re almost identical,” Colin defended. “With the exception of just a couple words—-.”

“A couple important words,” Spike interrupted.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I can’t believe I missed those.”

The group widened as Giles stepped around to join them, looking over Colin’s shoulder at the points on the pages he was marking with his two index fingers. It only took him a moment before he spoke. “How in blazes did you not see that?” he directed toward his colleague.

“It’s a rather long incantation, if you haven’t noticed!” The Watcher’s voice was rising, his confusion mingling with his fear to color his normally pale cheeks. “And the differences are buried in the middle. At the time it was brought to my attention, I was more concerned with the new information regarding the moon cycles than anything else.” He turned to stare at the young witch. “And you’re certain this book was in with the others?”

“For the millionth time, yes.”

“OK.” Buffy’s tone was firm. “What the hell is going on?” As her gaze danced over the group, it settled on her roommate. “Spike?”

The vampire sighed unnecessarily and picked up the two books, one in each hand. Holding up the one Willow had brought from her bag, he said, “This one—-the one our mate Colin here said he didn’t bring—-uses the word ‘duin’, while this one,” he shifted hands, raising the other while lowering the first, “uses ‘smachd.’”

“And for those of us in the English-speaking-only audience, that would mean…?”

Spike repeated the gestures. “This one closes it. This one commands control over it.” He glanced at Colin before tossing the books back onto the table. “Nice.”

“And I’m telling you, before Miss Rosenberg brought this one to my attention, I knew nothing of this book!”

The Watcher’s breath was coming in short bursts, and Buffy wondered for a moment if the man was going to start hyperventilating in front of her. “That doesn’t actually help your case here,” she
said, folding her arms over her breasts. “Because that means you were planning on doing the control spell all along.”

He froze, the truth of what she was saying sinking in like a lead weight. “I’ll prove it to you,” Colin finally blurted, and rushed through his next words. “We’ll go do the closing spell tonight. Right now. Then you’ll see I’m not lying about not knowing anything.”

She had to work over his last sentence in her head more than once to determine what he was actually saying, but when she had, Buffy’s head tilted, hazel eyes narrowing slightly. His protestations had been expected, and she’d been prepared to confront the issue until he came completely clean. However, this thing with the different spells…and now the suggestion to do the closing spell as scheduled anyway…the Slayer was beginning to have her doubts. Maybe he didn’t really know anything. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time the Council played someone for the dupe.

“You’re on,” she agreed. “But this doesn’t get you completely off the hook, you know. Consider yourself pretty much still demon bait, Col.”

“Why?” asked Giles. “Not that I’m disagreeing, but…why?”

“Because closing the tunnel only messes with half of the Council’s plans,” she said. “There’s still the matter of what they wanted Spike to play fetch with.”

“But if we close it, surely we’ll be locking inside whatever it is that interests them,” her mentor argued.

She shook her head. “What they want isn’t in there anymore. It’s out on that mountain somewhere, probably wrapped around a dead kelpie.”

It took only a moment for Giles to nod in understanding. “The bell harness,” he murmured.

“Exactly.”

* * *

Xander grimaced as he shifted his weight, the discomfort in his toes beginning to unsettle him to the point of fidgeting, but quickly froze at the dirty look from Anya at his side. “Sorry,” he whispered unnecessarily, and returned his gaze to the tableau before him, leaning back against the carved wall of the tunnel to alleviate some of the pressure on his feet.

Within a triangle of stones sat Buffy, Spike, and Willow, each at a different point, a clay urn at its center, while at the outer corners, the Watchers and Tara stood with lit candles. The shadows danced across their solemn faces, but all their concentration was focused on the trio within the cairn.

“Can you see OK?” Buffy asked, looking at her friend.

“Yeah.” Willow hefted the open book onto her lap. “You guys about ready?”

“Whenever you are, Red.”

For a moment, the only sound was the lapping of the water in the stream behind them. Even Xander found himself holding his breath as he watched the young witch settle her hands on her knees, all the time wondering if she was ever going to start reading the spell out loud. Any day now, Will, he thought, and felt Anya tense beside him.
The soft cadences of her voice swelled to fill the cavern as she began intoning the words of the incantation. As she’d instructed, Buffy and Spike had their eyes fixed on the urn before them, but even they weren’t prepared when it began to quiver of its own accord, its rounded bottom rocking against the earth. It quickened as the spell progressed, drumming its dull music into their flesh, until, when the last word fell from Willow’s lips, it froze upright, and three tendrils of...smoke?...floated from its mouth, slithering and entwining as they rose, only to break apart...separate...and drive each into the waiting chests of the three participants.

Both blonds immediately stiffened, their heads thrown back as their flesh seemed to glow from within. In the third corner, the witch felt the magic surge into her body, but almost as quickly, it was battled back, expelled by a fiery core in her gut that she’d never suspected existed. It left her panting, blinking as the smoke eddied before her, but before she could react, it started to wail, swirling in a tornado that seemed to gather its two other tendrils from the chests of Buffy and Spike before disappearing back into the urn.

Vampire and Slayer collapsed in a heap, both unconscious. Immediately, Giles and Colin knelt to check on them.

“Is Buff all right?” asked Xander, taking a step forward.

Colin nodded. “Her pulse is slightly elevated, but she appears to be fine.” He glanced at his colleague. “How is Spike?”

As he laid the vampire out onto the ground, Giles noted the burn mark that singed the front of the black t-shirt, and carefully edged aside the fabric to note the unmarked flesh beneath. “He’s not dust, so I assume he’ll live,” he said.

“Did it work?” This came from Tara, as her wide blue eyes darted from her girlfriend to the Watchers.

“I don’t know,” admitted Willow. “I didn’t…it felt…I don’t know.”

“Only one way to know for certain,” said Giles, and turned to face the tunnel as it disappeared around the bend. Everyone watched as he picked up the axe from the ground beside him and began walking away, footsteps too loud in the underground cavern, echoing in Doppler tones until both they and the Watcher were gone.

No one seemed prepared to speak, each lost in silence as they waited. It didn’t take long. Within a minute, Giles was back, his face grim.

“No,” was all he said.

“Didn’t Mr. Travers say it didn’t work the first time either?” Willow asked, slowly rising to her feet. “Do we know why that was?”

Colin looked uncomfortable, and he suddenly busied himself in re-examining the Slayer’s inert form before him. He stiffened when Giles clapped a firm hand down on his shoulder.

“Just because Buffy’s not awake,” the older man said, “doesn’t mean you can’t still get hurt for not telling us what’s going on.”

“I only know what I’ve been told,” Colin stammered. “And considering I’ve been left out of these other matters, I’m not sure I trust that information anymore.”

“Why don’t you let us be the judge of that,” said Xander.
“The spell requires the three---the living, the dead, and the host,” the Watcher explained. “In Celtic magic, the power of three is tremendous. Well, apparently, the Council attempted the spell the night after Samhain using an actual corpse as part of the triumvirate, and it failed magnificently. In fact, I was told the corpse actually burst into flame.”

Willow’s eyes widened. “You never told that to us,” she accused.

The man flushed. “No. We thought it might be better if you…didn’t know. We weren’t certain you’d actually do it if you understood all the risks.”

“It’s probably a good thing Spike’s out cold now,” Anya commented. “Somehow I don’t think he’d be too thrilled to find out he could’ve been a bonfire.”

Colin glanced at the vampire’s unconscious form, the knowledge that he was well aware of the threat clearly written across his face. “Obviously, that wasn’t the issue this time,” he said. “Otherwise…”

“I’m the issue.” Shakily, Willow rose to her feet, using her girlfriend’s arm to steady herself as the room pitched around her. “It didn’t want me as the host. I could feel something…inside…pushing it back.” She turned worried green eyes to the Watcher. “Are you sure I can’t talk to the witch who did the spell the first time?” she pleaded. “Maybe she can tell me what happened.”

He shook his head. “It’s impossible.”

“Don’t tell me she burst into flame, too,” said Xander.

“Um, no.”

He was rescued from speaking further when Spike stirred, groaning as his eyes flickered open. “Bloody hell,” the vampire muttered, sitting himself up. As he did so, he noticed the new hole across his chest and scowled. “Been here three days and gone through three soddin’ shirts,” he growled. “Goin’ to start askin’ for a clothing allowance, this keeps up.”

“Are you all right?” asked Willow.

He started to nod, but as he shifted his weight to stand, his gaze settled on the still-unconscious body of the Slayer next to him. His senses immediately alerted, and the group watched in amazement as he hovered beside her form, his fingers deftly searching for her pulse. “Slayer…” he murmured, before turning thunderous eyes to pin Colin in fear. “This another little secret you were hiding from us?” Spike snarled.

“She sh-sh-should…be all right,” the Watcher said, backing away from the pair. The fury in the vampire’s face was unexpected, and though Colin’s worry for his own safety jumped another notch, he couldn’t help but wonder as to the origins of such ire. “It’s just an…after-effect of the spell.”

“Yeah, you don’t even want to know what after-effect you almost were,” offered Anya.

“We should probably get her upstairs,” Spike said, and carefully scooped her into his arms, rising to his feet, oblivious to the curious stares from those around him.

“I’d like to suggest we all get some rest,” said Giles, blue eyes surveying the ragged couples scattered through the cavern. “There’s really nothing more we can do tonight. We’ll have an early start, try to figure out where exactly the spell went wrong.” He glared pointedly at his colleague. “And you can finish filling in the details we’re so severely lacking.”
In his arms, Spike felt Buffy stir, and stopped in mid-step as her eyes blinked open. “Slayer…” he said softly.

“Please tell me…I don’t have to…do that again,” she murmured, grimacing in pain.

“Sorry, pet.”

She groaned, and pressing her palm to his chest, pulled her legs from his grasp to right herself, allowing the vampire to lower her the rest of the way to the ground. Swaying slightly, Buffy used his arm as guidance, noticing for the first time the burn mark on his shirt, and then quickly glanced down at her own chest to scowl in displeasure. “And I really liked this one,” she complained as her fingers pulled at the singed edges of the fabric. She straightened to gaze coldly at Colin. “This is sooo not over,” she warned. “I’m going to be expecting some answers and new clothes here very soon.”

As the group trundled through the tunnel back to the dungeons, the younger Watcher’s heart thumped within his chest, his fears surging up his throat in palpable blisters. The morning was promising to be a nightmare, especially since he knew they were going to have questions he would be forced to answer. No more evasions. No more half-truths. And somehow, Colin didn’t think they would be pleased to hear that the witch who had conducted the first ritual was most likely dead…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Scoobies have attempted unsuccessfully to close the tunnel to the Otherworld, and Colin is still protesting his ignorance of the Council’s true intentions…

Colin watched as Giles laid the blankets out on the floor. “This really isn’t necessary,” he said. “Where exactly would I run?”

“It’s not about you running,” the older man said, straightening the corners so that they were square. “It’s about you trying to get into contact with the Council behind our backs.” His hand extended, waiting for the pillow that sat next to his impromptu roommate, his jaw tense. “At this point, I’m not certain what you might try to pull.”

“I understand you have reason to…not trust me,” Colin said slowly, handing over the cushion. “But I assure you, I’m not interested in seeing anyone get hurt. That’s not why I became a part of the Council. And neither is this…theft of demon artifacts, if what Spike says is correct.” He waited as Giles settled himself onto the floor, his fingers worrying his own sheets. “Do you…believe Spike?” he asked.

“Buffy does, and for now, I’m trusting her judgment.”

Slowly, Colin extinguished all but one of the candles at his bedside before sliding his legs beneath the blankets. “About Buffy,” he began, and then stopped when he saw Giles sit up to regard him with barely disguised anger. “We are not having this sleepover for you to sit there and complain about my Slayer all night,” he retorted. “Nor do I wish to hear any more overzealous assertions regarding your innocence. I understand you have issues with Buffy, but the facts of the matter are, not only does she have an amulet you yourself admit could only have come from a Council member, but she ran into Hornbrook herself on his way out. So anything you might have to add or refute is pointless because I’m not going to listen to you anyway.”

“But…” He bit his lip as he caught the menace in the other man’s eyes, the silent warning steeling the air between them. The sensible thing would’ve been to drop the issue, to just lie back in the bed and pray that things would be better in the morning, and that the Slayer wouldn’t hurt him too badly when she found out what he knew about the first witch. But sensibility always lost the battle with curiosity in Colin’s head, and he barreled forward. “I don’t understand the relationship between her and Spike,” he rushed. “She’s been very…protective of him ever since we arrived. And did you see how angry he got when he thought something had happened to her during the spell? I thought he was going to rip my throat out.”

Giles sighed. “You’re reading far too much into Buffy’s actions,” he said. “She’s merely trying to keep the project focused. And as for Spike, well…” His voice trailed off. He actually had no response to that. There seemed no logical reason for the vampire to be concerned with a Slayer’s life, especially one he’d attempted to kill on more than one occasion. “He’s probably just concerned that if something were to happen to Buffy, the project would get cancelled and he
wouldn’t get paid,” Giles finally said, only half-believing his own explanation. “I’m sure it’s nothing more than that.”

“I wish I could be so sure,” Colin murmured, and laid back, staring up at the ceiling. “Spike’s just so…volatile. I suppose I fear what might happen should something actually happen to Miss Summers.”

Giles rolled over onto his side, baring his back to the other Watcher, doing his best to ignore the continued observations that were coming from the bed. The implications of what Colin was suggesting were more than he was prepared to deal with presently; with the failure of the ritual and the added issue of the Council’s interest in the harness, there was more than enough at hand to worry about without conjuring additional specters to haunt his sleep. It was probably all nonsense anyway. Surely, if something was going on, someone other than an easily befuddled Watcher would’ve noticed?

* * *

“You mean you really didn’t see anything?” She felt the slight shake of Tara’s head against her chest and frowned, her fingers playing absently with a tendril of her girlfriend’s hair. “I don’t know how you couldn’t. It just seemed so…obvious.”

“I was too worried about you,” Tara replied. “But if you want, next time we do a spell with Spike and Buffy, I’ll ignore you completely and pay all my attention to them.”

The redhead smiled as shook her head. “Stop teasing,” she said. “I don’t know. Maybe I imagined it.” There was a moment of silence, and then Willow’s face lit up. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Did I tell you about the bed?”

Tara frowned. “What bed?”

“Yesterday, when I went and got Buffy for breakfast, Spike was in the bed.” She waited triumphantly for her partner to respond.

“But…he was hurt.” She lifted her head to gaze at Willow. “Buffy probably let him sleep on the bed because of the whole almost-got-eaten-by-a-kelpie thing. He did save her life, you know.”

“Well…yeah…” The witch frowned and physically deflated. “And I guess there were blankets on the floor. She could’ve slept down there, I suppose.”

The corner of Tara’s mouth lifted in amusement. “Why do you seem disappointed by the possibility that nothing’s going on between Buffy and Spike?” she kidded gently.

“I’m not. It’s just…I was so sure…I mean, there were signals. Maybe not huge blinking green lights right in your face kind of signals, but signals, nonetheless.” She sighed. “It’s gotta be this Scottish weather,” she complained. “That’s why I’m so off my game. First the spell goes kaplooie, then I can’t shake this totally harebrained idea about Buffy and Spike.”

“Could be the water,” Tara suggested. “They say when you travel you should always be careful about drinking the water.”

Together, the two witches laughed softly, but as they snuggled down into the blankets, the image of a furious Spike hunched over Buffy flashed across Willow’s inner eye, and she bit her lip, staring into the dimly lit room even as she felt her lover’s breathing ease beside her. I didn’t imagine it, she repeated to herself. I couldn’t have. Maybe tomorrow, she could feel Xander out, see if he noticed anything was off. After all, he’d been watching the whole thing from the outside.
If something was going on, he would’ve seen it.

* * *

“I’m telling you, Ahn---.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Xander. I’m tired. Go to sleep.”

“But I’m serious---.”

“And I think you’re being ridiculous. It’s nothing. Go to sleep.”

“Maybe---.”

“For God’s sake, Xander, if Buffy and Spike aren’t complaining, I don’t see why on earth you are. Now. For the last time. Go. To. Sleep.”

The young man pursed his lips, fighting to keep the words inside, while at the same time, doing everything he could not to move and exacerbate the situation. But it was like pink elephants, and within a minute his toe had twitched, sending excruciating bolts of pain up the top of his leg. “I’m telling you, Anya, my foot really hurts!” he exclaimed and felt her roll over, sighing as she buried her head beneath her pillow.

* * *

They had been the last to leave the Watcher’s room, answering their questions until Buffy had audibly yawned in front of them, not even bothering to cover her mouth as she gazed steadily at the pair of Englishmen. Their exit had been hurried after that, and it was all she could do to stifle her giggles as they climbed the stairs to the floor above.

Now, though, standing just inside her own room—our room, she hastily corrected—all sense of merriment had vanished with the near-silent closing of the door behind her. She couldn’t hear him, but Buffy knew that Spike stood just a few feet away, probably watching her, most likely waiting for her to make the first move. A truce had been reached this afternoon in the dungeons, and though she held no doubts about what she had done—either then or the previous night—an awkward quiet had settled between them, panicking her pulse so that it pounded in her ears.

“I hope for Giles’ sake that he doesn’t snore,” she joked, wishing that her voice didn’t sound so loud in the small space, or that it hadn’t done that little squeak thing at the end that she hated so much. “Not everyone can be as lucky as me and have a roommate who doesn’t need to breathe.”

“If I were Rupert, I’d be more worried about being bored to death,” Spike commented, his own voice just a little too jocular for his taste. “Betcha Sadler does a bleedin’ flow chart to explain their new sleeping arrangements.”

She laughed, in spite of the tension, and felt the familiar prickle on the back of her neck as she felt the vampire near. Her Slayer senses had been strong before, but now, in light of her decision and the recognition of her growing feelings for him, they were on hyperdrive, Spike’s every movement amplified across her skin so that discerning his presence was as comparable as breathing. Instinctive. Unconscious. There.

“Buffy…” he murmured, and she glanced back, saw him tilting his head as he watched her, blue eyes unfathomable in the dim light.

“And here I thought talking was going to make things easier,” she said softly.
“Do you want me to…sleep on the floor?” Even as he asked, Spike was wishing that he hadn’t, that he had the balls to just grab the Slayer by the horns and take her to bed. She wanted him---he could smell it on her---but he could also sense the anxiety seeping from her pores, the nerves that were stampeding through her veins, and refused to shatter what little confidence they’d already established just to satisfy his own impulses. That’s a first, he thought wryly, and waited for her to respond.

It took her only seconds. “No,” Buffy replied. “That would be kind of…silly, wouldn’t it?” Her eyes widened as she remembered her fear from that morning. “Oh!” she said. “But we’ve got to make it look like you did. Just in case, you know, Willow…or someone…for breakfast…”

“Right.” The vamp nodded, glancing past her to the bed before letting his gaze flicker to the floor. “Appearances and all.”

They worked in silence, operating in tandem as Buffy first laid out the sheet, then stepped back to watch Spike scatter the blankets haphazardly across it. “So that it looks slept in,” he explained at her raised eyebrow.

She just nodded, standing there, the pallet separating them in more ways than one, and felt the moment expand, lengthening into discomfort until she suddenly wished she were anywhere but in Scotland at the moment. It wasn’t supposed to be this hard; sorting out their miscommunications this afternoon was supposed to have paved the way to…Her brow furrowed. To what? What exactly was she thinking was going to happen now? No riding off into the sunset; she’d pretty much nixed that by making him wait to tell the others until after they were home. Sex? Was she really ready to be that person, even if it was against Riley…even if it was with Spike?

Except maybe she already was.

“You’re going to need some more shirts if we’re stuck here for much longer,” she finally said, gesturing aimlessly at his chest. Oh, that’s good, she thought. State the obvious.

He glanced down at his chest for only a second before looking back up at her. “Is that how you’re thinkin’ of it?” he asked quietly.

“What?”

“Bein’ stuck here.” Pause. “With me.”

“No,” she said automatically. “I told you this afternoon---.”

“And this is now.” Spike looked pointedly at the bed before sliding his gaze back to her drawn face. “Saying the words is one thing. Doin’ somethin’ about them is another.”

It was a dare---both of them knew it---but this awkward, end of first date feeling that Spike had had since leaving the Watcher’s room was beginning to wear thin, his desire to get everything out, in the open, on the line, suddenly his only purpose.

Buffy’s shoulders straightened, eyes narrowing. “And you expect me to…what?” she asked. “Throw myself at you and beg you to make love to me?”

He couldn’t help his smile. “Not that that doesn’t have its own appeal,” he drawled, “but no. Unless, of course, that’s what you want. In which case, I’m certainly open to the idea.”

“What is it you are expecting?” Her tongue darted out to lick her suddenly dry lips. “What is it you want?”
“Easy. You.” Slowly, Spike stepped forward, ignoring the blankets on the floor between them, closing the distance so that he stood just in front of her, their bodies not touching but only inches apart. “Even if it means I just get to hold you all night.”

His words pricked the bubble of her tension, deflating it with an almost palpable sigh, and Buffy felt the first relaxed smile of the night curl her lips. “Somehow, I never pictured you as the model of self-restraint, Spike,” she kidded, letting her hands stray to the hem of his shirt, tracing the narrow line of flesh between it and the waistband of his jeans with the tip of her finger. “But… thank you. Even if I’m not…you know…totally convinced it’s going to be necessary.”

All the heat of her body seemed to be focused on the half-inch of skin that ran along his abdomen, and Spike felt his own flesh begin to swelter, his cock hardening even as he lifted his arm to brush back a tendril of hair that had fallen over her cheek. “Just don’t be spreadin’ the word,” he said with a smile. “Big Bad’s still got a reputation to protect, you know. Even if the one I already have is shot to hell.”

“It’s not my fault you get yourself beaten up by dangerous chocolate demons.” She glanced up at him through her eyelashes, barely able to conceal her amusement. “Speaking of which---.”

“No,” he said firmly, cutting her off, both of his hands coming up to rest on her shoulders to push her gently away. “I’m not tellin’ you what happened.”

“Aw, c’mon,” she coaxed, and pushed back within the circle of his space, fingers curling through his belt loops to tug his hips against hers. “It’s got to be a good story. Don’t you want to share?” She could feel his arousal then, pressing into her hip bone, and sensed her body responding in kind. Stupid head, she thought. Doing too much thinking. I should’ve just been listening to what my body’s been saying all along.

“Not for all the blood in China,” he shot back.

Buffy frowned, jutting out her lip in a pretend pout. “Fine,” she said. “Be a party pooper.” Releasing her hold on his clothing, she turned and walked to behind the screen. “And just for that, holding is probably all you’re going to get tonight,” she called out from behind the divider.

Spike shook his head, a wry grin twisting his lips as he heard her begin stripping from her damaged clothing, the soft swish as the fabric hit the floor a sultry promise he knew she was deliberately baiting him with. Getting involved with the Slayer was going to be the death of him, he just knew it, but at least it was going to be a helluva ride.

Pulling his own t-shirt up over his head, the vampire rubbed at the spot on his chest that had been exposed by the burn before fingerling the frayed edges of the cotton itself. “How much longer do you think we’re goin’ to be here?” he asked.

“No telling,” she replied. “Willow’s the one with the moon schedule. We’re going to have to figure out what went wrong tonight, fix it, and then do the spell again so that we can close off the tunnel for good.” As she stepped out from behind the screen, the sense of relief for having gotten past the awkward first few minutes warmed her body, and she smiled to herself. This was better. Talking about business with Spike for some reason made sense. It felt…normal. “Why are you asking?”

“’Cause I think you’re right about me needin’ more shirts,” he commented dryly, and tossed the singed tee aside, watching as she walked over to the bed and climbed in. “Don’t suppose I could talk you into pickin’ some stuff up for me next time you’re in what passes for a shop around here?”

Her smile was wide. “You trust me to do that for you?”
It had been an off-hand request, made only because he knew bloody shopping hours in Britain meant no way could he make it out himself, but suddenly, seeing the unexpected glee on Buffy’s face, Spike began to worry about what exactly he’d just let himself in for. Slowly, he pulled off a boot, eyes narrowing as he surveyed the young woman on the bed. “Yeah, but nothin’ Harris would wear,” he warned. “And nothin’ with a print. Like my black.”

“Black’s boring.”

“Black’s classic.”

“How about a kilt?”

His gaze was level, but twinkled in mirth. “Don’t even think about it.” He pulled off his other boot. “Or you’ll be the one wearing it.” His lips quirked, the image of wrapping the Slayer in tartan suddenly showing up in his head. “Although that might actually be fun.”

“So I can get one?”

“No.”

He was halfway around the bed when he caught Buffy staring at him, and stopped, tilting his head as he looked down at her. “What?” he asked.

There was no mistaking the slight blush that came to her cheeks, or the way her eyes kept darting from his legs to his face and back to his legs again. “You’re…wearing your jeans,” she finally said. It was a bold question she knew, but she’d felt his arousal, understood how short the rein on his control actually was; as unsure as she was as to how quickly she herself wanted to proceed, she didn’t want to make things worse by denying him what he was probably expecting at this point. Or was he? He could’ve pressed the issue at any point, and hadn’t. Was she just reading too much into this? No, she decided. Just do it. Get it over with. It’s not like you don’t want him, too. That way, it’s done, it’s out there, and…Crap. She hated being confused.

“Yeah,” Spike replied slowly. “And you’re wearing your sweats.”

“I just thought…seeing as we’ve…” Buffy rolled onto her side, propping her head up with her hand. “I guess…I didn’t expect you to wear them to bed anymore. You said…that first night, about…not...And it’s not like you have to worry about getting cold or anything,” she finished with a rush, suddenly flustered and wishing that she hadn’t brought it up in the first place, not if it was going to make her feel like some silly sixteen-year-old.

His tongue tapped against the inside of his teeth as he regarded her. “How much sleep were you plannin’ on getting’ tonight?” he asked softly, his voice a gentle rumble.

Her pulse began to race as the image of a naked Spike pressed against her suddenly overwhelmed her inner eye. “Slayers don’t need a lot of sleep,” she replied. “I’ve had years of going without.”

“These come off and you won’t be getting any.”

“I can handle that.”

Taking the last few feet in just two long strides, Spike settled himself on the edge of the bed, twisting to look at her. There was no mistaking her arousal---if her heart beat any faster, he was sure it would leap from her chest---and god knew he wanted it, but the earlier awkwardness, even if it was now mostly gone, had told him one thing. She needed this to be slow. Baby steps. Which was fine by him as long as they were all forward.
“You don’t have to do this,” Spike said, and let his hand drop to rest lightly on the blanket, feeling the outline of her leg beneath the layers.

“Do what?”

His gaze was dark as he surveyed her flushed face. She was going to be thick about this. OK. Try again.

“This thing between you and me,” he started, “it’s something I’ve been…” What? How could he phrase this without sounding like a pansy or giving too much away? “…aware of, for a bit now. Not seein’ something specific there, mind you. More like, knowin’ it was something I…wanted. That it would be…good. Us.”

He’d started kneading the muscle of her calf through the coverlets, and Buffy felt a warmth begin seeping up her leg as she sat, rapt in his words. This side of Spike---the quiet, reflective side---was not one she was accustomed to, though he’d presented it to her more than once already on this trip, and she was finding herself mesmerized by his voice, wondering how she could’ve missed this aspect of the vampire for so many years. Was this something Drusilla had seen? She almost hoped not, wanting to believe that it was Buffy that was drawing it out of him. Foolish and romantic, she knew, but there, nonetheless.

“But I also know it’s kind of blindsided you,” he continued. “So I know it’s goin’ to take you some time to…adjust. You’ve got…” Fuck, he really didn’t want to say the name, but god knew he had to. “…Finn to consider, and your friends, and I want you to know…we do this at your speed. I mean, yeah,” and the twist of his smile showed her he was only half-kidding about the next, “I’d love to get crackin’ and spend the night shaggin’ you senseless, but there’s nothin’ sayin’ we have to do it now, not if you’re not ready for it.”

Releasing his grip on her leg, Spike slid himself to the head of the bed so that he sat next to her, pulling her against him with a firm circle of his arm, feeling her hair tickle his chest as she rested her cheek against it. “We’ve got all the time in the world, pet,” he said. “So…when you’re ready---and I mean you, not when you think I am ‘cause that’s pretty much a given already---you just let me know. I’ll be there with bells on.” He stopped, frowning. “I’m goin’ to have to stop sayin’ that now that this thing with that harness has come up, aren’t I?” he asked ruefully.

Buffy chuckled softly, the relief at hearing him let her off the hook suffusing her body with a heat that softened her muscles. “How come you know my head better than me?” she quizzed. “I’ve been sitting here, all wrapped up in these boyfriend/girlfriend issues---.” She felt him stiffen beneath her cheek and pulled away, gazing up into his face. “What?”

“You said…” He shook his head. “Never mind. Not important.”

She resisted when he tried to pull her back against him. “No, really, what is it?” she pressed.

The cock of his head stripped the mask from him, leaving behind the wide-eyed disbelief of a small boy who’d just been offered the gift he never thought he’d get. “It’s just…you said…boyfriend/girlfriend.” His voice threatened to crack, but he cleared his throat, returning to his confident façade with his next words. “Took me by surprise, is all.”

“Oh.” Buffy’s eyes darted to the curve of his lower lip before rising to meet his again. “Is that…bad?” she murmured, leaning in toward him.

He shook his head, watching in mute fascination as her mouth met his, lips gently pressing in a tender kiss that caused his grip to tighten around her, pulling her slight form into his embrace as
their tongues lightly explored the other’s. It ached of unspoken desire, but as they parted, and Spike could look down into the Slayer’s face, he saw the gratitude buried in the hazel depths of her eyes and knew he had done the right thing, even if it meant they would both be dreaming of unfulfilled promises…that is, if either of them even managed to fall asleep.

As she snuggled down into his shoulder, Buffy’s arm wrapped around the vampire’s torso, pulling him closer as she breathed in deeply of his scent. “I don’t know,” she murmured, letting her eyelids flutter shut. “I think you’d look cute in a kilt.”

His chuckle echoed through her cheek. “Don’t even go there, pet…”
Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Scoobies have attempted un成功fully to close the tunnel to the Otherworld, and have had a night of rest before continuing their research and confronting Colin…

They were congregated around the room---Spike leaning against the wall by the door, doing his best not to laugh out loud; Willow and Tara on one side of the bed, the redhead looking particularly plagued by something as her brow creased in deep furrows; the Watchers on the other side, while Anya and Buffy stood at the foot. In the middle of the double bed, Xander lay with the blankets thrown off him, one sock on with its mate discarded at his side. His brown eyes were wide as he gaped at his girlfriend. “You have got to be kidding me!” he exclaimed.

Anya shook her head. “I wish I was,” she said. “But I’ve seen it a thousand times. Hell, I’ve caused it a thousand times.”

“But how is this possible? I was fine yesterday.”

Giles bent over, peering through his glasses at the swollen flesh around Xander’s big toe, the angry crimson radiating a heat that the Watcher could almost feel even several feet away. “I really don’t know,” he said, and glanced at Anya. “You’re certain?”

The ex-demon’s nod was met with an audible whimper from Willow, and all eyes turned to the witch. “I think I know,” she said quietly. “In the car yesterday…isn’t that the foot---?”

Xander didn’t even let her finish. “You were chanting!” he exclaimed, shaking an angry finger at his friend. “Being all magicky!”

“It was an accident!” she defended. “And if you hadn’t been playing with my supplies, it wouldn’t have happened!”

Giles’ eyes widened. “You gave Xander gout?” he asked, amazed.

At the name of the infliction, the laughter that Spike had been struggling to contain erupted in a loud guffaw, and he bent over as it shook his body, hands on his thighs as his shoulders rose up and down in rhythm with his chortling.

Willow shot the vampire a dirty look before turning her gaze to the Watcher. “I didn’t mean to,” she said. “And I can fix this.” She glanced at her friend on the bed out of the corner of her eye. “I think.”

“We’ll have to go back into the market,” Tara said. “We don’t have the things here that we’ll need.”

Anya brightened. “Oh, can I go?” she asked. “I saw the cutest little top yesterday, but I didn’t get a chance to haggle with the woman who ran the stall because Xander interrupted us.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” the young man argued.
“You smelled of sheep! She didn’t want you near her nice things!”

“You still could’ve bought the shirt.”

“Haggling’s no fun if the other person’s distracted.”

Giles shook his head. “I can’t believe you gave him gout,” he murmured.

Though his laughter had started to subside, the repeat of Xander’s condition renewed Spike’s hysteria, and several in the group turned to look at him.

“It’s really not funny,” Giles chastised.

“Oh, no, you’re right.” His blue eyes danced as he straightened. “It’s bloody hysterical.”

“I’m glad you think it’s so amusing,” said Buffy with a smile. “It’ll help to keep you entertained while you’re keeping Xander company.”

His mirth immediately vanished. “What’s that?”

“Seconding from the sickbed,” added Xander, “with my own, ‘Huh?’”

“Well, we have to go into town again,” the Slayer explained. “And since Xander obviously can’t walk, he’s going to need someone to help him out.”

“And why does that someone have to be me?” the vamp demanded, his tone petulant. “Make Giles do it.”

“He needs to drive.”

“The other Watcher, then.”

“I’m not letting Colin out of my sight until we’ve got this Council business sorted,” Giles said.

Spike’s eyes locked with Buffy’s. “He’s your friend; you stay and sit with the boy. You don’t need to go into town.”

Her gaze widened in mock innocence. “But Spike, you asked me last night to get you some more shirts,” she said in saccharine tones. “And since everybody else is already going…”

He knew he was beaten, even as he scowled at the man on the bed. “Bollocks,” Spike muttered, and kicked at the wall behind him.

* * *

“I hope they don’t kill each other,” Willow commented as they strolled past a vegetable stand, her bag swinging lightly in her hand.

“I think we’re pretty safe there,” Buffy replied. “Spike’s chip’ll fire before Xander even needs to scream for help, and as for Xander, well…” She bit her lip as she tried to stifle her smile. “All Spike has to do is stay on the other side of the room out of arm’s reach, ‘cause Xan’s not moving any time soon.”

“He asked Anya for a long stick.”

“Then Spike just has to stay away from the pointy end,” the Slayer said. “Not like he hasn’t had
years of experience doing that.”

Willow chewed on the inside of her cheek as she glanced at her best friend. There it was. Her opening. Ask and get it over with. Except what if she was wrong? Would Buffy totally wig at the suggestion? She was beginning to regret letting Tara go off with Anya; she’d know how to handle this. She was so good at the diplomat thing.

She watched as Buffy stopped and began fingering some men’s t-shirts, taking the cotton between thumb and index to test the thickness, before starting to walk again, wandering to the next booth. When the Slayer’s face lit up at the array of flowers that adorned the varying shelves there, Willow frowned. Good mood. Shopping for Spike. Excited over plants. Uh oh.

“Which do you think?” Buffy asked, turning to face her friend with a single flower in each hand. “Roses? Or…” She turned to the woman in the stall. “What was this called again?”

“That’s a dahlia, lassie.”

She smiled in gratitude and shifted her attention back to the redhead. “So, lassie,” she said good-naturedly, “roses or dahlias?”

“Um, not to be all bubble bursty, but why exactly are we buying flowers?” Willow’s eyes darted to the various displays before returning to Buffy. “I thought we were in clothes shopping mode.”

The Slayer shrugged. “I dunno,” she said. “I just thought that some foliage around the castle might make it a little more homey, seeing as how we’re not actually getting to go home any time soon.” She pondered the stems for a moment. “I think we’ll go for the tried and true. Roses. Definitely.”

She was halfway back to facing the stall when Willow grabbed her arm and pulled her aside. “What are you doing?” the redhead asked. “You can’t be buying roses.”

Buffy shrugged. “Fine, I’ll go with the dahlias then.”

“No, that’s not what I meant either.” The flustered witch took both flowers from the Slayer’s hands and laid them back on the display. “Where is all this coming from? Is there something happening between you and Spike that maybe best friends should know about?” She hadn’t meant to blurt it out, but confusion and the need to know had gotten the better of her and sent her tongue wagging faster than she could catch it. Bad tongue.

The Slayer’s gaze immediately slid away as she turned to start playing with the flowers in the stand again. “Spike?” she said, her tone too light. “Are you kidding? Why would you say such a thing?”

Willow froze. “OK, see, now I know something’s not of the norm,” she said cautiously. “Because the first response from the Buffy I know would’ve been, ‘Oh my god, no!’” She paused. “Or hysterical laughter. That would’ve been appropriate, too.”

It took her a long time to respond. “Spike and I…we’re just making the best of an awkward situation,” the blonde said slowly, avoiding the other girl’s eyes. “We called a truce to make it easier on both of us. No big.” She began walking away from the flower stand, not even watching to see if Willow was following.

“OK, truce, I could get,” the witch said, scurrying after. “But since when do truces involve beds? Or long, meaningful looks? And yeah, maybe this really is none of my business, except I think it is because, hello, best friend here. Best friends share these kind of secrets.”

Buffy stopped and turned level eyes to Willow. “Really? You didn’t come clean about you and
Tara until after that whole thing with Oz when he came back. Weren’t we best friends then?"

“That was…different.” The turnaround agitated her, and her brow wrinkled. “It was complicated. I thought you guys would freak out. Which you did, by the way. A little.” Her eyes widened. “Wait a minute. So there is something going on? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I didn’t say anything.” But she wanted to, especially since it looked like she hadn’t been as careful about keeping things mum as she’d thought. If Willow was picking up on sparkage between her and Spike, then that might mean the others were seeing it as well. Mentally, she shook her head. No, that was wrong. No way were Xander and Giles nearly as perceptive as the young witch. Maybe it was just her. And possibly Tara.

The fact of the matter was, Buffy was dying to talk to someone about it. All the events of the past three or four days were confusing to say the least. An outside assessment might help her clear some of the cobwebs from her brain to make sense of it. And they were best friends, she rationalized. If she couldn’t tell Willow, who could she tell?

“What’s got you thinking something’s going on?” Buffy asked carefully, keeping her tone relaxed, resuming her walking down the aisle past the stalls. “Not that I’m saying there is, but…why?”

“Well, Spike, for one thing. You should’ve seen him when you were still knocked out after the spell last night. He got all growly and hovery over you when he thought you were really hurt. For a second there, I thought he was going to rip Colin’s throat out.”

“Really?” She had to struggle to hide her smile of pleasure. For some reason, the thought of Spike turning into the avenging boyfriend just because he thought she was hurt kindled a flame in her gut, augmenting her confidence in the choice she had made. “He didn’t, though, right? No sudden attacks only stopped by the chip?”

“No, he didn’t.” Willow frowned. “Why? What difference does that make?”

“None. Just curious. Go on. What else have you noticed?”

“Well…that morning when I came and got you for breakfast. You were all…” She bit her lip. “…perky, and Spike was all…naked.”

“Spike was not naked,” Buffy defended. “He had on his jeans.”

“Semi-naked, then. But you were still all giggly. And he was definitely in the bed, like, under-the-covers in the bed.” She paused. “You’re not…both…sleeping in it…together…are you?” She was almost holding her breath as she waited for a response. If she’d had doubts going into this conversation, they were quickly dissipating. Every word that came out of the Slayer’s mouth only seemed to confirm what Willow had been suspecting ever since the previous evening in the dungeon, even if half of them were protestations to the contrary. But she just needed to hear it for herself.

“If I said yes—.”

“I knew it!” Willow stopped and smiled triumphantly into Buffy’s face. “I told Tara. She tried telling me it was the water here addling my brain, but I knew I wasn’t seeing things.” Her grin vanished, her green eyes widening. “You’re sleeping with Spike. Giles is soooo going to freak out.”

“Which is why I’ve been trying to keep this all hush-hush,” Buffy hissed. “I was going to wait until after we got back to Sunnydale, break it to you guys gently, but you’ve pretty much put a kibosh on
that happening.” Her hazel eyes darted around, assessing the crowd surrounding them, and she lowered her voice. “And Spike and I haven’t…it’s just been cuddling. And talking. Major amounts of talking.” She gazed at her friend’s resolute face for a moment, and then ducked her head. “OK, and some kissing.” Pause. “Well, maybe a little more than some.” She bristled. “But, c’mon, can you blame me? The guy is hot. I mean, we’re talking serious voltage here. Oh, except maybe…” Her voice trailed off as she bit her lip, regarding the young woman with embarrassment.

Willow rolled her eyes. “Please,” she said. “I’m gay, not blind. I can still appreciate a star player, even if I don’t play for that side anymore.” She hesitated. “But…what about…Riley? I thought you two were going good there.”

Buffy shrugged. “It’s so hard for me to put it into words,” she said slowly. “Riley’s always been…safe. You know…making with being Mr. Nice Guy all the time. Not that that’s bad,” she rushed to clarify. “It’s just…not enough anymore. I’m not sure it ever was.”

“I thought you liked the fact that he was normal.”

“I do, but…” She shook her head. “He’s never really understood me. Oh, sure, he’s tried, just like I’ve tried not to see how jealous he gets about what I can do and he can’t. But…it’s still there, and it’s always going to be about him playing catch up, and then getting upset when he can’t.”

“And you won’t have that with Spike.” It wasn’t a question, but there was a lingering doubt in the witch’s voice as she spoke that immediately put Buffy on the defensive.

“Spike’s different,” she argued. “Spike’s always accepted what I am. He even respects it.”

“That’s because you’re a death threat.”

“Maybe,” Buffy conceded. “In the past. But since he got the chip, that hasn’t really been necessary. Oh, sure, there’s been a lot of talk and smoke blowing, but that’s all it is. And…” Her eyes softened, a small smile curling the corner of her mouth. “There’s something…there. Between us. This…spark. And every time I look at him, or I think about him, it just gets bigger, and it only makes me want him more.”

Willow’s face was almost sad as she gazed at her best friend. “And you don’t think it’s the whole vamp/Slayer thing?” she asked quietly. “That’s a powerful draw. Maybe you’re just confused.”

The memory of the vampire’s face as he’d sat on the edge of the bed the previous night floated in front of Buffy’s inner eye, the dark longing that had gleamed there hiding the deeper feelings she was beginning to suspect were his true motivation for pursuing this physical relationship between them. “No,” she finally said. “I’m not confused.” Her gaze met her friend’s. “I know this is going to sound weird, but Spike’s been…different since we got to Scotland. It’s like, he doesn’t have to do all this posturing anymore. He can let his guard down. And I actually really like that person.” She grinned. “Believe it or not, he’s been kind of fun to hang around with. He plays a mean hand of slapjack.”

“There’s more to relationships than card games.”

“I know. But, for the first time in forever, I feel like I don’t have to hold back. That I can…push myself to do what I have to do, and that he’ll be right there beside me, matching me, stroke for stroke. And if he does happen to fall behind a little, he’ll be OK with that. Because, in a weird way, he’s proud of what I can do.” Scanning her friend’s face, Buffy’s eyes were dark with worry. “So spill. What’re you thinking? Am I totally off my rocker here?”
There was a moment of silence, and then Willow sighed. “I’m thinking we’re going to have to learn to be a lot more tolerant about Spike hanging around,” she said. “But if you two start acting like I heard you did last year during that spell…” She waggled a finger in fake reprobation.

Buffy laughed, and looped her arm through the young witch’s. “Consider me suitably warned,” she said as the pair resumed walking. “I’m not interested in joining Xander in the gout parade.”

“When are you going to tell the others?”

“Soon,” she promised. “As soon as this mess is cleared up with Colin and the Council. Do you mind not saying anything to the others until I do? Well, except for Tara, of course. You can tell her.”

Willow nodded. “I don’t want to be the bearer of that kind of news anyway,” she said lightly. “I think it might get kind of messy when Xander’s head explodes.”

After a moment of walking in quiet, Buffy spoke up, her voice reflective. “So, do you think I can buy a kilt around here someplace?”

* * *

“For the last soddin’ time, it was not!”

“And I’m telling you, it was.” Xander leaned forward, being careful not to move his exposed foot. “I knew this guy in high school, who saw him on a talk show—–.”

“Frank Zappa was not the son of Mr. bloody Greenjeans!” Spike exploded and began prowling around the edge of the room. “It was a song! And it wasn’t even spelled the same! Only a total git would believe the two had anything to do with each other. And why the hell am I wastin’ the energy arguing with you about this? I’m right. You’re wrong. End of discussion.”

“But—–.”

“Don’t make me bite you.”

“You can’t.” Xander’s voice was gleeful. “You’ve got a chip.”

“The headache’ll be worth it if it makes you shut your gob about this.”

Pause. “I’ve got a stick.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Like I haven’t heard that one before.” His jaw tensed. “I say, if you’re feelin’ up to bickering over some stupid show for a bunch of ankle-biting, you’re up to waitin’ on yourself. I’m out of here.” He’d stomped halfway to the door before his patient stopped him.

“I’ll tell Buffy you walked out,” Xander threatened. “And that I had to hobble painfully all the way downstairs to get a drink of water just because you disappeared on me. She’ll kick your ass into next Tuesday for deserting me.”

The vampire’s eyes were fierce as he glanced back at the bed. “You bloody little liar,” he growled.

“Yes,” the young man agreed. “But a very bored little liar. C’mon. I’ve got no TV, no Gameboy, not even a good comic book to keep me occupied. And the only other person to talk to in this place happens to be Duncan the Wonder Cook, and we both know how I feel about him.”

Pursing his lips, Spike glared at Xander as he marched back to his chair against the wall. “You’re
just lucky I’m in a good mood,” he muttered, and flopped down into the seat, legs sprawled out in front of him. “But no more drinks,” he warned, a little bit louder. “I’m not carrying you to the toilet again. You can just poke me all you want with that little stick of yours, but you’re goin’ to have to hold it ‘til your little girlfriend gets back. She can be your soddin’ nursemaid.” He began picking at his nails. “Should’ve been in the first place. Certainly not sayin’ much for your relationship if she’d rather shop than make sure her little boytoy was fine.”

“I’m not her boytoy!” Xander defended. “And you’re hardly one to talk, seeing as how you’ve been dumped by both Miss Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs and the if-I-only-had-a-brain girl.”

He was about to shoot back that Harm was probably back in his crypt in Sunnydale right then, but remembered in time how Buffy and her gang didn’t know yet about the stupid bint’s idiotic notion that she was wanted by the Scoobies. Better to just let that one slide. “For your information,” Spike said instead, “there just happens to be little bit on the side who has spent her fair share of time tending to this sorry skin of mine.”

Xander’s eyes widened. “Spikey’s got a widdle girlfwiend!” he teased. “So, let’s see. You’ve done crazy, you’ve done stupid. Lemme guess. Blind?”

“She’s got better eyesight than you, I’ll tell you that,” the vamp countered. “And before you say it, she’s not a tart, and she wasn’t tanked up.”

“So cross off, paid for sex and too drunk to notice who she’s with.” He mused in mock seriousness. “Hmmmm. That would just leave---.”

“Drop it, Harris!” His tone had lost all sense of mirth, his words almost a snarl as he glowered at the man on the bed. “You prattle on about her like that any more, and I swear, you’ll be wishing it was only your toe that still hurt.”

The threat sliced through the suddenly too-thick air in the room, hanging before Xander in a delicate swing aimed at his carotid artery, wiping his amusement from his face. There was no mistaking the danger in the vampire’s face, and though he didn’t understand why, the young man knew he’d just stepped into risky territory. “Look, Spike…” he started, only to be cut off by a wave of the other’s hand.

“Forget it. Pick a new topic of conversation, mate. I don’t want to talk about this one any more.”

Xander frowned. “Wow. Are you actually in love with this girl?” he asked.

“None of your business.” He leaned back, closing his eyes as his head rested against the back of the chair. “Wake me up when you need something.”

The room was coated in quiet for a solid minute before he spoke up again. “Have you told her how you feel?” Xander ventured.

It was out of his mouth before he could stop it. “No.”

“You should. Girls like to hear that kind of thing. Even demon girls.”

“Don’t think I need advice from you, Harris. Managed my love life a long time before you even walked this planet.”

Xander snorted. “Dragging around your crazy ex-girlfriend from country to country, hoping she doesn’t shack up or fool around with another demon? Even my track record’s not that bad, Spike.” He didn’t even flinch when the vampire’s eyes opened to stare at him in receding anger. “What
about her? Does she feel the same?"

The sudden remembered touch of her lips on his…those tiny but powerful hands clinging to his shoulders…the unspoken gratefulness as it gleamed within the hazel orbs…they all softened the muscles in Spike’s cheek, dropping his gaze as he slipped away in time if not in place. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Sometimes, I think, yeah. Others, not a bloody chance in hell. It’s only been recent I even thought she could.”

“So…do something to find out for sure. Give her something romantic. Just make sure it’s not something Buffy’ll need to stake you for.”

The sound of the Slayer’s name startled Spike, and his head jerked as he sat up in his chair. Fuck. How did the boy figure out who he was talking about? She was going to kill him if she found out he’d leaked their little secret. “Buffy?” he quizzed stiffly. “What does she have to do with anything?”

Shrugging, Xander replied, “I assume romantic to a vampire usually involves carnage and dead bodies. I was just saying, don’t let your grand romantic gesture be something that might piss Buffy off. Might spoil the mood a little bit if the Slayer decides to go gunning for you or your squeeze.”

“Oh.” Spike visibly relaxed. “Yeah. Right.” His head tilted as he regarded the other man. “You’re bein’ awful helpful here, considerin’ you don’t like me all that much,” he drawled. “What’s your angle?”

“Can’t I just offer another guy some help when he needs it?” Xander’s face blanked at an attempt at innocence, but quickly broke, creasing into a smile as he shook his head. “Nah. Can’t do that with a straight face, either. I was just trying to get you not so mad at me so that you’d go get me something to eat.”

* * *

He stood within the cell and held the leather bag before him, the gentle ring of the bells inside pealing through the dungeon. As he watched, the wall that had been there slowly disappeared, revealing the dark hole the magic had been concealing, and he smiled. He hadn’t been sure that the harness’ effect would work through the satchel; all other times he’d seen it utilized had been while it was actually being worn. This was good information to have. It would most definitely prove useful in the future.

As he stepped through the tunnel, he smelled the familiar rush of air as it wafted from the waters, and frowned. It was fresh. But that couldn’t be. They had done the spell last night; of that, he was certain. Had it not worked? Or…and the other possibility actually made him halt in his tracks. Maybe they had done the control spell after all, and someone from the Englishman’s organization was in there right now. He felt his control begin to slip, the hair on his neck prickling as his feet began to edge backwards, away from the cavern. If that was the case, he was already too late and should by all rights flee, risking his chances with the harness in spite of what he suspected about the Englishman.

But maybe there was another reason. The vampire and the young man remained upstairs, and the others had certainly shown no signs of packing up to leave prior to their excursion into town. Perhaps the spell had simply failed. In which case, there was no reason for him to run, not until he could ensure that the entrance to the Otherworld was sealed, once and for all.

Turning on his heel, he trotted as quietly as he could back to the cell, cradling the bag to his chest in an attempt to muffle the clarion’s call. He would wait until after lunch, listen to their
conversations to determine what exactly could’ve happened, and make his decision after they’d eaten. An hour or two wouldn’t make a difference.

The thought of lunch made Duncan frown. Damn it, he thought irritably. I left the soup on high. I do hope it hasn’t boiled over…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Magic abounds---the closing spell has failed, Willow has inadvertently given Xander gout, and Duncan has the harness, which appears to have magical properties as well. The Scoobies are eager to find out why the spell failed, but there is still the issue of Colin to deal with…

His hands were shaking as he held the phone up in the air, turning in a circle as if that would draw whatever signal was in the air to his mobile phone, and he did his best not to jump when he heard the door open behind him. “What’s he doing?” Colin heard the Slayer say. “Some phone rain dance or something?”

“Reception is very poor here in the Highlands,” Colin offered, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as he stopped in mid-revolution. “Sometimes, moving the phone about a bit makes a difference.”

“Just do get on with it,” Giles urged impatiently. He turned to face Buffy. “Is Xander all right?”

She shrugged. “We’ll know in a couple of hours. Willow seems to think that because the gout took awhile to set in, it’ll probably take as long to go away.” She nodded toward the other Watcher. “Is he clear on what he’s going to say?” she asked. “He’s not going to go all Gomer Pyle and flub everything up, is he?”

“No, he’s not,” Colin interjected, bravely squaring his shoulders to face her, before slowly shading a deep crimson. “Not that I know who this Gomer Pyle is, but I assure you, if this is what it’s going to take to convince you of my innocence of these matters, then I will do it.” His gaze ducked. “Even if it does mean I’ll most likely lose my position within the Council when they find out.”

“Aw, buck up, Col.” Buffy’s smile was wide, if a little insincere. “It’s not like there aren’t tons of job opportunities for compulsive organizers who like to stab people in the back. Isn’t that what they call middle management, Giles?”

“Got it!” exclaimed Colin, and hurriedly, he began pressing numbers into the phone pad before he lost the signal again. There was a moment as he brought it to his ear, and then, “Quentin Travers, please. This is Colin, Colin Sadler.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “I really hate how he says that,” she muttered.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Travers,” the younger Watcher said, the cheer in his voice belied by the apprehension in his eyes. “And how are---?” He never got to finish his greeting, cutting himself off as he listened intently into the phone. “Yes, yes, all on schedule. Miss Rosenberg is proving quite handy in keeping things with the ritual on…” Another break. “Well, we did have an encounter the previous evening when the Slayer came across a demon out on the mountain. Unfortunately, it got away…No, no, nothing unusual about it. Probably just one of the local nasties…” His flush was immediate, and Buffy saw his lips begin to sputter. “Oh, yes, you’re quite right. My deepest apologies. It must be Spike’s influence. I’ve spent far too much time---.” Though he cut himself off again, Colin visibly relaxed as he listened to the man on the other end of the line, actually even
smiling at one point. “Yes, sir. End of the month as it’s been decided. Shall I check in with you tomorrow at the normal time?”

This was the signal that the conversation was over, and Buffy turned to go back to the castle, the chill in the air that cut through her sleeves bringing goosebumps to her arms. Once he was done, they could finish hashing this out inside. It would certainly be more comfortable. The sudden shot of Giles’ grip on her elbow stayed her movement, though, and the Slayer swiveled her head to see Colin’s hands shaking, his knuckles white as he gripped the phone.

“You’re…certain?” the Watcher said, and the anxiety in his voice caused it to crack, his eyes darting from Buffy to Giles and then back again before settling on the ground before him. “Yes…yes, unfortunate. Perhaps I should tell….No, of course not. If you say so. There’s no reason for the Slayer to know.” This last was said deliberately, and he met Buffy’s gaze with a small shake of his head before saying, “Thank you for letting me know, sir.”

“There’s no reason for the Slayer to know what?” Buffy demanded as soon as Colin had disconnected.

The Englishman sighed. “The reason Miss Rosenberg can’t speak with the witch who conducted the ritual the first time,” he said, and began trudging toward the castle’s entrance.

* * *

“Understand, all of my information is secondhand,” Colin said from his seat at the table. “I didn’t come to Dall Rath until after the first attempt had failed, so I only know what I’ve been told.”

“That’s still more than what we have,” Buffy replied, her mouth a grim line as she stared at him. “And you’d rather not do this upstairs?” His gaze darted to the various people scattered around the room---Willow and Tara sitting opposite him, leaning forward as they waited to hear the story…Spike lounging in his corner chair…Giles and Buffy at the head of the table, arms folded across their chests like waiting parents.

The Slayer shook her head. “We’ll fill Anya and Xander in on the details later,” she said firmly. “I’m tired of you squirming on your little hook here. Time to reel you in.”

Colin took a deep breath. “Right. Of course. Well, you understand the power of three within the context of the ritual---.”

“Living, dead, host, we got it.” Buffy’s exasperation was beginning to show. “Tell us something we don’t know.”

“The ritual failed, you know that. Well, while they were extinguishing the flames on the dead body…” Spike’s snort of derision from the corner caused the Watcher to visibly flinch, and he took a deep breath before continuing. “…it was decided to take advantage of the witch’s protective capabilities and do some further exploration of the tunnels.”

“Why then? Wasn’t she part of the Council crew?”

Colin shook his head. “She was a local witch, very powerful I was told. And they didn’t want to employ her any longer than was necessary. I originally thought that it was merely a cost measure. Now…I’m not so sure.”

“So let me guess. Everyone went exploring and got a big ol’ surprise when Nessie poked its head from the water.” Dropping into the nearest chair as she spoke, Buffy waited for the confirmation,
already weary of the tale’s predictability, her eyes colored in aggravation.

“Not…quite.” His eyes were furtive, and all of a sudden, the pencil in front of him seemed the most fascinating thing in the room as he picked it up and began twirling it around in his fingers. “They were attacked, but…not from the water. It came from…behind them. From…the dungeons.”

In the corner, Spike cocked his head. “Well, well,” he drawled. “This just got a little more interesting.”

Giles straightened. “Are you saying they were attacked by men?” he asked, incredulous.

“That’s never been…satisfactorily determined,” Colin replied. “When all was said and done, only one man remained, and his story has been…inconclusive.”

“So what you’re telling us here is that there’s another gang in town that wants to play in our playground,” Buffy said. “Only instead of trying to share, this one likes to kill everybody who gets in the way.”

The young Watcher held up his finger. “Ah. Now, I never said that. Don’t go putting words---.”

“You said it finished with just one man standing.”

“Actually, I said, one man remaining. That’s a world of difference.”

The great hall was blanketed in silence as his words sunk in, weighing the faces of the group surrounding him in sobriety, before Buffy finally spoke up, her voice steeled.

“How many attackers?”

“We’re not sure, at least, that’s what I’ve been told.” Colin dropped the pencil onto the table and let his hands fall into his lap. “The man who survived claimed a large group---six, perhaps seven---but the site evidence that was discovered after spoke to the contrary.”

“Evidence? What kind of evidence?”

He shook his head. “I was never told.”

“And so I’ll ask again.” This time, her hazel eyes were just as deadly as her tone. “How many?”

“Three. We think.”

“And Council guys? How many of them?”

“Seven. Plus the witch, so…eight.” He rushed forward, as if by doing so it would make the story less excruciating to be told. “It was all over very quickly, apparently, until it was only the witch and the other man left. The man pretended to be dead, so the intruders ignored him. They seemed very focused on the woman, and…left with her.”

“Left?” Willow’s voice was a mere squeak, her pale skin even more ashen as her throat worked in silent fury, swallowing desperately in an attempt to smooth the rasp of her mouth. Her fingers dug into Tara’s knee. “Why am I thinking they weren’t interested in a date and a movie…?”

“She was alive…when…they took her,” Colin confirmed, unable to meet the redhead’s eyes. He liked the young witch; she was one of the few in the group who didn’t give him a hard time and seemed to appreciate the hard work he put into keeping the project organized. It wrenched in his gut that she had to find out like this.
“So, that’s why we can’t talk to her,” Buffy concluded. “Because she’s missing.”

He braved himself for the next. “No,” he said quietly. “You can’t talk to her because she’s dead.” The weight of the five sets of eyes bore into his skin, and he stared at the edge of the table, concentrating on the woodgrain until it swam before him. “That’s what Mr. Travers confirmed for me,” he continued. “I hadn’t known…for certain until then, though I had suspected it for a couple days now.”

“And how…” She didn’t even need to finish the query, the pieces of the puzzle slowly slipping into place, and the Slayer shook her head. “The woman on the mountain. That was your witch.”

A single nod. “Hornbrook confirmed everything for Mr. Travers,” he explained.

“I thought you said it looked like the woman on the mountain got attacked by the same kind of demon that got Spike,” stated Tara.

“She did.” Buffy’s eyes were distant as her brain worked over the details. “Which means she either escaped from the men who attacked in the dungeons or…”

“…the attackers were actually kelpies in human form,” Giles finished.

“How is that possible?” asked Willow. “They were attacked from the dungeon direction, not the Otherworld direction.”

“I don’t know,” the older Watcher admitted, and then turned slitted eyes toward his colleague. “Why did Hornbrook show up in the first place?”

Colin cleared his throat. “Miss Summers’ description of the body gave me cause to worry, so I contacted the Council at that time.”

“You said you’d never seen the witch,” Buffy accused, sitting up in her chair.

“And I haven’t!” he argued. “I knew Miss Calvock was elderly, that’s all. I’d been instructed to be on the lookout, should she show up. Outside of organizing the ritual itself, that’s really the only direct order I was given. I wasn’t even supposed to check in with the board more than once a week. Only in the event of an emergency, they said. I have never been privy to any of the specifics. Even now, Mr. Travers didn’t say that Hornbrook was one of us. Just that my suspicions had been confirmed. And, of course, not to tell the Slayer.”

“I wish I hadn’t just let Hornbrook walk away the other day,” Buffy said. “I could’ve beat some of these answers out of him then.” Her eyes narrowed as she recalled their conversation. “You know, he never mentioned speaking to Spike when I saw him.”

“Well, he was bein’ all secretive-like,” Spike commented. “If I was playin’ cloak and dagger, I wouldn’t be sayin’ who I was meeting up with, either.” His blue eyes danced in silent merriment as they locked with the Slayer’s, their own covert relations very much in the front of his mind.

“It’s not that,” she said, breaking away from the cerulean orbs. “He told me he ran into Duncan. Maybe Duncan saw him do something or heard something out of the ordinary.” She glanced at the kitchen door. “Only one way to find out.”

* * *

Scurrying away from the door, Duncan plunged his hands into the dishwater, desperate for an air of normalcy when she appeared in his kitchen. They couldn’t know he was listening; he couldn’t
run the risk of raising suspicions about him, not until he had more answers.

Her face was creased in a wide smile when she poked her head through. “Can we talk to you for a sec?” Buffy asked.

“Of course,” Duncan replied, feigning surprise as he reached for a dishtowel. He followed her through the doorway and stopped just inside the great hall, dark eyes quickly scanning the layout.

“We had a visitor yesterday while we were out,” the Slayer said, staying at his side. “We were hoping you might be able to tell us what he said, what he did, while he was here.”

His confusion was immediate as his brows knitted together. “A visitor?” Duncan repeated. “Yesterday? Are you certain?”

Her smile began to face. “Yeah,” she said slowly. “Dr. Hornbrook. He said he ran into you. Old, kinda heavy, really thick accent?”

The cook shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know who you’re talking about. I’ve not seen anyone outside of your group here since I arrived.” As she began to turn away, he reached out and lightly grasped her arm to stop her. The charge was immediate, and it was all Duncan could do not to register the delight he felt in the power underneath his grip. He knew Slayers were strong but this…this was unexpected. It almost took his breath away.

“He’s not…dangerous, is he?” he queried when she turned to look at him. His eyes searched hers. “Is there reason for me to be concerned?”

She didn’t extract her arm right away, just stood there looking at him. “We don’t know,” she finally admitted and smiled softly as she edged away. “If we find out, we’ll make sure to tell you.”

With a nod of agreement, Duncan turned on his heel and retreated back into the kitchen, closing the door firmly behind him. There were enough secrets being bandied about Dall Rath; he hated the fact that this was one that had taken him completely by surprise.

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Spike’s nostrils flared as he watched Buffy return to her seat, his eyes darting from her to the closed door while images of a dismembered Duncan stretched out before him danced across his brain. The pillock had actually touched her, innocently she would most likely argue, but she hadn’t pulled away, hadn’t disentangled herself for a full minute. Harris was right when it came to the cook, and the sooner they were rid of the place, the happier Spike was going to be.

“So Hornbrook was lying, but we still don’t know why your bosses are interested in me gettin’ this harness for them,” the vampire said, garnering their attention as they shifted in their chairs to look at him. Back to business. Get her mind focused on the problem at hand. “Or why they’d be willin’ to bargain against my chip to get it.”

“I don’t know,” Colin confessed. “Until you and Buffy said so, I didn’t even know it existed.”

“But they want it.” She was standing again, back in control of the meeting as she rose to her feet, and Buffy flicked her gaze over her friends. “And we have to find out why, because if that’s the price they’re willing to pay, their reasons can’t be good.”

“That means research,” chimed in Giles. “Lots of it. We have to figure what the harness does, as well as find out why the ritual didn’t work last night.”
“But I thought we knew about the harness already,” Willow argued. “You know, the controlling the kelpies thing.”

The Watcher shook his head. “We can’t be certain of that,” he said. “Although that’s certainly a possibility, the clarion nature of this particular item doesn’t seem to match what we’ve discovered regarding kelpie mythology. I’d like to have a more definitive answer.”

“You guys can stay here and make with the books,” said Buffy. “I’m going to go out and do some more scouting around, see if I can find anything that Giles and Colin might’ve missed yesterday.” When her eyes settled on the younger Watcher again, they were cool, but not unfriendly. “So, game’s all tied up now, Col,” she said. “Only question I’ve got now is…whose team are you going to play for?”

He seemed almost startled by the query, and straightened in his chair. “I…thought I’d made that obvious,” he stammered. “I’m on your team, Miss Summers. I don’t appreciate being made a fool of.” That wasn’t the only reason, of course, but she didn’t need to know the fact that he was scared to death of her was far more compelling than any sense of revenge.

“Good.” She smiled, and for the first time since meeting her, Colin felt an ease begin to settle into his stomach. “And you’ve gotta stop with the Miss Summers crap. We’re on the same side here. It’s Buffy.”

* * *

So much information.

Though his head swam with the tidbits that had heretofore been denied him, the only outward sign of Duncan’s perplexity was the gleam in his dark eyes as he wiped distractedly at the soup bowls in the sink. First important fact. The spell had failed, and the group had every intention of trying the closing ritual again. The wide camber of his smile was irrepressible. He knew there was a reason he’d responded to the Americans so strongly, especially that Slayer. Practical girl. He liked that.

Second important fact. They knew about the harness. His smile faded. All right, they didn’t know specifics, but they were prepared to research for as long as necessary to find the answers they were seeking. It would only be a matter of time. He would have to keep that under consideration.

Third important fact. The Englishman’s organization didn’t trust him and had employed another party to secretly enlist the aid of the vampire. Duncan didn’t understand what the nature of this chip was they kept referring to, but obviously it held some bartering power if they thought they could control the demon with it. What was even more confusing was why Spike had given over this supposedly private information to the Slayer so easily. Slayers and vampires…not normally colleagues and yet there was a bond between these two that he wasn’t sure the others saw. It was inexplicable, and though it worked in his favor now, Duncan knew that it would bear watching; the inexplicable had a way of turning when one least expected it.

He didn’t like the fact that there was another party in the mix, especially one so eager to retrieve what clearly did not belong to him. This was his immediate problem, and like all of the others, must be addressed. What did they say his name was? Absently, he placed the bowl on the drying rack and wiped his hands on the nearby towel. It was a male, which was a shame. A female would’ve been so much easier and more pleasant with which to deal. As he slid the knife into the drawer, wracking his memory as it replayed the conversations he’d heard, it came to him.

Hornbrook. That was the name. That was all he needed.
Sapphire eyes glittered as they peered through his lashes at the retreating light in the window. Another soddin’ hour until sunset. Why in hell was this afternoon going by so fuckin’ slow?

Actually, he knew the answer to that, and glanced down at the paper tucked inside the book on his lap, the heavy scrawls and crossed-out words staring back at him in mockery. He’d told them it was for taking notes, in the event he ran across something in the text that was pertinent to the ritual, ignoring the frown from Rupert even as he’d snatched it from his hand. Spike didn’t care if they didn’t believe him. He was here, wasn’t he? Helping them in their bloody research when he’d much rather be out helping Buffy, the fact that it was physically impossible for him to currently do that notwithstanding. Oh, but no. And when she had chimed in to support the Watchers’ argument, Spike had known he’d lost.

“You know Gaelic,” she’d said. “That’s a huge asset right now. We need you here.”

It hadn’t been her words. It had been the silent plea in those gorgeous Slayer eyes, asking him for the help she knew he could provide. He knew he should’ve just looked away, but she’d fixed on him, and all of a sudden, everything else had seemed inconsequential, the sea of her gaze drawing him in, immersing him in green and blue, until the resolve melted away.

He’d followed her out into the hall, pretending to be furious at being left behind, even going so far as to slam the door shut behind them. Once it was just the pair of them, though, all tension evaporated from his muscles, and Spike reached up to push a strand of hair away from her cheek.

“Not that I have to tell you to be careful,” he’d started, and she’d shaken her head with a wry smile.

“You’re getting to be as bad as Giles,” Buffy’d chastised lightly. “I’m just doing some recon while we’ve got light left. You and I’ll go out tonight and do some serious searching for that kelpie then.”

“Red says there’s supposed to be something up with the moon tonight,” he’d drawled, eyes dark as they drank in the delicate arch of her face. “Maybe it won’t have to be all work.”

She had left then, tossing him a promising smile over her shoulder as she walked away, and Spike had watched until she’d disappeared before returning to the great hall. She wanted answers? He’d get them for her.

The book they’d given him to read was not only useless, but boring as hell, and after twenty minutes of flipping through its pages, Spike had realized this was not how he wanted to be spending his afternoon. Red and Rupes would probably trump him and find the answers first anyway. And it wasn’t as if the vamp was known for using his brain as it was. But maybe he could still put this time to some use after all. Grand romantic gesture, Harris had said. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. Who knew the boy had it in him?

If he’d been back in Sunnydale, it would’ve been easier. He would’ve had more options. A fancy weapon, maybe. Or some good tips about the vamp population. Or there was that specialty chocolate shop near the Bronze. She liked chocolate. He knew that.

But here in Scotland…in the middle of bleedin’ nowhere…unable to even get out of the friggin’ castle during a time of day when a shop might be open…his choices were much more limited, and the only thing that Spike could come up with was something he hadn’t considered doing in decades. That was why he’d requested the paper and pen. He’d just write the Slayer a poem.

Except he’d forgotten how hard it was sometimes to find the right words, how elusive they could
When the door opened to reveal Anya, Spike was grateful for the distraction, resting the book in his lap as she stepped just inside the entrance. “Xander needs to take a bath,” she announced.

“How’s his foot?” asked Willow.

“Better. We’re past the passing out phase when he tries to walk, and moved on to the minimal shrieking,” Anya replied. “Hence, the bath.”

Tara frowned. “Does he want the bath to make his foot feel better?” she queried. “Because the magic should take care of that.”

“No, I want him to have the bath because he still smells like a sheep,” the ex-demon explained. “I just came down to ask Duncan—.”

Spike snapped his book shut, marking his page with the paper, and jumped to his feet. “I’ll do it,” he announced, and dropped the text to his seat. At the puzzled gazes of the others, he bridled. “Need to stretch the legs.”

He was out of the room like a shot, the gang returning to their reading as Anya waited, but had returned within seconds, standing just inside the kitchen door. “Where’d he go?” he asked, his face darkened in a frown.

“Who?”

“You call yourself Watchers?” His amazement was plain as he jerked his head back toward the kitchen. “The bloody Iron Chef. He’s not in there.”

There was a mix of head-shaking and shrugs before Giles offered, “He’s probably just slipped out while we were all occupied. I’m sure he’s around here somewhere.”

“Does this mean Xander doesn’t get a bath?”

“I’ll get you your water,” Spike volunteered. Anything to get away from the bloody books and words for a bit.

When the vampire had left with the first round of full buckets, Willow rose from her chair and crossed to the corner, picking up the book Spike had discarded and flipping it open to see what he’d been working on. He’d been furiously writing for the past two hours and yet remained silent; she was eager to see what he might have discovered about the ritual. Maybe there was something they could use…

Almost immediately, her green eyes widened, skipping over the phrases, a flush rising to her pale cheeks. Oh my. Not something they could use. And she was really glad that she’d been semi-prepared by Buffy earlier that day in the market, because if she’d seen this without…

“Anything interesting?”

Snapping the book shut, Willow whirled to face Giles, hugging the text to her chest. “No,” she
replied, her voice a squeak in the great room, and she consciously lowered it as she repeated, “No. Just…randomness, and…doodles. Lots of doodles. Fangs and…dripping knives and…blood. Lots of blood. Nothing interesting here.”

“Really?” the Watcher pressed, and moved to remove the book from her hands, only to lift his brows in surprise when she hopped back, out of his reach. “He seemed quite intent. You’re certain there’s nothing—.”

“Absolutely, one hundred percent certain,” Willow affirmed. “Wrong track. Totally.” Brushing past him, she scurried over to the table, setting the book down at her side, well within reach should someone try grabbing it again but far enough away so that if Spike came in, he wouldn’t freak out about someone reading his stuff. Her heart thumped in her chest. No way did Buffy know about any of this, or she would’ve said something in the market. Which meant that Spike himself hadn’t told her yet. Oh god. And now Willow knew. But Buffy didn’t. Not good.

Sparkage between Buffy and Spike was one thing.

Spike being in love with Buffy was something else entirely.
Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Colin has come clean with Buffy, informing her that the witch who had done the original ritual was kidnapped and is now dead, while Duncan has overheard the lot and has decided to do something about Hornbrook. The Scoobies have gone into serious research mode to discover more about the harness and the ritual…

The point of her chin rested on the back of her hands, boring into the flesh as she stared at the book on the table in front of her. She was supposed to be reading, but her brain was refusing to cooperate, focusing not on the text before her but instead conjuring up memories of disconnected phrases that announced Spike’s feelings for Buffy louder than anything Willow had ever before witnessed from the vampire.

…gilt limbs beckoning in lambent sway…

…climbing, clambering, clawing to merit basking within the verge…

…my aurora of the night…

He didn’t know she’d seen it. When he’d returned from filling Xander’s tub, Willow had ignored the book’s presence on the table, watching out of the corner of her eye as Spike noticed its displacement, hesitating to pick it up, finally relenting as he tucked it into his hand before ambling back to his corner seat. Not one word had been said. It was just as well. She wasn’t sure she was capable of a coherent thought after reading the poem’s fragments anyway.

When Buffy had come back from her search outside, Willow’s distraction had worsened, watching the pair as they so studiously ignored the other. Once she looked for it, the signs seemed so obvious, especially from Spike, and the young witch found herself wondering how long the vampire would be able to hold off on letting Buffy know the depth of his feelings for her. He loved her, that much was certain; his every movement broadcasted it if someone took the bother to pay attention. His eyes were constantly following the blonde, not always straight-on, sometimes only out of the corner or covertly through his lashes, but always there, as if by letting her disappear from his sight she would somehow disappear altogether. It was even in his body---sitting, standing, didn’t make a difference---his muscles responding to each movement from the Slayer as if they were both dancing to some silent tune only the two of them could hear.

While there was no mistaking the veracity of Spike’s feelings, the most disconcerting aspect of watching her best friend that night lay in Willow’s growing dread that the vampire’s feelings might not necessarily be unreciprocated. Buffy had talked about a spark, but if the redhead was pressed, she would’ve called it a forest fire that surged between the pair, blazing in flames so high that it was a miracle the others didn’t see it as well. If the Slayer didn’t love Spike now, she wasn’t far off. And Willow was afraid that if she found out for herself what was going on inside her heart, Buffy was going to wig. Big time.

They were out on patrol together right now, leaving the others to continue with the research in the great hall, and the young redhead wondered if Spike was planning on giving her the poem while
they were out. After dinner, Willow had watched as he’d slid it out of his book and tucked it into his pocket, unaware that anyone knew what he was doing. She’d caught the whistle under his breath as he’d sauntered past, and ever since, had been stuck on the what-ifs and ohmigods tumbling about her head.

“Are you ready to go to bed?”

Tara’s voice was a gentle murmur in her ear, and Willow smiled as she shifted the weight on her hands to look at her lover. “What gives you that idea?” she asked quietly.

“Because you haven’t turned a page in half an hour,” came the amused reply. “That’s usually a pretty good sign that no reading is actually getting done.”

Willow glanced at the two Englishmen who still sat in rapt leisure at the end of the table. “Giles?” she prompted, waiting for him to look up before speaking further. “I’m beat. Is it OK if we go up now if we promise to be up extra early?”

“Of course,” he assured. “It’s been a busy day for us all. No reason to wear ourselves down unnecessarily, since we can’t attempt the ritual again for a few days anyway.”

“Are you staying over again?” she asked as she stood. “Are we going to see you at breakfast?”

Giles glanced at Colin before speaking. “Yes,” he replied. “Though probably only for tonight. I’ll most likely resume sleeping at the B&B tomorrow.”

Closing the book she’d been reading, Tara rose to her feet, cradling the tome in her arm as she waited for Willow to join her. “I’m not too tired yet,” she explained to the Watchers. “I’ll finish this upstairs.”

The two girls strolled from the great hall, hand in hand. It wasn’t until they were almost near the stairwell that the redhead spoke up. “There’s something I’ve got to tell you,” she said quietly. “But you’ve got to promise not to say a word about it to anyone.”

* * *

They stood at the crest of the hill, gazing down at the deserted valley below. If it wasn’t for the constant presence of Spike at her side, Buffy would’ve said it was the dullest patrol she’d ever had in her five-plus years as a Slayer. Just like it had been that afternoon, not one thing looked out of place in the silent Highland countryside; not one creature had poked its head out to announce its presence. It was very much as if they had stepped back in time, to an era where they were the only two living things on the planet. Well, she thought ruefully, one living and one unliving, that is.

There had been few words spoken since they’d left Dall Rath, but the silence was far from uncomfortable. Instead, it was as if they didn’t need to speak, treading through the heather as their eyes scanned the earth for untoward signs of demon activity, with only the occasional comment made between them. Buffy had never known Spike to be so quiet—the vamp always seemed to have something to say—and she was dying to ask what was so obviously on his mind. But fear of shattering the still accord that had bound them as they stepped through the moonlight checked her tongue, and she found herself making only the idle remark as the hours passed.

“I’m pretty sure we’re not going to find anything,” she said, glancing up at his immobile face as he looked down into the dale. “We should probably head back so we can get a good night’s sleep and start fresh in the morning.”

“You in a hurry?” he queried softly, not meeting her eyes, instead lifting his own to stare up at the
stars glimmering in the velvet carpet of the sky. “Nice night. Seems a shame to waste it.”

Watching the light reflect off his pale skin sent shivers down Buffy’s spine, and she found herself reaching up to trace the shadow of his cheekbone, fingers slightly trembling as the angles curved beneath her touch. The act took him by surprise, and Spike responded by turning into her touch, gazing with fathomless eyes at the softness of her mouth before sliding up to meet the silent wonder in her own aspect. They held like that for a long moment, each caught in the marvel of the other, before she smiled and slowly lowered her hand.

“Not like I’ve got a curfew or anything,” she joked. “I should probably take advantage of being reasonably responsibility-free while I can.”

Sliding his duster from his shoulders, Spike laid the leather out on the cold ground before settling himself down on its edge, automatically reaching up to offer her a hand in joining him. It was a curious gesture, more gallant than she would’ve expected from the vampire, but Buffy took it, storing it away in the growing file of previously unknown Spike facts that she was keeping in the back of her head. Pretty soon, she realized, he was destroying all her pre-conceived notions as to what to expect from his behavior. In a very much good way.

“I picked up some clothes for you today,” she said as she nestled into the curve of his shoulder, plucking at the cotton of the long-sleeved shirt he wore before smoothing it over the plane of his abdomen. “I’ve decided it’s time you experimented with color.”

“Thought I told you to get me black.”

“And one of them is black,” she countered. “It’s just the other two…aren’t.” She felt his head shake slightly, his chin brushing across the top of her head. “You don’t have to wear them if you don’t like them. I just thought, you know…we’re in this whole trying new things out phase…but you don’t have to. I’ll understand.”

She heard him sigh, and wondered why he did that, made all those little noises and did all those little quirks that made him seem so much more human than other vampires. She was sure he didn’t even realize he did it; it was as much a part of who he was as the bleach job or the black nail polish. The question of whether or not she should bring it to his attention lingered somewhere in the depths of her mind, but Buffy knew already what its answer was. No. It would probably make him self-conscious about it, and the last thing she wanted to do was make Spike uncomfortable around her, wondering if she was measuring every little thing he did or weighing every little word. Even if sometimes she was.

Though his arm curled gently around her back, there was a tension in the vampire’s muscles that had been present throughout most of the evening, his body a tightly coiled spring just waiting for the trigger to set it free. At first, Buffy had attributed it to patrol, but now, with the absence of any danger, lying here with her in the heather, it seemed misplaced, and she bit her lip, debating if she should bring it up. Not like she herself wasn’t a little wound up, but at least she understood where that was coming from. Was it possible Spike was having doubts about everything? No, she immediately thought. That’s silly. He’s the one who suggested we stay out here, and he’s the one who’d said he’d wait as long as necessary for her. He’s also the one who turned down your offer for sex last night, a little voice said in the back of her head, and she felt her pulse began to accelerate as the first niggles began to press into her confidence.

“Not too cold, are you?” His voice was low, his words almost inaudible, a shade of worry darkening his tone. “If this is too much for you, we can go back.”
“No,” Buffy replied, and snaked her hand across his chest to snuggle it under his arm, giving him a little squeeze as she did so. “Unless you do.”

“No,” he repeated, and tightened his own grip around her.

They were engulfed in silence, and though there was nothing strained or uncomfortable about it, after several minutes, Buffy began to wonder just what was going on, why he’d suggested they linger on the mountain when they could just as easily be cuddling like this in the warmth of their tiny bed. She was about to open her mouth to make that suggestion when she felt his muscles tense beneath her cheek, as if steeling himself to speak.

“‘She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies,’” Spike murmured, each word dripping in honey as he stared up into the void above them. “’And all that’s best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes.’”

She sat up, hazel eyes wide in delighted surprise. “Okaaaay…” she said, and felt her mouth curl into an unexpected smile. “What was what? Is that poetry?”

He stole a glance at her before returning his gaze above him. “Yeah,” he replied, his voice suddenly rough. So much for romantic gestures, he thought, furious with his own failing. Work up to this all bloody night, and as soon as the words come out of my mouth, she bolts. “Don’t look so shocked, Slayer. Not like I just pulled a knife on you or something. Just…got caught in the mood, is all.” Lay still, he reminded himself. Don’t get up and run or she’s goin’ to know for sure that this bugs the hell out of you.

She saw his fingers begin clawing into the heather at his side, the muscles twitch in his jaw as he clenched in some unseen determination. “I didn’t know you knew poetry,” Buffy said, deliberately softening her tone. “It…caught me off-guard.”

“Why? Because it means I like to read?” Spike’s lashes were dark against his cheeks as he closed his eyes, desperate to block out the assumed scorn he envisioned on her face. “Eternity lasts a bloody long time, pet. Can’t spend all of it fighting and killing.” Should’ve just kept my mouth shut, he raged. Gone back to the room and forgotten about the whole thing. Even better I didn’t try dragging out the rubbish I wrote. She’d be laughing until next Tuesday, then.

“You know,” and her voice was a husky caress across his skin, “I once pretended to know all about Emily Dickinson just to get this guy in high school to notice me. Our date ended up at a funeral home.”

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He opened his eyes, unable any longer to fight the desire to see her face, and met the appreciative awe shadowed in her smile. It wasn’t disgust or disdain, and it wasn’t anger, and so maybe her first response had been one of shock, but hadn’t he spent the last three years cultivating the Big Bad image for her and her friends? What else could he have expected?

Spike’s muscles relaxed, teeth parting from the grind in which he’d been holding them. “Dickinson’s not too bad,” he admitted, adding with a wry smile, “For an American.”

Buffy’s brows lifted, and she folded her arms across her chest in mock-defense. “And I suppose you could come up with better?” she dared.

He shrugged. “Just like what I like,” he said noncommittally, rolling onto his side to face her. “You want American? I can do that.” His eyes glittered in the moonlight as he recited, his voice dripping down her spine.
“And I would be the moon
spoken over your beckoning flesh
breaking against reservations
beaching thought
my hands at your high tide
over and under inside you

and the passing of hungers attended, forgotten.”

She was mesmerized. There was no other word for it. Lost in the black pools of his eyes as the words almost oozed from his lips, leaping across the chasm that separated them to slice through her coat…her clothing…reaching inside to stroke with satin fingers across her skin. Inside her chest, her heart was pounding in a vociferous rhythm that threatened to overwhelm the pair of them, and she had to balls her hands into fists in order to contain the trembling.

“You win,” Buffy breathed. “Way better than Emily Dickinson.”

Spike chuckled. “Thought you might like that one.” His hand reached out to begin caressing the arch of her bent knee.

“Who wrote it?”

“Bird by the name of Audre Lorde. Ask Red. I’m sure the Wicca knows all about her.” Trailing upward, the vampire’s fingers began kneading the tension of Buffy’s thigh, inhaling the musk of her arousal as he did so, and watched as she chewed at her lip. The effect the bit of poem had had on her was stronger than he’d expected, and he almost wished he could remember the rest of it, to see what type of visceral response it would evoke in the Slayer. Maybe it was time for the other test…

Slowly, Buffy uncurled her legs, stretching herself out while she twisted her body around to spoon against him, his hips nestling against her, her head resting on the powerful muscle of his bicep. Even as his other arm snaked across her stomach, drawing her closer, the sigh of satisfaction that escaped her throat was audible to both of them, and she chastised herself for doubting him earlier. Too many years of negative conditioning. And Spike was getting the brunt of it, if only in her head. She was going to have to be careful about that.

“What’s this?” he asked, feeling the lump pressed against her side.

Buffy reached into her pocket and extracted the cell phone that nestled there. “Giles went and bought phones for us today,” she explained, holding it up for him to see. “So that we’re not cut off from everyone in case of emergencies or anything.”

He pretended to sulk. “I didn’t get one.”

“And just who would you be calling?” she teased, twisting her head to look back at him with a smile.

“I know people.” Her elbow in his ribs told him she knew he was kidding, and he smiled as he pulled her closer, nuzzling his nose in her hair. “Have you had a chance to call your mum yet? Find out how she’s doing?”

“No. I’ve been meaning to, but I can’t get the time difference straight in my head for some reason. And if I call her in the middle of the night, she’ll have a fit. I just know it.”

“Well, it’s six or seven there now,” he explained. “If you’ve got signal on that thing, why don’t you
“Do it now?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“’Course not.” Spike’s eyes danced. “I like your mum, remember?” He watched as she sat up, peering at the tiny screen on the phone before she pressed a button. His eyebrow lifted. “You know how to dial internationally?” he asked, incredulous.

Her blush was obvious even in the moonlight. “Giles programmed all the phones with our home numbers,” she admitted. “He said he was worried about the charges of all these calls ending up in Japan or something.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Spike heard the faraway treble of Joyce’s voice through the phone. “Hi, it’s me,” Buffy said, and then proceeded to launch into the back-and-forth conversation that was so typical of the Slayer and her mother, punctuating her words with the occasional giggle, the odd story, but focusing primarily on the elder’s ongoing health issues.

Concern had been the mitigating factor in making her decision to accept this project from the Council, but listening to her speak now, Spike could sense the fears she had been hiding from them all begin to seep away, gradually replaced with a growing calm as her mother’s words eased the worry away. Though he was deliberately choosing not to listen, the vampire couldn’t help it when the sporadic piece of conversation broke through, and found himself wishing for Buffy’s sake that she was back in Sunnydale right now, having hot chocolate with Joyce, instead of having to deal with whatever mess the Council had created. The pair of them deserved it.

He felt her go rigid before the words came out of her mouth. “No, really, Mom, you don’t have to do that,” she sputtered, and then glanced wildly at Spike as her head ducked, switching the phone to her other hand and the ear farther away from him, making it more difficult for the vamp to hear the other end of the line. “Hi,” she said quietly, and when he heard the responding baritone, Spike’s own muscles tensed in kind.

Finn. She was talking to Finn.

There was no real reason for him to be upset. Buffy had made it more than clear that when they returned to the Hellmouth, she was going to break it off with the bloke. But now…seeing her turn away from him in the face of conversation with her so-called boyfriend…Spike’s body flashed between hot and cold as his nerves ran rampant across his skin, the sudden taste of blood in his mouth as he bit at his cheek, struggling to contain the words he so desperately wanted to shout out loud.

“No, no, it’s not bad,” she was saying. “Cold.” Pause. “She what? Oh, I am so going to kill her when I get back. Thanks for putting a stop to it.” Longer pause. “Really? That many, huh? No, it’s great. You’re being a huge help…Yeah, miss you, too.”

As soon as the words fell from her lips, Buffy froze, hating her mouth for going into automatic mode, her head whipping around to see Spike visibly stiffen as he sat up. Anger gleamed in his eyes, but under it, obvious even for her to see, burned the hurt, hauling him to his feet even as he yanked his coat out from underneath her seat. She didn’t even hear Riley on the other end as the vampire forced his arms into the leather, but when he turned his back on her to begin marching away, she mumbled a quick apology into the phone and covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

“Where are you going?” she demanded, jumping to her feet.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” he said coldly, his pace not slowing, not even bothering to look back.
“You probably want some privacy and all.”

Oh, no, she thought. He’s not getting off that easy. In a short burst of speed, she’d darted after him, grabbing his arm even as her hand came away from the phone, forcing him to stop and face her.

“Don’t do this,” Buffy hissed. “I didn’t mean it. You know that.”

Spike’s eyes flickered down to the phone and the open receiver. She wasn’t even aware that it was currently uncovered. Sucking at his top teeth, he regarded the flush in her face, heard the racing of her heart. She believed that, trusting him to take her word for it that what he’d heard—-*I didn’t mean it*—was true.

But Finn had heard it, too.

“Let’s just get back to our room, luv,” the vamp said slowly, making sure his words were clear even if he didn’t raise his voice. He watched as she raised the phone back to her ear, carefully choosing her next words as she said good-bye to the man on the other end, her voice deceptively light even as she locked gazes with the one in front of her.

“It was just habit,” Buffy explained as she slid the cell into her coat pocket. “I’m sorry. I wish you hadn’t…”

He cut her off with a kiss, both hands holding either side of her face as he lowered his lips to hers, sucking and nibbling hungrily at her mouth even as his tongue swept across hers. His. Not Finn’s. It was *his* touch she was responding to. It was *his* body she was now pressing against, trying to pull him closer, ignoring the fact that this was the first time he’d dared to kiss her so outside the confines of their room. Buffy wanted him. And he didn’t want her to forget it.

It was over far too quickly, leaving her breathless, but instead of pulling completely away, Spike rested his forehead against hers, closing his eyes as he breathed in her scent. “I’m the one who should be apologizing here,” he murmured, and his mouth rained tiny kisses across her closed lids. “Me and my bloody over-reacting.” She hadn’t stopped him, hadn’t pushed him away, had responded by kissing him back with a fervor that spoke of her own hunger…and nothing else seemed to matter anymore, not if he could have her…not if he could be the one to make her smile, or to sigh with such contentment.

As they began walking back to Dall Rath, Buffy leaned into Spike, her hand catching his, entwining their fingers, and felt his thumb trace lazy circles into the soft pad of her palm. “Don’t suppose you know any other poems?” Buffy asked softly, and caught his smile out of the corner of her eye. Good. Everything was going to be OK. Disaster averted.

* * *

Returning the phone to its cradle was automatic, which was a good thing for Riley because, all of a sudden, none of his muscles seemed to be working, locked in a rigor mortis that began to claw at his gut. He didn’t even hear Joyce come up behind him until she’d passed before his line of sight.

“That was a nice surprise, wasn’t it?” she asked lightly, oblivious to his discomfort as she crossed the room with the bowl of popcorn to sit next to Dawn on the couch.

“Yeah,” Riley said gruffly. “Nice.”

“She didn’t say how much longer they were going to be, did she?” Joyce questioned, shaking her head. “I can’t believe I forgot to ask.”

“No, she didn’t.” Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he hadn’t heard what he thought he’d heard. After
all, she was in Britain. There were bound to be lots of men with English accents around her.

“Betcha Spike’s not in a hurry to come back,” chirped Dawn. “When Buffy was packing her bag, he told me he got in this huge fight down at Willy’s. I just hope he remembers to bring me back a souvenir, like a kilt or bagpipes or something.”

Or maybe not.

He didn’t even hear the ensuing argument between mother and daughter. The only thing he could hear were those eight awful words.

“Let’s just get back to our room, luv.”


“Where are you going?” Joyce called after him as she watched Riley grab his jacket and head for the door. “I thought you were going to stay and watch the movie with us.”

“Can’t,” he replied. “I just remembered. I’ve got some…business to take care of.” As he slammed the door shut behind him, his lips thinned as he almost ran down the front path. Spike. Buffy. Together.

Suddenly, the only thing that mattered to Riley at that moment was to find something undead and beat the unliving crap out of it.
Let Not Woman E'er Complain

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Spike have shared a romantic moment out on the mountain, while Willow has figured out the depth of the vampire’s feelings for her best friend…

An innocent bystander wouldn’t have known where one ended and the other began. Legs wrapped around legs…arms curled around waists…hands clinging lightly to stretches of skin, both porcelain and gold…It wasn’t a matter of only having such a narrow space to sleep in. It was a matter of needing to hold on…him to her…her to him…because nothing else in the world existed. Not to them. Not at that moment in time. Or the next. Or even the next after that.

Words hadn’t been necessary when they’d returned to their room. They’d changed their clothes---no reason for screens anymore---each watching the other in mute admiration before Buffy took his hand and pulled him onto the bed, nestling her curves into the lines of his body even as she ran her lips across his cheek to meet his mouth, sucking at its fullness before releasing him with a heavy sigh.

“G’night,” she’d murmured, closing her eyes as she nuzzled his neck. He almost didn’t catch the next as her mouth was buried in his skin. “And thank you…”

No, Spike thought, inhaling her fresh clean scent, smiling softly as his own lids fluttered shut. Thank you…

And they both drifted off to sleep.

* * *

“Y’know,” she said, “the more I think about it, the more I’m thinking maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

Tara grabbed Willow’s arm as she moved to brush past her, pushing her gently back toward the closed door before them. “It’s a good idea. Relax.”

The redhead stared at the heavy wood, her arms locked at her sides. “What if Buffy answers the door?” she asked, her voice almost a squeak.

“Then we say we’re just here to get them for breakfast.” She slipped a reassuring arm around her girlfriend’s waist. “It’s OK. He won’t bite.”

The sound that came out of Willow’s throat was a cross somewhere between a snort and a laugh. “Fat lot you know,” she said. “You’ve never been one of Spike’s almost-entrees.” She took a deep breath and pursed her lips. “Better to just get this over with,” she muttered, and lifting her hand, rapped quietly at the door.

When the door opened, it was just a crack, revealing a scowling, rumpled Spike, and the witch’s eyes widened at the sight of the blond vampire. Oh my, she thought. More Spike semi-undress-ness. This was just getting way too familiar, even if it was…oh my.
No shirt again for Spike. This time, his articulated chest gleamed from the flickering candlelight behind him, each muscle whittled in precision, stretching down his taut abdomen to disappear in chiseled lines inside the black sweats Buffy had bought for him yesterday in the market.

“He sleeps in his jeans,” she’d said then. “These have got to be more comfortable.”

Looking at him now, seeing the way the thick cotton hung low on his hips, the ties in the elasticated waistband that seemed to only draw attention to the very unmistakable bulge between his legs, Willow wondered just for whom the Slayer had really bought the sweats. He may be comfy, but she was willing to bet that Buffy was enjoying them almost as much, if only for the show his hips were now providing.

“What bloody time is it?” Spike growled, blinking as his long fingers ran through his already-mussed hair.

“Is Buffy up?” Willow asked brightly, trying to sneak a look over his shoulder to see where exactly her friend was sleeping. OK, so she had admitted to the pair of them sharing the bed, but for some reason, probably something akin to being compelled to rubberneck when passing an accident, the redhead just had to see it for herself.

The vamp followed her example, glancing back before closing the door further, using his body to block out the vista of the room behind him. “No, not yet,” he replied, his voice hardening. “We didn’t get in until after three. She’s gettin’ some well-deserved shuteye.” His blue gaze flicked between the pair. “Tell Rupes she’ll grab some food later. Right now she needs to sleep.”

As he started to close the door, Willow’s hand shot out to catch it, stopping the movement. “Actually,” she said, lowering her tone, “we were kinda hoping that we could maybe…um, you know…talk to…you.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed, the muscles tightening across his cheeks as he regarded the two witches. “Why?” he asked hesitantly. “Something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Willow was quick to say. “We just…want to…chat.”

The query left his face, replaced with a calm annoyance. “Then it can wait,” he replied, and started shutting the door yet again.

“No!” shot Tara, biting her lip at her own boldness. “Something is wrong.” When her girlfriend’s head whipped around to stare wide-eyed at her, her shoulders lifted in an almost invisible shrug before she added, “With Buffy.”

That forced him to hesitate, the frown returning to the vamp’s face, while he stole a glance back at the sleeping Slayer. “Hang on,” he said abruptly and shut the door in their faces before they could stop him.

“What are you doing?” Willow hissed. “Now he’s going to be cranky. This is going to go a lot smoother if we have a crank-less Spike.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get him all cranked,” Tara said. “But he wasn’t going to come out. Don’t you want to get this over with?”

“Yes, but---.”

The re-emergence of the vampire through the door slapped wide, phony smiles on both girls’ faces, and they stepped backward, allowing him room to slip into the hallway, watching as he finished
pulling the t-shirt over his head and shutting the door.

“OK, what is it?” Spike asked, turning to face them. “Did the Watchers find something?”

Willow blushed. “All right, um…you know, that’s really a funny story. See, Tara was kind of… um…not telling you the truth.”

He folded his arms across his chest, lowering his head to stare at them through hooded eyes. “’Bout what?”

“There’s actually…nothing wrong…” Her words trailed away as Spike snorted and rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he turned to go back into the bedroom.

“Find a different game to play, ladies,” he said without looking around. “I’m goin’ back to sleep.”

His hand was on the doorknob when she blurted it out. “I read the poem.” The muscles so evident through his shirt went rigid, and she felt her flush deepen as the blond head slowly turned to stare back at them. In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought, and rushed forward. “And Buffy told me about the sleeping arrangements. That’s, kind of, what I wanted to…talk…” Her resolve faded as Spike, head still tilted, swiveled back around to face them, his blue eyes glittering as they locked on the redhead.

“Not nice to snoop,” he drawled, his voice dangerously low.

“It wasn’t snooping,” Willow defended. “I thought they were ritual notes. I wasn’t expecting… that.”

“So what’s this all about then?” Though his face remained calm, Spike’s insides were seething, anger and humiliation and frustration boiling into a gloopy mess under his skin. “Shouldn’t Rupes be here if you’re goin’ to tell me to leave Buffy alone?”

“That’s not why I’m---why we’re---here.” Willow grabbed Tara’s arm and dragged her forward so that they stood side by side in front of the vampire. Somehow, holding her girlfriend made her feel stronger, and she squared her shoulders, lifting her chin as she posed the next question. “When exactly do you plan on telling Buffy that you’re in love with her?”

He should’ve seen it coming. Red had always been the brightest bulb in the box, probably why he’d always liked her, and seeing as how she’d already admitted to reading the poem, Spike should’ve known that the young witch had found him out. Still…hearing the words actually said out loud, in a voice that didn’t belong to him, hit the vampire with a sledge in his gut. “Didn’t know I had to a schedule to stick to,” he finally said. “Or is that just a nice way of tellin’ me not to do it…?”

“No, no schedule, no nice,” Willow assured. “Just…curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Red.”

“I’m not a cat.”

His eyes narrowed. “How come you’re not here tellin’ me how you’ll rip my heart out if I even look at the Slayer the wrong way?” he quizzed. “And how come Buffy’s talkin’ to you about our sleeping arrangements?”

“Can I take the second question first?”
He shrugged. “Take whatever you want. Wasn’t really expecting you to answer me anyway.”

Inwardly, she flinched. Darn it. She stepped right into that one. “Buffy only told me because I asked her to,” she explained. “Because I saw…you…in the bed, and then there was the whole Gone-with-the-Wind, sweeping her into your arms thing after the ritual, and then when she wanted to buy flowers in town and they were roses no less, I just couldn’t take it anymore and I asked her what was going on, and that’s when she told me about the smoochies between you two.”

When he’d first heard about Buffy’s confession to her friend, Spike’s anger had jumped, wondering why she had bothered to leave out that little nugget of information when they were out patrolling the previous night. Knowing someone else was in the know about them was definitely good information to have, especially since it seemed to lead to surprise confrontations when he was only half-awake to defend himself. But now, hearing that she was actually sharing more, that she’d admitted to more than a convenient sleeping arrangement…

His head tilted, his face softening as he took a step toward the witches. “What exactly did she say?” he asked, the curious surprise lending him the air of a besotted teenager.

The sudden shift took Willow by surprise, and her eyes widened. “Oh,” she said. “Just that…you two had…cuddled and…stuff. And talked. She definitely mentioned talking. Oh, and the spark thing.” She laughed. “Kinda hard to forget that one when someone starts tossing out words like ‘serious voltage.'” The pleased smile that creased his face wiped her own from her face, and the young witch realized that maybe that last was probably a girlfriend detail that should’ve just stayed between girlfriends. Double darn. Change the subject, change the subject.

“So, you’re really in love with her then?” she asked, and watched as the blue eyes fixed on some memory only visible to him, that mouth that was so often twisted in contempt for the Scoobies softening.

“Yes, looks like,” he let slip, and then, as if realizing for the first time who he was talking to, Spike straightened. “But that doesn’t go anywhere but here,” he warned, trying for menacing but somehow falling short, the hidden plea in his words all too obvious to the two witches.

She shook her head. “Whatever you say,” Willow replied. “But…if you’re interested in secrecy and everything, you might want to consider, maybe, not doing the puppy dog thing when she’s around. That tends to be a dead giveaway and Buffy’s probably going to start catching on to that.”

“Oh. Right.” He took the advice in stride, nodding along as if what she said made the most sense in the world.

“Oh, and the poem?” she added. “Nice touch, but a little on the intense side. Buffy might freak if she sees it. Plus, she doesn’t really get poetry most of the time, although there was this one time, in high school, where she got all into Emily Dickinson—-.”

Spike smiled, remembering the Slayer’s words. “Yeah, heard about that one,” he said. He tilted his head, gazing at her quizzically. “Why’re you helping me here? Not that it’s not appreciated, but Buffy seemed to be of the opinion me and her startin’ something up wouldn’t exactly be putting me at the top of your guest lists for dinner.”

She’d been asking herself the same question, because this little confrontation wasn’t happening at all like she’d scripted it in her head. “Are you going to hurt her?” Willow asked.

He seemed shocked by the question. “No, wouldn’t dream of it.”
“And there’s no secret plan to try and turn her, or something like that?”

“As tempting as that sounds…no. I like her fine just the way she is.”

“And this isn’t all some insidious plot just to mess with her head, or try and destroy the world again, or some other sinister act of vamp evil?”

This time he laughed out loud. “Uh, no.”

Willow shrugged. “So why shouldn’t I…?” Her voice trailed off as the door behind him opened, and Buffy squinted into the morning light.

“What’s going on out here?” the Slayer asked, waking quickly as she saw her friends facing off with Spike. When he turned toward her, stepping forward to join her in the entrance, her hazel eyes widened, darting between the three, and she quickly edged herself against the doorway, as far away from the vampire as she could manage, trying desperately to look nonchalant.

“It’s OK, Buffy,” Willow said. “I told Tara.”

“Oh.” The blonde visibly relaxed, and immediately stepped within the circle of Spike’s personal space, her thin hand reaching down to hook a single finger around his thumb. “That’s good then.”

“Red came up to make sure we didn’t sleep through breakfast,” Spike said, effortlessly covering the content of their conversation with that single lie. “I was just tellin’ them to bugger off so that you could rest some more.”

Buffy turned to her friend. “I don’t suppose you know what’s on Colin’s schedule today, do you?” she asked.

“Research. For all of us. Oh, and he and Giles need to go into town for something. They didn’t say what.”

The Slayer grimaced. “Look, Will, I hate to ask this, but would you mind running interference for me and Spike? I’m really not that hungry and right now I just want to go back to sleep. Not that sitting and staring at smelly old books for the rest of the day wouldn’t do that for me, but I kind of prefer my bed.”

“If Rupes gives you hell for it, just remind him we’re on the graveyard shift here,” Spike offered. “He wants us at peak performance, he’s gotta let us sleep once in a while.”

“Sure. No prob…lem…” The word disappeared into silence as Willow watched the pair disappear into the bedroom, closing the door behind them without even a glance back.

“What just happened here?” Tara queried softly. “I thought we had a grand plan.”

“I don’t know,” the redhead admitted, her gaze thoughtful. “Somehow, I almost think…that was the grand plan.”

* * *

At Buffy’s request, he’d gone downstairs first. They had actually woken up at almost the same time, stretching against the muscles of the other, neither speaking as they sat up to face what remained of the day. There really wasn’t any need to. The measure of their rest said everything they could’ve. Or would’ve.
So, he was sprawled in his corner chair, a book propped up against his knee, doing his best not to be bored out of his mind, when she came bouncing in, her face creased into a smile even before she’d crossed the threshold of the great hall.

“Good morning!” Buffy chirped. “How’s the research coming?”

“It’s good afternoon,” Xander replied, “and it sucks.”

She stopped, looking around the group. “Where’s Giles?” she asked. “And Colin?”

“Not back from town yet,” answered Willow.

“And you really haven’t found anything useful yet?”

“Nope,” came from Anya. “Watcher resources are severely lacking.” She picked up books scattered across the table as she spoke, only to drop them almost immediately with a heavy thud. “This one talks about the Loch Ness monster. This one says kelpies are a myth. This one claims we’re actually in the Otherworld now and everything else is just a dream. And this one, well, this one is in a language I don’t recognize. I have no idea what this one says.”

Sitting down in one of the vacant chairs, Buffy’s eyes scanned the texts thoughtfully. “Maybe our answers aren’t in the books,” she mused. “I mean, this thing’s local, right? Maybe there’s some legend special to this area. Has anybody talked to Duncan yet? He said he was big on the whole lore thing, didn’t he?”

The guilty looks that passed around the tables spoke volumes, and Spike had to refrain from chuckling out loud. Sometimes, the Scoobies could be really thick. Leave it to Buffy to state the obvious.

“I’ll…go get him,” Willow said, and rising from her chair, disappeared into the kitchen.

“How’s the gout, Xan?” the Slayer asked as they waited.

“Gone. Thank god. And I vote next time someone has to get a funny disease, it’s Spike.”

“Well, that’s gratitude for you,” the vamp snorted. “After all the pokin’ I had to put up with. Least you could do is pretend to be thankful.”

The bickering was cut off before it could begin when the kitchen door swung open again, and a bemused Duncan followed Willow back into the great hall. His gaze immediately fell upon the Slayer, and he smiled as he steered himself to the chair next to her. “You really should’ve said something sooner about what you’re studying,” he said as he settled himself. “I was serious in my original offer. I’m more than willing to help in any way you need.”

As Buffy ducked her head in embarrassment, Spike’s eyes narrowed as he caught the lean of the cook’s body, angled just enough so that his knee was pressed into hers. She wasn’t even aware of it, or, if she was, she didn’t seem to mind, and the good mood that had been warming the vampire’s system slowly began to fade.

“Well, we didn’t want to look foolish,” Buffy said lightly. “Plus, we’re a little used to being the authority on these kinds of things. It’s kind of our specialty.”

Duncan laughed. “A group of beautiful girls being experts on monsters?” he kidded, his gaze sweeping over the other females at the table. “Now that I find difficult to believe.”
“Not just girls in the bunch, mate,” Spike said, rising to his feet and crossing to the end of the table. He glanced over at Xander, and saw that the young man was looking just as flustered as the vamp was feeling, although, as his eyes darted between the girls, he realized that each and every one of them was focused on Duncan as if he were the only other person in the room. What was it about this guy? Spike wondered. He just didn’t get it.

It was as if he hadn’t even spoken out loud. “So what do you know about kelpies?” Buffy asked, focused on the man at her side. “Other than, you know, big horses luring you to a watery death.”

Duncan laughed. “Horses are only one of their forms,” he explained. “And luring is relative. Have you read how to control them?”

“A harness, right?”

The cook’s pleased surprise at her knowledge was accompanied by a quirk of his lips that immediately set off warnings in Spike’s head. Too good to be true, he thought, glancing quickly at the others. The wanker’s got this down to a science.

“It’s quite sad, actually.” Duncan was saying. “To think that these beasts probably wandered into our world, unsuspectingly, only to find man trying to tether them in order to do their work. It’s really no wonder they grow feral in certain cases.” He smiled. “But that’s my personal bias shining through, I suppose. I’ve never been a grand proponent of tethering creatures so that it prevents them from living as nature intended. Cruel and unusual punishment, I rather think.”

Spike caught the slight tinge in Buffy’s cheek as her eyes jumped to the vampire before hastily returning to the man at her side. Well, that one hit a little too close to home, he thought dryly. So the bloke’s got one redeeming feature after all.

That momentary acceptance was shot out of the water when Duncan reached forward and lightly grasped the Slayer’s hand, turning it over to expose her palm. “Think of it this way,” the cook said as he stretched his hand out underneath hers, just barely supporting it. “You’re a strong and free-spirited creature, just going through your life, when suddenly---.” And before anyone could blink, the Slayer’s hand was trapped within Duncan’s. “---you’re caught, unable to move, unable to do for yourself.” He began moving his hand, forcing her arm to follow in each direction as he lifted, dropped, and then lifted again. “Obligated to do what you’re told, when you’re told, with absolutely no say in the matter.” His release of her hand was just as quick as its capture, and he smiled, his dark eyes dancing. “It’s really no surprise that they sometimes get a little…annoyed with men.”

It took her a moment to respond, sitting transfixed by his words. “I never…thought of it…that way,” she said softly.

“Me neither,” Willow echoed.

When Tara and Anya followed in with their own admiration for the new “perspective,” Xander and Spike’s eyes met, both sets asking the exact same question. What the hell just happened here?

“What about…special harnesses?” Buffy asked. “Is there anything like that in the legends?”

“Like what?”

“Like gold, ringing-type harnesses.”

He seemed to ponder the suggestion for a moment, and then shook his head. “Doesn’t sound familiar,” he said. “Are you sure it has something to do with the kelpie mythology?”
She nodded. “We---.”

The ringing of her phone in the center of the table interrupted Buffy, and with an apologetic smile to Duncan, she leaned over to pick it up. “Hello?” she said. “Hi, Giles. We were just talking about kelpies. Aren’t you proud of us?” Pause, followed by a quick glance over at the windows, her smile fading as her eyebrows came together. “Really? Well, actually, he’s right here.” She pulled the phone from her ear and handed it toward the cook. “Giles would like to talk to you.”

He looked surprised, but took the phone anyway. “Is there a problem, Mr. Giles?” Almost immediately, his eyes followed the same path Buffy’s had taken to the window, rising slowly to his feet. “Oh. Well, of course. I’ll just tell your friends.”

“What is it?” the Slayer asked, taking back the now-dead phone. Spike almost hissed out loud when he saw the slight caress of Duncan’s finger along the back of her hand.

“Apparently, there’s a rather large storm headed this way,” the cook explained. “Mr. Giles thinks it’s best if I were to head back to town as soon as possible. Otherwise, he thinks I might end up getting caught here overnight.”

“Oh, well, we don’t want that happening,” Xander said, just a little too loudly, his smile just a tad too wide. At the dirty looks shot to him by the females around the table, he bristled. “What? I’m just saying, the inn is pretty full here. Where would he sleep?” He held up a warning finger to Anya as her mouth opened to speak. “And you are not about to say, our room.”

“No, Mr. Giles is right. My Aunt Fiona will be up all night with worry if I don’t go home,” Duncan joked, and began skirting the room as he headed for the main door. “There’s a stew on the stove for your tea. It just needs a good stir every now and again before you’re ready to eat. And if you’d like, you can just leave the dishes until morning. I’ll take care of them then.” He flashed them a smile as he reached the entrance. “I have to admit, I do enjoy a brisk walk in an impending storm. It really makes you feel alive, don’t you think?” He nodded in farewell. “See you in the morning.”

Spike’s eyes were furious as they bore into the door shutting behind the dark cook. There had been definite touching, and holding of hands, and…more touching. Not that the vampire had any rights to be laying a claim…His nostrils flared. Hell, why not? Maybe they weren’t a couple out in the open like he wanted, but that didn’t make what they had any less real. Why couldn’t he lay a claim? His gaze flickered to Harris, who was watching Spike’s reaction with that infuriating I-told-you-so look that for once, he didn’t find annoying. When the younger man gave him a slight nod, Spike smiled, his lips hard, and began strolling to the door.

“Goin’ out for a smoke,” he said to no one in particular. “Be back in a few.”

* * *

He caught up to him just inside the front door. “Interesting speech,” Spike drawled as he pulled out his cigarettes. Sticking one between his lips, he offered the pack to Duncan, who shook his head in refusal as he buttoned up his coat.

“Aren’t you cold?” the cook asked, glancing from the vampire’s bare arms to the overcast skies outside.

Spike took a deep drag on the cigarette before exhaling slowly into the other man’s face. “Always,” he replied. He flicked his ash onto the floor. “You goin’ to share how you do it?”

“Do what?”
“The thing with the birds.” His lips curled into a vicious smile. “Not that I’m lookin’ for tips, mind you. Just wanna know what the trick is.”

The two men regarded each other for a long moment before Duncan responded. “Just talk to them,” he said. “Nothing special. You should really give it a try.” It was his turn to smile. “Buffy certainly seems to respond to it.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed, and he felt the growl rise in the back of his throat. “You’d be smart to stay away from her.” There was no mistaking the dangerous rumble in his voice, or the flash of gold behind his eyes.

“That sounds like a threat.”

“Consider it good advice for stayin’ healthy.”

“Perhaps you should consider it for yourself.” Duncan’s smile never left, but his dark eyes hardened. “She’s really not your…kind, is she? A bit out of your league, I’d imagine.” He didn’t wait for a response, merely turned on his heel and walked through the front door. After only a few steps, though, he hesitated, catching his pace as he half-turned to look back at the blond inside the entrance. “And don’t threaten me again,” he warned. “You really don’t want to cross me.”

Spike sneered, blowing a stream of smoke. “Or what? You’ll ladle me to death?”

“Only if it’s long, wooden, and pointed,” Duncan replied evenly, the smile now gone. Turning on his heel, he began walking leisurely down the drive, his voice floating back to the castle as clearly as if he was standing right on the threshold. “Have a good night with your Slayer, Spike…”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: A storm is on its way to the castle, leaving the Scoobies temporarily stranded there without the Watchers. Duncan was warned away in time by Giles, but had a minor confrontation with Spike before leaving…

"You should probably start back," Giles said as he squinted into the darkening sky. "That road to the castle might be rather treacherous once the storm starts."

Colin's scowl was uncharacteristically bleak, adding years to his otherwise youthful countenance, and he shoved the scrap paper into his pocket. "I just don't understand why we can't find him," he said. "It's not as if he's attempted to hide his tracks very well. He didn't even bother changing his name at that other B&B."

"It's likely he assumed we'd take him at face value," the older man said. "And supposedly, you're still on the Council's side regarding this issue, remember?" His gaze appraised his colleague coolly. "Travers would be correct in believing you would discourage me or the others from discovering Hornbrook's true identity."

"That still doesn't explain why it's looked like he's dropped off the face of the planet," Colin muttered. "You don't think he's returned to London, do you?"

Giles shook his head. "Doubtful. He's expecting to be conducting this deal with Spike."

"Another detail that boils my blood," the younger Watcher groused. "Why would the Council agree to such a transaction? Letting Spike back out into the populace without benefit of the chip is tantamount to murder."

"I don't know." His voice was thoughtful, his gaze pensive. "That's the one aspect of this I'm having trouble digesting."

"If I were Quentin Travers, I would've tried to figure out a way to get the harness from Spike without actually having to remove his chip," Colin said as he began walking down the path to the car. "That would be the smart thing to do." He was almost to the curb when his colleague's voice stopped him.

"What was that again?" When the younger man repeated his statement, Giles' brow immediately furrowed into a frown, his hands plunging even deeper into his coat pockets as his brain so obviously worked over behind his face. "Wait," he finally said, pivoting on his heel to head back into the B&B.

"Why? What's going on?"

Giles paused at the doorway, half-turning to look back at Colin. "I'm getting my things," he explained. "I'm coming back to Dall Rath with you."

* * *
She saw him before he saw her. Standing in the doorway…one hand on the jamb as he leaned forward staring at whatever through its opening…the sinew of his arms raised in bas relief even as he held himself away from the fading afternoon light. The coiled grace of his shoulders tugged at the knot in her stomach, and Buffy found herself stopping, freezing, holding her breath as she just watched him, the questions that had been flitting through her head like thousands of featherweight moths finally settling, as if someone had just extinguished the light that attracted them.

The flutterings had started out on the mountain, when she'd seen him begin stalking away after her faux pas with Riley on the phone. Her body had screamed at her then, ordering her to stop Spike, to make him understand that she didn't mean it, and she'd obeyed without question, with the very obvious reward of having him listen to her. And believe. That was the important part. That was always the important part.

It had snowballed after that, walking back to the castle hand-in-hand like a pair of shy teenagers. That didn't happen to her, not in Buffy's Slayer world, or at least, it hadn't happened in a very long time, and when she'd crossed the threshold of Dall Rath, brushing past Spike as he held the door open for her, she had realized just how much she'd missed it. The honest ease. No holding back. Buffy being Buffy. And the walls, they came a-tumbling down…

She'd been so close to it in their room. They had walked in, and when she'd seen the bed, the first thing that had crossed her mind was how it would feel having him pressing her down into the mattress, bare limb to bare limb, his mouth to hers. Even remembering it now made her skin tingle. And so she'd stripped, consciously avoiding the screen, letting him watch as she'd pulled the t-shirt over her head, hearing his slight hiss as she slid her legs into the cotton of her sweats. That was when she'd wished she'd brought something a little sexier to sleep in, but who would've guessed she'd be trying to seduce Spike? Not her, that was for sure. Yet, there she was, desperately wishing he would take the initiative and stop her, to cross the room and catch her hands and bury her in those kisses that seemed to never stop.

But he hadn't.

It wasn't until later that she remembered how he'd said it was her choice now.

And then the sleep…It still boggled her that she slept so completely when held in his arms. No waking up restless and needing to patrol, to do something—anything—just to get out of bed. No bad dreams with weird questions she never seemed able to puzzle out. No bad anything. Just utter rest. Peace.

Trying to gather them in the great hall had been pointless. There was work to do, and whatever thoughts that were going through her head that weren't kelpie-related had to wait, regardless of how delicious Spike looked sprawled in his chair, his leg thrown over its arm, the glint in the azure depths of his eyes. But…how had she gone so long not really seeing him? Not seeing the ease he slid into her circle…For some reason, Xander's light-hearted jab at the vamp had seemed more jokey than antagonistic. Or not noticing the simple beauty of his face…How it could strike her even when he was doing absolutely nothing. But now she was—seeing him—even if she had to somehow concentrate on the research.

Only during those few minutes when Duncan had been speaking were the moths temporarily netted, but as soon as the cook had left the room, they were once again released, driving her to find some excuse to follow after the vampire, to seek him out as he went after his nicotine fix.

And now they were gone. Because now she knew. She didn't know how, but frankly, she didn't care.
She was pretty much in love with Spike.

I wonder what he would say if he knew, Buffy thought. Would he laugh? Tell her she was crazy, that he was only in it for the sex? But he wasn't, at least…she didn't think so. Not that she was ever that good at reading guys in the first place, but everything Spike did seemed to say the opposite, that he wanted more than just the physical, that he was happy with the friendship part of it just as much. Why else would he have said no to her other night when she'd offered him her body? The only fly in the ointment was that he'd never actually come close to saying anything remotely like "I love you" back at her. Just that enigmatic "world to me" stuff that night of their almost-kiss. Was it worth it to ask? She didn't know. But she did know she couldn't. That just wasn't in Buffy's nature.

"He's gone already."

She was startled from her reverie by Spike's words, jolting herself back to the moment as she watched him turn to face her. "What's that?" she asked, taking a step closer to the vampire.

"Superchef," he clarified. "You've just missed him."

"Oh." A tiny line appeared between her brows as she edged herself even closer. Something was wrong. She could see it in the flecks of gold that kept flashing across his eyes, and realized for the first time the deep grooves in the wood where he'd been gripping the jamb. "What is it?" she asked.

He sucked at his teeth, lips pursed as he regarded her, then seemed to make up his mind. "What's the magic?" he demanded, straightening and stepping away from the open door. "What the hell is so bleedin' interestin' about Duncan Davison that's got you and Red and the other two so goddamn Pollyanna about?"

She immediately bristled. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm talking about holding hands, and going gaga because he manages to string more than two words together, and that 'oh I never thought of it that way' rubbish. Spike dropped his cigarette, grinding its red tip to dust beneath his boot. "You know he knows you're the Slayer, right? And somehow, he's managed to suss out I'm a vampire. But is that gettin' your hackles up? Noooo. 'Cause Little Miss Buffy is too busy sittin' on her soddin' tuffet to notice the big black spider about to start crawling its way down her back."

It was turning into one of his rants, but why, she had no idea. Something had obviously happened in the few minutes since he'd left the great hall, and it had obviously happened with Duncan. When she automatically stepped forward to the doorway, craning her neck to try and catch a glimpse the cook's retreating back, Spike snorted, whirling on his heel to head for the stairwell.

"Un-fuckin-believable," he muttered.

"Spike! Wait!"

He stopped at the sound of her voice, but didn't turn, hands balled into fists at his side, not even flinching when Buffy marched up to him to whirl him around.

"What the hell just happened here?" Her voice was strident, clamoring down the stone walls, and for a fleeting second, the Slayer wondered if the gang would be able to hear her all the way back to the great hall. Didn't matter, she decided quickly. Gotta get this fixed first.

And there it was again, that same look that had chilled her last night on the mountain. The impotent anger trying so desperately to hide the hurt underneath. Cutting through both of them. He was jealous. Of Duncan? Riley, she understood, but this…this made no sense. She didn't even
know the cook very well. Why would Spike be reacting this way?

"Is this the way it's goin' to be?" he asked. She didn't know which was worse---when he was yelling, or when he went quiet like this, his voice sounding like it had been chipped from ice. "Play the hot and cold act. Turn me on and then turn me away, while you go skippin' off to chat up the next bloke. Turn into a simpering little bint just because he lays on whatever charm he seems to have, all the while forgettin' that the one who's been standing right by you the entire time is watchin'. Then go lookin' for him when he leaves the room." He snorted. "You've got stones, I'll give you that."

"I came looking for you, you idiot." Twin spots of color sprouted high in her cheeks as her voice rose in volume. "You're the one who brought up Duncan."

"And you were the one holdin' hands with him."

"No, he was holding my hand, not vice versa."

"You didn't seem to be stoppin' him."

"Because it happened for all of five seconds!" Exasperated, she turned away, only to whip back around to shove him back against the wall, pressing herself against his length, as she stared up at him, hazel burning. "In case you haven't noticed, I've been turning my world upside down to accommodate you, and this, and...us. OK, so I haven't exactly put a full-page ad in Variety announcing how I feel, but I told Willow. That counts for something. And hello? Do we not remember me giving Riley the brush-off last night? For you. Because I didn't want you to walk away. I'd've buried the stupid phone if you'd asked me to. You, Spike. That's who I want. Not Riley. And certainly not some English cook who I've barely spoken five words to ever since we got here." Her breath was coming in short spurts, her heart beating as if to escape her chest. "You."

"Hey, what's going on here?"

The sound of Xander's voice caused Buffy to leap away from the vampire as if burned, and her head whipped around to see him standing in the hall, the other girls rushing up behind him. An apologetic shake of Willow's head told the Slayer only that they hadn't been able to stop him, and she exhaled loudly, even as she glanced at Spike out of the corner of her eye.

"Nothing," she bit out. "Someone's just being a stubborn pain in my ass, as usual."

"Slayer's just pissed 'cause I had a few words with Duncan that weren't of the love and adoration variety," Spike said, sliding into the half-truth with an effortless ease. "Guess she doesn't like the fact that I'm not a card-carrying member of his fan club." His look at her was pointed. "Even if he is trouble."

Xander visibly relaxed. "Oh, well, if that's all," he said. To him, the explanation made perfect sense.

It didn't to the others. "How can Duncan be trouble?" asked Willow with a frown.

"You can't be trouble and cook as good as he does," piped in Anya.

"You can if you know you're catering to a Slayer and vampire," he replied. "Somehow, he's sussed it out about me and Buffy. That can't be good."

"But how could he know?"
Spike shrugged. "Probably overheard someone talking. Castle walls often have big ears."

"M-m-maybe he works with Hornbrook and the Council." Everyone turned to look at Tara. "He'd know about Buffy and Spike then, wouldn't he?"

"Could be." Buffy was calmer now, the shift back into work-mode enough to calm the frenzy in her skin that dealing with Spike's jealousy had churned. Not that she was anywhere near being done talking to him about it, not by a long shot. But he was right about Duncan's knowing not being good. Maybe it would be possible to kill two birds with one stone.

"Just to be safe," she continued, "I'm going to give this place a thorough sweep. See if I can find anything out of the ordinary. For a Scottish ruined castle, I mean." She turned to face Spike, her jaw tight. "You feel like seeing if we can find any trouble?"

His gaze was measured, taking his time to respond. "Sure, pet," he finally drawled. "You know me. Always up for a spot of violence before my evenin' tea."

"Do you want us to help?" offered Xander.

Buffy shook her head. "You guys go back to book detail. We can't be giving up on the research just yet. Spike and I'll be fine on our own." She watched as the gang returned to the great hall, waiting until she heard the door close in the distance before turning to face the vampire at her side. "Let's saddle up."

* * *

"So, there a reason we're starting here?"

Buffy glanced back at Spike, his face hidden in shadow as they made their way down the tunnel to the underground cavern. "Lots of them," she said. "Which one are you interested in hearing?"

He shrugged. "Surprise me."

"OK, the official Giles answer is that this is what Hornbrook wanted from you, this going into the tunnels. Plus, this is the only place in the castle we've actually had any trouble. So it makes Watcher sense."

"And unofficially?"

Stepping into the cavern, Buffy's eyes swept over the calm surface of the water as she waited for him to join her. When he had, she turned her flashlight and shone it directly into his face. "Privacy."

His eyes betrayed nothing. "For what?"

"To finish what we started upstairs."

"And that is…?"

She stamped her foot in frustration. "Are you deliberately trying to piss me off here?" she demanded. "Because that's the vibe I'm getting and I don't understand why."

This time, there was no mistaking the slight quirk of his lips. "So that's where little sis picked it up," he said, eyes skipping from her feet to her face. "Always wondered 'bout that."

Her gaze widened. "Now you're teasing me?" She watched as he sauntered past, heading along the
"You said your piece upstairs, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah…" Buffy rushed to catch up, aiming the light ahead of them but looking up at him as she spoke. "But you didn't seem like you were listening."

"I've got ears, pet. Last time I checked, they seemed to be workin' just fine."

"Sometimes, I seriously wonder about that."

He stopped, finally turning to look at her. "Look, did you mean what you said? You're not yanking my chain here just to give yourself some kicks?"

"Of course I'm not. Pretty elaborate for just messing around with you, don't you think?"

"Then I'm right as rain now."

"But…you were…about Duncan…" Though she wasn't dismissing it, the sudden flip-flop in his attitude was confusing, and Buffy couldn't help but feel that she'd missed a step somewhere.

His head dropped, his gaze darkening as Spike looked at her through his lashes. "Yeah, about the cook," he said softly, and began advancing toward her, edging her back into the wall. "See, the thing of it is," and his hand came up, one finger tracing the line of her jaw as he spoke, "blighter made me want to rip his heart out and shove it down his throat when I saw him touching you like he did. All…up close and personal-like."

The cold wall pressed into her back, but Buffy couldn't feel the chill, her body warming from the inside out as he stood before her, her heart accelerating at the anticipation promised by that lone digit running along her skin. "It was just…a show," she breathed. "Hand holding to make his point. Nothing big."

"Not just that," he murmured. "It was the whole knee business…" As if to demonstrate, Spike's own joint inched forward, nudging its way between her legs, somehow caressing her inner thigh through the layers of cotton that separated them. "And then that stroking thing…" His other hand came up, capturing hers just as Duncan had caught it earlier, and the finger that had been sliding across her chin disappeared to re-alight on the vein that ran down the back of her hand, following it down onto her wrist before circling around to her palm.

"I don't…remember that…" And she didn't. Of course, if someone had asked her her name at the moment, she probably wouldn't have remembered that either, the sensations now rippling down her arm effectively erasing all rational thought from her head.

"Just made me want to let him know you're taken," Spike said. He seemed to be waiting for her to contradict him, testing the waters with his choice of words, his eyes taunting her as he held her pinned against the wall. When she didn't, when instead she pressed herself back into him, the corner of his mouth lifted, and his head came down so that his lips could brush up her neck. "Yeah," he repeated, his mouth against her ear. "Right as rain."

The splashing in the stream behind them jerked them from their reverie, and Spike stepped away and back, allowing Buffy to see the creature as it leapt from the water to stand on the bank. She automatically shifted her concentration, her body priming as she reached for the sheathed dagger at her side, feeling her partner ready himself even as she propped her light up against the nearby stone.
"Looks like trouble decided to show up after all," she said lightly, steeling herself at its sight. Black, and just as big as she remembered, its silky coat glistened from the beads of water that clung to it, its enormous human-like hands curled into dangerous claws.

"You trespass…" it said, baring its needle-like teeth as it spoke.

"Got a bone to pick with you, mate," Spike said. "Least, I assume it's you. Unless you've got a cousin or sister in there with you."

"I follow my duty," it replied, slowly advancing. "You are not welcome here."

She saw it lunge before he did, its head lowered as its long arms reached out to grab at whichever of the pair was closest. With a quick shove, she pushed the vampire out of the way, leaping into the air to somersault over the demon's head, landing with a soft thud on the ground behind it. A quick glance at the water reminded her to be careful, but as she prepared to attack it from behind, she saw Spike scramble out of the way of the approaching threat.

"Not goin' to fall for that one twice," she heard him mutter, his eyes shifting to gold even as the ridges appeared in his brow. With a snarl, he tackled the demon, sending both of them to the earth in a tangle of ebony, and Buffy rushed forward, weapon ready, skirting the rocks as Spike sank his fangs into the monster's arm.

A loud roar filled the cavern, echoing hollowly against the walls, and the demon tore itself free, the blood dripping from its limb. The momentary distraction was all Buffy needed. Just keep away from the mouth, she thought as she jumped forward, dagger ready, feeling it slice through flesh and muscle to sink into its chest. She pulled it out with a sickening squelch, and as the demon staggered, she whirled, foot already positioned into a vicious kick that sent it crashing into the wall.

She was on it in a flash, the dagger now discarded, fists pummeling it first left, then right, breaking the teeth into crystal shards that cut into the knuckles of her hands. It struggled between her legs, but remained powerless under the eave of her strength, its thrashing growing gradually weaker as the blood seeped into the dirt beneath it. When she felt the rumblings begin vibrating through it, it sent corresponding tremors through her own limbs, and Buffy hesitated, her weight shifting slightly back as she watched it with growing concern.

It was changing. The ebony of its coat was lightening, shading to a fleshy pink, even as it seemed to shrink onto itself…into itself. The teeth that had seemed so dangerous were all of a sudden human, huge gaping holes where she had beaten them loose, and the demon's face melted into a young man's, with huge dark eyes that blinked up at her in pain.

"Please…" it---he---whispered. "Don't…kill me."

Spike saw the change come over her, saw the glaze shine over her eyes as the monster spoke, and his brow furrowed into a heavy frown as she sat back, her hands opening and falling defenseless to her sides. "Slayer," he said, his voice low in warning. "Stop playin' around and just kill the bloody thing."

"What are you?" she asked the demon, ignoring her partner's words.

"A guardian," it replied, and within the space of a second, had thrown her off.

"Buffy!" Spike shouted, watching as she landed in a graceless heap over ten feet away. Though his brain wanted to run to her side, make sure she was all right, instinct dictated otherwise, whirling
him forward to grab the demon, hands squeezing around its head, wrenching it sideways in a furious pique. With a sickening crunch, its neck snapped, and he let it drop lifelessly to the floor, not even waiting to check on its condition before rushing to Buffy.

"You all right?" Spike asked, crouching to turn her hands over, his fingertips hovering over the abrasions speckling her knuckles.

"Yeah," she replied, and her gaze flickered over his shoulder at the heap by the water. "Is it dead?"

He didn't even bother looking back. "Goin' to say yeah," he said. "Important thing is, it didn't get a bite out of either of us this time."

The cool touch of his hands on hers should've calmed the heat that was suffusing her body now, that oh-so-familiar fire that always started to burn after a good fight, the one that she'd only learned to recognize for herself after hearing Faith's rather ineloquent observations. But it didn't. Instead, it only stoked the furnace, enflaming her cheeks as she watched his bowed head, her fingers itching to reach out and tangle in the platinum curls.

"Spike…" she murmured.

He could feel the heat coming off her in waves, the adrenaline rushing through her veins combining with her heartbeat to create a deafening concert that lifted his gaze, tunneled the world around him so that he saw only her. That's the way it always was. Just her. Just Buffy. His Buffy.

There was to be no more waiting. Both moved at the same time, mouths opening…coming together…tasting, and searching, and needing…two sets of arms encircling behind powerful backs to strengthen the contact. It was at once too much and not enough---more, Buffy thought greedily, please---alternating shuddering waves of fire with walls of ice across her flesh, hardening her nipples as she pulled him to her, until the whimper of want that escaped her throat was unavoidable.

They could've been anywhere…on top of the Hellmouth…in the back seat of a '58 Buick…curled up beside each other on the softest of feather beds. Neither cared. The only thing that mattered was that each had just thrown away the last of the bricks that made up the wall between them, crashing through the dust and mortar in a flush of heat and need that billowed in scarlet waves, entwining themselves around the other in a flurry of limbs and half-shed clothing until they lay on the earth, bare skin to bare skin, clinging and kissing as if it was the last time…or the first…

His lips danced down her neck, tongue trailing to the uppermost curve of her breast, lapping at the sweaty tang that flavored her skin. Buffy gasped, the breath locking in her lungs, and curled her nails through his hair, back arching as Spike closed around the nearest nipple, sucking it hard against the roof of his mouth before abandoning it for its mate. More more more, her head chanted, and considered saying it out loud when his lips returned, swallowing her down into another kiss as his nimble fingers slid downward, grasping her hips to slide her directly underneath him.

"Last chance, luv," he murmured, the length of his arousal resting amid her coarse curls. "This can still stop. Just say the word."

Slowly, Buffy shook her head. "Don't like stop," she whispered, gazing up into the vampire's eyes. "I like…please."

It was the only invitation he needed. Raising his hips, Spike's knee coaxed her own apart, sliding himself downward just enough so that the tip of his cock settled at her entrance, before inching its way inside, stretching and filling, drowning him in warmth that sent shudders down his spine. He
felt her muscles squeeze around him, drawing him deeper, and heard her breathing grow ragged, each breath a little shorter, each breath a little shallower.

When she felt their pelvises meet, she moaned, her eyes sliding shut as her head tilted to the side, waiting for his tongue to meet the contours of her neck, hungry for him to start sliding himself in and out, her muscles already tensing in anticipation. But the moment seemed to hang forever, and she felt instead his hand reach up to cup her cheek, guiding her back to face him directly.

"Luv, look at me."

Her lids obeyed, opening to gaze up at the aquiline features, the faintest of lines between his brows. "What is it?" she asked, her voice ragged.

His thumb traced her cheekbone as he seemed to contemplate his next words. "Don't turn away," he finally murmured. "I need you to look at me while we do this. I need you to see me." If she could say the word, so could he. "Please."

"I didn't…mean…" And she understood, without him having to say, and felt the guilt wash over her, mingling with the desire, as she realized what she'd inadvertently done to him by turning her head, such a simple response with such complex ramifications. It drove her forward, lifting her head to brush her lips over his mouth, while her legs curled around the power of his, crushing him to her as she began the rhythm for him.

A surprised growl rumbled from Spike's throat, but it took him only a moment to follow her lead, thrusting in and out, feeling her tight sheath clutch and squeeze with every stroke, milking the pleasure from his cock in hundreds of electric charges.

As she promised, she didn't look away, instead locking gazes, green to blue, sucking at his mouth in hungry kisses that demanded more and more with every pulse, while tiny nails raked at the flesh on his back, driving him deeper, summoning the demon within even as it called to the man. Growls interspersed with moans, some from her, some from him, until they became interchangeable… indistinguishable… one, guiding them to a pitch-fever crescendo that both had envisioned but neither truly expected.

Hers came first, a surge that pulled her from the swell of the moment and slammed her against the wall, shaking and spinning and shimmering and screaming, until the world swam before her eyes, forcing her to clutch the man above her in desperate hopes of not drowning, holding him even as the orgasm rocketed through his own flesh, his back bending impossibly as he gave one last thrust that threatened to split her in two, holding himself there for what seemed eternity before shuddering to a collapse onto her sweat-slick chest.

His mouth immediately sought her out, needing to taste, needing to feel, while his hands came up to sink into the golden tresses as he cupped her face. "God, Buffy," he murmured between kisses. "Love you so much…"

She wasn't even sure he realized what he'd said, but hearing it spoken out loud, knowing that she hadn't been wrong, sent tremors across her skin. He loved her. He'd said it. Should she say it back? Would he think it was just the heat of the moment? Or that she felt like she had to? So many questions, and how come she didn't know any of the answers? Spike always seemed to know, even if he did sometimes jump to the wrong conclusion, and…oh god, he said he loved her…

* * *

The winds were already in full force, whipping around him as he dragged the body across the
heather. Get it to the others; that was the only thought in Duncan's head, his eyes almost glowing as he pulled it along. The storm was invigorating, but it didn't help his control, the itch to change suddenly overpowering, knowing he couldn't, not just yet. Not safe. There would be time enough for that later.

It was almost hidden, the cave, and Duncan marveled that the Slayer had yet to find it on her many sojourns out onto the mountain. Maybe she's not as smart as I think she is, he thought, pulling the corpse to the safety of the cavern. Maybe it's just the vampire I have to worry about, after all.

The others were buried under the loose dirt, able to be dug up if necessary, but now, his attention was focused on the portly body before him. Ripping open Hornbrook's shirt, Duncan ignored the deep wounds he'd inflicted the previous day, the blood where it had congealed across the mottled skin looking black in the confines of the dark. Laying his hand over the man's chest, his fingers spread, digging into the flesh. Time to give up your secrets, old man, he thought, and closed his eyes against the images that began to flitter into his head…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Spike have killed a kelpie down in the
dungeon, making love for the first time afterward, while Giles has opted to return to
Dall Rath with Colin…

"Is it possible you could find *another* pothole in the road?" Giles asked irritably, his foot nudging
back the bag that had tipped against his leg.

Colin's knuckles were white on the steering wheel, his shoulders tense as he peered at the driving
rain through the windshield. "I'm doing the best I can," he said through gritted teeth. "And if you
didn't want to be chauffeured through a Highland storm, you should've stayed in town. It's
supposed to have passed by morning." He stole a quick glance at his colleague, taking a deep
breath before barreling forward. "Are you going to sit there and stew the rest of the way to the
castle? Or are you going to tell me what you're considering? Because frankly, if you still believe
that I'm not on your side---."

"I want to take a closer look at the control spell the Council wished to utilize." The effort of
keeping his thoughts to himself was exhausting, and in spite of his mood, he knew that having
another brain working over the possibilities could only benefit their side. Even if it was Colin.

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe they ever intended for Spike to survive the ritual."

It took a moment before Giles' implication sank in, but when it had, Colin's eyes widened, the
wheel jerking his hand to press the older Watcher uncomfortably into his door.

"Keep your bloody eyes on the road!" Giles barked. "I'd rather like to make it back in one piece,
not wrapped around a tree trunk."

"I realize that we're generally considered the 'good guys,'" Colin protested, "but I find it just as
difficult to believe that the Council would kill Spike as they would to de-chip him. How on earth
are you reaching this type of conclusion?"

"Because if I'm correct, I think I know why the spell failed for us. And I think Travers knows why
it failed for them."

"And do I have to guess at these suppositions, or are you going to tell me?"

Giles sighed. "When we attempted the spell, we saw the magic try and possess Buffy, Spike, and
Willow, correct?"

"Yes, but it was very obviously expelled from Miss Rosenberg. She even said she could feel it
getting pushed out."

"Exactly. She was meant to be the host, but for what? Celtic magic is based on the power of three,
the living, the dead, and the---."
"---the immortal," Colin finished, and frowned, his mind working as he mulled the details. "The core of Celtic power itself."

"And though she may argue to the contrary, Willow has a very powerful natural talent for magic. I would argue there wasn't room for the host within her. That's why the spell failed for us."

"So, the ritual will never work with her as an element," Colin mused. "We'll have to make the necessary adjustments for our next attempt. Frankly, I'm surprised Mr. Travers would've requested her presence if he knew that aspect."

"I would imagine they didn't anticipate just how strong Willow really is," Giles said. "But what concerns me is that we don't even know exactly how the control spell works. What happens after the three are possessed by the magic? Up to this point, we've been accepting that it's a passive process for the participants. What if it's not? Maybe the spell failed the first time because the dead component needs to be animated in order to complete its portion, and so the corpse was incinerated from the power of the magics that consumed it."

"And Spike's demon circumvents that issue."

"We know at least that within the confines of the spell itself, he doesn't have the same conflict that Willow does. But what about after?" Giles shook his head. "We know far too little about this spell to be so blindly trusting in it. And after all the subterfuge in their attempts to gain the harness and control of this passageway to the Otherworld, it wouldn't surprise me if the Council never expected Spike to walk away from this project. It would certainly explain their rather cavalier offer of de-chipping him."

They drove along in silence, bending around the curved lane as the storm raged around them. More than once, the younger Watcher sneaked a peek at his colleague, before finally gnawing at his lip. "Not that I…maybe we should…I mean, it's only Spike," he tried, quailing when Giles turned a hard gaze to stare at him.

"You are not suggesting what I think you're suggesting."

"Well, he is just a…vampire…" Colin's voice trailed away, only to reassert itself as he stared ahead. "You don't even like him," he qualified. "Why does it matter to you what happens to Spike?"

"It doesn't. But…it would be wrong." Even as he said it, Giles couldn't believe the words were coming out of his mouth. "Not that I believe we should remove the chip. But Spike is more than proving an…adequate ally. Punishing him for that is hardly the right message to send, don't you think?"

"And then there's Buffy to consider."

It was meant off-hand, stated merely as an adjunct to Giles' own explanation, but the inference narrowed the older Watcher's eyes. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asked quietly. "You are not actually pursuing this line of thought again."

"I'm not pursuing anything. I just believe that if something were to happen to Spike…Buffy might not be happy about it." Colin sighed. "And I'm changing the subject now. Go back to stewing."

He wanted to reach over and slap some sense into the younger man, force him to realize just how ridiculous he was being, but Giles refrained, instead removing his glasses to rub tiredly at his eyes. It was bad enough to consider that the Council had intended reneging on their deal with Spike; to contemplate something might be brewing between his Slayer and the bleached vampire was just
too much fodder for headaches, and now was the time to keep his mind clear.

He frowned as he felt the car slow to a stop in the lane, and looked up to see Colin leaning forward, eyes narrowed. "What is it?" Giles asked, slipping his spectacles back onto his nose.

"Is that Duncan in the road ahead?"

The older Watcher squinted into the rain. "I don't know how you can tell," he muttered. "I can see bugger all in this."

As if on cue, the hunched form of the cook appeared in the headlights, shielding his eyes to try and make out the car's occupants before breaking out into a smile and bolting for the driver's side. When Colin rolled down his window, Duncan poked in his head and said, "I don't suppose you'd let me spend the night at the castle?" he asked, his voice far too chipper for the strength of the surrounding storm. "I'm afraid I got a little side-tracked and at this rate, I'll never make it back into town."

"Of course," Colin agreed, and watched as their new passenger climbed into the back seat. "What about your aunt?"

Duncan's smile was wide. "She'll just have to learn that I'm not a child anymore," he replied, and wiped the wet from his brow.

* * *

"I'm tired of researching," Xander whined, closing the book in front of him as he pushed himself away from the table. "Let's go find Buffy and Spike, and help them with the recon instead."

"Um, how about no," said Willow, and pushed his book back toward him. "We still don't have any answers and they really don't need our kind of help."

"I'm going to bet they find something," the young man continued. "If our boy Dunc's keeping any secrets, Buffy'll find them. Or Spike. One of them." He seemed to be waiting for some sort of response, but getting none, took a deep breath and pressed on. "OK, I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I just gotta know if this is me playing all by my lonesome in this tree house or not."

"What is it, sweetie?" asked Anya.

"It's about Spike. Does anyone else think that he's a little…different since we got to Scotland?"

The two witches immediately stiffened, glancing at each other before affecting an air of ignorant nonchalance. "Seems like the s-s-same old Spike to me," Tara said, eyes glued to the book in her hands.

"Yeah," Willow agreed. "You know, grrr, can't wait 'til I can bite you, crankypants Spike. Not different. Definitely the same."

"I don't know." Xander's face was thoughtful. "I mean, he's still annoying, and I still occasionally get this irresistible urge to play Pin the Stake on the Vampire when he's around, but I'm thinking he's not really the same guy anymore. Makes me wonder if maybe it's got something to do with this new girlfriend of his."

"New…girlfriend?" The redhead had frozen, eyes like saucers, her voice a tremulous squeak. "What makes you think…he's got a…"
He shrugged. "He said so."

"He just...t-t-told you this?"

"Is it so hard to believe? Cupid's pretty much turned Spike into his own personal pincushion. The guy needed some friendly advice."

In spite of her anxious surprise, Willow's wide-eyed apprehension twitched into an amused grin. "And...you figure you're the best candidate to be playing Dr. Phil? Xander, I hate to break it to you, but your dating record's not much better than Spike's."

"Hey!"

The redhead smiled apologetically at Anya. "No offense."

"See, and my take on the sitch is I'm the perfect guy to help a vamp out of a tough spot. Or have you all forgotten that I'm catnip for the demon set?" He ticked them off on his fingers. "There's been Bug Lady. Mummy Girl. Anya's only recently left the demon fold. And let's not forget Miss Cordelia Chase. If anyone has demon girlfriend experience, it's Alexander Lavelle Harris."

Both witches visibly relaxed. He didn't really know. Not when he thought...'So, Spike's new girlfriend is a demon?' Willow asked.

"Well, yeah, what else would she be? Just..." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "...don't go telling Buffy, OK? The guy's already having a hard time trying to figure out how to tell this girl he loves her. The last thing he needs is the Slayer busting his fangs because she's not having any luck in the slaying department. You know how much the Buffster likes to take her frustrations out on Spike."

"Don't worry." Their smiles were wide. "His secret is safe with us."

* * *

It was as if a thousand butterflies were trapped just under her skin, and had simultaneously decided that exact moment to take flight, beating their gossamer wings in a flurry to escape the confines of her flesh, only to be netted in frustration, fluttering instead against Spike's skin in a riot of feather kisses. As he rolled himself to the side, propping himself up on his elbow while his other hand trailed down between the sweaty slickness of her breasts, he watched as she followed him, her eyes somehow made more translucent in the dim cavern light, and wondered just what Slayer thoughts could be teeming behind the hazel to create the illusion of more than he hoped to imagine.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" Spike murmured, letting his fingers curl under the weight of her breast.

Wordlessly, she nodded. "Something about...climes, right?" she breathed.

It took him a moment before realizing she'd actually been listening to the poetry on the mountain, Byron's words lingering in her memory like the aftertaste of a fine wine, and the sense of satisfaction that began to tickle in his gut warmed him, lifting the corner of his mouth into a smile. "But better," Spike said, and lowered his lips to hers in a gentle kiss. "Much better."

When he pulled away, she was still watching him, and he lay, transfixed, as she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "I don't...suppose..." she started, then blushed, finally ducking her gaze.

"What?"
Buffy rolled onto her side, stretching out her legs to match his. "I'm not really…tired," she said.

He caught the inference and held it to his chest, entranced by this sudden shyness on her part, wondering what else she would do yet tonight to surprise him. "Vampire constitution, pet," he murmured. "All you have to do is say the word and I'm there." His lips quirked. "Or even ahead of you. That's been known to happen on the odd occasion."

Her brows shot immediately up. "That sounds like a challenge." Her hand began dancing over his chest, one fingernail grazing the tip of a nipple, tweaking it to a hardness that matched her own. "You're not really daring the Slayer here, are you?"

His cock twitched against her hip, hardening within seconds at the promise behind her words. "Depends." A flash of gold glittered behind the azure. "You think you've got something to prove?"

In a flash, she had pressed him back onto the floor, and Spike felt the grit rasp across his shoulder blades, just as the silk of her fingertips stroked the outline of his chest. The shine in her eyes was gone now, replaced with darkened irises that gleamed in hunger, and the anticipation of what she was going to do spurred him to lift himself onto his elbows. "That's not the best you've got to offer, is it…Slayer?" he taunted, and was immediately rewarded by a shove back into the earth, her thighs straddling his hips, slick against hard as she leaned forward, her hair dragging over his cheek.

"I haven't even started," Buffy whispered, and licked upwards at his chin, catching his mouth with hers in a fevered kiss as her fingers dug into his flesh.

More than anything, he wanted to wrap himself around her, hold her close as their tongues battled, but Spike knew the rules to this little game, had played it out in his head countless times before he'd ever considered it could even become reality. The dance of who really was in control. Letting her lead until it was his turn. Then, showing her that it wasn't about winning. It was about the dance itself. Executing the steps as one. His. Hers. Together.

So he clung to the ground, feeling her lips leave his and begin their wet descent down his neck. And he waited.

He tasted of clean leather, and with each lap against his skin, Buffy felt the prickles in her mouth salivate, coating her in moisture as she licked a duet across his chest...down the slight hollow of his abdomen...into the muscled creases of the juncture of his thighs. Each lethal sinew seemed to hum beneath her touch, and when she heard his groan as she nipped at his hip, she couldn't repress the chuckle of delight that bubbled from her own throat. "Told you not to dare me," she said, wrapping her hand around his erection as her tongue darted out to trace around its head.

Gritting his teeth, Spike's eyes squeezed shut as Buffy replaced the warmth of her fingers with the heat of her mouth, sliding down the length of his cock as she swallowed him whole before inching her way back up again. Not yet, he warned himself. Not bloody yet. But when her nails raked along his inner thigh, he bucked, forcing himself even further down her throat, unable to constrain the instinct to thrust even as she lifted herself away to gaze up at him in amusement.

"Don't tell me you like that," she teased. She lowered her head back down to allow her tongue to skate along the velvety underside of his arousal. "I wasn't even trying that hard."

This was his cue, and he grabbed it with both hands, twisting out from beneath to knock her backwards, pinning her down just as effectively as she had him only moments earlier. His eyes drank in hers, and Spike smiled. "My turn."

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but as she felt him pass by the curve of her breasts to
continue downward across her stomach, Buffy stiffened, knees lifting as she instinctively curled to protect herself. "Spike!" she squealed. "What're you doing?"

"Way I figure it, turnabout's fair play," he drawled, and gently pushed at her legs, forcing them to straighten even as he spread them apart.

"But I…this is…I've never…" She flushed, suddenly embarrassed, and turned from the quizzical tilt of his blond head.

"Lemme guess. Not Soldier Boy's thing?"

Buffy shook her head. "He said…he'd tried it once, but…" God, this was awkward. "…it didn't really do anything for him," she finished.

"Always knew something was off with Whitebread." Spike slid himself up so that he could wrap his arms around her, pulling her against him as his mouth caressed her ear. "If you don't want me to, I'll stop," he said. "But gotta tell you, pet…just the smell of you is drowning me here. I can taste you already…" His hand slithered across her hip to her inner thigh, one finger dipping into the moisture it found, causing her to gasp as he pulled it away. "Do you have any idea just how delectable you really are?"

She watched in mute fascination as he licked at the juices clinging to his finger, holding her breath as it returned to the font between her legs. "You…like it?" she asked. "It's not…"

Spike chuckled. "Most definitely not," he affirmed. "Trust me?"

"Of course."

Though the light in her eyes would've been the only impetus he needed, hearing her say the words lifted the corner of his mouth, kissing her tenderly before beginning the inexorable slide back down her body, allowing his tongue to wander this time…a cool flick across her hardened nipple before tracing the pink aureola…tasting the clean line of drying sweat in her navel as he felt the tremors begin vibrating through her skin…his hands pressing her thighs into the ground as he positioned himself between her legs, watching the staccato of her body's rhythms play across her limbs.

He seemed to wait forever, but as she felt those cool fingers part her coarse curls, Buffy's eyes fluttered shut, the heady sensations of his strength causing the world to tilt around her. The first glide of his mouth along the inner curve of her labia caused her hips to twist, forcing him to tighten his grip as he held her firm. I'm going to come before he even touches me again, she thought erratically, but when she felt his tongue circle her clit, catching it between his teeth, the jolt it sent up her spine rooted her in place, ripping the guttural cry from her lips as her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer…and deeper.

There was no mistaking her pleasure, and as he felt the smooth skin of her thighs against his cheek, Spike couldn't help the growl of satisfaction that rumbled from his throat. Though he had always known it could be this good, it was having the proof trembling beneath his touch, hearing her call out his name in rasps that scraped down his spine in virulent tremors, that made each second of waiting more than worth it. She was his now, whether she knew it or not. And if he had to fight every remaining moment of his undead life to keep her, Spike was prepared. Because he couldn't lose her. Not now. Not ever.

Her orgasm was a flood through both of their bodies, her legs wrapped around his shoulders, locking him in place as the undulations ricocheted through Buffy's muscles in a tornado. At the first sign of ease within her legs, however, Spike slid up, guiding himself inside before she'd
finished, thrusting in a furious rhythm as he clung to her tiny frame. His own climax was only
seconds away as she squeezed around his cock, and as he came, he buried his face in her neck, the
demon within struggling to emerge even as he fought to keep it under his control.

"Spike…" she whispered, arms clinging to his broad back, her mouth hot against his ear. "Say it."

And he understood then, remembered his words as they'd tumbled from his lips before, and knew
why her body had betrayed her earlier thoughts with its racing pulse and butterfly quivering. As
they slid over the crest of their lovemaking, Spike lifted his head, kissing the corner of her mouth,
and felt her gaze remain steady on his face. "I love you, Buffy," he said softly, and saw her visibly
soften, her breath escaping in a delicate exhalation from the hold she'd been keeping it.

That was it. Asking him to repeat his earlier declaration had been one of the hardest things Buffy
had ever had to do, and even then, she hadn't been certain he would. It could've been just the heat
of the moment, words only tossed about in the flurry of fire that had consumed them both. He
could've feigned ignorance, done almost anything else if he hadn't really meant it. But he hadn't.
And she'd seen the look in his eyes this time. He believed. And he loved her.

* * *

The intruders seemed to take an eternity to get dressed, and then even longer to leave, gathering
their things while they so studiously ignored the dead body on the shore. It was only when the
cavern returned to its natural light did he break his head free of the water, immediately swiveling to
gaze upon the shadowed corpse as he began the swim to the bank. This was a risk of being a
guardian, but facing the death of his colleague was difficult. It wasn't just that it meant the gate to
the Otherworld could now not be completely sealed without other forms of intervention; this was a
friend, and as such…he would mourn.

His black hands curled around the kelpie's human form, carrying it back toward the water. He
didn't believe the man and woman would be back tonight; their departure announced clearly that
they believed the cavern was now clear. This meant it would be safe to leave his post long enough
for him to return his friend's body to their home. And to pray that the third returned quickly with
the harness…
Behold the Hour, the Boat Arrive

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Colin and Giles have picked up a wet Duncan to bring him back to Dall Rath, while Spike has finally admitted to Buffy that he's in love with her…

Each step closer to the great hall was slower than the one before. It wasn't conscious; neither of them was deliberately delaying their entrance. But every foot, every inch, found Buffy and Spike loosening their grips, skin sliding against skin as palms separated, knuckles uncurled, until by the time they stood before the door, it couldn't even be called holding hands. Fingertip to fingertip, they hesitated, unwilling to cross the threshold and shatter the spell that bound them.

"Y'know, Watcher Junior's goin' to make us pull an allnighter lookin' for info on this guardian, don't you?" His voice was low, and though he strove for neutrality, anything to make the pretending easier, Spike's arm tremored as he stepped aside, widening the chasm between them even as his body screamed to pull the young blonde close. Stupid bloody promise to wait.

"It won't be much longer."

He shrugged. "Well, now that we've got something specific, Red and Rupes will probably find---."

"I didn't mean that." She looked up at him, eyes apologetic. "I meant us. Telling the gang. I don't…" Buffy's gaze returned to the closed door. "I hate this as much as you do."

Cocking his head to try and catch her eyes, Spike's lips lifted in a half-smile that softened his face. "So let's come clean," he offered. It's what he wanted; it's what he wanted to believe she wanted. She knew how he felt now and though Buffy had yet to say the words herself, he couldn't help but hope that the depth of his feelings might somehow be mirrored within her. "The witches already know. That's half the battle right there."

"No. They're the easy ones. We're fighting testosterone here. Xander and Giles are the ones we have to win." She hated doing this to him. Everything she had asked for---the waiting, the silence---Spike was doing without question, all because he loved her. Yet, she couldn't find the courage to tell the other men in her life about their relationship. What a good girlfriend I make, Buffy thought sarcastically, mentally shaking her head.

Taking a deep breath, the Slayer's hand curled around the doorknob. "Ready to face the lion den?" she said softly.

"The sooner we get crackin' on connecting Duncan to that beastie in the dungeon, the happier I'm goin' to be."

She stopped, swiveling her head to stare up at him in confusion. "What're you talking about?" she asked. "What does the one have to do with the other?"

His brows lifted. "You're kidding, right?" Spike waited for her to nod, but was met only with the blankness of her hazel stare. "C'mon, the bloody thing pulled the same trick on you that that
bastard chef does. That can't be a coincidence."

"I really wish I knew what your problem with Duncan was," Buffy said, shaking her head. "Because coming up with these imaginary relationships between him and the kelpie downstairs makes absolutely no sense to me."

His eyes searched hers, looking for something—anything—that might indicate she was teasing. "You really…don't see it, do you?" he finally commented. "That thing talked you out of killing it, Buffy. You remember that, right?"

"I remember giving it a chance to explain itself. Huge difference, if you ask me."

"No, you let it distract you. It turned into a human, and you all but turned into Ulysses, minus the boat lashing." Grabbing her shoulder, Spike spun Buffy so that he could face her, full on. "Don't you see? I'll lay odds it's part and parcel of the whole kelpie mystique. Probably how the whole luring thing works."

"Spike." Her voice was quiet. "I thought we talked about this. There is no reason for you to be jealous of Duncan. Making up these stories—."

"This isn't about—." His nostrils flared as the vampire felt the ire begin burning in his throat, and he let her go, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. "OK. So, maybe I don't like the pillock. But this isn't about that. This is about sleeping with the enemy and not even realizing he's in the same bed with you."

"Not an analogy you want to be using when you're the one I'm sleeping with."

"I'm just saying—."

"And I'm saying you're wrong." There was no anger in her voice, and her gaze was calm as she outlined her reasoning. "Giles has met Duncan's aunt. The man has roots here. He has not once done anything that could be regarded as dangerous, or threatening, or even slightly scary. There is no way he has anything to do with our resident kelpies. The next was joking, though the words were serious. "And if you don't drop this, I'm going to drop you, got it?"

Spike's lips thinned. "Got it," he said tightly. She didn't see it. Whatever power Duncan was exerting over Buffy and the other girls, it was blinding them to what was so obvious to him and Xander, and trying to bring it to her attention was only going to piss her off. And the thing that had happened when the cook had left? No way could he bring that up without making himself look like a complete git. He was going to have to go about this one on his own.

Her hand returned to the doorknob. "Can we do this now?" she asked. On his nod, she smiled and pushed her way into the great hall.

"Hey, gu—." The greeting choked in her throat as she walked into the nearly empty room, her gaze automatically settling on the lone set of hunched shoulders at the table.

Spike frowned as he stepped beside her. "Where'd they all go?" he asked, scanning the corners of the great hall. "It's not that late, is it?"

"I don't know." Buffy turned back into the entrance. "You stay here. I'm going to see if I can round everyone up."

He grabbed her arm, stopping her from leaving. "How did I pull Xander-sitting duty again?" he demanded. "The boy's sleeping. He hardly needs me to watch him breathe in and out."
She didn't even bother replying. With a roll of her eyes, she had pulled herself free and was out the door, leaving Spike alone to glare at the young man's stooped back.

It took him only a moment to decide. If Buffy wasn't going to listen to him, the vamp knew that at least Harris would. He just needed to be awake to actually hear what had happened. In three long strides, he had crossed the distance to the table, his boot deliberately knocking the chair leg as he walked behind the sleeping Scooby to the adjacent seat.

Xander bolted upright. "I got the bleach, Mom!" he cried out, his brown eyes wide.

"Actually," Spike said, settling himself into the chair and propping his feet up on the table, "you never did get that straight."

"Oh, because you're the laundry guru." Rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands, the brunette looked around in confusion. "Where'd everybody go?"

"Buffy's bringing 'em around to go over what we found out."

He immediately perked up. "You found something on Duncan?" he asked. "Please tell me we get to kick him to the curb and that I get to wear steel-toed boots to do it."

"Not exactly." Quickly, he relayed the events from the dungeon, carefully editing out any references to what happened between him and Buffy, and watched as Xander's face grew darker and darker. "So the way I see it," Spike finished, "is we have to get our proof first if we want Buffy to believe us about him."

"Do you have any ideas about that?"

He didn't even bother hiding his smirk. "If I'm right about the wanker---and I know I am---I can go one on one with him without settin' off the chip."

Xander was quiet. God, he hated to admit he really loved the idea of Spike pummeling Duncan into the ground, the image of the dark man's bloody nose vivid in his imagination, but at the same time… "What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not."

"But what if you are?"

"And I say, I'm not." His feet came down as he leaned forward, blue eyes hard. "If you're goin' to whinge about it, I'll go it on my own, Harris. But I'm doin' this, whether you like it or not."

"Buffy'll kill you if you're wrong."

He thought about that for a second, remembering her warning in the hall. "Maybe," Spike admitted. "But if I'm right---."

"I thought you said you were sure."

His exhalation was for show only, his mounting frustration driving him to his feet, knocking the chair beneath him back. "Will you just bloody make up your mind?" he barked. "I am sure, so stop playing semantics and just let me know if you're in or out here, or god help me, I'm going to take that soddin' stick of yours---."

"I'm in, I'm in." Xander sat up. "What's the plan?"
"Thought that was clear. I'm going to hit the bloke and if I come out of it free and clear, we go to the Slayer. But you're goin' to have to be a witness to it 'cause if someone doesn't back me up, she's not goin' to believe a word that comes out of my mouth about that blighter." He stopped in mid-pace, heavy brows suddenly furrowing. "Course, he's gone for the night so we'll just have to wait until mornin' to..."

His voice trailed off as the door to the great hall opened, and the Watchers and Duncan entered, each in varying degrees of saturation from the rain outside. As his jaw tensed, the vampire's gaze locked on the dark figure of the cook, watching as he shook the water from his coat, casually ignoring the pair they'd walked in on. "Or maybe not," Spike muttered.

"Where's Buffy?" asked Giles, stepping up to the table.

"Getting Red and the others." His platinum head jerked toward the door. "Thought he'd gone home for the night."

"I'm afraid I didn't walk quickly enough," Duncan said. "When they came across me in the road, Mr. Sadler was kind enough to bring me back here to escape further soaking from the storm."

"Is this a party?" Buffy was smiling when the men parted to see her standing in the doorway, the other girls hanging behind her. "How come we weren't invited?"

"A research party," Giles clarified. "And your presence is most definitely required. Where are the texts regarding our..." He glanced at Duncan before returning to his charge. "...preparations?" he asked, hedging his choice of words.

"We put them away when we went to bed," Willow explained.

"And thank you so much for letting me know you were going," Xander said. "You didn't have to leave me Rip Van Winkling in the dining room, you know."

"You looked too peaceful to wake up," Anya said.

"And Buffy and Spike weren't around to carry you upstairs," offered Tara.

"Still would've been nice to be---."

"The books?" Giles prompted. He watched as Willow scurried to the box in the corner and began rummaging around, leaving the remaining females to take their places at the table.

Spike's eyes narrowed as Duncan approached, hanging back slightly as he waited for the girls to seat themselves, then stepping forward to just behind Buffy. When the cook's hand came down to rest on the chairback, the vamp gritted his teeth as he saw him deliberately position his fingers so that they were brushing against her shoulder, so lightly Spike was certain she wasn't even aware of the contact but unquestionably there. So lost was he in the anger that was flaring inside him, he missed the first part of what the other Englishman was saying.

"...shouldn't have been so short with you."

Spike blinked. The wanker was talking to him. "What was that?" he asked.

"Earlier. When I was leaving." Duncan was smiling, his eyes sheepish. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology for my behavior, Spike. I really don't know what came over me." He laughed, edging himself closer to the blond vampire, only to strengthen the contact of his fingers on Buffy's shoulder. "It must've been the storm. All that electricity in the air is bound to short circuit
something in the brain occasionally."

Unexpected. That was the only word for it. Out of the blue, unanticipated, and such a total line of bullshit, Spike was having problems looking at the guy with a straight face. Apologizing? They both knew the mutual threats had been more than intended, yet here he was, playing up with the so sorry routine, and there wasn't a damn thing the vamp could do about it. Not with that expectant smile of "I told you so" on Buffy's face. And especially not for as long as he was pulling that charmed act of his on the girls in the gang.

"Yeah," Spike drawled, squaring his shoulders as he thrust his hands into his pockets. His eyes glittered as he stared at the other man, the set of his jaw firm. No way was he going to let Duncan think he'd won, that he for a second bought the little apology act. But appearances still had to dictate otherwise. "Know a little myself about things messin' with your head. You should be careful. Can get a nasty headache if you're not paying attention."

The warning didn't go unnoticed, and the cook's mouth tightened in its smile. "Still," he said slowly, "it was hardly necessary for me to respond to you in such a fashion. Not when there are more…appropriate ways of expressing one's feelings. And I am most sincerely sorry that I allowed you to see me acting in such a way." His smile faded as he looked around the group. "I am in dire need of some refreshment," he said, changing the subject. "So I'm going to put the kettle on for some tea. Would any of you care for some?"

"That would be nice," Giles murmured, and gave him an absent wave of dismissal. "Thank you."

They waited until Duncan had left the room before speaking again. "I thought you were staying in town tonight," Buffy said to her Watcher.

"I've had some…revelations. I want to look at the control spell some more."

"But why? We're not even doing it, are we? I thought we were on the closing train here."

"We are, but Colin and I may have figured out why it went wrong. We want to investigate further."

Spike stepped forward. "Tell him about the dungeon, Slayer."

Giles frowned. "The…dungeon? Did something happen while I was out?"

"Oh, yeah." She rose to her feet. "And this one, you gotta see for yourself."

* * *

They stood along the bank of the stream, their flashlights cutting and crossing across the bare ground. "I'm telling you, it was right here," Buffy argued.

"And you're sure it was dead?" Giles asked. "It couldn't have stood up and walked away of its own accord?"

"You don't think I can't tell a fresh kill when it's right in front of me?" Spike said. "I broke its neck. It wasn't walking away from anything."

"Well, it's not here now, that much is certain," Colin commented. "It appears we have another mystery to puzzle out tonight."

Slayer and vampire exchanged a quick look before she turned to face the two Watchers. "Listen," she said, "about the research---."
"You're not getting out of it," Giles pre-empted. "We need all the eyes we can manage right now."

"Doesn't killing our resident kelpie count for anything? I should earn extra get-out-of-research free cards for that one."

"If you're going to play that kind of game, technically Spike is the one who has earned the right to have an early night," her mentor countered. He glared at the vampire when he saw him brighten. "Not that that's going to happen, either," he added. "You two are the only ones who've had proper looks at both the kelpies and the harness. And now that there's this guardian business, I'm not about to allow either of you to shirk your responsibilities to the team by retiring early."

Their shoulders were slumped as they began trudging back to the tunnel, and Buffy kicked at some loose grit under her shoe. "Stupid research," she muttered.

Colin looked up at the older Englishman in amazement. "How on earth did you manage that?" he asked. "She's going to do it. I've been wondering ever since we arrived how to get the Slayer to pay any attention to my instructions."

"It's the law of averages," Giles explained as they followed after the pair. "Say something often enough, and eventually, she'll actually listen to you."

* * *

He blew gently at the tea, cooling it to tepid temperatures that would make it bearable to drink. Though his clothing still clung to his frame in a warming damp, Duncan was oblivious to the sensations, a lifetime spent in and out of the water dulling what discomfort getting caught in the rain might have provided. Instead, his concentration was focused on the voices on the other side of the closed door, a mingling of tenors that believed themselves to be hushed enough for privacy but were as clear to him as if he'd been sitting there at the same table with them. All it took was a matter of listening.

Another guardian was dead, but they had yet to discover that there were three, their confusion over the missing body sparking arguments between the Slayer and her mentors as they fought to find the answers within their books. He didn't doubt they would; someone, somewhere, had surely documented the existence of the Otherworld guardians, and with the resources this group seemed capable of commanding, it was most likely in one of the many texts they were now searching. But closing the pathway to his home now required either time for two more guardians to be placed, thus completing the triumvirate necessary to protect it, or the completion of the spell Duncan had provided the visitors. And he wasn't certain any longer that he wanted them to actually do it.

It was that vampire's fault. He felt his muscles tense, lips pursing as his control over his form tightened in his pique, and felt the surge of excitement course through him at the anticipation of an added player in the game. He liked the young people, especially that Slayer, even if she wasn't necessarily the smartest one of the bunch, but she was female and easily led, his initial interest in her capabilities waning as each day passed and she continued to be oblivious to what was right in front of her face. Power she commanded in spades, and as thrilling as that had been to touch, it was insignificant when it came to the bigger picture.

No, his true opponent was Spike, him of the capricious moods and possessive nature toward the humans surrounding him. He was the only one of the group to challenge him, noticing the lures, the touching, making the playing of the Slayer all that much more delicious because Duncan knew she would never believe anyone else while he could exert his control, forcing Spike to watch in impotence and growing frustration. Though he didn't care for being threatened—especially when it was done not-so-subtly as the vampire had done earlier—his desire to dole out the deserved
comeuppance to the other demon was quelling any instincts to just take the harness and run, driving him to return to the castle and run the risk of the exposure, just on the possibility of showing Spike that he wasn't the cock of the walk as he imagined. Just on the possibility of winning.

He could be beaten. And Duncan could do it. With the aid of the information he had gleaned from Hornbrook, of course.

* * *

His hand hovered over the phone, picking it up only to replace it back into its cradle with a plastic thud. I don't want to do this, he thought, long fingers worrying his hair. This gets me back in, and that's not who I am anymore. It's not.

But the suspicion was gnawing at his insides, depriving him of sleep, creating black nightmares inside his head as he imagined the monster's hands on his Buffy. It was the only reason he was even standing there debating it, but the longer he stood, the more he knew how fruitless it was. He would make the call and ask. He had to. He couldn't just pretend he hadn't heard. Not when it was Spike. And definitely not when it was Buffy.

There was only a moment before he heard the familiar voice on the other end of the line. "I need a favor," Riley said, as his hand tightened around the phone.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Scoobies are researching the guardian that Spike killed, while Giles is researching the control spell the Council wished them to use.

Though the pictures were spread out on the desk before him, Quentin Travers didn’t see them, his eyes fixed on a spot on the opposite wall as he leaned heavily back in his chair. Examining photographs of Peg Calvock wasn’t going to tell him why Hornbrook hadn’t checked in the past two days, nor would it explain why they were in turn unable to contact him. It was as if the man had fallen off the face of the planet, and that worried the head of the Council more than he was willing to admit to his colleagues. At this stage of the project, each and every complication jeopardized what they had been working toward these past few months, and anomalies, whether a disappearance or merely a lag in protocol, could not bode well for their success.

“We can always bring in Mr. Sadler,” said the woman who sat across from him. “He’s proving resourceful, and I know he’s eager for more responsibilities within the Council.”

“No.” Quentin’s voice was quiet, but firm, affording no one in the room opportunity to argue with him. “I don’t believe we can entirely trust him with this just yet. He’s young, and easily influenced. If Rupert begins to suspect that there is a risk to his Slayer, young Colin might be swayed to act outside of the Council’s best interests.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid we’ll just have to sit and wait a while longer. Perhaps those storms we heard mention of knocked out power or something. It’s not a highly populated area. It could just be a temporary loss of communication.”

“What about the body of the witch?”

Slowly, Quentin straightened in his seat and began collating the pictures, stacking them into an even pile before returning them to the file folder. “Send it back for burial,” he instructed. “We’ve learned all that we can from it for now.”

He waited for the others to file out of the room before rising to his feet, sighing heavily as he did so. Though he would never confess it to the others, Travers was beginning to wonder if acquiring the harness was really worth all the effort the Council was extending. Hornbrook had claimed getting Spike to agree to the arrangement had been simple, and the vampire’s eagerness to be rid of the chip had stopped him from questioning their motivation in offering such a deal in the first place. It was times like this Quentin was glad of Spike’s impulsive nature; if he had given it the amount of thought such an offer should’ve warranted, the demon would surely have realized what a silly proposition it was to make in the first place. Nothing prevented either side from honoring their end of the bargain, and though it was that sort of thinking that he was counting on, Travers was slightly disappointed that Spike had accepted their proposal without doubting their sincerity for even a moment. Perhaps the vampire was not as crafty as they had always been led to believe. He just hoped it didn’t impede his attempt to fetch the harness for them.

Which only brought him back to his worry about the missing Watcher. In spite of his arguments to the contrary, Hornbrook was one of his top men, and his failure to report in was unusual to say the least. The more he thought about it, the more he believed in the worst, and without a man on the inside, there was no way they could continue the project to its completion. Travers sighed, and
turned back to his desk, pressing the intercom on his phone. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said, resigned. “Get me Colin Sadler.”

* * *

Colin had been right. Now that it was morning, the storm was gone, with sunshine streaming in through the small windows to illuminate the great hall in morning brightness. As the Watchers had promised, the night had been spent in research hell, and the gang was just now beginning to feel the repercussions.

Almost everyone was asleep. Anya and Xander both sat at the table, their heads resting on the books in front of them, while Tara had curled up in the chair next to the fireplace. When Giles and Colin had started nodding off around dawn, Buffy had ordered them to go upstairs and rest, knowing that the better they slept, the more useful they would be later on. In his chair in the corner, Spike was dozing off and on, every once in a while his eyes fluttering open to gaze at her across the room before drifting back closed again, almost as if he was just checking to make sure she was still there. Even thinking of it now made Buffy smile.

She and Willow were the only two still awake, but how long that was going to last, the Slayer had no idea. Though it was only ten in the morning, she was exhausted, a night of reading tiny text and arguing with Giles giving them little but shortened tempers and tired eyes. She wasn’t even sure anymore what exactly they were looking for; after so many books on Celtic lore, Buffy was beginning to believe that maybe it was just all the trick of fairies, and that they should just go home and leave well enough alone. Let Tinkerbell have her day in the sun without them. And to top it all off, everyone was likely to end up sleeping through the day as a result of their wasted allnighter. Another twenty-four hours shot to hell.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Duncan came strolling out, a tray with steaming cups on it in his hands. His eyes were bright, and he was whistling under his breath; of everyone in the castle, he appeared to be the only occupant to have slept soundly the previous night.

He crossed immediately to Buffy and handed her a cup. “Not that I think you should be staying up,” he chastised as she sipped at the hot tea. “Surely you should be getting some sleep. Whatever it is you’re looking for can wait on that, can’t it?”

As the heat seeped into her fingers surrounding the ceramic mug, she regarded him with steady eyes as he stepped to Willow’s side. “It’s OK,” she said. “We’re used to this kind of thing.”

“Yeah,” agreed the witch. “Although usually we’ve got Xander awake and ready to do a donut run right about now.”

Duncan brightened. “Would you like some pastries?” he asked. “It’s actually turning into quite a beautiful morning. I could walk into town and get something from the bakery. Or if you’d rather not wait, I could prepare something here. Aunt Fiona’s scone recipe—.”

Willow was waving her hand, trying to get him to stop talking. “I wasn’t fishing for goodies,” she interrupted. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother—.”

“No, don’t, really,” Buffy said. “We’re probably not going to last much longer anyway.”

“Maybe for when you wake up then.” He began to turn away, and hesitated, his dark eyes contemplative as he slowly swiveled back. “I hate to seem pushy,” he said, “but I must say, for
being on holiday, it really seems as if you’re working awfully hard.”

The young witch rolled her eyes. “If this is a holiday, my name’s Little Bo Peep,” she said.

Buffy giggled. “And I’m Little Miss Muffet,” she added.

“And Xander’s Georgie Porgie---.”

“And Anya’s gotta be Little Bunny Foo Foo---.”

“And Spike’s Wee Willie Winkie---.”

Buffy smiled wickedly. “Not so wee,” she said suggestively, looking pointedly over at the sleeping vampire before turning back to her friend. “More like Huge Willie Winkie.” The pair of girls burst out into a fresh round of giggles, gulping at the air as they laughed at their own silliness.

“OK,” Willow finally said. “Maybe we’re a little tired.”

“What were we saying?” Buffy asked Duncan.

He smiled in return. “You weren’t. I was. I just think that if you really must work so hard, you should reward yourself now and again with a night out. There’s a nice little pub in town. Darts, a snooker table---.”

“Snooker?” Buffy wrinkled her nose in confusion. “What’s that?”

“It’s like billiards,” he explained. “Only harder. And on a bigger table. There’s no live entertainment, but it does have a jukebox with not too outdated music in it. You should really consider taking tonight off and paying it a visit. I think the break would do you good.”

The Slayer shook her head. “Giles would never let us get away with that,” she said. “Too much research to get done.”

Duncan’s eyes twinkled in wicked glee. “So don’t tell him,” he said. “You’re certainly over the age of consent and he’s not your father, is he?”

“It would be nice to do the whole pub thing before we go back to Sunnydale,” Willow said to Buffy. “And it’s not like anything…special needs to happen tonight anyway.”

“We can’t,” the other girl said. “None of us drive, remember? We’d have to walk there and back.”

Duncan glanced over at the sleeping form of the vampire in the corner. “Your friend Spike is English,” he said. “Surely he can drive for you.”

Both girls turned to look at the blond. “It’s not like it would be hard to talk him into sneaking around behind Giles’ back,” Buffy said slowly, the rationalization paving the way for Willow to start planning.

“One of us will have to steal a set of keys.”

“And we’ll have to do something to make sure that Giles and Colin go to bed early so they don’t catch us on the way out.”

“If you want,” Duncan offered, “I could ensure that tea is overly large. Nothing like a full stomach to coax a man into bed.”
“You would do that?” Buffy’s eyes were wide in surprise.

“Of course. It’s not like I don’t have to cook it anyway.” He glanced at the two men in the room before taking a conspiratorial step toward the girls. “I’d only ask one thing,” he said.


“Would it be possible not to say anything about this being my idea?” His embarrassed smile was accentuated by his furtive looks at Xander and Spike. “I’m afraid your two male friends don’t particularly care for me. If they were to find out I suggested it, they’d probably say no to going, just on the principle of the idea. And I’d hate for you not to get your night out on my account.”

“What’re you talking about?” the witch said. “The guys don’t---.”

“Actually, Will,” Buffy interrupted, leaning forward so that her already low voice wouldn’t travel any further than necessary. “He’s got a point.” Her tired gaze up at the cook was apologetic. “I told Spike he was whacked, but he won’t listen to me.”

Duncan’s answering grin sent a twinkle to his eye. “Perhaps you’re not using the right type of persuasion,” he teased and laughed out loud at the sudden astonishment in her face. “He’s quite taken with you, you know. Which is why I’m sure he doesn’t care for me in the slightest. Anyone else who might find you attractive is automatically the enemy.”

“How’d you…is it really that…?” Then it dawned on her what he’d actually said, and Buffy colored. No mistake about it this time; he was flirting with her. And though it wasn’t unpleasant, it was unexpected. Except…was it really? Hadn’t Spike been saying all along that Duncan was playing her? But that was crazy. He was just a nice guy, paying her a compliment. Nothing sneaky or evil about that.

“Why don’t I get started on those scones?” Duncan said, gathering their cups before heading to the kitchen. “And whatever you decide, just let me know. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

When he was gone, Buffy leaned across the table toward Willow. “What do you think of Duncan?” she whispered. “Was he just flirting with me?”

“Well, yeah, he flirts with all of us. I think it’s his thing. You should hear him and Anya go at it---.”

“But do you like him?” A tiny line appeared in the Slayer’s brow as she glanced at the closed kitchen door. “I mean, does he seem all right to you?”

The witch’s smile was wide. “More than all right. If I wasn’t gay, I know I’d be wanting a piece of Duncan pie.”

Buffy’s jaw dropped. “Will!”

“What? He’s cute, he’s smart, and he can cook. What’s not to like about that?”

“Spike’s got this crazy theory that Duncan is actually a kelpie in disguise. He’s convinced he’s some kind of threat to me and you guys.” She bit her lip. “I’m beginning to wonder if he might not have a point.”

“Oh, because Spike’s not the jealous type at all,” Willow commented, rolling her eyes as she settled back into her chair.
“You think that’s what it is? He’s just jealous?”

“Buffy, I know that’s what it is. This thing between the two of you, it’s still really, really fresh, and the fact that you still haven’t told Giles or Xander about it? Probably not instilling a huge sense of confidence in him.” She shook her head. “Duncan just knows how to talk to girls, put them at ease. Other guys get intimidated by that. Spike’s just reacting like any guy in love would—-.” She froze, realizing what words had actually come out of her mouth, her eyes widening as Buffy fixed on her face.

“How did you know that?” Her voice was low, her words slowly enunciated.

“Know what?” Quickly, Willow buried herself in the book before her, turning the pages too fast, not really reading but not willing to meet her friend’s gaze. Blabbermouth. That’s what she was. Spike was sooo going to kill her when he found out.

With a quick glance at Xander and Anya asleep at the other end, Buffy rose from her seat and stepped around the table to lightly grab Willow’s arm, pulling her up and away from their friends to stand in the corner where they could continue talking in just a little more privacy. “How do you know about Spike, and the…being in love-age?” she asked again.

Wait. She wasn’t wigging. She seemed to… “You know?”

Buffy hesitated before replying. “Yeah. He told me. Down in the dungeon last night. How do you know?”

“Ummmm…” Had he shown her the poem? Could she bring that up? “Actually, that’s kind of a funny story…”

There was a long pause while Buffy waited. “And…?” she prompted after over a minute of silence. “Did he tell you before he told me? Because that’s not so much of the funny if he did.”

“No, no, Spike didn’t tell me. It was…” Oh, wait a minute! “…Xander. Xander told me.”

For some reason, that didn’t make things better. “How does Xander know?” Buffy demanded.

“Well, he doesn’t know it’s you. Seems they had a bonding moment when we were buying roses in town. Spike admitted to being in love with someone, but he didn’t tell him who it was, so your secret is still safe.”

“Spike and Xander bondage does not fill me with sunshine, Will.” Except…maybe that wasn’t a bad thing. One small step toward friendship might be just what Buffy needed to get their relationship accepted by the gang. Life would be so much easier if she didn’t have this to worry about, too.

“So…Spike said he loved you?”

The faraway look in Buffy’s eyes softened the exhausted circles underneath them, the heat rising to her cheeks as she remembered the caress of his hand across her face, the dark promise in his gaze as he’d told her. “Yeah,” she murmured. “Twice.”

“And…this is a good thing?”

Her lip curled, and she lifted her gaze to meet Willow’s directly. “Definitely,” she affirmed softly.

* * *
Sometimes, pretending to be asleep was a good thing. Their footsteps across the stone floor had pulled him from his dozing, and though he hadn’t meant to maintain the pretence, once Spike had realized what Buffy and the witch were discussing, his nerves had started racing, waiting to see what Red was going to say, whether she’d mention the poem that was still burning a hole in his pocket, and then, to hear what the Slayer would say in response. She hadn’t said the words, but he didn’t need eyes to tell what was going on in her body, to hear the faint catch in her voice as she spoke to her friend, to smell the scent of arousal emanating from her flesh. It would happen. It would just take time. And god knew, Spike had all the time in the world.

* * *

The air was crisp with cold, the sky a black velvet stretched above them, and the quartet stood next to the car, hands stuffed deep into pockets, watching the front door of the castle in eager anticipation. After a day of productive sleeping, they were finally all wide awake, ready to experience what Highland Scotland considered nightlife. That is, if Spike and Xander ever decided to show up.

“What’s taking so long?” Anya complained. “It’s just a set of keys.”

“What I wanna know,” said Buffy, “is why Giles locks up his car when we’re out in the middle of nowhere.” She stomped her feet in an effort to warm them. “Who does he think is going to steal it? The Loch Ness Monster?”

“Maybe they got c-c-caught.”

Willow shook her head. “Xander’s probably just being careful. If Giles knew we were sneaking out, he’d be out here already with a stack of books for us to start reading while he herded us back inside.”

“I didn’t know Giles and Colin were so tired,” observed Anya. “Did you see them after supper? Out like a light, the pair of them.”

“It’s just the research catching up with them, I’m sure.” Willow kept her eyes away from the others, unwilling to get caught up in the lie. Duncan had been true to his word and fixed a relative banquet for dinner, making sure that the Watchers’ plates were constantly full, giving them seconds and thirds even when they weren’t requested. Then, when they’d both begun yawning at the table over dessert, the cook had gone as far as suggesting a shot of whiskey with their cake. That had been the last straw. Within minutes, they were staggering upstairs, barely able to keep their eyes opened, and the Scoobies had gone scrambling to get ready to go out.

The door opened, and Xander and Spike exited, the vampire whistling as his duster swirled around his legs. “It’s about time!” Buffy said. “What the hell took you so long?”

The construction worker looked pointedly at Spike before turning back to face the girls. “Someone decided to make a small detour,” he said.

“Detour?” Buffy folded her arms across her chest as she looked at the vamp. “What kind of detour?”

“The kind of detour that goes through Giles’ wallet,” Xander explained.

“Big mouth,” Spike muttered.

“You stole money from Giles?” She was indignant, her voice rising, and it sparked the vampire to straighten in defense.
“How else were you expectin’ to fund this little midnight jaunt?” he said. “This may not be the Hellmouth, but they still expect you to pay for your drinks here. ‘Sides, Rupes won’t even miss the dosh. And even if he does, what’s he goin’ to do? Ground us all?” He rolled his eyes and headed for the driver’s side. “Get in and stop your whinging.” Spike caught the firm set of her mouth as he pulled open the door, and shook his head in resignation. “And if it makes you feel better, I’ll pay him back when we get to Sunnydale, all right?”

“And let the partying begin,” Xander said gleefully, rubbing his hands together as he waited for Spike to unlock the remaining doors.

* * *

It had almost been too easy. The girls had been so easy to sway, talking the others into a night out with little effort, while incapacitating the older Englishmen had been simple for him to arrange, an obscure sleeping concoction mixed into their food portions and drinks knocking both of them out within minutes of consumption. Duncan was now the lone waking occupant of the castle, just as he had hoped to be, and as he stood in the upstairs window, watching the car pull away from the front and down the lane, he smiled.

So much to do. And now he had most of the night free to get it done with little fear of interruption.
Good Ale Keeps the Heart Above

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Duncan has convinced the Scoobies to sneak out of Dall Rath to spend the evening in the local pub…

It wasn’t a date. Not really. Not when there was a mess of Scoobies crammed into the back seat of the car. Not when half of them still had no clue that anything beyond the usual antagonism was happening between Buffy and Spike. And certainly not when he had to pinch some cash from Rupert just to cover the drink tab he was sure they were going to run up. So, not a date. Definitely.

Except it sure as hell felt like one.

He’d been surprised when Buffy had brought it up in the first place. “Don’t you think it would be fun?” she’d quizzed when he didn’t jump on the bandwagon right away. “And it’s not like we don’t deserve it. We’ve all been working pretty hard here. It’ll do us good to soak up some local color.”

“Just doesn’t sound like your usual style,” Spike had replied. But he’d dropped it at that. The anticipatory shine in her eyes made her mischievous grin all that much more infectious, and the prospect of getting to spend some time with her outside of the castle milieu---albeit with Scoobies in tow---was enough to quell any arguments he would’ve put forth. He wanted to prove to her that they could work, even within the framework of her Slayer existence, and placing them in a neutral setting, forcing him to socialize and interact with her friends, seemed the best way to accomplish that. He hoped. If not, he was going to end up strangling himself for agreeing to put up with them for the night.

She was excited about it, that much he could tell, and though his fingers itched to reach to his left and take her hand in his, Spike refrained from doing so, concentrating instead on the dark road ahead of him as he tried not to hear her heartbeat pounding in his ears, or to smell the combination of musk and perfume and radiated from her skin. Every once in a while, he would glance out of the corner of his eye to try and catch the shadow of her skin in the darkness of the car, but the night betrayed him, cloaking her in midnight so that he was left to rely on his other senses, picturing her bright face with his inner eye as he drove along, contributing the occasional remark to the conversation happening around him.

Maybe it was that that was messing with his perceptions. No one seemed in the slightest bit perturbed at the vampire’s presence in the car. In fact, Willow had actually teased him back at one of his comments, including him in the same camaraderie they usually reserved for Harris. And when Buffy had at one point leaned over to poke him in the arm when he said something derogatory about American beer, it had been jokingly, jerking Spike’s gaze to the mirror to see her friends’ reactions, surprised by their seeming lack of one. In so many ways, it almost seemed mundane, a group of friends going to the local hangout for some rest and relaxation, but on the night-to-night existence of the chipped vampire, this was far from it. It had been a long time since he’d felt like he was actually a part of something---even those last few years with Dru when most of his time had been spent just making sure she didn’t go wandering off into some loopy fugue---and if he was going to be honest with himself, he missed it. Who the hell would’ve guessed he’d
find it wrapped up in the Slayer package of loving Buffy? And if he’d thought his reputation in Sunnydale was shot before, Spike knew there was no saving it once they returned. Not if Big Bad was spending his waking moments hanging with humans at the Bronze.

Finding the pub was cake, and Spike pulled the vehicle into the half-full car park that sat beside it, killing the engine as he glanced up at the wooden placard hanging from the building’s front. “End of the line,” he announced.

Buffy followed his gaze, her brows wrinkling slightly as she read the sign. “The Fleece and Firkin?” she said, looking over at the vampire. “What the hell’s a firkin?”

“Do you really want to know or are you plannin’ on playin’ the daft tourist all night?” he teased, his grin gleaming in the dim light. He chuckled as he jumped from the seat, avoiding her playful jab as he skirted the car, dropping the keys into his duster pocket as he watched everyone else emerge from the vehicle.

“We can drink here, can’t we?” asked Xander as he approached. “Isn’t eighteen the legal age in England?”

“It is,” Spike affirmed, “but you’re in Scotland right now, and about to go mingling with the locals, and they tend not to take too highly to being considered English. Mainly ‘cause they’re not. So try and keep your mouth shut when it comes to that, all right?” He grinned. “Though I realize askin’ you to stay quiet is about the same as askin’ Buffy and Red not to natter on about chocolate, or some such. Which,” he said, swiveling his head to gaze at the two women in question, “for the last time, is still better in this country, not that grainy stuff you try to pass off for sweets back in the U.S. of A.”

Buffy’s lips twitched. “Guess you’re the expert on chocolate, huh, Spike?” He caught her hazel eyes darting to the rest of the gang. “Have I told you guys about Bleach Boy’s little run-in with the Easter Bunny yet?”

“Slayer…” he warned.

She giggled and made a dash for the front door of the pub, eluding his outstretched hand. “Last one in’s gotta buy the drinks!” she called back.

Spike shook his head as they hurried past him, jostling and nudging in their rush to get inside. He was the one with the soddin’ money; didn’t make a whit of difference who was the last one in because it was goin’ to be his ass at the bar. Now, if he could just get her to keep her mouth shut about that chocolate sauce…

It looked like any other pub Spike had frequented over the years, though seeing the shine of delight on Buffy’s face as she drank in the ambience made him look around with a fresh set of eyes. Dark wood abounded, from the heavy beams that striped the low ceiling to the tall backs of the worn benches that lined the partially paneled walls, and framed pictures---from the publican’s travels, it appeared---took up what remaining wallspace there was, lending the interior a homely feel in spite of the small groups of people that populated the room. A worn bar dominated the space before the entrance, with the usual brass taps and array of bottles decorating it, while a quick glance around showed the doors that led to other areas, most likely a games room of some sort, the vampire reasoned. It was dark, and it was too warm, and for the first time since arriving in Scotland, Spike felt a sense of having come home at last.

He nodded toward a corner table near the fireplace. “Should probably grab a seat,” he said. “I’ll get the drinks.”
As he began to turn away, Buffy grabbed his arm. “You didn’t ask us what we wanted,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “There’s a reason for that.” His blue gaze flickered over the lot of them. “Don’t figure you lot are too expert at holding your liquor.”

“Hey!” Anya protested. “I’ve been drinking a helluva lot longer than you have, buster. I bet I could drink you under the table.”

“There will be no drinking under the table,” he warned. “The last thing you need is a bunch of hangovers in the morning announcing to the Watchers exactly what we’ve been up to.”

Buffy pouted. “Since when did you turn into the grown-up?” she asked.

“Since I’m the one who drove your asses out here,” Spike countered. “As much fun as it is sneakin’ around Rupes’ back, I don’t really fancy gettin’ caught when we get back, because you just know I’m the one who’ll end up gettin’ hell for it. Corrupting the young and all that. I’m sure Rupert will find some suitable way of torturing me if he finds out, and knowin’ my luck, it’ll probably involve either chains or boring Gaelic textbooks. Which means I’m doing the drink ordering.” He pushed her toward the table. “Now go sit.”

“I’ll help you,” Xander offered, and after a curious look from the vampire, followed him to the bar.

“What’ll you have?” the bartender asked.

Spike quickly scanned the bottles. “Glenlivet on the rocks, four bitter shandies---.”

“What’s a shandy?” Xander asked.

“Beer and lemonade. It’s a poofter drink. The girls should be OK with that.”

The other man grimaced. “Ewww.”


“Oh. Well, that’s not so bad then.”

“You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

The bartender glanced over their shoulders at the corner while he prepared the drinks. “Two for one,” he commented with a smirk. “Lucky blokes.”

Xander’s eyes widened, looking back at the four girls as they sat giggling around the table before turning to meet Spike’s amused gaze. “Oh, it’s not like that,” he protested to the bartender. “We’re just all friends. Well, except me and Anya, we’re a couple, but the rest of us, just, well, Willow and Tara are---ow!” He crumpled slightly to his right as his head jerked to look at the vampire, his footsmarting from the force of the boot that had just landed on his toe.

His cry of pain was mimicked by Spike as the blond clutched at his head, mentally chastising himself for letting the younger man provoke him. “Just a group of friends looking to relax,” he said through gritted teeth. “Stressful day and all.”

“Should tell your friends to be careful then,” the bartender warned. “Some of the rugby team showed up after losing their game today. They’ve got a thing for chatting up the lasses, especially when they’ve been drinking. They’re in the snooker room for now so if you stay outta there, you
shouldn’t have trouble.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“Just don’t want any problems in my pub, understand?”

Spike met the other man’s gaze and nodded. “No problems from us,” he repeated, and picked up the tray of drinks to take to the table.

“Why’d you kick me?” Xander demanded as they walked away.

“Told you to keep your gob shut.”

“You didn’t have to kick me. You could’ve saved both of us a lot of pain if you’d just cut me off nicely like everybody else does.”

“I’ll remember that next time.”

The girls’ giggles had bubbled into laughter by the time Spike and Xander sat down at the table. “What’s so funny?” Xander asked, an expectant smile on his face.

“They sell t-shirts here, too,” Willow said, pointing to a display on the wall. “Look.”

“I think I want the one that says, ‘I’d rather be Firkin than working,’” Buffy said through her giggles.

“As long as I get the ‘we give good head at the Firkin’ one,” Anya added.

As the group dissolved into laughter, Spike smiled, picking up the tumbler as he leaned back in his chair. This was most definitely going to be an interesting night.

* * *

His assessment of the drink situation would’ve been accurate if they had stopped at just one. When Spike had gotten up to change the music on the jukebox---they’d had to sit in agony while an old biddy kept plugging her change in to listen to Tom Jones sing “It’s Not Unusual” for twenty minutes straight---Buffy had pilfered some of the cash from his duster pocket and purchased another round, half of which was gone by the time he had returned to the table. He’d voiced his protestations aloud, but was privately amused, watching as she laughed and joked with her friends, her color high, hazel eyes dancing as she kept stealing looks at the blond across the table from her. Underneath the wooden surface, her foot stole across to nudge his before curling around his shin and running along the backside of his calf muscle. Her touch was electric, and his cock throbbed within the confines of his jeans, but Spike returned the pressure, locking her gaze with his, as he ran his tongue over his teeth. Oh yeah. Nothing wrong with a little R&R at the local pub. Not when it leant such warm promises.

The third round happened when he and Xander were arguing at the dart board, and though he’d been smart enough to take the money with him this time, Spike still returned to see the girls surreptitiously sipping at fresh pints, the stifled giggles and furtive glances at the guys at an adjoining table telling him all that he needed to know about who exactly had purchased these particular drinks. He’d given up at that point. Maturity be damned, he thought. If you can’t beat ‘em, might as well join ‘em. And became the official drink-go-getter for the Scooby gang. At least, that was the title Buffy bestowed on him. It wasn’t so bad. He’d been called worse.

“I’m bored,” the Slayer announced as the clock on the wall chimed ten. “What else is there to do in
this place?"

Spike watched as she craned her neck to look around the pub. “You’re pretty much lookin’ at it, ducks,” he said. “Except for the snooker table---.”

“Snooker!” She leapt to her feet, and started tugging at his sleeve. “Let’s play snooker!”

“Do you even know what snooker is?” he asked.

“It’s like pool, right? And I can play pool. C’mon. I feel like doing something other than just sitting here.” She looked around at the others. “Does anyone else want to play?”

There was a round of head-shaking. “I think that last shindy---.”

“Shandy,” Tara corrected her girlfriend.

“---shandy might’ve gone to my head just an eensy weensy little bit,” Willow finished. “You go. We’ll watch from here.”

“It’s in another room,” Spike said.

“So, we won’t watch then. We’ll just think about watching.”

Without regarding what her friends might think, Buffy plopped herself down in Spike’s lap, throwing her arm behind his shoulder as she pouted. “I wanna play snooker,” she whined. “Come play snooker with me.”

“It’s harder than you think---.”

“That’s OK. I can do hard.” She grinned wickedly and squirmed slightly against the erection that was pressing into her ass.

Spike’s eyes darted from her flushed face to those of her friends, noting their oblivion to the Slayer’s behavior. Why am I the only one who sees her acting like a bitch in heat? he wondered. Not that he was complaining. The taut feel of her muscles against his thighs was making his mouth water in anticipation, and he certainly wasn’t going to argue with the smell of her arousal assailing his nostrils. Besides, he was the one who wanted to bring everything out in the open in the first place. If Buffy was going to make it this easy for her friends to suss out the truth, who was he to stop her?

“Much as I’d love to, pet, we can’t. There’s a rugby team in there right now.”

“So, we’ll kick ‘em out.” Hopping to her feet, she pulled him along with her toward the closed door to the game room. “They’re just going to have to learn how to share.”

A last look over his shoulder caught Xander’s eye, and Spike gave the other man an almost imperceptible nod while glancing at the women who remained. He may be drunk, but it was Harris’ turn to look after the lot of them. For some reason, the vamp was certain he was going to have his hands full with Buffy.

There were four of them gathered around the six by twelve table, and inwardly Spike groaned. The smallest of the group made Finn look like Pee Wee Herman, and though the vamp wouldn’t have blinked twice at taking on four demons of that size, four humans were another matter.

“Hi, guys!” Buffy chirped as she strolled in, a wide smile brightening her flushed face.
The four men looked at each other, then glanced at Spike leaning against the door jamb. “’Lo,” said the one nearest her.

The young woman picked up a cue from the wall and began twirling it expertly in her fingers. “You about done?” she asked innocently. “Because I was kind of hoping that we could maybe have the room to ourselves so that Spike here could teach me how to play.”

The one who had spoken earlier smiled and stepped toward Buffy. “Actually, we’re in the middle of a game, but if you’d like, we can teach---.” He stopped when Spike straightened and folded his arms across his chest, stepping slightly more into the room. Though he easily outweighed the blond by a good hundred pounds, something about the smaller man’s carriage set the Scot on edge, and he warily backed away from Buffy. “Or not,” he hastily added.

“Tell you what,” the Slayer said, still smiling. “You guys give up on the game and let us have the room for a while, and Spike will pay for your next round of drinks, OK?”

“Really?” asked the Scot.

“Really?” asked Spike, turning to look at Buffy.

“Really,” she said firmly, and waited expectantly for her partner to follow through with her offer.

Rolling his eyes, the vampire reached into his pocket and extracted the cash, pulling out a few bills to hand to the nearest man, then stepping back to allow the four to file out of the room. When the last had left, he turned to face Buffy again. “I hope you’re done drinking because that’s the last of Rupert’s money,” he said.

He watched with mounting amusement as she stepped up beside him and shut the door, grabbing a nearby chair and propping it under the door knob to prevent anyone from just walking in. “Yep. All done with drinking now. Now I’m ready for snooker.” She stood before the table, tilting her head to look at it. “How come in a country where everything is so super duper tiny, the pool table is enormous?” she queried.

“Because it’s not a pool table, luv. I told you this. It’s a snooker table.”

She picked up one of the red balls and sent it rolling down the green, watching as it bounced off the far side to go careening into a cluster. “There’s too many balls,” she complained.

“No, there’s just enough.” Picking up a nearby cue, he walked around the table. “Do you want me to teach you or not?”

“Maybe we can teach each other.”

Glancing back over his shoulder, Spike saw Buffy climb on top of the table, crawling to the middle on her hands and knees while knocking the balls in her path out of the way. The arousal that had started abating returned with a vengeance as he drank in her darkened irises, heard the quick pant of her breath. “You don’t play snooker from on top of the table, luv,” he drawled, but turned toward her anyway, setting aside the stick in his hands. “Lesson number one.”

As he watched, the Slayer stretched herself out, rolling onto her back and lying widthwise across the table so that she could dangle her head over the edge, gazing up at him upside down. “You look funny from this angle,” she said lightly.

“That’s because all the blood’s running to your head, pet.”
“Where’s all your blood running?” Before he could blink, her arm had shot out, her fingers hooking into the waistband of his jeans and pulling him forward so that she could rub her cheek along the length of his erection through his pants. “Found it,” she singsonged.

Spike chuckled as he extracted himself from her grasp, stepping just far enough away so that she couldn’t reach him. “You’re drunk, Buffy,” he commented.

“Yep,” she agreed. “I’m drunk Buffy.”

“This shouldn’t happen like this.”

“Why?” She rolled onto her stomach and propped her chin up in her hands to gaze at him, eyes luminous. “I thought you loved me.”

Damn, he thought. How am I supposed to resist that? Not exactly the spokesperson for the moral majority here. Still… “Because it would be takin’ advantage,” Spike said. “And you won’t be happy about that in the morning.” The fact that he was convinced she was going to be hungover as hell as well he kept to himself.

She made a buzzing sound in her throat. “Wrong answer, William. It’s only taking advantage if we’ve never actually done it before. But we have, so it’s just me throwing myself at you, because I desperately want a repeat performance of last night.”

“Really?” He tilted his head, gazing at her through hooded eyes, his lips curved into a half-smile. “And why’s that?”

Her voice was soft. “Because it was amazing, and you know it, you jerk,” she teased. “So get up here and snooker me.”

* * *

The first thing he did when he passed through the barrier was put down the bag that held the harness. This was never going to work if he showed up with it or in any way let its presence be known. Then, raising the sword he had taken from the weapons cache to a ready position, Duncan began stepping quietly down the tunnel toward the stream, dark eyes glowing in the dim light. Stay calm, he reminded himself. You’re armed. He won’t be. And he’ll know right away if something’s amiss if you appear anything but ready.

When he emerged, he hung back near the wall, unwilling to be taken by surprise. Though it would be a one on one battle, even armed, Duncan wasn’t certain he could best the guardian; after all, protecting the entrance to the Otherworld was its job. Let’s get the show on the road, he thought, and opened his mouth to utter a baleful cry that echoed throughout the cavern.

The splashing in the water was almost immediate, and he stiffened as the black shape leapt onto the bank, turning to face him in hatred. The guardian’s hands extended into deadly claws as he took a step toward Duncan. “You,” he growled. “You dare to return here? You dare…” He broke off, eyes narrowing. “Wait. Why have you come back?”

“I’ve come about the harness.”

The guardian snorted. “You can’t bargain with it,” he warned. “You’re a thief, and you will be treated as such. However, if you return the harness to me now, perhaps the Elders might be convinced to show some leniency and make your death quick.”

“I don’t have it anymore. That’s why I’ve come to you.”
It was an unexpected response. “Have you lost it? Or has my colleague managed to taken it back?”

“Your colleague is dead. The Slayer killed him.” Duncan kept his gaze level, regulating his breathing so as not to reveal his half-truth. Dead, yes, but killed by his own hand when he stole back the harness.

“Slayer? What Slayer?”

“The young blonde woman. She was with the vampire who killed the other just last night.”

Anger rippled across the guardian’s black pelt. “Vampire…” he hissed. “I should’ve known.”

Now was the time. “That’s why I’ve come to you,” Duncan continued, his voice smooth and even. “Yes, I stole the harness, but it’s been taken from me, and I need your help to ensure that it remains in the hands of kelpies, not those of humans.”

“Are you saying this…Slayer has our harness?”

“No.” Duncan shook his head, his eyes cold. “I’m saying the vampire has it.”
Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The Scoobies have gone out for a night at the local pub, while Duncan has taken their absence as an opportunity to go see the guardian kelpie in the dungeon…

The two regarded each other, dark eyes to dark eyes, and Duncan did his best to maintain even breathing as he stared at the guardian kelpie. Yes, he'd eluded all three of them when he'd first run from the Otherworld, but it didn't negate the fact that they were still heavily dangerous and skilled at their chosen path of protecting the entrance. Even if he was only facing one now, that didn't mean he was any the safer.

"Since when does a common thief worry about the plight of his species?" the guardian asked. "If you cared so much, you wouldn't have stolen the harness in the first place."

"The two have nothing to do with the other," Duncan countered. "The vampire is a threat to our world, especially with the harness. If I can't have it, I'd rather it was back in your hands. Not in those of someone who aligns himself with the humans who want to control the passageway to the Otherworld."

The guardian's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring. "How do you know about that?" he queried slowly, his voice low and dangerous. "The witch we captured knew very little outside of the spell she was involved with, and you were nowhere around when we drained the information from her."

Damn it. That was more than he should have leaked. Quickly, the cook scrambled to sustain his composure. "I have my ways. I'm even doing what I can to thwart their efforts. Were you aware that the spell they attempted a few nights ago was actually one to close the seal, not to control it? That was my doing."

There was a long silence. "If the vampire is such a threat, why is he helping the humans? The Slayer…seems to trust him."

Duncan shook his head. "I don't know. I only know that I can only do so much on my own. It's part of your responsibility to protect the harness from those who would misuse its power. You must go after the vampire."

"Your generosity of spirit is overwhelming," the guardian said dryly, his disdain for the other kelpie dripping from his words like jagged shards of ice. "I shall consider your statements while I am returning you to face the Elders---." He cut himself off as Duncan stepped backward, readying the sword in his hands.

"I'm not going back."

"You must. You don't belong in the human world. Perhaps, in light of the current circumstances regarding the harness---." His thought was cut off in a garbled cry as the sword darted forward, slicing across his upper arm, leaving a trail of crimson streaming down his flesh, and the guardian watched as the other demon whirled and raced down the tunnel. He could've pursued him. It was
his job, after all. But that would leave the Otherworld completely unprotected, and both wounded and unarmed, he was no match for the thief. He would wait. He had other issues to consider now. Primarily… the harness and the vampire.

* * *

As much as he loved her, as much as he loved the power and grace and strength of spirit that the Slayer owned, standing there alongside the game table, watching her inch herself backwards along the green to allow him room to join her, Spike decided that he genuinely liked drunk Buffy as well. Gone were the inhibitions he'd seen holding her back when he'd observed her with Captain Cardboard, replaced with a freedom he'd only previously witnessed when she fought, when she thought no one was around and she could lose herself in the thrill of the battle. He'd seen glimpses of this woman briefly over the past few days, each time a little longer, a little more direct, and was glad that she was finally discovering the facility to let go, to stop pretending about who she was and what she wanted. And though he wished she didn't need to drink to find it, he wasn't going to argue with the result.

"Someone could walk in on us," Spike warned, lifting himself onto the edge of the snooker table, settling on his hands and knees as he gazed at her through hooded eyes. Not that he cared about the relative lack of privacy. Just wanted it out there in the open so that if it happened, she couldn't blame him for distracting her.

She didn't even bother looking at the door, or the chair she'd left propped there to prevent anyone from entering. "Don't tell me Spikey's afraid?" Buffy taunted, eyes twinkling. "Does the thought of an audience all of a sudden strike Big Bad down with performance anxiety?"

He heard the breath catch in her throat as he began crawling forward, locking gazes as his tongue ran along the edge of his teeth. "They're your friends, pet," he murmured. "And the last thing you've got to be worried about is me bein' unable to perform." He stopped, nose to nose with her, and caught her mouth with his, nibbling at her bottom lip as he inhaled the scent of her skin. God, she smelled like ripened peaches just waiting to be plucked, and it was taking everything the vampire had not to rip off the clothes she seemed determined to shed and pound her senseless right then.

"So how come there are so many balls?" Buffy said, breaking away from the kiss to slide herself sideways, knocking the spheres out of her way as she stretched herself across the felt. "And why are so many of them red?"

Hovering over her, Spike lifted one hand to allow his fingers to dance down her torso, undoing the buttons of her blouse with a nimble grace, letting the fabric fall to the side and expose the golden expanse of her stomach. "That's the play of the game," he replied, catching the front hook of her bra between index finger and thumb. "Told you it wasn't like pool, not really. Much more complex. More thinkin' involved other than just sinking the balls in the right pockets."

As her nipples became exposed to the air, Buffy let her hands lift to trace the curve of his lip. "But half of them are red," she said. "How do you know which ones to hit?"

He smiled, nipping playfully at her finger. "It's the natural placement of things," he explained. "It's all about doin' things in the right order. First," and he lowered his head to her breast, tongue circling the tip, "you sink a red ball." His lips closed around the hardened bud, sucking it against the roof of his mouth as his hand curled around her waist, chuckling in pleasure when she moaned beneath his touch.

"And then…?"
Spike slid upward, leaving a wet trail across her skin that sizzled as it chilled against her. "Then you go for one of the others," he murmured into her ear, and hooked his fingers through the waistband of her trousers to pull her to him, pressing his hard length to hers, his erection straining to be free of his jeans.

Buffy's arms came up and around his shoulders, tangling in his hair. "What if you miss?" she asked playfully. "Is it the other player's turn?"

His eyes glittered. "Yeah," he drawled, and was immediately flipped over onto his back to find himself gazing through the tendrils of her hair that dangled over his face. Spike gasped as she laid directly on him, hip to hip, lean muscle to lean muscle, grinding her heat into his arousal as her mouth descended to his, swallowing him into a kiss that came from more than hunger.

How did she do it...? Make him forget within the space of a single blink over a hundred years of life without her...as if everything up to this time of his life had been merely preparation, drawing him to her with no doubts as to its truth, readying him to stand at her side regardless of how she might feel about him in return. He would've, too. Even if Scotland had never happened. It wouldn't have been as much fun, but for the love of his Slayer, Spike would've done it.

Yet there was more to it than that. He knew it. He could feel it coming off her skin in tensive filaments that coiled around his limbs to pull him closer, wrapping and stretching and binding him to her in something more than the heat of the moment. He only wondered if she could feel it as well.

Buffy broke away from the kiss to gaze down at him, irises almost completely swallowed by black. "So what happens when I knock one of the colored balls into a corner pocket?" she asked breathlessly.

He grinned. "You lose your turn," he replied. Swiftly, he'd reversed their positions, back to him being on top, and laughed at her wide-eyed surprise. "S'posed to go for a red one first, pet."

"Snooker's hard."

"But doesn't that make it worth it when you win?"

"So where's the strategy come in? Red, color, red, color. Doesn't take much thinking to keep that one straight."

"You have to start thinkin' about the game when you realize you can't sink a ball right away."
Spike's thumb began tracing lazy circles around her aureola, carefully avoiding the pink. "When that happens, you try and set it up so that your opponent is forced into an awkward position, make 'em miss hittin' a red at all. That gives you extra points."

She giggled as his hand tickled over her abdomen to settle at the waistband of her pants, undoing the button there before sliding down the zipper to glide inside the silk of her underwear. "I like extra points."

"Not as much as I do."

She was soaking wet, hot and sticky as his fingers parted her outer lips, over her clit to sink deliciously slow into her depths. "No," she disagreed, breath barely coming in brief exhalations. "I think these kind of extra points are definitely more for me."

Propping himself up on his elbow, Spike looked down at her, watching as she caught her lip between her teeth, gliding his hand in and out, each time just lightly allowing the heel of his palm
to brush against her clit in giddy anticipation of a firmer contact. "You don't think I win from this?"
he asked.

It was getting harder to speak. "Well, maybe...eventually," she said. "But this part..." She moaned
as he added a third finger, plunging the trio even deeper. "...this part is...Buffy wins..."

He snorted, but it was done affectionately, his platinum head shaking in mock dismay. "So much to
learn," he teased. "This is goin' to be fuuuun."

"And just what do you think I have to learn?" She was trying for indignance, but in the waves of
pleasure rocketing through her inner muscles, it came out as merely a petulant squeak, her lower lip
jutting into that familiar pout as she gazed up at him. Too hard to glare when her eyes refused to
focus properly. And for some reason, she knew it wasn't the alcohol's fault.

Spike smiled. "Haven't you sussed out yet what gets me off?" As she opened her mouth to speak,
he shook his head. "Other than the obvious." His hand never stopped moving as he spoke, gliding
in and out in a lazy rhythm. "See, pet, the way it goes is..." And his voice became a husky
whisper. "...the harder you come, the harder I come. So takin' my time with this...playin'...seein'
you squirm...it's part and parcel of the same game, 'cause really, we're on the same side here, seein'
as how our end goals are pretty much identical."

"Sometimes the obvious is enough." Her hands lit on the waistband of his jeans, tugging them
undone to allow his erection to spring free, hard and smooth and pulsing in the circle of her fingers.

"Sometimes," he agreed, and lifted his hip to let her push his pants down, feeling her warm hand
cup the curve of his ass in a desperate attempt to pull him closer. "But why settle for just comin' up
to scratch when you can excel?"

For a moment, the only sound in the too-warm room was Buffy's heady breaths, catching thickly in
her throat in their struggle to get out. "You haven't said," she started, and then moaned as his thumb
caught at her clit again, "what happens when the...red balls are all gone. Is the game...over then?"

He pulled his hand free of her heat, sliding it around to drag her own trousers down around her
ankles, off her legs, and positioned himself above her. "Not over," Spike murmured, dragging his
lips across hers. "Just moves on to the next phase."

Her back arched as he slid himself inside her, no pretense at gentility guiding his motion as he
began thrusting, pulling himself almost all the way out before plunging back in. If it had been their
first time, each might have thought it was merely about satisfying a mutual lust, their bodies rash in
need as hands crawled over skin, clutching and clinging and holding and raking, mouths tangling to
encompass the other. But it wasn't. And neither entertained the notion that this was just a passing
fling, an answer to a physical call they'd been unable to ignore. It was more than that. Even if Buffy
had yet to say the words out loud.

He felt her first orgasm shudder through her body, and clamped his mouth over hers to stifle the
scream that rose in her throat, swallowing her breath as she rode it out in writhing silence. No way
was he going to get the gang's attention at this point. No bloody way was he ready to be interrupted
now. Keep her quiet. Keep her close. Keep her all to himself.

His pace never hesitated, quickening instead into a pounding rhythm that dragged Buffy's skin
across the felt of the table, made the snooker balls bounce as they jostled from cushion to cushion,
occasionally brushing against her unsuspecting flesh in cool temerity that mimicked Spike's touch
before skittering away to collide with another. The last thing she expected was to come again, but
as she felt the now-familiar twitch of his cock as it stiffened even further in anticipation of his
climax, she wrapped her legs around his hips, holding him deep, buffeting the forces that vibrated through both of them before drowning in the fervor of his mouth as Spike buried his face in her neck.

"God, Buffy...luv..." he murmured. As badly as he wanted---needed---to hear her say it, part of him was hoping she wouldn't, that she'd stay quiet in the aftermath. He didn't want it like this. Not when she wasn't completely sober. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be real. And now, after everything, that's what he wanted, that's what he was aiming for. The real deal.

She giggled against his cheek, and he lifted his head to look down into her laughing eyes. "I think I like snooker," she said softly. "Definitely my kind of game."

* * *

It wasn't until she saw one of them standing next to Xander did Willow come to see that, in actuality, rugby players were quite large. Massive, really. Not that she was feeling threatened or anything, but with the other three clustered around their table, everything in the pub seemed suddenly smaller and too close, the shimmery feeling the shandies had been creating in her head beginning to turn to lead, weighing her in until she had to fight the urge to jump from her seat and go running out into the cool night, dragging Tara along behind her.

A bell rang from behind the counter, catching her attention. "What's that?" she asked, deftly avoiding the nearest Scot's meaty hand as she pressed her knee away.

"Last call."

Any grimaced. "Damn it!" she said. "I totally forgot they have to stop serving in this country at eleven." She began to twist in her seat toward the dartboard. "Xander---."

The man at her side leaned sideways, blocking her view of the game, lifting his arm around her shoulders as he did so. "You won't be needing him," he said. "He looks busy."

The player next to Tara grinned. "Just because the pub's closing, doesn't mean the night has to end," he said suggestively. "We can just move the party to another location."

Willow's eyes widened. OK. Now she was feeling threatened. Just a little. "We have an early morning tomorrow," she said. "We should really be heading back. Xander!"

The hand found her knee this time and pulled her legs apart as it held on. "Don't be daft," he said. "You've got time for just one more drink with us."

OK, maybe a lot threatened.

She reacted without even thinking, the combination of her rising anxiety and too many "poofter" drinks making her aim not as true as it should've been, or really as it would've been if she'd been sober. It was just supposed to be a small distraction, a drink in the farthest's lap so that they could make a break for the car, and stay there until Buffy and Spike came out to join them. But when Xander, who had finally heard his name being called, stepped in front of her pointing finger, it was too late to stop, and the pint that had been on the table suddenly appeared in his hand before tipping of its own accord over the rugby player's head.

It was hard to tell who was more shocked---a wide-eyed Xander or the soaking wet Scot who leapt to his feet to face the young man in front of him. His hands balled into meaty fists and he took a hostile step forward, only to be checked by the publican behind the bar clearing his throat. With one angry glance over his shoulder, he nodded to his teammates, who joined him on their feet.
"We're taking this outside, Yank," he growled.

As the quartet herded a now-terrified Xander to the front of the pub, Willow pushed Anya to her feet, shoving her toward the closed door to the snooker room. "Go get Buffy and Spike!" she hissed as she rose to follow the men outside. "Now!"

* * *

They were stretched out on the snooker table, she curled into his side, nudging the occasional ball away with their feet, when the doorknob began jiggling, followed immediately by the incessant pounding.

"Buffy!" called Anya. "Get out here! Xander's about to become another basic food group for a group of drunk Scots!"

Spike rolled his eyes as she jumped from the table, stumbling slightly as the alcohol still in her system tilted the room around her. "Coming!" the Slayer replied, scrambling for the trousers that had fallen to a heap on the floor.

"Hurry!"

He listened to the ex-demon's retreating footsteps as he rolled onto his side, blue eyes hooded as he watched Buffy struggle to get her legs into her pants. "Might serve the boy some good," he said casually. "Let him learn not to make with the wisecracks around blokes who really can hurt him."

She glared at him, even as she toppled sideways against the wall, her foot caught in the fabric. "Are you going to come help me?" she demanded. "Or are you just going to lay there, looking..." She couldn't finish the thought, the memories of their recent escapades still flushing her skin. Focus, she thought. Xander needs help now. Sexy Spike thoughts can happen later.

"With the pants or with the boy?" He couldn't help smirking as her underwear appeared in his hand, extracted from underneath his body, and began to twirl them around on his finger.

"With Xander," she said through gritted teeth, finally managing to get both legs in at the same time. Pulling them up, she grabbed for her panties and stuffed them into her pocket before reaching for the shoes that had somehow disappeared from her feet as well.

It was a challenge, unspoken as it was, and he knew even before her heel had disappeared into the first shoe that he was going to help her. Much as Harris annoyed him, he wasn't about to let him get hurt unnecessarily, even if it meant turning his own head into mush as a result. No, this was part of the Slayer package as he'd accepted it. Inherit the friends. Get adopted into the inner circle. Find a family. And, truth be told, the git was starting to grow on him. He wanted to help him out. Damn it.

They found the pub nearly empty as they bolted from the room, rushing for the front door and the chill night air without their jackets to burst upon the scene of Willow standing in front of Xander, blithely attempting to barricade him from the four men who stood menacingly around. "Don't make me angry," she was saying, her voice nearly a squeak. "You won't like me if I get angry."

"Thanks for the help, Will," Xander said, his eyes locked on the four men. "But I'm not so sure Hulk-ese translates very well to Scottish."

"Hi, guys," Buffy said brightly, stepping forward into the fray. "What's going on here?" She stood between the two factions, head swiveling between them, a wide smile on her face.
"Someone needs to learn some manners," said the Scot who'd been dunked with the beer. As he began to take a step closer, a pale hand wrapped around his upper arm, closing in an iron vise that didn't hurt but definitely prevented any movement. He glanced back to see Spike looking up at him with deadly eyes.

"Much as I like your style," the vamp drawled, "I can't let you do that."

"Yeah?" the man barked. "You and what army?"

Before anyone could react, Buffy's leg had shot out, connecting with the chest of the nearest rugby player, sending him flying back into the parking lot even as she stumbled to keep her balance. Gotta remember, she thought as she straightened, watching the world swim before her hazel eyes. Fighting and drinking? Very un-mixy.

As the remaining three stood agape, Spike smiled. "Care to askin' that one again?" he said, tightening his grip just enough to remind the man he was still there. Sometimes, intimidation could be a wonderful thing.

"He poured his bloody drink over me!"

"And I said I was sorry!"

Buffy folded her arms across her chest. "Sounds like a fair trade to me," she said. "No harm, no foul." She tilted her head to gaze at Spike. "Is that what they call them in rugby?" she asked.

"They're penalties, luv."

She turned back to the offender. "So, no harm, no penalty then." Her eyes flickered to the Scot trying to rise from the ground. "Unless you want some of what your friend got. Because I'm more than happy to oblige."

It took only one look back at the wheezing form of his teammate for the man to back down, stepping away as Spike released the grip on his arm. Black eyes darted between the group and with a quick jerk of his head, he nodded for his friends to follow him, down the path and into the slumbering town.

"Pissin' off a drunk Scot was probably not the smartest thing you've ever done, Harris," Spike said once they were gone.

"Yeah," Buffy agreed. "Why on earth would you pour a drink over him?"

Xander waved an angry finger at Willow. "No more magic!" he demanded. "Every time you start going all bewitchy, I end up turning into the bunny you pull out of your hat!"

"Hey! Not an image that's going to get you lucky tonight, Xander!"

He tossed an apologetic smile at his girlfriend. "Sorry, Ahn."

"Why don't we talk about this on the way home?" the Slayer offered. "I think our fun pub night out has just ground to a screaming halt."

"I'll go get the coats," Spike said, and pivoted on his heel to head back to the pub.

"Wait up," Xander said. "I'll come with you."

They walked in silence until they were on the other side of the door at which point, Xander
grabbed the vamp's arm, forcing him to stop and look at him. "Listen," he said. "In case no one else says anything to you. Thanks." He nodded back toward the outside. "For helping."

Spike's eyes narrowed, his surprise etched across his brow. "Don't mention it," he replied slowly.

"No, really." His brown eyes were sincere. "I mean, I know Buffy can ride you kinda hard, so I just wanted to get it out there. 'Cause I'm not sure she's noticing it like I am."

There was a moment, and then the vampire shrugged. "Wasn't goin' to actually hit the wanker, you know," he said, as he turned away. "Not worth the headache it would've given me."

Behind his back, Xander smiled. "Yeah," he agreed, accepting the statement they both recognized as the lie it was. "I know."

* * *

None of them could hold their liquor, Spike decided. Within five minutes of jostling along the narrow road back to Dall Rath, the quartet in the back seat were asleep, heads on adjoining shoulders, the ex-demon girl stretched out across Harris' lap as loud snores emanated from his open mouth. Only Buffy remained awake and as soon as she realized her friends were out of it, she had turned to face him in the car, her face hidden in shadow, her hand reaching out to rest lightly on his thigh.

"Did you have fun?" she asked.

He glanced over, wishing he could see her eyes. Was she serious? After everything that had happened tonight, how could she ask him such a thing? "Don't really fancy facin' the Watcher Inquisition in the morning," he said. "But outside of that, yeah, I'd say I had fun."

"Good." She seemed satisfied with that answer, and leaned her head back against the seat, her lids fluttering closed even as her hand remained on his leg. "I was worried."

"After the snooker table? Trust me, pet. You've got nothin' to worry about."

Buffy laughed softly. "No, that's not it," she said, and then stopped as her mouth stretched into an audible yawn. "I thought you'd be a grump about it since the whole thing was Duncan's idea."

The cook's name sent a chill through Spike's body, raising his hackles as his hands tightened around the wheel. "What was that?" he asked, his voice low. But she was already asleep, her even breathing testimony to the effects of the alcohol still in her system.

The vamp's mind raced as he maneuvered the car through the winding road and over the mountain. No wonder it had seemed so off when Buffy suggested it. It wasn't her bloody idea in the first place. It also explained Red's odd behavior about the whole set-up, her evasive answers when she'd been initially pressed. Neither girl had wanted to admit to being convinced by Duncan to drag the gang out for the night, and the fact that she was only now admitting to the truth---albeit under the lingering effects of the alcohol---didn't appease Spike in the slightest. Warning bells were pealing in his head. There was definitely something not right about it, but what exactly it was, he had no idea.

If it wasn't for his heightened agitation, he probably wouldn't have noticed the movement in the adjoining field as he crested the hill. As it was, his gaze only flickered across the moonlit heather, not really seeing until the shadow passed within the path of a stray beam. Immediately, Spike extinguished the lights, braking the car as quietly and gently as he could without rousing his passengers, switching the key in the ignition as he stared out the window. He couldn't really tell for
Sure, and after a furtive glance at Buffy, let his vampire visage slide into place, golden eyes peering into the darkness, picking up the details that had heretofore escaped him.

Duncan. Speak of the devil.

Slowly, Spike dropped his hand to his lap, tapping firmly on the back of Buffy's. "Slayer," he said, his voice firm but low. When she merely stirred, he gave her fingers a squeeze. "Slayer," he repeated, a little louder.

Her lids drifted open and she gazed sleepily at the car's driver. "Are we…?" she started, only to cut herself off as she noticed the ridges in his forehead. Instantly, she straightened, senses alerted as her head whipped around to look outside.

Spike nodded in the direction of the figure, and waited for the recognition to widen her eyes before speaking. "Now do you believe me?" he asked. "Cause that's not quite the way back to town for our boy, now is it?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head, watching as Duncan disappeared over the mountain's peak. Where could the cook possibly be going? He should've left the castle hours ago, to return to his aunt's, and yet here he was, trudging through the heather near midnight, moving in the opposite direction of his home. The niggles that had been biting at her ankles before suddenly grew teeth, and Buffy felt a chill as she realized how blind she had really been.

Spike had been right all along. Something was up with Duncan.
The Lover's Morning Salute to His Mistress

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: After a night spent at the pub, Buffy and Spike have seen Duncan on the mountain…

Even before she was awake, she knew he wasn’t there. A hollowness seemed to overtake the fuzzy dreamland in her mind, and as Buffy battled through the clouds of waking, the absence of Spike in her bed sent her reaching sideways, fingers stroking the sheets in search of his cool skin, finding instead only the abandoned wrinkles he’d left behind. Wherever he was, it wasn’t with her. And though she knew it shouldn’t, the taste of disappointment it left in her mouth drove the Slayer to pull the pillow over her head, to try and block out the morning and the pounding ache inside her.

Only half of it was because of the hangover. One of these days, she thought miserably, I’m going to actually realize that drinking is a bad thing. I wonder if Willow still has that “Beer=Bad” sign she made up after CaveBuffy came out? Anything to remind me not to go through this again. It just isn’t worth it.

At least she could still remember what had actually happened the previous night, even if things did start getting a little blurry about the time they’d pulled up in front of the castle. She remembered the pub, and the snooker table—oh god, and Spike on the snooker table, no way could she forget that—and the fight with the rugby players, and the drive home…

And it was there that her brain stopped, the image of Duncan’s silhouette in the moonlight as he traipsed through the heather etched in clarity across her mind’s eye. Out on the mountain. Way past when he should’ve been anywhere near Dall Rath. And the look on Spike’s face, that “I told you so but you’re just a stubborn bint who refuses to listen to me” look she had a feeling she was going to come to know really well, staring back at her as she tried to figure out what to do.

Spike had wanted to go after him on the spot, but Buffy had talked him out of it, using the gang in the backseat as an excuse not to abandon the car. She was embarrassed to admit that if he was right and Duncan was actually one of those kelpies, she wasn’t sure she was sober enough to fight effectively, let alone lay chase should he decide to run, and hid behind her responsibility to protect her friends, knowing even as she said the words that the vamp saw right through her. He didn’t argue, though. Just looked at her with that amused tilt of his head as she promised to come out in the morning and scout around, to see if maybe she could find what exactly Duncan was up to. It didn’t make her feel better about it, though.

But thinking of it now wasn’t helping her headache, and Buffy quickly banished the thoughts of the cook to the far recesses of her brain, locking them in the closet of “Things to Do When I’m Feeling Human Again Land” in hopes that sometime in the next few hours, she would actually be up to lifting her head from the mattress. I wonder what time it is, she mused. More importantly, I wonder what the hell could’ve been so important to Spike that he’s not even here when I wake up.

She wanted to go back to sleep, but suddenly, the single bed seemed huge, the vacancy left by the vampire daunting, and Buffy found herself tossing under the blankets, twisting them around her legs as she sought to get comfortable before finally kicking them off to embrace the chilly air. Gotta get up. Find Spike. Make sure he doesn’t approach Duncan until I’ve got a chance to…
She saw it before she was even halfway up, and her surprised smile brought a childlike glee to her hazel eyes. In the corner, the screen had been set aside, revealing a steaming bathtub complete with an array of toiletries at its side. They weren’t hers---somehow, they were nicer---and as she rose from the bed, Buffy couldn’t help but wonder just where he had gotten them from. Because Spike was really the only explanation for this. This had to be his doing.

The paper had fallen to the floor, and she spotted it as she padded quietly to the tub’s side. Stooping, she picked it up, scanning the words once…and then a second time, wishing yet again that he was there.

_Because it’ll help. ---S_

His handwriting was neater than she’d imagined; somehow, she’d always thought Spike’s script would be more of a scrawl, not the confident, angular strokes that now graced his note. No mention of where he’d gone or when he was going to come back, but as the heat of the water began to steam across her cheeks, the fuzz inside Buffy’s head began to settle in anticipation of the relaxing draw of the bath. He was probably right; a good, long soak was sure to get her ready to face the day, and if anyone knew anything about helping with hangovers, she was sure it was the blond vampire. She could only hope that he wouldn’t be gone for too long.

* * *

If he’d had a watch, he would’ve been looking at it, checking to see just how long she had been inside. As it was, Spike had to settle for pacing irritably in front of the closed door, giving it a look of death every time he passed by, his hands balled into fists deep in his pockets.

When it finally inched open, allowing Willow to squeeze herself out without the occupants seeing out into the hall, the vampire pounced, grabbing the bottle from her hand even before she had closed the door behind her. “Took you bloody long enough,” he growled as he looked over the label.

“You are going to owe me in such a huge way,” the witch whispered back, her face furious. “Do you have any idea how many lies I just told to get you that? Not to mention the images that are now burned onto my retinas. Remember that rope Colin was complaining about not being able to find? Well, guess where I just found it.”

Now that he had what he’d come after, Spike’s mood lifted, allowing him to look back at the closed door with a cocked brow and half-smile. “Well, notch one up for Harris,” he drawled.

Willow wrinkled up her nose. “No. No notching. That’s one of my best friends in there. I do not want to be imagining him and Anya playing their little bondage games. I lose enough sleep as it is worrying about important stuff, like school, and Tara, and my other best friend getting involved with another vampire.” She said the last defiantly, lifting her chin as if daring Spike to argue with her, but under his direct gaze, found herself faltering within moments, her own eyes falling to the bottle in his hands. “I don’t know why you want Anya’s bubble bath anyway,” she pouted. “It’s not like you didn’t already raid everything Tara and I brought along for Buffy. Couldn’t you have used her own stuff?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a surprise then, now would it?” He shook his head, turning the toiletry over in his hand as he scanned its label again. “‘Sides, this smells better than what the Slayer has. She didn’t exactly pack for a day at the---.”

“Spike!”
His shoulders slumped at the sound of the Watcher’s voice behind him, but he had only managed to turn halfway around to look at him when Giles’ hand gripped his upper arm and shoved him face first against the wall. “Hey!” Spike yelled. “Defenseless vampire here!”

“Defenseless, my ass,” Giles said through gritted teeth, and pushed him harder into the stone. “Where in blazes did you go last night?”

Willow’s eyes widened, and she caught the vamp’s level gaze as he grimaced. Uh oh. Busted.

“What makes you think---?”

“Don’t play me for a fool, Spike.” His words were clipped, the blue of his eyes flashing in anger. “There’s fifty pounds missing from my wallet, and Colin just told me that half the petrol is gone from one of the cars. You’re the only one who can drive in this country, outside of Colin and myself. Now. I’m going to ask you one more time.” He shoved him again for emphasis. “Where did you go last night?”

“Should’ve known you’d be keepin’ an eye on the tanks,” Spike rejoined, but was rewarded with a hard twist of his arm. “I was out of smokes,” he barked. “And goin’ stark ravin’ mad bein’ cooped up here with Nancy Drew and her hardy girls. And since you and Junior were bein’ so stingy with the whiskey last night, I decided I’d get myself a pint or two. That’s all. Not like the rest of you haven’t been gallivanting off into town whenever the fancy takes you. Leavin’ me here to rot in boredom, with nothin’ to do but stare at books that make your eyeballs bleed.”

“And Buffy just let you go?”

“Slayer didn’t know anything about it,” the vamp countered, avoiding the surprised look from the nearby witch. “I told her I was goin’ out to do a bit of patrolling, stretch my legs a bit.”

“And she trusted you to go out on your own? I find that very hard to believe.” Giles’ grip loosened, and he stepped away from the wall, allowing Spike to turn around to face him.

“We’ve got an understanding.”

Willow could see the danger begin to flicker in the azure depths of his eyes, and was amazed at the restraint the vampire was showing in not blurtting out the true story to the older Englishman. She didn’t know why he was covering for them, but seeing the righteous anger in the Watcher’s face, she was rather glad he was.

“Well, understand this,” Giles held up a warning finger as he spoke. “You are not to go out of this castle again without the express permission of either myself, Colin, or Buffy, nor without supervision from one of the three of us. I will not have you roaming the Scottish countryside, looking for kicks. Or worse, escaping entirely and leaving us all here with a spell we can’t complete and questions we can’t answer. Until we return to Sunnydale, consider yourself under house arrest.”

“You’re grounding me?” Spike’s jaw dropped in incredulity. “I’m not some soddin’ child---.”

“Then stop acting like one.”

“It was just a runner to the pub.”

“I don’t care if it was a runner to Heaven itself. If you can’t behave as a responsible member of this team, you hardly deserve the freedoms afforded to those of us who take the time to search for the answers we need to get out of this place and get back home.”
Spike’s head tilted as his eyes narrowed. “Right. ‘Cause you were burnin’ the midnight oil buried in your books,” he snorted. “How was your little kip? Have any nice dreams?”

The Watcher’s gaze was cold behind his spectacles. “I suggest you make yourself useful for a change, Spike,” he said, ignoring the vampire’s gibe. “Get downstairs and---.” He stopped, noticing for the first time the bottle in the other’s hand. “What is that?” he queried.

Spike’s fingers curled reflexively around the label, blocking its contents from view. “Conditioner,” he said evenly. “Slayer ran out and asked me to get some from the witch here.”

“What were you doing in Buffy’s room while she’s bathing?”

He didn’t even hesitate to respond. “I wasn’t. She makes me stand in the bloody hallway. Yells at me through the door when she’s done.”

As Willow watched the two argue back and forth, it was all she could do not to shake her head in reluctant admiration for the vampire’s ease in lying to Giles. OK, spent a century evil and doing this for a living, she thought, but still, no good reason why he should be doing this now, masking the Scoobies’ involvement in the pub escapades with plausible half-truths.

“Buffy’s just going to have to do without,” Giles finally said, the definitive tone of his voice brooking no more discussion on the matter. “I need you and Willow downstairs in the great hall to work on the spell. Colin and I believe we may have discovered something about the casting.” He turned on his heel and was halfway down the corridor to the stairwell before he stopped, glancing back at the pair over his shoulder. “Five minutes,” he instructed.

“Wow,” the redhead breathed once he was gone, “he’s really mad.”

Spike shrugged. “Nah,” he dismissed. “Should’ve seen him last year when I taped Passions over his copy of the highlights from the 1966 World Cup. Made me drink cold blood for a week.” He shook his head at the wrinkled confusion on her face. “It’s an English thing,” he said. “Trust me. He was pissed.” He handed her back the bubble bath, glancing in the direction of the stairs wistfully as his finger unconsciously caressed the bottle. “Not that I’m thrilled about missing Buffy’s blue lagoon bit, but I better be gettin’ downstairs if we want this story to stick. Thanks anyway, Red.”

She stopped him before he’d taken two steps. “How come you didn’t tell Giles what really happened?” she asked.

“’Cause I’m his favorite fall guy,” Spike replied, with a half-smile. “Let’s just say it’s easier for him to be brassed with me than it is for Buffy to have him being disappointed in her.”

* * *

He was whistling when he entered the great hall. Last day, he thought. Time to pack up and move on. In a small way, Duncan realized he was going to miss hanging around the Americans; there was just something about the girls that drew him to them, that Slayer in particular, but with the harness safely stowed in the cave and the groundwork laid for Spike to be the guardian’s target for a while, he knew it was time to go. Take the time the diversion was going to allow him to run as far as possible, to start a new life with the harness to help.

He knew he could’ve just walked away last night. That probably would’ve been the sensible thing to do. But suspicions might be raised if Duncan were to suddenly disappear, and with Fiona’s injury healing enough for her to tend to the matters at Dall Rath herself, putting in this final day
seemed right. He just had to inform the Watchers.

“Mr. Sadler?” He had to stifle his smile when the younger Englishman started from his seat at the table, turning to notice him for the first time since entering the room. “I wanted to let you know that my Aunt Fiona is doing much better,” he continued. “In fact, so much better, she’s decided that she can resume her responsibilities around here beginning tomorrow.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you for telling me.” Colin seemed slightly flustered by this information, his brows knitting together. “You’ve been…most helpful in filling in for her.”

“It was my pleasure. Really.” Duncan’s dark eyes darted to the door, watching as the older Watcher came striding in. “I’ll just be starting with breakfast now.”

They didn’t even wait for him to leave the room before striking up a conversation. “You were right,” Giles said behind him. “It was Spike.”

Duncan slowed his pace slightly to hear the other’s response. “I knew I smelled smoke in the leather,” he replied. “What did he think he was going to accomplish by stealing out in the car last night?”

“He said something about needing cigarettes and then started off on this woe-is-me speech about how we leave him out of everything. Funny, really, coming from him, considering how he’s managed to get himself involved in almost every aspect of this project. He was just supposed to help with the spell, yet he’s helped Buffy with the demon in the dungeon, helped us in our translations.” There was a pause. “I can’t believe Buffy would just allow him to go out on his own like that. It’s not like her to be so careless.”

Duncan didn’t hear any answer, but as he stepped out of the room and into the kitchen, the thought in his head almost exactly matched that in Colin’s.

It’s not careless; it’s called being in love.

* * *

To say she was disappointed Spike hadn’t returned while she was in the tub was an understatement. By the time Buffy emerged from the water, her mood had shriveled almost as tightly as the wrinkles in her skin, and though the worst of her hangover was now gone, she couldn’t help but be annoyed that the vampire would go to the lengths of providing such an erotic possibility without actually following through with it. Stupid Spike.

When a knock came to the bedroom door, her heart leapt to her throat, only to immediately sink when she realized that he wouldn’t bother with announcing his arrival; Spike would’ve just walked right on in, that jaunt to his step, probably with some self-satisfied smirk on his face. She sighed. Great, now she was doomed to Spike-filled fantasies all day. No doubt of the naked, sweaty variety. Her sweat, not his. That cool flesh of his always seemed to remain so dry, only getting slick when her own body was rubbing up against it, feeling his muscles tense against hers, his mouth…

She sighed again. This was going to a loonngg day.

“B-b-buffy?”

The Slayer frowned, pulling her hair free from her collar as she crossed to the door, opening it to reveal a smiling Tara. “Hey,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Willow asked me to come up and try and catch you before you came downstairs.” She glanced
furtively back over her shoulder before returning her wide gaze to the girl in the doorway. “Can I… talk to you…in there?”

Buffy stepped aside to allow her to enter, closing the door behind them to leave the pair in solitude. “Is something wrong?” she quizzed. “Willow hasn’t done another spell on Xander, has she?”

Tara laughed. “No, nothing like that.” Her gaze flickered over the tub. “Did the bath work for your hangover?” she asked. “Spike said it would.”

“Yeah,” she replied, softening. “Are those yours?” She gestured to the toiletries that still rested next to it.

“Spike said they were…nicer than the ones you brought,” the witch offered in apologetic explanation.

“He’s right. Thanks.” Crossing to the bed, Buffy perched herself on its edge to begin slipping on her shoes. “So what did you want to talk about?”

Briefly, Tara explained what Spike had done, the confrontation with Giles and his subsequent banishment to the great hall and research duty. With each passing sentence, the Slayer’s eyes widened, her surprise at his assumed culpability enveloping her in waves of guilt, until she finally cut the other girl off with an upraised palm.

“Stop,” she directed, rising to her feet. “I’m going to go fix this. He can’t be---.”

The touch of Tara’s hand on her arm astonished both of them, but she didn’t remove it even when Buffy made to move away. “Spike said don’t. He passed a note to Willow and said just to let sleeping dogs lie on this one.”

“But why…?”

“Mr. Giles was pretty peeved. Spike thinks it’s better if it’s directed at him, than the rest of us. He s-s-said…well, he wrote that we’ll be more productive this way.”

She hesitated, mulling over the vampire’s logic. Twisted and uncalled for, but somehow, probably right on the money. Funny how he always had a way of doing that. One of these days, she was going to have to ask him how he pulled it off. “So, he wants me to keep quiet when I come down,” she mused. “Guess I can do that. Not like we’re not getting really good at keeping secrets around here.”

“Actually…” Tara seemed hesitant to say anything further, biting at her lip as she blocked Buffy’s path to the door. “Spike said something else to Willow. Something about you not coming down to the hall at all.”

“Oh? And pray tell, what does he think I should be doing?”

“Um…he said not to w-w-wimp out and forget about checking the mountain this morning. I guess…you saw something last night on the way home?”

She seemed to be waiting for a response, the messenger frightened of the unhappy reply, and Buffy smiled in reassurance. “It’s OK. He’s right. Besides, anything is better than research. As long as it’s not raining.” She looked hurriedly up at the small window, and relaxed when she saw the sunlight peeking through. “Just tell Giles I’m doing a little investigating and that I’ll be back in time for lunch. Don’t give him any details or anything. I’m not sure what I’m going to find.”
Tara frowned. “Is it bad?” she queried. “A demon? Or something to do with the harness, maybe?”

Buffy shook her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted reluctantly. “But I’m going to find out…”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Duncan has decided to make it his last day at the castle, Buffy has gone off to search the area they saw the cook the previous night, while Spike has taken all the responsibility of the Scoobies’ jaunt out and been grounded as a result…

Giles’ eyes flickered over the group, the slumped shoulders of Xander as he slouched in his chair, Anya’s drooping eyes as she rested her chin on the book in front of her, the two witches leaning against each other, Willow’s fingers playing with a strand of Tara’s hair as they read over the texts in their laps. Only Spike appeared as normal, audibly shifting in his corner chair, the occasional snort of derision punctuating his reading almost always immediately followed by the slam of the book onto the floor and a, “Next one, Rupes,” biting through the air. Each time, the noise seemed to reverberate against the stone walls, and though he wouldn’t have called it unnecessarily loud, the gang seemed finely attuned to it, visibly flinching when it happened.

There it was again---the snort---but as the group steeled themselves for the accompanying thud, Spike surprised them by rising to his feet. “Thought you said you and Junior had sussed something new out about the spell,” he said to Giles as he approached the table, tossing the text onto its top. “If that’s so, why’re we still bothering with the Gilgamesh rejects here?”

The Watcher peered at him over his glasses. “It was a theory Colin and I were bandying around,” he explained. “We were hoping to find something substantive to support it before voicing it to the group.”

“But it was good enough to use it as an excuse to lure us back here into research hell,” Spike snapped back. “So ‘fess up, Rupes. I’m not wastin’ my time any more if you’ve got something you’re holdin’ back.”

Behind his book, Xander bit at his lip in a semi-futile attempt to stop from smiling. Leave it to Spike, he thought. It was what everyone in the gang was thinking but no one dared to say; only the annoying bleached one could get away with directness like that when it came to Giles.

The two Watchers exchanged a look before the older one sighed and closed the book in front of him. “It’s just a theory,” he started. “Regarding why the spell failed both times it was attempted.”

“And remember, we’ve found absolutely nothing to deem our theory anything more than preliminary speculation,” Colin jumped in. “That’s why we haven’t mentioned it.” He glanced at Giles. “And why I thought we were going to keep it to ourselves until we knew for sure.”

“Well, the cat’s out now,” Spike drawled. “And those things have a way of scratchin’ if you try to stuff ‘em back in, so give us what you got.” He sat down in one of the chairs, propping his boots up onto the table as he waited expectantly.

Giles cleared his throat. “We believe there’s a…physical element to the spell that we’re overlooking. Some act that must be completed once the incantation has been said. It would explain the immolation of the corpse the Council used. Indirectly, it also explains why Willow was
rejected as the host.”

“Yeah, about that host thing.” The redhead straightened in her chair. “Tara and I have been talking about it, and we definitely think that something inside me pushed it out. Literally. That’s what it felt like.”

“Yes. That something would be your magic.”

Xander frowned. “I thought her magic was supposed to be what was sucking whatever she’s hosting in. Turning her into a Big Gulp-sized straw.”

“Actually, the magic was channeled through all of us in the ritual,” Colin interjected. “Buffy, Spike, and the three of us on the outside. Willow was just acting as our mouthpiece.”

“And here I thought that was my job,” Xander quipped with a broad smile. “Being the…mouth…” Under everyone’s direct stare, he slouched back in his chair. “Never mind.”

“Our theory,” Giles continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “is that the spell requires the host’s aspect to be an empty vessel, to allow the spirit of the immortal sufficient room to animate it, so to speak, in order to complete the physical requirements of the spell.”

“An empty vessel?” Willow’s brow was furrowed. “What does that mean?”

“That means…no demon, no magic, no additional inner forces, per se.” He kept his gaze studiously away from the group. “We believe that means Xander actually.”

There was a moment, and then… “Me?” His eyes were wide, his jaw dropped. “How can that mean me? Anya’s demon and magic-free, too.”

“Yes, but she used to be a demon, as well as have all the skills that went along with it. We can’t be certain there might not be some residual effects.”

“What about you? Or Colin? I can’t be the only one empty enough to be able to do this.”

“As Watchers, part of our training includes extensive use of magics. We undergo quite strenuous instruction, as well as partake in numerous rituals and channeling exercises. It’s the same issue with us as it is with Anya. Unknowingly, we could possess lingering effects that would prohibit the spell from working.”

The younger Watcher leaned forward. “My skills are actually quite strong,” he pressed. “In fact, I would hazard a guess that my abilities could rival Miss Rosenberg’s—.”

“Colin. Do shut up.”

He flushed under Giles’ admonishing stare, pulling back into his seat. “Of course,” he mumbled.

“I was possessed once,” Xander offered. “Doesn’t that count?”

“Oh, no.”

Spike chuckled. “Well, guess the boy’s coming finally served a purpose after all,” he said, and then froze as Willow’s head whipped around, her eyes blazing. Bollocks. Too many secrets tumbling about in his head. Wasn’t supposed to let that one slip out so easy. Now he was going to have to deal with a pissed-off Buffy when she got back.

“What’s he talking about?” Xander’s surprise faded into confusion, turning from one Scooby to
another, each of them reluctant to meet his gaze. Only Anya seemed as clueless as he.

Giles sighed. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “I’m sure Buffy never meant for him to be kept in the
dark indefinitely.”

“Then somebody, please, turn on a light for me. What did Spike mean about ‘finally serving a
purpose’?”

“I meant, you two weren’t on the original invite list.” No one else was offering the information,
each of them squirming uncomfortably in his or her seat, waiting for someone else to take the
initiative. As usual, that someone was Spike. “Slayer had to barter to get you and demon girl to
come along.”

“And we weren’t told because…?”

“She didn’t want to hurt your feelings,” Willow interjected. “The Council was being all closed-
minded about how much of an asset you are to the team. Which you are. An asset. A huge asset.
An enormous, gigantic asset. The biggest asset—.” She shot the vampire a dirty look as he muffled
the snigger in his throat. “Ass-et,” she stressed to Spike. “Stop trying to make me look bad. It was
Buffy’s idea, remember? I just…” Her voice trailed off, guilty eyes flickering back to her best
friend’s hurt face.

“…went along with it,” Xander finished for her. “Because poor old Xan can’t pull his weight
around here. Or deal with the fact that nobody thinks he’s mature enough to handle the truth.”

“I never understood why they didn’t tell you in the first place. Made bugger all sense to me.”

“Not helping here, Spike.” Willow shot the older Watcher a silent cry for help.

“Regardless of what the Council originally thought,” Giles picked up, “your presence now is of
tremendous value to the team. You need to replace Willow within the confines of the spell the next
time we attempt it.”

“And that will be…?”

“Tomorrow night,” the redhead said. “That’s the next window of opportunity for us.”

“Some window,” Xander muttered. “How come just this once I can’t be the black lesbian Wicca?
Then I’d be safe from this equal opportunity employer. And has everyone forgotten the Harris
touch that seems to contaminate every spell I come into contact with? Just watch. Put me in this
and you’ll have half of Scotland banging down our doors trying to kill us.”

“Buck up,” said Spike. “It’s not like you’re in any actual peril by doing it. Council’s not about to
whack their precious Slayer with a spell that’s goin’ to hurt her.”

Giles cleared his throat. “Actually—.”

“Actually?” The vamp was on his feet in a heartbeat, leaning forward against the table to put his
face into the Watcher’s. “Actually is not inspiring, Rupert,” he said, his voice deadly calm. “Don’t
be telling me Buffy’s not walkin’ away from this without a scratch. You can just say sayonara to
this sunny disposition of mine if something happens to her.”

Willow felt Tara’s hand squeeze her knee, her eyes wide as they just stared at Spike. Why don’t
you just come out and say you love her, you stupid vamp? the witch thought wildly. Because if
anyone had any doubt about it before, he had pretty much just blown it up with a live grenade at
close distance, leaving no survivors. Golden glints of anger flashed in the azure depths, his knuckles even whiter as they dug into the table. If he gripped the wood any harder, she was sure his bones were going to pop straight out through his skin.

“Buffy is not in any danger.” Giles stared up at the blond, eyes hard. “I would not allow her to be.”

“Then…” As the truth sank in, Spike’s body eased, his head tilting as the two men squared off. “You’re bloody kidding me.”

“I told you he would take this badly,” Colin murmured, inching himself away from the pair.

“We think that’s why the Council was willing to bargain with your chip,” Giles said. “They didn’t expect you to walk away from the ritual.”

“Well, now, they can just bugger off then!” Spike pushed off from the table and began pacing the length of the room like a caged animal, muscles taut in fury. “No way am I risking my skin if it’s just goin’ to fry afterward. I’m not playin’ the patsy for a bunch of underhanded, troublemakin’ gits who’re only interested in havin’ a vampire flambé for tea. Not in this lifetime. Or any other, for that matter.”

“We don’t know that. We don’t know what the repercussions will be. That’s…why…we’re doing the research. And why we didn’t tell you in the first place.”

“C’mon, Spike.” Xander’s annoyance shone brightly in his face. “Don’t be backing out on such a great opportunity here. You were so quick to go all Gipper on me, remember?”

“That was different. You’re not the one they’re tryin’ to turn into Guy Fawkes.” He began marching for the door. “I’m outta here. You lot can bloody well suss this one out on your own.”

“Spike.”

She was the only one who probably could’ve stopped him, but as it was, Willow’s voice only slowed his pace, making him hesitate as his hand hit the doorknob. “Not goin’ to work, Red.”

“At least wait until Buffy gets back. Maybe she’ll have a solution to all this.” It was the magic word and she knew it. The song to soothe the savage beast…except a name, not a song. And not really savage. More like just…really, really pissed off.

Tara jumped on the chance her girlfriend gave her. “She’s supposed to be back by lunch time,” she called out as he hung in the doorway. “And that’s only…a little while away. You can wait a little while, can’t you?”

His head dropped, his eyes closing. Whoever said the witches couldn’t play dirty didn’t know them very well. “Fine,” he said, resigned. “I’ll wait for the Slayer. But I’m not changin’ my mind. No way are we celebratin’ Bonfire Night late around here. Over my undead body.”

* * *

The ache behind his eyes was starting to pulse, threatening to push out the orbs in its frenzy, making his eardrums quiver in resonance. It wasn’t supposed to be this difficult. It was supposed to have been a simple retrieval of a demon artifact. Dig under Dall Rath, find the harness, bring it to London. Simple. They weren’t supposed to uncover an entrance to the Otherworld, and they weren’t supposed to lose a dozen good men trying to manage their mistake. And now…still no word from Hornbrook, and unable to get through to young Sadler. Quentin Travers was not having a good day.
Perhaps it had been an error in judgment to approach the vampire with their offer. Perhaps he’d gotten angry and had turned on Hornbrook…

But that couldn’t be, and Travers knew it. Spike was no threat to anyone human, though Colin had voiced his disagreement with that theory on more than one occasion. No, if something had happened to the Council’s agent in Scotland, it wasn’t at Spike’s hand. The question was…whose?

Popping the two tablets into his mouth, Quentin swallowed them dry as he reached for his telephone. The other end was picked up almost immediately. “Ready a plane for a trip to Dall Rath,” he said into the receiver. “If we can’t reach Colin, then we’ll just have to go see him personally.”

* * *

She stood at the top of the hill, eyes scanning the rolling sweep as the breeze lifted and swept across the heather. This was where she had seen Duncan; she was sure of it. A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed the position the car had been in, and Buffy turned back, mouth grim. Time to search. Time to find out what exactly the cook was hiding.

She discovered it at the base of the swell, the opening hidden behind the heavy brush, obscured from anyone who wasn’t deliberately searching for something out of the ordinary. Not that a cave in the Highlands was odd. But considering the circumstances, she wasn’t leaving any stone unturned. Or…cave unexplored, as the case may be.

Though there was no mistaking the chill in the air, once she stepped through the fissure’s entrance, the first thing she noticed was how much warmer it was inside, a moisture she couldn’t place hanging in the atmosphere to stick in her throat. Buffy felt an odd sense of déjà vu, and stopped, looking around the dimly lit space, absorbing the earthen walls. Something about it seemed familiar, like someplace she’d been before, but where, she couldn’t quite figure.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” she singsonged, walking further into the darkness. The knife in her hand played between her fingers. It wasn’t as if she actually thought she was going to find Duncan; it was coming up on lunchtime. He was back at Dall Rath, simmering away, probably getting out the dishes to prepare setting the table. So what was making her so nervous?

Her foot caught in a depression in the earth, and Buffy glanced down, noting the uneven texture of the dirt, frowning as the furrows seemed to stretch back into the depths. Slowly, she kicked at a hard clod, knocking it aside to send it ricocheting against the wall, and felt her pulse begin to accelerate at the glimpse of pale coming from the hole it left behind. Another nudge…and more was revealed, a disclosure she hadn’t been expecting.

It looked like…skin.

Now why didn’t I think to bring a shovel? Buffy thought as she knelt down, hands scraping away at the earth, carefully avoiding direct contact with whatever it covered. Giles would call this being unprepared. Not that I really thought I’d be playing treasure hunt, but still…digging up bodies? Not anywhere near the top of my fun-things-to-do-in-Scotland list.

It took only a few minutes to uncover enough of the body to recognize it, but when she did, the Slayer’s heart dropped. Hornbrook. Not good. Not good at all. Her mind jumped back to the conversation she’d had with the cook, how he’d claimed not to know anything about the doctor showing up at the castle. Big fat liar, she thought irritably. But why on earth are you hiding his dead body?
If Buffy had learned anything by being the Chosen One, it was that one dead body usually led to two, and she quickly set about to scrape away the top layer of dirt at various points around the cavern. It was almost too easy; it was as if he’d been waiting for them to be found. There weren’t that many—well, anything more than zero was too many, but still—and when her hand touched the silky coat of the kelpie she’d chased across the mountain, she hesitated, knowing without having to look that the harness wouldn’t be around its neck, reluctant to dig further to confirm her suspicions.

“So, our Galloping Gourmet has the harness,” she mused out loud as she straightened. Not that there was anyone to talk to, but old habits die hard and she’d spent too many hours walking through cemeteries conversing with the undead. “The question is…why?”

Without answers, Buffy knew she was right back where she’d started from…unsure, with her hands tied until she knew for certain what was going on. But it did give her a springing off point, and right now, she felt like springing off on the smug cook’s face. That charming act of his suddenly seemed very not charming, in light of the plethora of corpses he was leaving behind. She just had to get back to the castle. Empty-handed. Not her favorite state. It was much better to be full-handed, or at least, partially full. Then, at least, she’d have a peace offering for Giles when she had to come clean about the previous night and why, all of a sudden, she’d thought to search this particular part of the landscape.

As she began covering the bodies back up, Buffy noted a small patch near the back of the cave, a recess in the wall invisible to anyone just standing in the entrance. Seeing it required coming deep into its bowels, and then to crawl on hands and knees for a few feet in order to reach it. A nice little hidey-hole, she thought, as she began the trek. Wonder what he’s got stashed in there.

There were more furrows in the ground, matching almost identically with the ones in the front of the cave, and the Slayer wasted little time scratching at them. She stopped almost immediately as a familiar set of dark eyes stared back at her, hitting her head against the low ceiling as she sat abruptly back.

Duncan Davison.

The real Duncan Davison.

Very much dead.

Crap.

There was no more time for searching. She had to return to the castle. She had to warn the others. Someone had left the stable doors open.

And the kelpie was running free.

First, though, she had to hide what she had done. Bury the bodies back up. Make it look like she had never been there in the first place. One of the few tactical strategies she had left to her devices was the element of surprise; if she could take the demon unaware, perhaps they stood a better chance of…

She’d been concentrating so hard on the lifeless form of Duncan Davison, she’d almost missed the glint that emanated from the nadir of the recess. A gleam of gold catching what little light managed to make its way to the back of the cave. A sparkle she hadn’t anticipated finding quite so easily.

And to the victor…came the spoils…
His breathing was heavy as he stood in the small cell, looking behind him to see the wall magically appear. When his hand reached out to touch it, the guardian was met with stone, and silently cursed. A spell. Which seemed to work only one way apparently. It also meant that he was leaving the Otherworld completely unprotected until he could find a way to return. With the harness, that would be no problem, but without it…

He refused to finish the thought, choosing instead to turn back and face the enveloping darkness, the light from the tunnel fading as he crept carefully toward the doorway. He’d come with a plan. Now, he had no choice but to see it through…
Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has found the truth about Duncan buried in the cave, while Xander and Spike have both learned some unwelcome truths about the upcoming spell…

The first time, nobody noticed.

The second time, Anya glared at him out of the corner of her eye, and poked him in the side, wordlessly reprimanding him back into silence.

The third time, Xander felt an unwelcome kick in his shins from Willow across the table, along with another poke from his girlfriend, and ducked his head when Giles swiveled his gaze to stare at him over his spectacles.

The fourth time, Spike finally spoke up.

“Oh, for the love of everything evil, will you just stop with the nancy boy sighing already?” The vampire glowered from his chair in the corner. “We all get the idea. Just let it go.”

“What?” The young man looked innocently around at his friends. “I’m tired, and I’ve got one butt cheek snoring away with the other doing its best to join it, and I just want to do something other than stare at these books for a little bit. I don’t know what you guys are talking about.”

“Maybe you should go stretch your legs,” Giles offered. “Take a walk before lunch. Perhaps it will…refresh you sufficiently so that you can continue with our research without the…vocal accompaniment.”

“You’re lettin’ him go?” Spike’s voice was sharp in amazement. “A few bloody sighs and he’s gettin’ paroled. If I thought it was that easy to get outta here, I’d’ve tried it myself. Thanks so ever-lovin’ much, Rupert.”

Xander shambled to his feet. “You wanna come?” he asked the blond vampire.

The invitation took everyone by surprise, no one more so than Spike. He stiffened, brows furrowed, his eyes jumping from Xander to Giles, and then back to Xander again. “This a trick question?” he asked slowly.

The young man shrugged. “Just thought I’d offer,” he said, and turned away from the table.

“Hang on, then!” Spike was on his feet and across the room in seconds. “I didn’t say no.”

“And just where do you think you’re going?” Giles queried, gazing at the pair in annoyance.

“Don’t tell me Harris falls outside of your little grounding rules.” The vampire rolled his eyes. “‘Cause unless you or Junior want to tag along, I’m walkin’ through that door whether you like it or not.”
The Watcher inhaled deeply, trying to control his rising irritation “I just meant, it’s noon, and daylight outside. Your options are rather limited if you’re interested in stretching your legs.”

Spike glanced at the unexpected ally at his side before turning back to the group at the table. “We could go scout out the dungeons again,” he suggested. “Do a quick sweep before the Slayer comes back for lunch. Maybe that beastie I killed the other night crawled into one of the nearby cells.”

It was actually a reasonable offer, taking the older Englishman by surprise as he regarded the pair. “Fine,” he finally said. “Just make sure you both take weapons. We can’t be sure what else might have come through from the Otherworld.”

Xander brightened. “Oh! Can I take that nifty sword Buffy had the other night?” he asked as he followed the vampire’s saunter to the doorway. “The one with the swirly things on the handle?”

Spike snorted. “Sure. If you can bloody well lift it.”

* * *

Their flashlights cut through the darkness as they descended the stairs into the dungeon, sending dozens of bugs scuttling into the shadows in the wake of their beams. Hesitating at the bottom, Spike waited for Xander to join him before gesturing off toward one of the adjoining halls.

“Slayer and I checked that one out pretty good last time,” he said, and nodded in the opposite direction. “I think this way’s goin’ to be our best bet at findin’ anything.”

“Is that what we really want?” Xander asked, and ducked his head, his cheeks slightly red, when the vamp cocked his eyebrow. “I just didn’t want to read anymore. I didn’t think we were actually going to be doing any serious patrolling here.”

Spike started ambling toward the latter portion of the dungeon he’d suggested. “I was just blowin’ smoke for Rupes’ sake,” he said. “Buffy and I have been through here more than once. Trust me. We’re not goin’ to find anything.”

“That a promise?” He double-timed his step in order to catch up to the vamp. Safety in numbers, after all.

“Since when do I make promises?”

“How ‘bout just a super strong assurance then?”

“Will it make you shut your yap?”

“Probably not.”

“Then no.”

They walked along in silence for a moment, the knife that Xander had grabbed from the weapons cache gripped tightly in his hand as he focused his light before them. “Upstairs earlier,” he said, his voice sounding oddly hollow as it bounced around the stone walls. “You weren’t really going to walk out on doing the spell, were you?”

There was only the slightest hesitation in Spike’s step as he glanced back at his companion. “Were you?” he countered.

“I didn’t actually get up.”
“But you thought about it.”

Xander shrugged. “But I wouldn’t have done it. Just kind of hit me hard, what with the whole not-being-wanted thing, on top of only being useful because I have absolutely no special skills to contribute, whatsoever. Not exactly a huge kick to the old ego there and a double whammy to boot. Useless and uninvited. Xander Harris, empty vessel extraordinaire.”

“Not so empty. I’ve seen the way you eat.”

“Donuts do not a man make. Unless your name is Homer. Or you’re a cop. Or---.”

“At least they expect you to get through this thing alive,” Spike interrupted. “Think about how I feel. Turns out, I’m just spell kindling. You just know they’re thinkin’, ‘good riddance to bad rubbish.’”

“Giles and Willow won’t let that happen. They’ll find a way to work around it. They always do.”

“I think Rupert would be happy to let me fry, right about now. He’s still just a tad vexed about last night.” That made Xander stop in his tracks, and it took the vampire a few seconds to realize the young man was no longer behind him. He halted, tilting his head to look back over his shoulder, his face swallowed in shadow. “What now?”

He seemed to hesitate to pose the query, then made the conscious decision to go for it. “About that…why’d you do it? Take the heat, I mean. Anya told me what happened. We’re all grown-ups here, Spike. And volunteers in the whole battle against evil shebang. It’s not like we’re going to get fired or anything. There’s no reason you had to---.”

“Told Red, and I’m not goin’ to repeat myself,” the vamp interrupted, resuming his pace. “It’s done, it’s out there, and the more people keep harpin’ on it, the more I regret doin’ it in the first place. So let it go.”

“Did you do it for Buffy?”

The Slayer’s name reached into Spike’s spine and jerked him to a standstill, his shoulders tensing as he debated how to respond. Couldn’t turn; even under the veil of darkness in the dungeons, there was no way Harris would be able to miss the truth on his face. Yet, the question held no malice, innocently asked in that trusting manner the young man usually reserved for the girls of the group. Somehow, he suspected that if he looked at Xander right now, Spike would see the wide-eyed artlessness that probably activated every protective instinct in Buffy’s body.

“It was just…the best thing. For all involved,” he finally replied. Good. Safe answer. Boy can’t argue with that one.

“Not for you.”

Bugger. He caught that.

The slight lift of Spike’s shoulders almost went unnoticed. “Since when does that matter? ‘Sides, not like it’s goin’ to happen on a regular basis. Enjoy it while you’ve still got a patsy vamp around to blame things like this on.”

Xander took a step closer. “You didn’t really answer my question, Spike. Did this have anything to do with you and Buffy?”

Spike gritted his teeth. He wanted to tell, even if it was Harris, but he’d promised her he wouldn’t.
Sure, he’d slipped upstairs, letting his emotions get the better of him when he’d thought the spell was a threat to her. But had that been enough for Xander to figure out the truth? “Well, seein’ as there is no me and Buffy, that’s not very likely, now is it?” he said, and began walking again. Keep moving. Keep it light. Don’t let him know. Promises, promises, bloody promises.

The hand around his bicep came as a mild surprise, and this time, Spike turned and shone his flashlight in the other man’s face. There was no anger there, no hate, only that quirky half-smile as he struggled to find the right words. Times like this, the vampire knew why the Slayer let Xander hang around as much as he did. Annoying as hell, but still...something there.

“I see how hard you’re trying here,” Xander said. “And if being in love is what’s doing it, then hey, I say, all the power to you. Even if she doesn’t see it right away, no way can Buffy pretend you haven’t been on your best behavior when we get back to Sunnydale. Not to mention a huge help. Which I know is what you’re aiming for. Life on the Hellmouth is easier if you’ve got the Slayer on your side. I can personally vouch for that one.” He laughed. “And you won’t have to worry about her staking your new girlfriend. You can just hold last night over her head as blackmail material with Giles.”

He didn’t know. God, Spike thought. The poor git really is thick. Well-intentioned and mildly likeable, but still thick. “I’ll remember that, Harris” he said slowly. “Though I wouldn’t have thought you’d be a big supporter of something as underhanded as that.” His lips curled into a smirk. “Must be the demon girl’s influence.”

“Ex-demon. Emphasis on the ex.”

“Still good to see she can corrupt with the best of ‘em.”

“I’m not corrupted!”

“You just encouraged me to blackmail the Slayer for personal gain. Sounds corrupt to me.”

“I just…” Xander’s voice trailed off, his brow wrinkled, and he loosed his grip on the vampire’s arm. “How is it you manage to turn every conversation I have with you into something that makes me want to drive something long, wooden, and possibly a little on the blunt side just for that extra bit of pain, right through your unbeating heart?” he asked.

Spike laughed and began heading back down the corridor. “Call it that vamp je ne sais quoi,” he drawled. “I got it in spades.”

“Have you figured out when we’re going to try this thing we planned in exposing the badness that is Duncan?” Xander queried as he hurried to the other’s side.

“We’ll see if the Slayer comes back with anything first,” the vamp instructed. “Somehow, I think any evidence she digs up might be a little more convincing to Rupert than us playin’ ping pong with the wanker cook’s head.” He grinned. “Though that would be fun.”

“You told Buffy? And she believed you?”

“Didn’t have to. When you lot were kipping it on the way home last night, we saw him out for a late night stroll on the mountain. Hard to argue with what’s skulking around right in front of you.”

“But Colin said this was his last day. She’s going to have to move fast if she’s going to---.”

“Junior said what?” The amiable atmosphere evaporated, hardening Spike as he whirled to stare at the young man.
Xander flinched. “Apparently, Duncan showed up this morning and said his aunt was doing better and that she’d be back in the kitchen as of tomorrow,” he explained. “Colin said so before you came downstairs.”

The ramifications of such a move on the part of the cook ticked over in the vampire’s brain, the muscles in his jaw twitching as he tried to figure out what exactly that could mean. Ready to make a run for it? But then why stick around for so long? What was his motive? And why play up to the girls for so long if he wasn’t going to follow through? Plus, couldn’t forget about the not too idle threat he’d made to Spike the night of the storm, even if he had tried covering it up later on with some half-assed apology.

“Don’t like it,” he finally muttered. “Something’s not right there.”

“But this is good, right?” Xander said. “I mean, if he’s not around, he’s not a threat. And the girls will stop acting so crazy without him in the picture.”

The blue of his eyes appeared almost black in the dim light of the dungeon. “And where exactly is he s’posed to be goin’?” he quizzed. “A kelpie roaming around the Highland countryside, eatin’ up the locals for tea? You think Buffy’s goin’ to be thrilled to hear about that? And we’ve still got that whole harness deal to be worryin’ about. That Hornbrook bloke said that came from the Otherworld. What if there’s some tie between that and our least favorite cook? We need to find it, suss out what it does. Maybe then we’ll get some answers about this whole soddin’ mess.”

“OK, I see your point.” Both men were silent, lost in his thoughts. And then, “That doesn’t mean we have to go back up to the research just yet, does it?”

Spike snorted. “Are you kiddin’ me?” he retorted. “We wait for Buffy to get back, see if she found anything. No reason for us to be bored out of our minds in the meantime.” With that, he swept his flashlight back to the corridor and began trekking further into the bowels of the dungeon, Xander close on his heels.

* * *

He should’ve known. They didn’t know he was there, blending amidst the velvet shadows. The vampire had obviously been too distracted to sense his presence. So there was no reason for them to lie. But their words, their worries…it only confirmed what he’d suspected from the beginning, solidified his plan. No other choice now. Must proceed forward.

He waited until their footsteps were mere echoes against the stone walls before emerging from the cell, his dark eyes glowing softly in the darkness. Instinctively, the guardian kelpie turned toward the stairwell, his own tread silent. Time to act.

* * *

She waited until the two Watchers had stepped from the room before jumping into it. “OK, what the hell is going on?” Anya demanded, dropping her book to lean forward over the table.

Willow and Tara exchanged a quick glance, both brows slightly furrowed. “We’re…researching,” the redhead said slowly. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“That’s not what I meant.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m talking about with Spike. And don’t you two go pretending you don’t know what’s going on. I saw all those little looks getting passed around. Xander may be blind to these kinds of things, but I’m not. Not after a thousand years of watching guys and girls falling in and out of love all over this stupid rock. So, spill. I want
Details.”

“Details about…what?” Even though she could sense it was pointless, Willow couldn’t bring herself to confess to the truth just yet. Anya was just going to have to…

“Spike’s in love with Buffy. Only a fool can’t see it. If there’d been one more wrong word out of Giles, we’d be scraping little bits of stuffy Englishman off the ceiling right now and Spike would be passed out on the floor from the headache that chip gave him for attacking Giles in the first place. Don’t think I can’t tell that the two of you know about this. So I want the truth here. Is Spike in love with Buffy?”

Willow visibly deflated. “Yes,” she admitted, her voice tiny.

“I knew it!” Anya’s smile was wide. “God, my instincts are good. I’m so glad I haven’t lost my touch. I worry about that sometimes.”

The redhead harrumphed, doing her best not to laugh in the other girl’s face. “Oh, yeah?” she challenged. “You might want to think again about how good that touch of yours actually is. Apparently, Spike’s been in love with Buffy for a while now, since before we left Sunnydale even, so fat lot of good those instincts are doing for you, I’d say.”

“Like I really spent a lot of time with Spike prior to this little Highland fling,” Anya countered. She shook her head. “Xander’s head is going to explode when he finds this out---.”

“You can’t tell Xander!”

The ex-demon frowned at the blonde witch’s outburst. “Why not? Everyone else seems to know about this. Well, except probably for Buffy.” She chuckled. “No way would she ever have agreed to the sleeping arrangements…” This time, there was no mistaking the guilty look exchanged between the two lesbians, and Anya’s jaw dropped. “That’s why you two were borrowing my bubble bath this morning! It was for Buffy!” She paused. “Well, good for her. Bathtub sex can be highly erotic, especially if there’s lots of soap---.”

“You’re not going to tell Xander, right?”

She went on as if she hadn’t heard a word what the witch had said. “His head is sooo going to explode. His best friend in love with another vampire? No way is he going to be able to process that one without some serious cerebral damage.”

“We’re not supposed to say anything. Buffy wants to be the one to break it Giles and, well, just Xander now.” Willow bit her lip. Their little secret wasn’t turning out to be so secret anymore. She just hoped she wasn’t the one who got blamed for it.

“Then she should have a talk with her boyfriend. He’s the one who’s got it written all over his face. Did you not see the way he nearly bit Giles’ head off?”

She had a point. “I’ll find a way to tell her what happened,” the redhead said. “But in the meantime, could you please just keep mum about all this? Don’t say a word to Xander until Buffy gives us the green light. OK?”

Anya shrugged. “OK,” she agreed. “Not like I haven’t kept secrets from him in the past.” She smiled. “There was this one time, when he wanted to have sex on top of the dryer…”

Picking up her book again, Willow slouched in her chair, hunching up her shoulders to try and cover her ears. Maybe if she thought about something totally different, like daffodils or Snoopy...
dancing or chem equations, she wouldn’t actually hear what was about to come out of the other
girl’s mouth, or picture in her head what she was describing…

Nope. She sighed. Didn’t work.

* * *

He was reaching for his coat hanging delicately from the stand when the rap came to his door.
“Enter,” Quentin called, not hesitating in his task.

It opened, revealing a trim secretary waiting in its entrance. “I realize you’re about to leave, Mr.
Travers,” she said. “But I’m afraid something has…come up.”

He shrugged the heavy wool over his shoulders. “Unless it’s regarding the issue at Dall Rath,” he said, “or involves dire circumstances, it can wait until I return.”

“No, sir, it can’t.”

The young man’s appearance behind his secretary surprised Quentin, and he frowned as he lifted his gaze. “You’re…Mr. Finn, correct?” he said.

Riley nodded grimly. “And if you’re going to see Buffy, I’m coming with you. That’s why I’m here.”

Travers shook his head. “I’m afraid you’ve wasted the trip for nothing, young man. I have no intention of involving you in Council matters at this time.”

“Look, I can appreciate that you have protocols you have to follow. I’ve been there. I know—–.”

“Your government is hardly the same thing as my Board,” Quentin said smoothly, and swept past him. “Now, good day.”

Riley watched as the man walked away. He’d come too far to get the brush off this easily. He wasn’t going to let a little thing like no stop him from getting to Spike. “Buffy’s in danger,” he called after the Englishman.

Hesitating, Quentin glanced back over his shoulder to survey the veracity of his unannounced visitor. “And why would you say that?” he asked slowly.

“She called me. The other night. She didn’t say as much, but I heard Spike in the background—–.”

“Spike?” The vampire’s name sent a trigger of alarm through Travers’ veins. “Was he threatening the Slayer in some way?”

No time for niceties. The only thing that mattered was getting to Scotland. “Yes,” he said, chin held high.

There was a moment of consideration, Quintin’s pale eyes flickering over Riley’s face as he seemed to be weighing his words. “I don’t approve of your methods, Mr. Finn,” he said. “No doubt you utilized your government contacts in order to locate me. But I do believe that you have only Miss Summers’ best interests in mind. Very well. You may accompany me to Dall Rath. But I will not have you interfering in Council business, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” The relief flooded through the young man’s body as he strode confidently behind Mr. Travers. One step closer to Buffy. One step closer to getting rid of Spike for good.
She stowed it in the brush outside the castle, doing everything she could to make its clarion ring as quiet as possible. Taking it inside would only be tipping her hand, and Buffy wanted to confront Duncan with as much ammo as she possibly could. If he knew she’d found the harness in his stash of dead bodies, no telling how he would react. But first, time to arm up.

His body just inside the doorway jerked her to a halt, and Buffy sighed as she tried to step around him. “Out of my way, Xander,” she said, heading down the hallway toward the weapons cache.

He followed after her, long steps sure, and grabbed her arm. “We need to talk,” he said. When she gazed back at him, hazel slightly glassy, his lips thinned. “In private,” he added, and began pulling her in the opposite direction toward the stairwell.

She followed blindly, not questioning her friend’s motives. It was only when they were on the upper floor, when he had let go of her arm, did she speak. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Did something happen while I was out?”

“Kind of.” He stood back, and under her watchful gaze, straightened, lifting his head and staring at her with wide brown eyes.

It was the last thing she expected…the rippling of his skin as he seemed to shrink, his hair to grow…lighten…the chocolate of his eyes dissolving into hazel. Within seconds, Buffy found herself staring into her own face, grim and unsmiling, and only moments after that before she realized what it was standing in front of her.

Her foot lashed out, connecting with the kelpie’s gut, sending it reeling against the stone wall. “Nice trick,” she spat. “But I’ve got you figured out, Duncan, or whatever your name is. Don’t think I’m going to let you kill my friends like you killed all those other people. Not on my watch.”

“Not…wish to…”

It was weird hearing her own voice arguing back with her, and for a second, Buffy faltered, the punch she’d been about to throw catching for a millisecond before it landed. It was enough to allow the kelpie to react, to catch her hand within his, and to stay her movement as it began to shift again…sprouting the black coat she’d seen down in the dungeons…teeth elongating…

“You are a worthy fighter,” it said, its words gliding into her, using his charms to calm her nerves. “But I am not the one you wish to battle.” Very slowly, it released her from its grip, stepping back. And waited.

“Really?” she said, fists still poised, shoulders ready, prepared for another assault should it come. “Who are you then?”

“The last remaining guardian of the Otherworld,” it replied, “and we share a common enemy. I believe you call him…Duncan.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Anya has figured out Spike and Buffy are together, and Buffy has returned to the castle with the harness, only to be confronted by the one remaining guardian kelpie…

They faced off, both wary, both expectant of any movement from the other, regarding the unanticipated ally in each with suspicion and interest. Though she’d seen it---or something exactly like it---down in the dungeon, it now seemed to be in miniature of itself, standing at just about six feet, with almost human-like features. Well, except for the long razor-like teeth that extended from its mouth. And the black eyes that almost seemed too big for its face. And the fact that instead of bare skin, it sported a black pelt that rippled even in the dim light of the hallway. OK, maybe not so human-like.

“A guardian,” Buffy finally said slowly. “You have a name or something? Because calling you that guardian kelpie demon turns into quite a mouthful for me if we’re going to have a conversation here.”

“I’m afraid you wouldn’t be able to pronounce it in your tongue.”

She relaxed her stance, mildly annoyed. “Well, I’ve got to call you something.” She thought for a moment. “How ‘bout Frank? Good, solid name. That work for you?”

The kelpie’s confusion was evident in its dark face. “Do I look like a Frank?” it asked slowly.

Buffy shrugged. “You look like that thing that attacked me and Spike the other day.”

“That would’ve been my colleague,” the newly-dubbed Frank said, nodding. “Another guardian.”

“And you say you’re the last one?”

“Until more are called to replace those that have been killed in the line of their duty.”

“Nice to hear I’m not the only one who got called,” Buffy commented, and then frowned. “Wait,” she said. “There were more of you? How many more?”

“Three are required to effectively protect the entrance to the Otherworld---.”

She rolled her eyes. “There’s that number again,” she muttered. “So, you’re one, Spike killed number two when it attacked us downstairs…if you’re the last, where’s the third one? Don’t tell me it’s Duncan.”

“No. The third guardian was the one you killed out in the human world.”

The memory of the kelpie standing in the moonlight, its mane rustling in the slight breeze, the stray beams of silver highlighting its luxuriant coat, came rushing back to the forefront of the Slayer’s mind, and she flushed as if a child who’d just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “I didn’t kill it,” she defended. “I wounded it, yes, but I found it---.” She cut herself off, reluctant to
divulge all the information she’d only recently acquired. There was still no telling what this creature’s full motives were, and until she had a firmer hand on what exactly was going on, Buffy wasn’t going to give any more than she had to.

“You said Duncan was your enemy, too,” she said, changing the subject. “Spike seems to think he’s a kelpie. Is that true?”

“Yes. Though I am ashamed to admit that he is of my kind. He has no honor.”

“And how do you know he’s our enemy? If you’re so busy guarding your Otherworld, you can’t have known what he’s been doing in my world.”

It took a long moment for the kelpie to respond. Its eyes were solemn, but not malicious, boring into her as if by doing so it could read her very soul, and Buffy found herself shifting uncomfortably as she waited for it to answer. Frank was doing his own assessment, judging her merit to determine how much to reveal, and the shift in their positions was disconcerting, to say the least. Don’t push it, she reminded herself. So far, his explanation has been without the routine kelpie touching thing that seemed required for her to be affected by its sway, so he’s doing his best to maintain his sincerity in this issue. No need to go all Slayer-y until he gives me reason to.

“The one you know as Duncan came to me the other day,” Frank finally said. “He attempted to lay the blame for his crimes at the feet of you and your vampire…companion.” For some reason, the guardian knew enough not to qualify their unusual relationship in other terms; somehow, he suspected she would not react well if she were to discover the pair had had an audience during their recent coupling. As it was…

“He what?” Her indignation colored itself in twin spots of red high on her cheeks, her jaw dropping as the statement sank in. “He said we killed all those people? Oh, I am soooo going to enjoy wringing his too-charming neck.”

“Not the deaths,” he clarified. “His theft.”

Though her pulse raced, she gave no outward appearance of having understood what he was referring to. But in her head, Buffy’s brain was firing, making the connections regarding the harness that had been eluding her, yet…it still didn’t coalesce into a cohesive picture. “Tell me what happened,” she said calmly. “What did he steal?”

The guardian sighed. “It’s a long story---.”

“Then I suggest you dive in. Unless you’d rather be fighting.” Her fists tightened at her words.

Another sigh. “If it will aid in your trust, so be it.” He took a deep breath. “As a guardian, my duties are twofold. First and foremost, I, along with my colleagues, protect the Otherworld from those who would seek to harm it, which unfortunately, we have come to learn means all intruders. So, we prevent any from crossing through the entrance.”

“You kill them,” she stated, remembering the attack on her and Spike during their first sojourn into the tunnel.

“We protect our species,” it reiterated. “Death is a necessary effect of that. As the Slayer, you should understand our need for such measures.”

She blushed slightly at the admonition in his voice. “What’s the other part of your job?” she asked.

“We guard what is considered one of the most valuable artifacts in the Otherworld. It has great
potential for misuse, should it fall into the hands of someone with less than noble goals…”

“…and Duncan stole it out from under your noses.” Not time yet to say she knew he was speaking of the harness. Maybe that would come later.

The kelpie’s nod was one of saddened guilt. “It was the night of Samhain. We guardians were on alert because for the first time in years, men had uncovered one of the portals to the Otherworld, and we feared that they would utilize the one night of the year when the veil separating us is thin enough to allow themselves entrance. All of our attention was focused outward. We never expected one of our own to take advantage of that. The traitor…this Duncan…stole the artifact, then fled past us into the human world. We had no choice but to lay chase to him.”

“But you didn’t catch him, or he wouldn’t be downstairs right now cooking our lunch.”

“No. We attempted for almost a full day to track him down, but to no avail. When we realized it would take a much longer search, we returned to our post to plan further, only to find a group of men there attempting to enter.”

Colin’s story of the witch and the first try at the controlling spell came filtering back into Buffy’s conscious, and she now understood why the attack on the Council had come from the outside. The guardians had still been in human form from their excursion into the Scottish countryside, hence the confusion on the part of the single witness who had been left.

“Those men,” the kelpie was saying, jerking Buffy back from her thoughts. “I assume…your presence came so soon after their departure…you are working with them?”

“With is kind of a strong word,” she replied. “But I did hear about the fight. Why did you kidnap the witch?”

There was no apology in its voice. “She was the best choice to learn what the men were planning,” Frank explained. “As the only female, she would be the easiest for us to lure away, and there was no mistaking the fact that she had strong magical capabilities. We thought her the most powerful one of the attackers.” It sighed. “We were wrong. She knew next to nothing. Only that they were attempting to gain control of the entrance. Nothing about the…artifact, or how they meant to profit from having access to the Otherworld.”

“So you killed her? Nice interrogation tactics.” The sarcasm dripped from her voice, and Buffy folded her arms across her chest. She was no longer afraid of a pending attack from the guardian; by divulging so much of the story, he was slowly buying her trust, and her body language showed this.

“She had served her purpose. Once we had what little information she could give us, we knew we could not leave the entrance unguarded indefinitely. It was then that we decided to separate---two of us to return to the tunnels, while the third remained in the outside world to search for the traitor and retrieve the artifact.”

Now was the time for her to give in this little information tug-of-war they were playing. “I saw him,” Buffy admitted. “Your friend. Out on the mountain. At least, I think it was him. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Duncan.”

The kelpie frowned. “What makes you so certain?”

Shifting uncomfortably in her stance, the Slayer replied, “Because I wounded it. Duncan’s never showed any sign of being that badly hurt. Unless you guys have some sort of super-healing
capabilities that we don’t know about.” She waited expectantly.

“No,” it said. “So you did…kill him?” Its voice was tight, and for the first time since approaching her, the guardian showed signs of tension, regret perhaps in trusting her enough to relate his tale.

“I don’t think so,” she argued. “Yes, we did chase it. All we knew was that some creature that matched the kelpie’s description had gotten out and was running loose, chowing down on natives. You have your job? Well, mine’s pretty darn similar. I’m here to protect people from demons who do that, so when Spike and I saw it, we tried taking it out. Tried being the operative word. I got close enough to wound it, but then it took off. And when we went back the next day to try and track it down, we couldn’t find the body anywhere.”

This relaxed him, though his unease still twined through his limbs. “The traitor claimed you killed my colleague. Perhaps he was merely making an assumption.”

“No maybe he finished the job himself.” Time to take the plunge. “The thing of it is…when we saw the kelpie, it was wearing this…harness. Made of bells. Does that…mean anything to you?”

“You saw it?” It was in her face then, crossing the distance between them before she could blink, its hands gripping her upper arms tightly.

“Let. Me. Go,” Buffy said through gritted teeth. It took more exertion than she thought imaginable; the pervasive sense of calm that swirled through her at its touch was distracting, but experience---and Spike’s warning---had told her that its power over her rested in its need for physical contact with her. This was not the time to not be in full control of her faculties.

Frank complied immediately but didn’t move, hovering just inside her personal space, staring down at her with those black pools. “You saw it?” it repeated, its voice only slightly calmer.

“Yes.” She took a small step backwards. “Is that what you’re looking for?” She already knew the answer to this; she just needed to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. So to speak.

“That is what was stolen,” it admitted, but the frown that creased its face betrayed his thoughts. “Though why my colleague should have possession of it, I don’t know.”

“Maybe he managed to get it back. Could be, he was on his way back here with it---.”

“---when you saw him.” The rest of the thought lay unspoken between them, but the accusation was clear. If Buffy and Spike hadn’t chased the kelpie on the mountain, it could very well have returned to the dungeon with the harness safely intact, leaving all three guardians still alive, and the artifact back where it belonged. Buffy flushed. Nothing like a little guilt to get the blood flow pumping.

“You said Duncan accused us of having something to do with the theft,” she said, desperate to return to the truce they had garnered. Shift it back to the bad guy. Focus his attention on that. Don’t let him dwell too much on the Slayer’s screw-up.

“He claimed that the vampire was in possession of the harness.”

Time for half-truths. “That’s ridiculous. Spike doesn’t have the harness.”

“I know.”

“Not that it matters, but you sound awfully sure of that.”
“I overheard the vampire speaking with another male down in the dungeon. He made it clear that your group was still searching for it.”

“And we are. Still searching. Because we don’t have it.” OK, that one was a lie, but nothing in her voice or face disclosed her duplicity. She wasn’t ready yet to give away the only power card in her hand; the guardian didn’t need to know about that part just yet. “It’s not like we even cared about the stupid harness in the first place,” she added unnecessarily.

“But you’re looking for it.”

Buffy sighed. “Only in a my-boss-lied-to-me-and-I-want-to-know-why-so-I-can-beat-him-at-his-own-game sort of way. It seemed too important to too many people who didn’t want to tell us why. We couldn’t just ignore it.”

“And yet you were going to attempt the same spell to control the entrance.”

“No, we tried to close it,” she argued. “The Council---that would be the boss I mentioned---tried to trick us into doing their spell, but we figured out what they were doing in time.”

The guardian was thoughtful. “Yes,” it mused. “The traitor mentioned he had managed to arrange that.”

Well, that explained where the book came from, but… “Why would he want us to change the spell? And how did he know about it? He wasn’t with you when you did whatever to the witch, was he?”

“No, he wasn’t.” That was one of the many questions the guardian had raised in his mind when the thief had approached him in the first place. “And as for wanting the entrance closed, he asserted that he was concerned about protecting our species from outsiders, but that’s just another of his lies.”

“And you think this because…?”

“Because if I were him, I would want those who were hunting me down safely locked behind a spell that prevented them from chasing me…wouldn’t you?”

Piece by piece, it was all beginning to make crystal sense to the Slayer…clarification of what had happened to the first group to try the spell…why Duncan persisted in sticking around when he’d had the harness in his possession almost all along…most likely using Spike as a diversionary tactic to throw off the guardian…and yet, certain questions still lingered.

“How did Duncan get into the tunnel to talk to you?” Buffy asked. “There’s a spell blocking the way between it and the dungeon.”

He seemed reluctant to answer. “That was one of the…questions I myself had. Why I doubted his honesty in coming to me. When I came through and discovered the way back barred, I realized it was likely he had the harness in his control when he sought me out. It was the only way he could’ve crossed the barrier. That is one of its…side effects. It…dissolves magic.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Nice side effect,” she commented. “What else does it do?”

“No.” His denial surprised her even further. “You don’t need to know that.”

“Need…want…two sides of the same coin.”

There was no denying his vehemence as his hands clawed into themselves. “I’m not telling you,”
Frank said again. “In knowledge lies power, and I am not about to arm you in such a way.”

“And here I thought we were friends.”

“We are allies. Nothing more.”

“You told me about the magic thing.”

“Because that is secondary to the harness’ true power. I suggest you let this one go, Slayer. I will not be the one to disclose what you seek.”

She stared at it, thoughts ticking behind her eyes. Fine. If Frank wanted to play that way, she had no problem with it. He didn’t share what the harness actually did, she wouldn’t share that she now had it. Balance.

“So what now?” she queried, hazel eyes calm. “Feel like ripping off harness boy’s head? I can always use a strong fighter as back-up.”

“My original plan had been to do just that, but now…”

They heard it at the same time, the steps along the stairwell behind the Slayer, and in the space of Buffy turning around to see who was there, the kelpie had changed, hair lightening, black coat smoothing into a t-shirt and jeans. It had folded its arms across its muscled chest by the time Giles stepped through from the stairs, regarding the Watcher with cool blue eyes.

“Buffy,” Giles said, surprise quirking his brow even as his gaze flickered over her shoulder. The second name that came from his lips was far less friendly. “Spike.”

She whirled to see the kelpie in her lover’s form standing behind her, the vampire’s trademark smirk curling its lips. “You mind?” it asked. “Me and Slayer were havin’ a conversation here. Private-like.”

“Where’s Xander? You didn’t abandon him in the dungeon, did you?”

Kelpie Spike snorted. “Right. I chained him to the wall and left him to fend for himself.” It tilted its head. “The boy got bored and said he was goin’ to take a nap before lunch. I was just comin’ up to let him know we should be headin’ downstairs when I ran into the Slayer here.”

“Actually, I’m rather glad that I’ve found both of you,” Giles started. “There’s something I’d like to discuss---.”

Grabbing the kelpie’s arm, Buffy dragged him past the Watcher and toward the stairs. “Can’t right now,” she shot back over her shoulder. “I need Spike to help me check something out down in the tunnel. I think I’ve found some answers for us.”

“This really shouldn’t---,” he called, but the pair was already gone, leaving the Englishman frowning behind his glasses.

* * *

She waited until they were down in the dungeon before whirling to face the familiar---yet not---face behind her. “How can you do that?” she asked, amazed. “Looking like Spike is one thing. Talking and acting like him is another. You totally fooled Giles.”

It tilted its head in that Spike-like way, blue eyes narrowed. “But I wouldn’t fool you,” he
commented. “You’re very…attuned to the vampire, aren’t you?”

“It comes as part of the Slayer gig,” she explained. “And that’s not the point.” Her fluster creased her brow in wrinkles that were hidden by the darkness. They had only the flashlight she’d grabbed on the way down for illumination, and Buffy was doing everything she could to keep it away from her face. Don’t want to give too much away, she’d thought.

“It’s no great mystery,” the kelpie said. “I’ve had the opportunity to observe him more than once. His mannerisms and speech patterns are quite…original. It makes them simple to mimic.”

“Still…” It was confusing, a havoc in her head where her eyes were telling her one thing and her body was screaming another. By all appearances, it was Spike…the clothes, the body language, the voice, even the little cock of his brow when he’d been talking to Giles…yet she knew with every inch of her skin that it wasn’t. And it was more than the Slayer/vampire connection. Much more.

Though the superficial was there, gone was the spark that lit the vampire’s face when he spoke, the delight that managed to dance in his eyes as he took his turn in playing the joy, the smolder that emanated from his flesh whenever his gaze would settle on her. It astonished Buffy that she knew so much about Spike without even realizing it, and surprised her even more when she realized it was the spirit behind the porcelain sculpture that captivated her so. That’s how she would always be able to know him. Because there could be no copying of Spike’s heart.

“If it bothers you, I can change,” it said, and as it spoke, began to shift again, reverting to the black coat and long teeth of its true form. “I have to admit, I am curious why you align yourself with a vampire. I thought it was your duty to rid your world of them.”

“Spike’s different. He’s…not a threat to humans. And why are you asking?”

“It’s that…unusual relationship you share with him that made me believe you would listen to me. That you would be open-minded to consider my story without hastening to kill me. Like you did my colleague.”

“Hey, do I tell you how to do your job? He attacked us. We defended ourselves. End of story.” She folded her arms across her chest. “And besides, that is so not the point here. We were talking about Duncan and our next step.”

“Yes.” The return to topic sobered the guardian instantly. “When will you be attempting to close the entrance again?”

She frowned, remembering. “I think Will said tomorrow night.”

“So it should be safe to assume he will not leave until he knows it is done. That means we must find the harness before then.”

The silence in the dungeon was deafening as both remained lost in their thoughts. “If I can get you the harness,” Buffy finally ventured, “do you trust me to take care of Duncan myself?”

He regarded her with fathomless eyes. “He must not live. He cannot be trusted.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve kind of got a thing about not letting the bad guy walk away from a fight. Usually it involves some sort of dust, or slime, or some other demony substance, but you guys don’t do that, do you? You just kind of lie there.”

“And you believe you can find the harness without my aid?”
She thought about the bag hidden in the brush outside the castle. “Yeah,” she said. “Pretty sure that one’s not going to be a problem.”

“Then I will trust you. I’ll wait in the cell with the magical barrier for you to return with the harness and news that the thief is dead. You can open it then, so that I may return to my~…” His gaze flickered to the depths of the dungeon. “Your friends are returning,” he commented.

“My friends…?” Buffy started, pivoting to see two spots of light dancing along the stone wall, growing larger as they approached. She turned back to the kelpie, only to be met with emptiness, and frowned. “Now where did he go?” she mused, glancing around before shining her own torch toward the floor. Wouldn’t do to be walking around if he turned himself into a bug or something. She would’ve just stepped on her first real outside ally in this whole mess. Plus, she kind of liked these shoes. It would be a shame to ruin them because of splattered kelpie guts on the soles.

“Hey, Buff! You’re back.”

The Slayer whirled, a wide smile plastered on her face, to see Xander amble toward her, Spike close at his heels. “I’m back.” she chirped. “What’re you two doing?”

“Doing our best to escape the evil clutches of butt-numbing research demons,” Xander replied. “Is lunch ready?”

“Yeah,” she said, grabbing on to the lifeline he extended. “Lunch. Giles said you two were down here.”

“I knew it,” the young man said.

“Your bleedin’ stomach knew it,” Spike countered, coming to a stop at Buffy’s side.

His presence hit her like a wall, and the difference between him and the kelpie when it had taken his form jumped into clarity. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch him, to return to a state of contact that had been promised so deliciously that morning with the bath, but she refrained, settling instead to close the distance between them so that her shoulder brushed against his. Make it look accidental, casual. Except there was nothing casual about the charges that leapt between them, even at that slight touch. And she could tell from the almost inaudible rumble in Spike’s chest that he knew it, too.

“That thing’s been growlin’ louder than a Whrontha demon for the past ten minutes,” the vamp continued, keeping his tone light. He glanced down at the Slayer. “Any luck in the search?”

“You could say that. I’ll fill you in upstairs.”

“And just wait until you hear what we found out,” Xander chimed, following the pair as they started climbing the stairs. “It’ll make your hair go white. Oh, wait, too late for Spike.”

“Very funny, Harris.”

“I’m just saying, maybe you should consider…”

* * *

The noon meal was done and their evening tea was simmering on the stove, bubbling and releasing tiny pockets of scents into the close air of the kitchen. Duncan could hear the voices of the group as they chattered away in the great hall; the Slayer, in particular, seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood, and he found himself musing on her capacity to hold her alcohol. She certainly doesn’t
seem hung over, he thought, amusement twisting his lips. From the way the others had presented themselves that morning, he’d gotten the impression that the lot of them had tied on one the previous evening.

Not that it mattered. He’d already cornered the younger Watcher, making his excuses to leave early, claiming he didn’t feel well enough to stay on, but that dinner was cooking and all they would have to do was keep an eye on it. His excitement was building, his desire to retrieve the harness and make his escape growing, spurring him to cut his plans short. He had bought himself time by going to the guardian, and hopefully, Spike would suffer as a result. The pompous vampire deserved to be taken down a notch or two, thinking he could play in the same league as Duncan. It was all he could do not to laugh out loud as he slipped out through the pantry, into the hall, and out into the noon sunshine.

Life was good.

And about to get much, much better…
In the Prospect of Death

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Now with the harness back in her possession, Buffy has formed an alliance with the last remaining guardian...

“I’ll clear,” Buffy chirped suddenly, picking up her plate as she rose from her seat at the table.

“You’ll what?” Giles frowned, perplexed and more than a little surprised at the bright offer from his protégé.

She began circling the table, taking the empty dishes and balancing them in her arms. “I said, I’ll clear,” she repeated. “Just because I don’t usually, doesn’t mean I don’t know how. And if five years of Slayer training means I can’t balance a couple plates, I’m doing something seriously wrong.” She beamed down at her Watcher as she took his dish. “Besides, I’m in a good mood, so you should take advantage of it while you can.” She stopped when she reached Spike, looking him directly in the eyes and giving him an almost imperceptible nod. “Wanna help me carry these out to the kitchen?” she asked the vamp, nothing in her voice relaying the hidden intent behind her words to anyone other than the man before her.

He didn’t hesitate. “Sure, pet,” he agreed, and shifted to his feet, relieving her of part of her burden before following her out of the room.

When they stepped through the kitchen door, however, Buffy’s smile immediately vanished, her hazel gaze sweeping the empty room, taking in the simmering pot on the stove, noting the carefully stacked utensils on the drying rack. “Where’d he go?” she asked, dropping her load unceremoniously onto the sideboard, her hand darting out to catch the top plate that threatened to fall to the floor.

Spike’s own eyes were narrowed, his mouth pursed. “Looks like the chef has flown the coop,” he said. “He the reason you were so gung ho to play housemaid back there?”

She didn’t reply, noticing instead the only other door in the room and striding determinedly over to it. With a quick yank, she revealed the empty pantry, and saw the door on the opposite wall, hurrying inside to open that one as well. “Crap,” she muttered, as she found herself gazing out onto the main hallway. “He’s left.”

“Didn’t answer my question, luv,” Spike said when she came back into the kitchen. He leaned against the sink. “What did you find out there this morning? You kept awfully mum during lunch for someone who was dying to dish down in the dungeon.”

“I didn’t want to be overheard,” she said. “Guess who’s got the harness?”

The vampire snorted. “Figures the prat was in on this whole mess,” he said. “So you think he stole it from that beastie you knifed out on the mountain?”

“I know it.” Her eyes gleamed as she stepped up to Spike, stopping just in front of him to reach out and begin playing with the hem of his t-shirt. “But he’s going to be pretty disappointed when he
goes back to his hidey-hole and finds out that his cupboard is now bare.”

Pale fingers curled into her hips, pulling her closer, and the chuckle in his throat matched the smile on his face. “That’s my Slayer,” Spike murmured, feeling her thighs pressing into his. He’d been waiting all day to get his hands on her again, ever since his aborted bathtub seduction, and though the anticipation always seemed to consume him in fire, the reality of her always managed to shame that into ash.

“I got us an ally, too,” she said, looking up into his face. “And you’re never going to guess that one.”

“Who is it?”

“It turns out that Otherworld guardians come in threes.”

His grin faded. “Another guardian?” he said, hesitantly. “You mean, another kelpie with that whole animal attraction thing.” He shook his head. “Thought we got this sorted, luv. You can’t trust them. They’re trouble.”

“This one’s not.” Briefly, she explained the situation, how he’d offered her the information without forcing whatever charm he had, and how Duncan fit into the whole picture. None of it seemed to ease the vampire’s suspicion, though.

“If he’s on the up and up,” he argued, “how come he took off when Harris and I showed up?”

“Well, let’s see. Maybe the fact that you killed one of his co-workers? I think that might make me a little skittish.”

“This whole shapeshifting thing’s starting to look like a problem, if you ask me,” Spike continued. “He got your attention by lookin’ like Xander, then fooled Giles by lookin’ like me. What’s to say he’s not out there right now, posin’ as one of your friends? Maybe this is all some kelpie game, this is how they get off. Messin’ with the humans’ heads.”

“No,” she insisted. “OK, yes, it tricked me with Xander, but I totally knew it wasn’t you. And I would’ve even if I hadn’t seen him go presto change-o right before my eyes. Maybe I just wasn’t paying enough attention when he was in Xander costume. It can’t be that easy to fool us.”

He’d actually stopped listening to her after her admission that she’d seen through the guardian’s Spike disguise, the familiar rush of heat surging to his nerve endings, unconsciously strengthening his grip on her pelvis. “You…knew?” he repeated, his voice a low rumble, focusing intently on those few words.

“Well…yeah.” Buffy lowered her gaze to tentatively rest her cheek against his chest. How could she describe how it had been? Was she ready to tell him exactly why she thought she could tell? He loved her; he’d made no bones about sharing and reiterating that information now that the declaration was out there. And she knew he was waiting for her to say it back, but those were words that didn’t come easily to her mouth. She’d never been one to be all gushy with the vocalizations. Well, maybe at one time in her life. But not now. She wasn’t the innocent teenager any longer; she’d had her heart broken too many times by too many different men to just be handing it over so easily. Yes, she loved Spike, but she couldn’t drown out the voice that claimed telling him would be giving over too much of her power. And so she didn’t.

She pulled back, smiling widely up into his face, trying not to see the hope that flickered in the cerulean depths. “I mean, c’mon,” she said lightly. “How many times have you told me you’re one
of a kind? That is one mold that obviously went kaplooie after they used it. You really think a
demon who’s only seen you for a few minutes at a time is going to be able do an impression of you
that wouldn’t come across as some Billy Idol wannabe act?” She tilted her head. “Besides, you’d
be able to tell if it was trying to be me, wouldn’t you? And there is only one way to answer that,
just so you know.”

He laughed, in spite of her whole circumvention of the issue, his fingers relaxing their hold. “Don’t
think I’d ever be able to not tell it was you, Summers,” he teased in return.

“It’s not like Frank’s going to be Mr. Contribution anyway,” she continued.

“…Frank?”

“The guardian,” she clarified. “Apparently, kelpie names are on the hard to pronounce side, so
that’s what I’m calling him.”

The reminder of the guardian brought him back to his earlier misgivings. “It’s not some puppy
you’ve just brought home,” Spike argued, shaking his head. “You’re not s’posed to be naming him.
I’m tellin’ you, seein’ as how it can take the shape of any one of us, it’s trouble with a capital T---.”

“And I said---.”

“Be honest with yourself, Slayer. Did you have any clue it wasn’t Xander before it changed on
you?”

She looked at him, eyes solemn. “Well…no.”

“And now he’s just gone, right?”

“Well…yeah…”

“Both the Watchers left the room at least once during lunch, and Harris and his bird took an awful
long time coming back down from washin’ up before we ate. Now. Can you tell me that you’re one
hundred percent positive Frank’s not sittin’ out there right now, pretending to be one of your little
slaymates, while the real person is knocked out somewhere in Dall Rath?”

The possibility hadn’t occurred to her, and it showed in her eyes. Though she found herself wanting
to trust the guardian, Spike had a point. The only one she could be sure wasn’t the kelpie was the
vampire himself; she’d proven that downstairs. Buffy hated not being able to trust her friends---or
what looked like her friends---but until the guardian showed his face again, maybe it was better to
be safe than sorry.

“Fine,” she said. “Point taken. But the fact remains, I made a deal with him. He agreed to let me
take care of Duncan, and I’m going to take him the harness before we do the spell again tomorrow---.” Spike’s snort cut her off, and Buffy frowned. “What? Did you guys find something that
explains why it didn’t work?”

“You could say that.” His voice was clipped as he told her the morning’s events, carefully omitting
the fact that it was his own slip-up that revealed the truth to Xander and Anya, leaving the part
about his pending fiery vampire death for last, watching as her face grew darker and darker,
until…

“Giles!”

She was out the door like a shot, separating from him with the precision of a finely honed knife,
the wood slamming against the stone with a resounding crack that Spike suspected meant it probably wouldn’t close properly again without some sort of maintenance. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he followed after her, the saunter in his step announcing to all his self-satisfaction in having gained such a response from her.

Buffy stopped at the head of the table, leaning forward to press both hands against the wood as she stared at the two Watchers. “When were you going to tell me?” she demanded.

Giles’ eyes darted between the Slayer and the vampire who stood just behind her shoulder, his mouth thin. “I presume Spike told you what we suspect regarding the spell for the Otherworld,” he said. “You were going to be told once lunch was finished. Once we re-grouped and had some semblance of privacy.”

“And have you completely forgotten everything that’s ever happened in Sunnydale now that you’re back on native soil?” Her pointed look at Xander was telling. “Magic and Xander go together about as good as chili dogs and chocolate sauce. Both really nice on their own, but not things you want to be mixing.”

“It’s OK, Buff, I think I’m finally coming to grips with the whole empty vessel thing.” He quirked a smile. “It’s kind of refreshing knowing my uselessness is now of the useful.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“And living on the Hellmouth isn’t? Besides, if Spike can risk turning into Sparky the Fire Dog, I think I can handle this just fine. It’s not like I have to do much.”

“Actually, we finally uncovered some information regarding the physical demands of the spell,” Giles said, and then frowned as he glanced at the wide-open kitchen door. “But perhaps we shouldn’t be discussing this right now,” he said slowly, looking purposely at Buffy.

She waved a hand in dismissal toward the kitchen. “We’re fine,” she said. “Duncan stepped out. Probably ran into town for something for supper.”

“Um…actually, he’s gone for the day,” Colin interjected. He quavered under the Slayer’s direct gaze. “He…said he…wasn’t feeling well. I told him he could go home early.” When there was a collective gasp from the sitting females at the table, he jumped.

“But we didn’t get a chance to say goodbye,” Willow complained, her lip jutting into a tiny pout. Both Anya and Tara quickly nodded in support.

Buffy frowned at the unexpected responses from her friends. “So? You’ll just see him tomorrow anyway,” she said.

“No, pet, she won’t.” Spike folded his arms across his chest as the Slayer swiveled to look at him. “Today was ole’ Dunc’s last day. Just ask Junior.”

The reality of what that meant took a moment to sink in, but when it did, Buffy’s mouth tightened, her eyes steeled as she locked gazes with the vampire. No longer around meant harder for her to find, to kill before he disappeared for good and she was left with a rogue kelpie loose in her world. Except…he didn’t have the harness anymore. Would he run without it? Or would he figure out where it had went and come back for it? Either way, she didn’t like it. He was a loose cannon, and that made her nervous.

“Well, since we don’t have to worry about unwanted interruptions then,” Giles was saying, “why don’t we go over what we discovered?” He rose from his seat, pushing his glasses up his nose, and
crossed to a stack of books on the floor nearby. “It’s actually not as bad as we feared.”

Whirling on her heel, Buffy had begun marching for the door even before the Watcher had risen, the vampire close behind. “Does Spike still end up toast?” she shot out as she pulled it open.

“Well, yes, but---.”

“Then it’s not good enough.” And just like that, they were both gone.

“Where is she going?” Giles asked to no one in particular.

“I must say,” Colin mused, amused at the older man’s befuddlement, “it’s rather enjoyable not being the only one she flouts authority with.” At Giles’ furious glare, he shrugged. “I was just saying.”

* * *

He caught up to her just before she reached the weapons cache, his long hand wrapping around her elbow to jerk her to a halt. “What’re you plannin’?” Spike asked, as she looked up at him.

“I’ve got a kelpie to kill,” she said grimly.

He recognized the dangerous tone in her voice. This was a Slayer who was past playing games, quippy young woman gone only to be replaced by the deadly machine who now stood before him. Though he’d seen this all-business side of her often enough over the past few years, her lethal grace when she was so focused still managed to arouse his senses, sparking those memories of his own vicarious kills, inciting the demon within to fight for control. His blue eyes flashed with hints of gold.

“You shouldn’t go on your own,” he warned. “What if he decides to play dirty with the charm business? Who’s goin’ to watch your back then?”

“Slayer here, remember? I watch my own back. Besides, I patrol every night on the Hellmouth by myself. I think I can handle one too-oily horse demon.”

“Oh, really?” His arm dropped. “That why you let the one down in the dungeon buck you off like some second-rate rodeo clown? Don’t think I’m just goin’ to stand aside and watch you go ridin’ off into the sunset just to get yourself killed. All it’s goin’ to take is one of his hands on you—hell, all it takes is one bloody finger—and that’s it. He’ll slip that knife into your back so fast you’ll never see it comin’.”

“You honestly don’t think I can take him out?”

“I know you can, as long as you have somebody watchin’ to make sure he keeps his bloody touch away. Believe it or not, bein’ a bird in this instance is a serious handicap because of that luring thing he does.” His eyes softened, desperate to get her to understand. “I’m not talkin’ about keeping you from doin’ your job. That’s not what I meant. But watchin’ your back means more than just fighting at your side. It means lettin’ you do what it takes while makin’ sure whatever’s on the other end of your fist doesn’t come through with some secret mojo that bollocks the whole thing up.”

Buffy tilted her head. “You just don’t want me to fight with Duncan because you want a piece of him yourself,” she observed. “That’s why you’re stopping me here.”

Spike began pacing the width of the corridor, never taking his eyes from the young woman before
him. “OK, I’ll admit it. I want to get this wanker just as badly as you do,” he said, “but I’m not
prepared to be losin’ you in the process. Not after everything. Not after I finally—.”

Her voice was low. “You finally…what?”

Spike’s nostrils flared, the turmoil seething below his skin in thunderous waves. For a moment, he
debated how much more to reveal. It wasn’t as if any of it was just one huge secret anymore, but
still…would it scare her away? She had yet to make any avowal of her own…Ah, the hell with it,
he thought, and rushed the rest forth.

“You think fallin’ in love with you had something to do with the Scottish air?” he asked. “Think
again. It was there when we were on the plane. It was there when Captain Cardboard and his little
goof troop shoved this chip up my brain. Hell, it was there down in bloody South America. Why do
you think Dru left me? ‘Cause of you. ‘She’s all around you,’” he mimicked, rolling his eyes. “In
my head. In my blood. In my dreams. I hadn’t had a decent sleep in months ‘til that night you let
me hold you in that soddin’ bed upstairs.” Spike stopped, stepping toward her, eyes dark. “So if
you think for a blinkin’ second I’m just goin’ to wave all that adios while you go out bein’ all
Chosen, you’re even thicker than Harris is.” One hand came up to brush an imaginary hair away
from her forehead. “I love you, Buffy. I’m just…askin’ you to be careful, is all.”

Her heart threatened to burst from her ribcage, the palms of her hands suddenly slick with sweat.
“I’m always careful,” she said, her voice barely audible. “And the last thing I want is for all this to
go away, so trust me when I say, nothing’s going to happen.” There was suddenly no moisture in
her mouth, and the room began to sway around her. Give him something, she thought. Even if you
can’t say it, you have to give him something.

“You think you’re the only one with something to lose here? That I would risk losing…us, by
being careless or reckless?” she asked, the faintest of quivers vibrating her words. “You have no
idea how free I’ve felt over the past few days. Well, except for the whole not telling my friends
part of the deal. But even then…it’s like this door has finally been opened to me. One that’s been
locked up in forever. And that’s because of you, Spike.”

He knew by her determined need to keep her gaze averted from his that she wasn’t going to say,
and though it hardly surprised him, the vampire found himself oddly hurt that she was having such
difficulty uttering the words. Yes, they were there, and yes, she was going to admit to needing him,
to wanting him, to being fearful of losing him, but prying that small little sentence from her lips
was going to take more than the possible threat of a kelpie’s charm. He would just have to be
patient. Not his strongest suit, but for Buffy, he would do it. Even if it meant waiting forever.

“But you’re going to go anyway.” There was no question in his voice; this was a battle he knew
he’d lost. And all because the bleedin’ daylight kept him from following her out there himself.

“It’s my job. But I’ll make you a deal.” She stepped back, turning towards the weapons cache. “If
Duncan’s not at the cave, I’ll come straight back here. Odds are, once he realizes it’s gone, he’ll
come looking for it anyway, and we can just have our little showdown here instead of out on the
mountain. That’s another reason for you to stay, outside of the fact that you kind of have to because
of the whole sunlight issue. You’re my back line of defense if he tries to pull anything dangerous.”

Somehow, the thought of getting the chance to give the cook a piece of his fist brought a smile to
Spike’s face, and his shoulders relaxed as he watched her step into the cache. “You’ll come right
back?” he asked. “No dawdling.”

“Yes, Mother,” she called out.
“And I’ve got full permission to use whatever means necessary to stop the blighter?”

“That’s what I said.”

His grin widened. Slayer probably had a point about the cook coming back to the scene of the crime when he realized the harness was gone. She’d be perfectly fine. As long as she kept her distance, she’d…

“Take a long-range weapon!” he instructed with a frown.

She emerged from the cache, a crossbow in her hand, her eyes amused as she shook her head at the blond vamp. “You’re as bad as Giles,” she admonished. “Something tells me I’m going to have two overprotective Englishmen haranguing me every step I take, when I get back to Sunnydale.”

He watched as she brushed past, heading toward the front door of the castle. “Whaddaya expect me to say to the Watchers? ‘Buffy got bored so she decided to take a little stroll? Oh, by the way, she plans on doin’ in the cook. Hope you don’t mind.’”

She stopped, hesitating. “Tell them I need to double-check something I found this morning,” she said. “I shouldn’t be gone for more than an hour.” She thought about it for a moment. “Walk there, kill me a kelpie, walk back. Yeah. An hour tops. But don’t say a word about Duncan or the guardian just yet. I’ve got a feeling they wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

Spike was left in silence when she disappeared through the door. “Got that same feelin’, pet,” he muttered.

* * *

He knew as soon as he stepped into the cave that she’d been there. Even if he hadn’t noticed the differences in the packed dirt, the smell of her perfume still hung in the air, cloying and too human, and for the first time since meeting her, Duncan felt disgust and anger at the Slayer. That’s what she’d been doing out all morning. And him, playing the smug fool, had assumed he was now free and clear, leaving the harness where he couldn’t protect it directly.

Though he was at the back of the cave as quickly as his feet could carry him, he knew before he searched the nook that it was gone. There was no way Buffy would come to such lengths and not be able to find it; it wasn’t as if he’d buried it along with the bodies. The bodies…

His black eyes fell to the ground, and the realization that she now knew the truth about him, would most likely warn her friends now that he was no longer at Dall Rath, brought the depth of his situation clear. No way was he going to give up now, not after coming so far. The harness was his; he’d stolen it, fair and square, and no too-skinny, too-blonde, too-perky Slayer was going to take it away from him.

The problem was, he couldn’t go back for it. Not now. She would be ready, waiting for him, probably with that damn vampire right behind her, all too prepared to tear his throat out if he dared lay a foot inside the castle. The only thing he had going in his favor was the fact that the guardian would be after Spike as well, but Duncan knew he couldn’t rely on that. The guardians weren’t exactly known for their propensity for venturing from the tunnels; that was one reason why he’d been so shocked when they’d actually followed him out into the human world on the night of Samhain.

But this was about the harness. They would want to protect it, no matter what the cost. Maybe that would be enough.
Regardless, he needed another plan of attack. Another avenue of retrieving the harness without tipping the Slayer’s attention. Something she wouldn’t expect.

As he heard the distant rumble of thunder begin rolling over the countryside, Duncan’s eyes lit on the ground at his feet, his shoe scuffing at the loose earth, and the scheme began to merge, the pieces slotting together into a twisted picture that brought an angry smile to his lips. Yes. That would work. And with the rainstorm on its way, it would probably buy him just enough time to get it off the ground.

* * *

It had started almost inaudibly, a gentle patter against the stonework that sounded like a soft hug, but by the time Spike had returned from heating up another mugful of blood, it had begun to pelt in earnest, hammering against the outer walls as if every drop was trying to drill its way inside.

“Slayer’s goin’ to be in a lovely mood when she gets back,” the vampire remarked wryly, glancing up at the window before settling into his chair.

“She’ll just turn around, won’t she?” asked Colin.

Giles shook his head. “She’s patrolled in weather like this before. If it’s important enough, she’ll follow it through, regardless of a little rain.”

Spike’s derisive snort cut through the air. “You’ve been livin’ in Sunny Cal too long, Rupert. This one’s goin’ to be a pisser of a storm. You can smell it in the air. No way Buffy’s been out in one like this before.”

“And since when did you become the expert on Buffy’s slaying habits?” Giles demanded, pulling off his glasses as he turned in his chair to glare at the blond vamp. “Or the keeper of her back, for that matter? Really, Spike, this new bend your attitude is taking around her is completely out-of-hand. Take that little outburst of yours earlier, for example. How dare you assume I would allow anything to happen to Buffy that she wouldn’t be able to cope with?”

Spike lowered his head, looking at the older man through his lashes, clicking his tongue in reproval. “Not nice to lie, Rupes,” he drawled, a hint of anger tingeing his tone. “You forget. I’ve bunked extensively in your little flat. Watchers who don’t want to be caught out shouldn’t leave their precious little diaries around where just anybody can pick the lock and read them.”

Giles’ eyes widened. “You…didn’t…” he hissed, and rose to his feet.

The vampire rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Like you’re shocked and disappointed? Do we really need to go into the whole Big Bad theory again?”

“Rupert…” Colin half-stood, leaning forward to look up into the other Watcher’s face. “Perhaps now is not the best time for this discussion.”

“No, I think now is the perfect time.” His voice was cold, hard, his blue eyes blazing as he dropped his glasses onto the table, not even glancing back to acknowledge Colin’s increased presence. “It’s time Spike is reminded that his involvement with the Slayer is a temporary arrangement.”

Slowly, the vampire set the mug down on the floor beside his chair, freeing his hands as he stood up. “Sounds like you’ve got something you’d like to say to me,” he dared, eyes dark. “Shouldn’t bottle those kind of feelings up, Rupes. Not good for the digestion.”

“Actually, repression can be a good thing,” Willow chirped, but the smile faded from her face
when she realized neither Englishmen was paying her any attention.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing,” Giles said, “but pretending to care about Buffy’s welfare is most likely one of the slimiest turns you’ve taken since returning to Sunnydale to torture us with your continued presence. This will not garner her favor, Spike, nor will it garner mine.”

“Not that I’m not one for bein’ all for the garnishing, but who says I’m pretending?”

Willow’s eyes went wide. He was going to tell. Oh god, where was Buffy when you needed her? He was going to let it all out, and Buffy was going to be so pissed. Come back, Buffy, she thought frantically. Come. Back. Now.

“You shouldn’t even be situated in our lives this closely in the first place, able to play your sick games whenever you choose. You may be an ally to her now, but once this entire matter is resolved, we will return to the Hellmouth, and you will no longer be a part of her life. Do you understand?” Ice could’ve been chipped from his voice, and his eyes glinted even paler in the dimming light of the great hall.

There was no denying the danger wound through Giles’ body, and it was mirrored by the menace in Spike’s, the vampire’s hands balling into fists at his sides. “What I understand,” he said slowly, doing everything in his power to keep control, “is that you don’t know your Slayer as well as you think you do. I suggest that if you’ve got a problem with whatever relationship you think you’re seein’ between me and Buffy, you try talkin’ to her about it. ‘Cause tellin’ me to back off is the surest way to get me…not to.” His nostrils flared, and he allowed the smirk to twist his lips. This was Buffy’s tale to tell, but God, he was going to enjoy this while he could. “Face it, I’m here, the Slayer likes it, and this is her call to make. ‘Sides, what do you think the chances of her getting overly chummy with a vamp are, anyway…?” He broke it off as he feigned remembering. “Oh, wait a minute. Did I forget about Peaches?” The smile he offered the Watcher was malicious. “My mistake.”

“Guys, guys.” Before either man could register the third’s arrival, Xander was smiling at their sides, laying a hand on each of their shoulders, pulling them apart so that several feet stood between them. “This is just a failure to communicate we’re having here. Or at least, the wrong kind of communicate. We’re all just a little tense. Roughing it, both of you having to sleep on the cold stone floor. Blood sugar’s probably a little low from the serious lack of donuts around this place. Why don’t you two go do a couple laps? Get some of that tension out of your systems.”

Both men turned puzzled frowns to Xander, whose smile only grew wider, although now from slight embarrassment. “Hey, it always worked for Coach Marin. Of course, he did end up getting attacked and eaten by his own swim team, but…that’s so not the point.” He clapped their shoulders firmly in good will. “Spike’s not on a human diet anymore, and the closest thing Giles has gotten to cannibalism is that blood pudding I’ve seen lurking around in the back of his fridge, so we’re all safe here, right?”

“Do you have a soddin’ point, Harris?”

“His point, as circuitous the route he is taking to make it appears to be,” Giles said through gritted teeth, “is that we’re all on the same team for the time being, and should behave appropriately.”

“Wow,” said Xander, his pleasure lighting his amiable face. “And here I thought I was just breaking up a fight between two of my friends.”

It took a moment for the younger’s choice of words to reach through Spike’s receding anger, and his frown lessened, his head tilting as he gazed at him curiously. He’d said…friend? When in
bloody hell did that happen? And why wasn’t he given a say in the matter?

“We should really be concentrating on reviewing the physical requirements of the spell with Spike and Xander,” Colin interjected, taking advantage of the lull to bring the focus back to the task at hand. “With only twenty-four hours until our next opportunity, it’s important everyone is up-to-date.”

“Right,” the vampire drawled, and turned his head back to face Giles. “Toss you for who fills in the Slayer when she gets back,” he offered.


Spike shrugged, stepping away to drop back into his chair. “He’d probably land on his tail anyway,” he said, reaching for his mug. “No fun in that.”

“So,” said Colin with a forced smile. “Where were we?”

* * *

They each bent their heads against the wind as they battled their ways to the waiting car, Riley automatically stepping back to allow Quentin to slide into the back seat first, even though it meant getting even more soaked from the driving rain. Sometimes, old habits were just impossible to break.

As soon as they were settled, the chauffeur turned around and handed a mobile phone to Travers. “There’s been a call waiting for you, sir,” he explained. “I’ve lost the signal once or twice due to the storm, but he’s called back each time. He says it’s urgent he speak with you.”

“Who is it?” Quentin asked, his brow furrowed as he raised the phone to his ear.

“It’s Mr. Hornbrook, sir…”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Tension is rising between Giles and Spike, Riley has arrived in Scotland with Travers, and Buffy has gone out to try and kill Duncan, all with a storm raging through the Highlands…

An hour. Who had she been kidding? OK, maybe an hour if the weather hadn’t decided to thoroughly hate her and go from normal Scottish overcast to full-blown raging thunderstorms in what seemed to be thirty seconds flat. Soaking her through before she could even think about turning around. Not that she would’ve anyway. Not when she had a kelpie to kill. But still…it would’ve been nice to be warned. Maybe she would’ve brought an umbrella.

Buffy almost laughed as she bent her head against the driving rain. An umbrella. Right. Like it would’ve lasted two seconds in this wind. For a moment, fantasies of what it would’ve been like to be Mary Poppins, floating along the air with an umbrella as her sole support, distracted the Slayer from the discomfort of the icy wet, but those quickly dissipated as her foot got stuck in yet another unseen hole in the heather, her shoe squelching around the mud as she stopped to disentangle herself. This cold and the ground’s not frozen? she thought grumpily. Of course, if it had been, chances are she would’ve pulled the same twist trick with her ankle, only this time, she wouldn’t have Spike around to carry her back to the castle. Not that that hadn’t been its own kind of fun.

With a grimace, she tilted her foot, looking down at her ruined boot and wistfully remembering the worry she’d had about getting Frank squished along its bottom. That would’ve been a salvageable mess, rather than the squishy disaster that was now her lowermost limb. Yuck.

The only thing that was cheering her at the moment was the thought that most likely Duncan was stuck wading through this same storm. If she had to be miserable, it was only fair that the bad guy had to be as well. Or, even better, he was waiting it out in the Kelpie Cave, making him easy pickings for her to dispatch once she finally got there. If she ever got there. At the rate she was going, Buffy wondered if it might not have been better to stay back at the castle and wait until sundown for Spike to accompany her. At least then, she’d have somebody to talk to along the way.

Then there it was, looming in front of her like an open wound in the side of the mountain, and the Slayer knew automatically that she was too late. He’d made no attempt to hide the entrance this time, which could only mean he had left in a hurry. Probably pissed. But pissed meant more likely to make a mistake---at least she hoped so---and by all rights, it should be easier for her to track him now.

She stopped, lifting her head to stare around her, watching as the charcoal clouds flashed in brilliance as lightning danced through the air. The heather bowed in the wind, flattened to the earth against its power, and she had to blink more than once to clear her lashes of the rain that kept blinding her vision. She turned around once…twice…and was halfway through a third revolution when she saw the dark shadow on the horizon. It could’ve been anything, but in light of her current choice lackage, Buffy wasn’t going to ignore it, especially since it seemed to be moving. Away from her. Which meant…run.

Each step seemed to sink into the earth, dragging her pace, the weapon slung along her back
jostling into her spine as she fought to maintain her balance without losing too much speed. Whatever it was---whoever it was---it was moving along at a good clip, and though the Slayer was faster, it was taking far too long to cover the distance between them, the storm doing everything in its power to slow her down. It was still impossible to recognize it, and Buffy found herself wanting to give up, when fate smiled, turning her target toward her, its dark head bent, its eyes glowing in familiar luminescence through the rain.

Duncan. It had to be.

A bittersweet flood of relief powered her legs to quicken, her arms to pump harder. This would all be worth it if she could just get close enough to use the crossbow. One shot and it would all be…

The wind hid its approach behind her until it was nearly abreast, and Buffy faltered as she glanced over and saw the familiar shape of a kelpie in its horse form suddenly galloping along her side. Her head jerked back up to her quarry, brow furrowing, before whipping back to her newfound companion.

“Frank?” she yelled into the wind.

From somewhere in the horse’s long neck, a voice seemed to rumble, and briefly, Buffy flashed on Mr. Ed when she saw its lips move. “The thief is mine, Slayer,” he said, and veered sideways, brushing against her with its powerful flank, sending her tumbling into the heather in a tangle of wet as it strengthened its pursuit of the other kelpie.

She was back on her feet in an instant, swiping at the mud on her face, and resumed the chase with a growing sense of annoyance. Great. So Spike had been half-right. So much for putting her trust in the guardian. The only good thing about getting interrupted like this was at least she didn’t have to worry any more if any of her friends were actually demons in disguise. She had both of them in her sights right now. And she was closing in on them fast.

Duncan turned then, and this time, the pair was close enough for their presence to register through the violence of the storm. For a moment, she saw his eyes widen in fear, then steel coldly as he reached around, his hand disappearing from view, only to return a moment later to send whatever he had retrieved scattering into the wind.

She saw the tiny blades come slicing through the air, but noticed with growing alarm when the guardian didn’t. “Frank!” Buffy yelled as she dove to the ground. “Duck!”

Facing into the wind meant her words were carried behind her faster than they traveled forward, and the kelpie heard the warning just a fraction too late, grunting in pain as the knives embedded themselves in its flesh. It stumbled, buckling to its front knees, the coppery scent of blood joining with the flowering aromas that already permeated the air, its hold on its equine shape faltering so that it seemed to dissolve into blackness before her eyes.

A grim Slayer sat up, whipping the crossbow from its sling on her back, arming and bringing it up to shoot before her partner could react. Slinging through the air, the arrow was buffeted by the wind, but training had honed her aim to a deadly missile, and though it veered slightly astray, it still managed to meet its mark, sinking deep into the shoulder of the fleeing Duncan.

He stopped, screaming, his hand reaching around to clutch at the wood buried in his back, furious eyes whipping around to stare at the girl as she hurried to the guardian’s side. As the cook pulled it from the wound, his face contorted from the pain, shifting from one mask to another before returning to his true visage as a kelpie.
“I can see I underestimated you,” Duncan snarled into the storm, staunching the flow of blood with his hand.

Quickly, Buffy scanned the prone form of the guardian, assessing the severity of his wounds before rising to her feet. They were superficial; he’d live. Right now, she had to finish what she’d started.

“Yeah,” she agreed, as she slowly closed the distance between her and Duncan. “You’d be surprised how often I still get that. I think it’s the blonde hair. Oh, wait. Do they have dumb blonde jokes in the Otherworld?”

He was backing up as she neared, trying to keep himself as far away from her as possible, eyes darting between her determined face and the weapon still dangling from her hand. “For some reason, I always thought this would come down to me and Spike,” he noted, trying to keep his voice level. “He’s the only one among you who’s been intelligent enough from the beginning to even suspect me.”

“He is kind of smart that way,” Buffy said, and stopped, lifting the crossbow back into her arms. “But I’m the one who’s going to kill you.”

“Why bother?” he hissed. “I don’t even have the harness any more. You’ve got it.”

The Slayer shrugged. “I don’t like you,” she commented, and tightened her finger. “And I hate loose ends.”

“You have it?”

Though the guardian’s voice from behind her didn’t scare Buffy, it did catch her attention just enough to jerk her arm in a movement so minuscule an onlooker wouldn’t even have noticed, allowing the arrow to veer right of its target. Duncan seized the opening, diving forward, avoiding the missile to go sliding in the mud and heather. She rolled out of his path, tucking into a ball as she held her weapon clear, jumping to a vertical position several feet closer to the wounded Frank.

His eyes glowed up at her in anger. “You lied to me, Slayer,” the guardian growled.

“Not a lie,” she said, shaking her head. “Just a careful omission of certain facts.” Her body whirled instinctively, the heel of her boot connecting with Duncan’s jaw, sending him reeling backward. “And don’t try sneaking up on me again,” she said to the ex-cook. “It makes me cranky.”

“When were you going to tell me?” Frank asked. “Or were you going to double-cross me with that, as well?”

Buffy turned amazed eyes back to the wounded kelpie. “Hello? Who was the one who didn’t want to be all chatty about what the harness actually does? I am so not the only one with cross issues here. And what the hell are you doing showing up like this? I told you I’d take care of him.” She saw his gaze flicker behind her and lashed back, feeling her foot meet the other kelpie’s chest and knocking him to the ground.

“He is mine to kill.”

Her telling gaze swept over the wounds that peppered his flesh and she shook her head. “You should’ve trusted me. He’d be dead now, and you wouldn’t be a pincushion.”

Lightning flashed, followed almost instantaneously by thunder, and Buffy found her senses temporarily overwhelmed, blinded by the sudden brilliance, deafened by the clap so close to her
ear. It was almost as if she stood briefly in limbo, caught in a Scottish no-mans-land. Except…she wasn’t alone.

Before the thunder had dissipated, his hand wrapped around her ankle, his grip slick in blood and rain. “Drop the weapon,” Duncan said.

Her body obeyed before she could get the thought out---he’s touching me---into the too-calm ether of her consciousness, and she could only watch as he smashed the crossbow beneath his free fist. “Let…go…” she struggled to say.

The cook chuckled, yanking viciously to send her sprawling into the heather. “I don’t think so,” he said gleefully. “And you don’t really want me to…do you…”

And suddenly, she didn’t, staring back at the kelpie’s dark face as he slid his way up her body, hands running along her arms, gripping her biceps in a force that would’ve crushed a normal human. This was just Duncan, she thought peacefully, and it wasn’t as if he’d really done anything horribly wrong. And she did have the harness. Killing him wasn’t totally…

When his teeth sank into her shoulder, Buffy’s back arched in pain, tiny slivers of white-hot daggers bearing down onto the joint, cutting through the muscles, grinding into the bones…

And then he was gone, and she was blinking up into the rain, trying to discern which shadow belonged to which kelpie, seeing the glint off the knives that were still embedded in Frank’s flesh as he grappled with the Otherworld thief only to be forced away when Duncan wrenched himself free. She struggled to rise against the torrent of pain consuming her shoulder, but just sank back onto the ground, feeling the blood dripping down her arm as it refused to support her weight. Damn Duncan, she thought. And god, am I going to get a boatload of “I told you so’s” from Spike when I get back.

The fight between the two kelpies was brief, both of them too hurt to battle effectively for very long. It ended when Duncan grabbed the remains of the crossbow from the ground and shoved a handful of arrows into Frank’s leg, sending him back to the sodden earth to writhe in pain. As Buffy watched, the thief smiled, or tried to, and gave her a tiny salute with his good arm.

“It’s been lovely,” he said, his voice slightly garbled from pain. “But I really must run now. And my apologies if I’m not looking forward to having to do this again.”

“That’s OK,” the Slayer replied through gritted teeth, rolling onto her side in a delicate flourish that sent him skittering away. “Next time I see you, you’re going to be wishing I’d killed you this time.”

She could only watch him turn and run, her own body incapable of following at the moment, and slowly, Buffy swiveled her head to look at the fallen guardian, its eyes closed. Wiping at the hair that lay plastered to her cheeks, she called out, “Frank? You better be alive over there because if you’re not, I swear I’m going to kill you.”

There was a long stretch of near-silence where the only sounds on the mountain came from the wind whistling past her ears and the rain spattering the soil. “Perhaps next time,” Frank finally said, lying almost completely immobile, his voice calm, “we should confer on a plan of attack ahead of time.”

She laughed, in spite of the waves of pain washing over her. “Yeah,” she agreed. “And maybe next time, you can tell me that you plan on tagging along.” She stumbled to her feet, and weaved across the heather to where Frank lay. “Thanks for the save, by the way,” she said, extending her good
hand to him.

Though he looked worse for wear, his grip when it took hers was strong, and Buffy had to brace herself as he pulled himself up. His dark eyes flickered over her injury before returning to her face. “You need to get that bandaged,” he warned.

“So do you.”

He frowned. “You would...do that for me?”

Buffy started to shrug, then stopped, grimacing from the sharp needles that shot through her torso. “Sure, why not?” she said, turning to begin the trek back to the castle. “We’re on the same team here, remember?”

* * *

The third time he left the great hall, Willow followed after him, catching up to the vampire as he stood in the front doorway of the castle, staring out at the rain. “It’s like a watched pot,” she said. “She’s not going to get back until we stop looking for her.”

Spike was oblivious to the redhead’s comment. “Think the rain will put out any flames the bloody daytime will cause?” he asked, head tilting so that he could gaze up at the clouds. “That should stop me from combustin’, I should think.”

It was actually an interesting proposal, and the witch found herself pondering it for almost thirty whole seconds before she realized how silly she was being, and shook her head as if to clear it. “And you wonder why Giles is wigging on you?” she demanded from the blond vampire. “Hello? You’ve got worried boyfriend tattooed all over your face. I mean, you’re in, you’re out, you’re up, you’re down, and now you’re standing here debating if you can count on a storm to make you flame-retardant so that you can go out and find Buffy?” She took a deep breath. “She’s a big girl, Spike. She can take care of herself.”

“Fat lot you know,” he muttered. “You’ve been charmed, too.”

Willow’s brow creased in a confused frown. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “I thought you said she was just being checkout girl. Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Glancing back at her, Spike debated for a moment, wishing he could just blab the whole thing without having to worry if it was one of those kelpie demons getting more of their secrets under their belt. It took him only seconds to decide, and with a tilt of his head, he turned toward the witch, reaching forward to take a large section of her arm between his fingers and squeezing hard. “Ow!” Willow cried out, yanking back and away from his pinch. She rubbed at her flesh as an echoing yelp came from Spike. “What did you do that for?” she demanded.

“Had to make sure,” he said through gritted teeth, shaking his head against the pain.

“Of what? That you’re a big ol’ bully who just wants to be mean whenever he feels like it?”

“No. That you’re actually Red…Red.”

That surprised her, and she stared at him dumbly. “Being in love is making you weird, Spike,” she said slowly. “Let’s say, we go back to the hall, sit down, maybe enjoy some ancient Celtic history over a cup of nice warm blood, and forget all of this ever happened, OK?”
As she turned to leave, the vampire grabbed her arm, forcing her look at him. “Buffy went out to kill Duncan,” he explained. “He’s been a part of this whole mess from day one. And her not bein’ back yet does not bode well for her success, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s absurd. Why would Buffy kill Duncan?”

Spike sighed. For a brief moment, he was jealous of the cook, of his ability to just talk to the girls and have them believe him, no matter what. It would certainly make explaining the current situation a helluva lot easier, and he wouldn’t have to put up with the never-ending third degree that always seemed to follow him around, no matter which of the Scoobies he was dealing with. “Prat’s one of those bloody kelpies,” he said, trying to keep the impatience out of his tone. “He’s been charming you birds ever since he set foot in this place. Buffy finally sussed him out, found where he was hiding the harness—-.”

“Duncan has the harness?”

“Had. Slayer got it out of his slimy little clutches without him knowing about it when she was out this morning. And was goin’ to take care of him after lunch, but the sneaky wanker made a runner for it.” He turned to gaze out into the driving rain, the muscles in his jaw twitching. “I swear, if he’s hurt her in any way, I’m goin’ to rip his soddin’ heart out and shove it up his—-.”

“Spike, get back in the great hall. Now.”

The vampire didn’t move. “Bugger off, Rupert.”

The young witch stepped back as the approaching Watcher stopped short of the doorway. His mouth was set as he glanced down at her. “Please return to the research, Willow,” he instructed. “I have a few words I’d like to say to Spike.”

Spike snorted. “How much you wanna bet some of those words are goin’ to be includin’ stake, dust, or ‘over my dead body?”’ he directed at the redhead before returning to his former position, fixing his azure gaze on the tableau outside the entrance.

“Maybe we should all go back—-.”

“Now, Willow.” A slight pause. “Please.” There was no room for negotiation in his voice, and Giles waited until the two men were alone, watching as Willow retreated down the hallway, before speaking again. “What exactly do you think you’re doing?” he asked of the vampire, folding his arms over his chest.

Spike shrugged. “I dunno. Just something about a good Scottish storm, really gets my blood goin’.” His tone was light, but there was no mirth in his face, and the vamp’s knuckles went even paler where they gripped the doorframe.

“I am in no mood for your feeble attempts at levity.” The Watcher took a step closer. “Answer my question. What are you doing out here?”

For a brief moment, he contemplated playing the snark card again, biting back with his customary snide remark, but worry and exhaustion were eating at the vampire’s guts, shortening his fuse and settling his mind before he’d even realized it. “Lookin’ out for Buffy,” he admitted. “She should’ve been back already.”

Although it was the answer he was expecting to hear, once he was confronted with it, Giles hesitated, fear tempering his tone as he stumbled over his next query. “Do…you…have feelings for Buffy?”
Spike cocked his eyebrow. “Hello? Vampire here, remember? And she’s the Slayer. ‘Course I’ve got feelings for her. It’s called hate, loathing, and the desire to kill. You know, the usual odds and sods.” His head tilted, eyes glittering. “Isn’t that what you keep sayin’ that’s all us vamps are capable of, Rupert?” Not my place to tell, he intoned silently. She’ll be pissed as hell if I spill on this one. At least with the boy not bein’ invited, that can get explained away. This, though…

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then you better elaborate, ‘cause…” His voice trailed away, his body stiffening, as a random movement from outside captured Spike’s attention. Blue eyes narrowed, peering through the rain, and all thought of the man at his side vanished from his head. When the scent of blood drifted in on the prevailing wind, every hair on the back of his neck stood on end, his nerves prickling in sudden fear. Buffy. Hurt. And getting closer.

Giles saw the change come over the vampire, and stepped up beside him, following his gaze out into the storm. It was the outline of the two pale bodies emerging from the gale that diverted his awareness from the argument at hand, pushing him out into the wet, scooping his arm underneath Buffy’s to aid her in the final few feet to the doorway. Neither man took notice of her companion as she slumped against the jamb, both of them locked on the teeth marks that peppered her shoulder.

“Is dinner ready?” Buffy asked feebly, her face wan as she attempted to smile. “Because I’m starved.”

As she took a step across the threshold, the Slayer’s knee buckled, causing her to lurch sideways, only being prevented from falling by Spike’s rapidshot arm around her waist. “Bloody told you so,” he muttered, blue eyes riveted to the exposed skin of the bite, watching as the blood that had already started to clot begin to run free again, dripping leisurely down her skin in scarlet stripes.


For the first time, Giles took notice of the fourth in the party, his frown deepening as he saw the blood-stained shirt sticking to the man’s chest. “What happened?” he queried as he ushered him inside. “Were you attacked by another…” He broke off, reluctant to finish the question, glancing worriedly back at his charge.

Her hand fluttered in dismissal. “It’s OK,” she assured. “Frank knows all about---.”

It was the name that did it. Before she could finish the sentence, Spike had grabbed the unsuspecting guardian, now in human form, and slammed him against the stone wall, holding him in place by drilling his forearm against the creature’s neck. “Told her you lot were trouble,” he growled into the kelpie’s face. It wasn’t struggling, merely bracing himself against the power of the vampire’s assault, its face blank in its calm. “Not that she bloody well listens to me, and now she’s got your little dentureprint to prove it.”

“Spike!” Despite her injured state, the vehemence in Buffy’s voice was enough to startle all three of the men, and the vamp turned his cerulean gaze to her furious aspect. “Frank saved me. Let him go!”

Though his face was a livid mask, the vamp’s response was immediate, dropping his arm to stand back from the kelpie. The menace remained, though, and Spike locked gazes with the other demon, folding his arms across his chest as Frank composed himself, stretching his neck as if to clear his throat of some unseen blockage. “Was this before or after he had himself an all-you-can-eat
Buffy?” he asked, eyeing her shoulder.

“It wasn’t him. I found Duncan.”

“Duncan? What in blazes does he have to do with anything? And why didn’t Spike’s chip go off?” Giles’ confusion stippled his voice, his pale eyes darting between the three.

Buffy sighed, a long exhalation that was more indicative of her mental exhaustion than physical, and silently wished she didn’t have to do this right now. “It’s such a long story, Giles. Do we have to go into this right now?”

“The Slayer needs tending,” Frank said firmly.

“You do, too,” she said to the guardian. “Duncan shoved a fistful of arrows into your leg.”

“It seems you both do,” the Watcher corrected. “Come into the great hall. You can tell me what happened while we clean out those injuries.”

Her moue almost made Spike smile in kind. “Have you seen my clothes, Giles?” she asked, her voice plaintive. “C’mon, I look like I mudwrestled a grizzly. Bath first, bandages and stories later.”

Though his worry for her wellbeing was foremost in his mind, the mention of the word “bath” brought an unexpected grin to Spike’s face, his head ducking to hide it as he flashed on the unfulfilled promise of that morning, thoughts of Buffy rolling around in the mud before stripping to wash away the grime tightening his jeans around his hips in unbidden pleasure. It was a gesture that caught her hazel gaze, and though it hadn’t been what she’d actually considered, the prospect she knew he was imagining nonetheless caused her own color to flare, her lip catching between her teeth as she looked furtively away from the blond vamp.

The exchange didn’t go unnoticed by the Watcher, and his jaw locked. “All right,” he said, his voice terse, eyes jumping between the two blonds. “I’ve had enough of these games. I want the full truth, and I want it now. You’re bleeding all over the floor, there is no logical reason Spike should be able to get away with manhandling this…man, and the two of you are acting like a pair of naughty schoolchildren keeping a secret from the headmaster. So. Both of you are going to start telling me what’s going on here, or I’m going to start making assumptions that, frankly, scare the bloody daylight out of me.”

She sighed as the mental picture of a steaming hot bath suddenly vanished from her head. Her eyes settled on the guardian, and after a small moment, she nodded. “Go ahead,” she urged, and clung to the wall, regarding the human form she’d requested Frank to take dissolve away into the kelpie visage he’d worn in the dungeon.

Giles paled, and took a step backwards. “That’s…not…what I was…expecting,” he murmured, his anger seemingly gone, dissipating in fascinated confusion as he gazed at the new arrival.

“Frank, meet my Watcher, Giles. Giles, meet Frank, the last of the Otherworld guardians.”

* * *

Wait until morning my eye, Riley fumed silently, his jaw tense as he marched silently down the stairs. He’s got to be kidding me. But he knew the Englishman wasn’t, that Travers was quite firm about approaching this…Dall Rath by daylight, almost as if he feared the place. Though he wanted to think that it was because of the storm, the ex-soldier had gleaned enough from the older man’s brief telephone conversation in the car to believe that things were not going well on whatever project Buffy was involved in, that serious steps were about to be taken in order to rectify it.
Probably because of Spike, he thought, his enmity for the vampire burning under his skin, pushing him to hasten his step to the front room. It’s always because of Spike.

She was there, right where she’d been before they’d gone upstairs to unpack, and she smiled up at Riley when he stopped in the doorway. “Yes?” Ibbie queried. “Is everything all right with your room?”

“Actually, I was kind of hoping you could help me out,” he said, affecting his widest Iowa boy smile. “Mr. Travers said you knew the way to…” He pretended to stumble over the name.

“Dall Rath?” she prompted.

He pretended to chuckle at his own expense. “Yes, ma’am. Dall Rath. That’s it.” Taking a step closer, Riley lowered his gaze, ducking his head as he strove for an innocent sheepishness that he hoped would garner her good favor. “I was thinking, maybe, you might be able to tell me how to get there.”
She Says She Loves Me Best of All

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: A wounded Buffy has returned to Dall Rath with Frank, the last guardian kelpie…

Storytelling hour didn’t last for nearly that long.

Within minutes of settling in the great hall, the tremors began, starting from somewhere near the base of her spine and undulating outward, rippling in minuscule waves through her muscle tissue to overtake all sensations, until Buffy was left visibly shaking as Giles finished the last of the dressing. Nothing she could do could control it; even setting her jaw hurt as the shivers from going from the extreme wet cold of the mountain to the damp not-so-cold of the castle rattled her teeth.

Spike had been hovering in the background, allowing her Watcher to take control of the situation, watching in impotent worry as Buffy perched herself on the edge of the table---half on, half off---to let Giles peel away her jacket in a swift sucking rend before carefully ripping her shirt to expose more of the wound on her shoulder. Even from his vantage point near the fireplace, each daub of the antiseptic to the teeth marks sent an answering twinge through the vampire’s body, every hiss and visible cringe from the Slayer sparking the memory of his own kelpie bite, and he had to consciously stuff his hands into his pockets in an attempt to curb the desire to just snatch her away from it all. It didn’t work with his feet, though. Step by step, they moved of their own accord, edging him nearer to Buffy, until once again, he found himself back at her side. For one fleeting moment, the realization that they would probably have similar scars, albeit in slightly differing places, had sent a warm flash through his skin, but that had quickly dissipated, returning him to his icy anxiety regarding his lover’s health. And he watched. And waited.

His attention had been split, darting from Buffy to the corner, where Colin and Anya were tending to the wounded guardian. It had reverted to a human form, to make it easier for the others to deal with, but its wounds were still very much real, its bare chest still sporting the tiny daggers the younger Watcher was carefully extracting, while the young woman carefully bound the arrow wounds in its leg. The whole situation seemed to amuse Frank, and more than once, Spike found himself meeting the other demon’s eyes, the tacit understanding of what it felt to be at the care of a bunch of humans passing between them.

It didn’t mean he liked him, though. If the Slayer said he was OK, Spike was going to have to believe her, but since he was the only one outside of her who knew the full story, the vamp wasn’t risking any more attacks by taking his eyes off the kelpie. Not while Buffy was still in the room. And not while she was most definitely below par.

When the shivering began, though, all thoughts of Frank vanished, to be replaced with a grim determination as he watched Giles settle back to begin pumping her for information. Buffy’s skin was a flourish of color, twin spots of bright red high on her cheeks, fingers pale white from exposure to the wet and cold, her shoulder and upper arms mottled in purples and greens from the bruises he could only assume Duncan had caused. Though she was doing her best to be strong, the glassy shine in her eyes betrayed her discomfort, and she held herself as still as possible while she braced herself for the interrogation. She couldn’t fool Spike, though. Especially when he could
hear the wild, uneven staccato of her heartbeat. Hell, he could practically hear the tremors vibrating her skin. Enough was enough, and bugger if he cared anymore about Buffy’s precious secrets. Nothing was worth her gettin’ sick over.

“OK, show’s over,” he announced, boldly slipping his arm around her waist to lift her to her feet. “C’mon, pet.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide, mouth set, but there was no struggle left in her, only the calm realization that the time for pretending was now long gone. Slowly, she let her own arm steal around his shoulder, leaning heavily against him as she turned back to the grim face of her Watcher, ignoring the array of responses from her friends around her.

“I haven’t even started,” Giles said, his voice tight.

“And you’re not goin’ to,” Spike finished. “Do you even have eyes behind those bloody glasses of yours? ‘Cause from this angle, I’d wager not.” His grip around her tightened as he felt her begin to sway. Buck it up, Buffy, he thought. You just have to wait until I can get you out of this and upstairs where you belong. “Slayer’s not up to this. She needs a long hot soak and then a good night’s rest. Anything she has to say about this whole mess can wait until mornin’ .”

Giles’ gaze flickered from the vampire to his charge, taking in her disheveled appearance, the flush in her cheeks, seeing for the first time the slight quiver in her limbs as she fought against the inner trembling. As worrying as that was, it was the possessive bent of her head against Spike’s shoulder, the powerful curve of his fingers around her waist, that was the most troubling to the older Englishman, and he slowly rose to his feet. There was going to be no more argument regarding this; that much was certain. “Fine,” he said, meeting blue for blue with the vamp. “I shall be the one to help her upstairs. Then I can speak with her along the way.”

“Rupert—.”

“You and Xander begin fetching water for her bath,” Giles interrupted, ignoring Spike’s protestation. “Willow, could you and Tara please prepare something that will help Buffy speed in healing? We really need her to be at her best tomorrow night when we attempt to close the entrance again.”

The Slayer’s head swiveled to look back at Spike, the silent plea buried in the hazel to just go along with it clamoring for recognition. It took only a moment for the vampire to duck his head, stepping away to allow the Watcher to slip his own arm around her and pull her gently toward the door. A moment that felt like forever.

The demon inside him raged at being shoved to the side yet again, but on the outside, the vampire remained cool, face implacable as he was left to watch the pair disappear from the hall. She was going to get lectured, of that he was sure, and Giles was going to do everything in his power to try and sway her opinion of Spike, because there was no doubt in his mind any longer that the Watcher knew the truth about what was going on between them. Too many clues and Rupert was hardly a stupid man. A little blind, perhaps, especially when it came to considering his Slayer’s personal life, but definitely not stupid. Which might be hard on Buffy.

His mouth thinned. Headache or not, if Rupert made her cry, Spike was going to thump him.

* * *

He wasn’t sure how to start. Frankly, it wasn’t a conversation he’d ever thought he’d have with her, though in light of her past and her predilection for surprising him, Giles should have seen it
coming. Still…knowing didn’t make it any easier to form the words, and he found himself remaining silent when they emerged from the stairwell, assisting her in mute concern as they made their way down the hall.

“Does it help if I go first?” Buffy asked quietly as they stopped in front of her bedroom door. Her tired gaze lifted to stare up into her mentor’s. “Or is it the sudden wish that you were deaf that’s turned you into Mr. Mime?”

His face softened. It was so difficult to be angry with her when the pleading hazel of her eyes seemed to cut through his feelings like a knife, and he ducked his head in order to get the words out. It was the only way he could. “What’s…happened between you and…” God, he couldn’t believe he was actually having to say the name. “…Spike?”

“A lot,” she admitted, and though she was still wary of how he was going to react, and though the chill of the castle air was still wreaking havoc with her body, there was no denying the liberation Buffy suddenly felt at confessing even to that much, the relief sending a warm flood washing through her body that temporarily lessened her shivering. She reached out to lay a thin hand on his arm. “But it’s all good.”

Giles snorted. “Good is not a word that I regularly associate with Spike,” he said. “And neither should you. Have you forgotten everything I’ve ever taught you? He kills Slayers, Buffy—.”

“Killed. Past tense. He doesn’t do that anymore.”

“Only because the chip doesn’t allow him.”

“Maybe that was the way in the beginning, but it’s different now.” Her face was earnest. “He’s changed, Giles. I can see it, Willow can see it. Even Xander can see it, I think. Why can’t you?”

“Perhaps because I’m the only one who refuses to be taken in by his so-called charm,” he retorted, and immediately regretted the harshness of his tone. Giles took a deep breath, deliberately lowering his voice as he continued. “Spike’s a survivor. He does whatever is necessary to preserve his own skin—.”

“Then why was he almost kelpie chow our first day here?” she countered. “And why did he take the blame for me and the gang about the joyride last night? Nobody asked him to do either, Giles, but he did them. Without being prompted to. Without getting any kind of reward. In fact, he got a nasty bite from the guardian and a grounding from you to show for his troubles.”

Her latter example took the Watcher by surprise, and he frowned. “What are you talking about?” he queried. “What about last night?”

Buffy sighed. “Don’t ask me why he did it because I have absolutely no idea. But…Will and I were the ones who badgered him into driving us and the others to the pub. We wanted to get out of the castle for a while, maybe experience some of the Scottish nightlife while we still had the chance.” She blushed under his amazed stare. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. You and Colin weren’t even supposed to find out. Of course, taking your money was probably not the smartest thing Spike could’ve done. But he did try talking me out of it. I was just more…persuasive than he was.”

“You should’ve said something to Colin or myself. There’s certainly no reason we wouldn’t have allowed…” His voice trailed off as he watched her tilt her head and look up at him pointedly. No. Even he didn’t really believe that. “Still,” Giles continued, “this is William the Bloody we’re talking about here—.”
“No, because there’s nothing left to say. You’re family, you know that, but I’m not a child any more that needs to be protected from what you think is bad for me. Because he’s not.” Her eyes were sad, but her mouth was firm. “Spike’s going to be a part of my life now, Giles, whether you like it or not. Of course, it would make everything a lot easier if you’d just trust me on this, but I believe in this enough to do it on my own, if I have to. Well, not really on my own, because Spike will be there, but you get the idea.”

It was all starting to go fuzzy in her head, her shivering returning with a vengeance, and Buffy found herself reaching out to clutch at the doorframe to keep herself vertical. Now was not the time to be looking like she couldn’t take care of herself, even if she really didn’t think she could. Had to look strong.

The action caught Giles’ eye and he was about to return his arm to her shoulders to guide her into the room when Spike and Xander stepped from the stairs, both loaded down with buckets of steaming water. It took only a moment for the vampire to see the state of the Slayer, to take in her heavy breathing and accelerated pulse, before he dropped what he was carrying to rush to her side, scooping her into his arms while he shot the Watcher a dirty look.

“So much for helpin’ her,” he snapped as he kicked at the door, forcing it open and marching inside.

Giles looked on puzzled as Spike set her down on the edge of the bed, pushing the hair away from her eyes before gently cupping her cheek in his palm. “Just have to wait a few minutes, luv,” he heard the vampire say, and then stepped aside as Xander brushed past.

The two men were quick, moving the screen to expose the tub, emptying their pails into it wordlessly before the brunette rushed out to refill his. Picking up the buckets he’d brought upstairs, Spike strode over to the door and shoved them into the Watcher’s unsuspecting arms. “Make yourself useful,” the vamp ordered, his eyes cold. “Instead of tryin’ to make this worse when it doesn’t have to be.”

Giles’ gaze darted to a shivering Buffy on the bed before flitting back to Spike’s stern anger. “I’m not done---.”

“Yeah, you are.” He desperately wanted to slam the door in his face, shut out the doubt and mistrust that shone in the Watcher’s eyes, but Spike knew it was the last thing the Slayer wanted, stepping back instead to fold his arms over his chest to watch in waiting.

When Giles looked to Buffy, his uncertainty lining the space between his eyes, she nodded. “I need this right now,” she said simply. It took her only a moment to add, “Please?”

He left then, with one last look at the pair, shaking his head as if it was some mystery he had yet to solve. Once it was just the two of them, though, Spike relaxed, glancing back at her over his shoulder as his arms fell to his sides. “I’m just goin’ to help finish with the water,” he said. “Then we’ll get you sorted.” He turned away, and paused, the muscles in his back rippling beneath his shirt as his hands balled into fists at his side. “If you want your privacy after…now that…” Getting the rest of the words out was impossible, and his head lowered as his body tensed again. If it was what she wanted, he’d do it, but he sure as hell didn’t have to like it.

“Spike. Look at me.”

Glancing back, the vampire saw the delicate smile curve her lips. “The minute I start feeling human again, we’re talking, OK? In the same room. So, no doing a duck and run because you’re worried about Giles.”
“I’m not---.”

“Hey, this is a big deal for me,” she joked as best she could. “You’re getting Chatty Buffy instead of Action Buffy for a change. I say, grab it while you can.”

He couldn’t help his grin. “Nothin’ wrong with Action Buffy,” he commented. “I like how she keeps me on my…toes.”

“Maybe she’ll make an appearance later. After Chatty Buffy decides she’s said enough. Or after you get tired of listening to her.”

Spike shook his head. “Never happen, pet.”

* * *

Although it was still raining, the storm had lessened from the gale that had raged upon Buffy’s return to a softer, steadier tempo that spoke of gentler winds and calmer skies. The temperature was dropping, and though he had left his jacket inside, Giles felt nothing of the bite in the air, staring as he was into the nothingness of the approaching night. The occasional drop would catch on the breeze to splatter across his trousers as he crouched in the doorway, but it was nothing compared to the wet that still stained his shirt from assisting the Slayer. Not that he would have noticed anyway. The last thing on the Watcher’s mind at the moment was his dress.

“Tea should only be a few more minutes,” Colin said from behind him, but even that wasn’t enough to gather Giles’ attention. “Anya is serving it up now.” A moment of silence hung between the pair, and then the younger man stepped forward, carefully setting down a bottle of whiskey and a tumbler at his elder’s side. “I thought you might like a drink before we eat.”

Picking up the bottle, Giles only gave its volume a quick glance before saying, “Thank you.”

Another pause where the only sounds were the alcohol before poured into the glass and the rain being dropped from the sky. “Rupert, I understand---,” Colin started.

“You understand nothing.” Giles’ voice was harsh as he lifted the tumbler to his lips, draining the amber liquid in a single gulp. “You’ve never had a proper assignment with a Slayer.”

“Well, no, but that hardly means I’m not familiar with the Watcher diaries. Required reading, you know.” He cleared his throat. “Buffy is not the first---.”

“That’s not the point,” he snapped, and poured himself another shot, downing it just as quickly as the first.

“I did try to warn you,” Colin tried again. “But you refused to listen to me.”

Giles straightened, turning to face the other man with barely disguised frustration gleaming in his eyes. “And is that supposed to make me feel better?” he demanded. “To know that a fledgling Watcher, with absolutely no field experience, knows my Slayer better than I do?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“No, but it’s what you said.”

“Is it because of the problems you had with…the other one…with Angelus?”

It was probably the worst question he could’ve posed, and Colin had to physically jump away as
Giles stepped viciously toward him. “She deserves better than a vampire,” he hissed into the younger’s face.

“N-n-not that I don’t agree,” Colin was quick to assure, “but I should think that perhaps this might be...Buffy’s decision to make.” He flinched as he saw Giles ball his hand into a fist, but the arm remained at the other Watcher’s side. “She’s almost twenty years old, after all. And technically, Spike is no longer a threat to her. Not that I still don’t think he’s dangerous, and he can certainly learn a thing or two about proper etiquette, but when it comes down to it, he’s no longer in a position to harm her. Isn’t that what’s important?”

Giles shook his head. “You are a horribly naïve young man,” he said softly. “It was only a year ago that Spike was trying to kill her. He will not have changed so drastically in such a short period of time.”

“Yes, about that.” Colin was gathering courage, straightening before his colleague as the thoughts ticked through his brain. “I’d read your accounts regarding Spike and Buffy prior to our arrival in Sunnydale, and one thing I always wondered was, why did neither of them ever succeed?” He hurried forward at the growing frown on Giles’ face. “I mean, Buffy is one of the strongest Slayers we’ve been privileged to have in quite some time. And Spike has two Slayer kills under his belt, including Nikki Wood, who was formidable in her own right. Why on earth haven’t either of them ever managed to kill the other? They’ve both had ample opportunities, yet something has always managed to intervene. Why do you think that is?”

“Rotten luck.” He didn’t want to consider what Colin was suggesting, that the attraction between the two had always been there, or at the very least, had been there far earlier than this…arrangement in Scotland. It was hard enough seeing Spike’s face, with a stalwart Buffy just behind him, knowing that they were presenting as a united front. Not that he hadn’t had to deal extensively with the chipped vampire in the past, but this was different. This was Buffy. This was his Slayer.

“It sounds as if you don’t trust your Slayer.”

“Hardly. It’s Spike I don’t trust.”

“And yet, to be fair, he was the first to insist Buffy wasn’t well enough to relay their findings. Surely, his concern for her above all else merits some…attention, wouldn’t you agree?”

“And you’re telling me this because…?” He wasn’t expecting a reply, his blue eyes narrowed as he stared at the younger man. “It wasn’t that long ago you were simply dismissing Spike as only another vampire. Not worth telling of his own potential endangerment regarding the spell. Expendable, I believe you called him. And now you’re his relationship advocate?” Giles shook his head. “Don’t tell me he’s got to you, too.”

“Not…got, per se. It’s just…his actions make me…curious. Like perhaps we’ve missed something. For example, in the great hall. There was a great deal of blood, including Slayer blood, and yet the only reaction from Spike was directed intently on Buffy’s wellbeing. He didn’t seem…attracted in the least, to the draw of a potential meal. In fact, he seemed much more concerned with---.”

“Enough.” That was the part that he was finding the most difficult to deal with. While Giles had been intent on discovering just what had happened on the mountain, Spike had been the one to notice just how badly Buffy needed to rest, pre-empting him from observing it on his own, and worse, making him look bad to the others. Not that he wasn’t used to occasionally being played for the fool by the younger generation, but certainly not when it came to Buffy. And definitely not by Spike.
But it had to have an explanation. The problem was, the explanation made him just as uncomfortable as the question, because that would mean that the two blonds had developed even stronger feelings for the other than they were verbally admitting. They were certainly behaving as a partnership and though he had at one point entertained the notion that perhaps the vampire would make a powerful ally, that his chip had allowed him the opportunity to attain some higher calling, it was never meant to happen in conjunction with...falling in love with Buffy. Because that’s what had happened with the vampire. And it was pointless to go on denying it to himself.

Giles sighed, the tension beginning to ease from his muscles as the alcohol started to wind its way through his veins. “This would be so much simpler if Spike could’ve just remained evil,” he muttered. “At least then, there’s no moral ambiguity issues for me to contend with.”

“Chin up, Rupert,” Colin said with a wide smile, one hand coming up to rest on his colleague’s shoulder. “Perhaps he’ll solve the problem for all of us by doing something so heinously wicked, Buffy will have no choice but to stake him.”

His lips twitched, battling the smile the other’s words encouraged. “You’re just trying to cheer me up,” he chastened, affecting a mock severity to his tone. “It won’t work.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would.” The two began walking back toward the great hall. “Maybe he’ll attempt to vamp her mother.”

This time, Giles laughed out loud, although more from the innocuous use of the word “vamp” coming from Colin’s mouth than anything else, and entered the dining area with a considerably lighter heart than he’d left it.

* * *

Watching the steam rise from the bath as Spike poured the last of the water in it made Buffy’s skin tingle in anticipation, her lip caught between her teeth as she tried to peer around him, almost bouncing on the bed in her excitement to just get out of her clothes and get into the tub. “Two baths in one day,” she commented. “And you said we were going to be roughing it.”

He glanced back at her over his shoulder. “Gettin’ mangled by a kelpie is a piss poor way to get an extra soak,” he admonished. “And you said we were going to be roughing it.”

“I did listen,” Buffy pouted. “I took the crossbow. It was the stupid storm’s fault. And Frank’s. Don’t forget him. He showed up out of nowhere and totally blew it for me.”

Spike snorted, straightening to turn back and face her. “Don’t think I can be forgettin’ the guardian,” he said. “Especially since he’s sittin’ down there right now, tellin’ God knows what tales about what happened out there.”

“How many ‘I told you so’s’ am I going to have to put up with before you let this go?” Placing her palms on the blanket, the Slayer used it to help guide herself into a standing position, stopping halfway as the world began to sway around her. Spike was at her side in a shot, strong arm around her waist, steadying her as she finished rising. “And I’m going to keep saying this until I’m blue in the face. Frank’s on our side.”

“You’re blue in the arms at the moment,” he noted, looking at the bruises that adorned her flesh. “Does that count?”

“Ha ha, very funny.” She twisted to face away from him. “Now help me get out of this so that I can wash the kelpie smell off of me.”
His blue gaze swept over the ruined fabric that still clung to her back, certain patches still damp while others were dry and caked with mud. “Are we pronouncing this shirt officially dead?” he queried.

“I’m pretty sure it’s past its sell by date.”

Abstractly, Spike nodded, and gripping the bottom hem of the material, tore it up the middle, allowing the two halves to fall to her arms so that she could shrug it away from her skin. Though there were abrasions and minor cuts marring the golden flesh of her back, it was for the most part unmarked, a smooth expanse belying the strength it housed inside. For a brief moment, the urge to run his fingers down her spine, to trace the delicate curve of the muscles, was overwhelming, and Spike had to consciously step backwards, away from the young woman, in order to refrain from doing so. She doesn’t need that right now, he silently reprimanded himself. This is about her doin’ some recuperative bathing, not about gettin’ off on how gorgeous she is…or enjoying the beauty she probably doesn’t even realize she possesses, not really…or about anything else even remotely connected to any of your body parts located from the neck down. Buffy. This is about her.

She had already removed her shoes and socks, in spite of the ice-cold floor, so all that remained were the trousers that seemed to be glued to her legs, but struggling with those only sapped what remaining strength the Slayer had left, leaving her worn and exhausted and bending in the air like a willow trapped in a hurricane. He noticed before she did, bending to lift her up, carrying her to the side of the tub and allowing her to slide inside.

The water wrapped around her in a fiery sheath, staving the shivers that had slowly started to win the battle with her body, letting her eyelids flutter shut as she sank into the oblivion the scents provided. Her sigh of pleasure was enough to bring a smile to Spike’s face, and though his dark gaze flickered over the exposed flesh, drinking in the curve of her breast and the sinew of her waist, it was the wound on her shoulder that kept the majority of his attention, the stark crimson too red against her skin. Hate for the cook boiled in his throat, and silently he vowed to be especially vicious with the other demon on their next encounter. Because there would be another one. There was no way the vampire could allow Duncan not to be punished for what he did to Buffy.

“About that chat you were wanting,” Spike started, and then stopped when her eyes shot open. “You’re not bailing, are you?” she asked, her muscles tensing as she began to straighten in the water.

“I’m just thinkin’ maybe it should wait,” he replied. “You need to be gettin’ some sleep when you get out of there. I wasn’t kiddin’ Rupert about that.”

The candles that flickered in the sconces cast long shadows over her face, and for a moment, Spike thought he saw a twinge of fear skitter behind her eyes. “It can’t wait,” Buffy said softly, relaxing back into the tub. “It’s waited too long as it is.”

“If this is about that prat Duncan----.”

“No. It’s about…us. You. Me.” Her eyes darted to the bed. “Do you mind…sitting for this?” she asked.

His head tilted. “Sitting usually goes with bad news.”

“Oh, not bad,” she insisted. “You just seem very…imposing, standing there like that. And this is hard enough for me to say with you watching me. It makes me goosebumpy.” Suddenly, she seemed absorbed in the water, head turning as she watched it lap against the porcelain sides of the
tub. “Or maybe…if you wanted…it’s kind of roomy in here. You could…sit in here with me instead of on the bed.” Her lashes lifted to allow the darkened hazel to meet the sapphire glitter of his eyes. “If you wanted.”

The arousal of his body was immediate, and his jaw dropped as his tongue darted forward, running along the inside edge of his teeth as he regarded her. “You’re s’posed to be gettin’ washed up so you can sleep,” he said softly, no recriminations in his voice, only a faint shine of expectation.

“So, I’ll wash after we’ve had our…talk.”

He didn’t have to be asked twice. With his eyes never leaving her, Spike pulled the t-shirt over his head, his blond hair mussing even further into the curls running his worried fingers through it all afternoon had already encouraged, tossing the tee casually aside as he sat down on the bed to unlace his boots. The sinew of his muscles flexed as he worked at stripping himself, sliding his feet free before rising back up and settling his hands at his waistband. He was hard, but not ashamed of it, and his erection sprang free as the denim fell, gleaming golden in candlelight, throbbing in sympathetic rhythm with the cadence of the Slayer’s heartbeat.

It was surprise on her face when he moved behind the tub, strong hands reaching forward to grip the sides as he lifted himself and slid in behind her, nudging her forward so that she sat between his legs, then releasing the porcelain to guide her carefully back against his chest. “How’s this?” he questioned, his voice a rumble in his throat, and allowed his fingers to carefully push her hair away from the arch of her neck, running his index finger along the vein that ran down its side as he leaned back against the slope of the tub.

Buffy could feel his erection pressing into the small of her back, up the beginnings of her spine, and wished for a second that she was facing the other way. “Not what I expected,” she admitted with a breathy sigh. Somehow, she had a feeling bathing alone would never quite be good enough again.

She felt him tense. “You want me to move?”

“No, no,” she insisted. “This is good. Somehow, you always seem to come up with better stuff than I can possibly imagine. It’s…surprising.”

His chuckle vibrated through his skin, into hers, echoing into her own torso. “It’s called a century of experience, luv. Now…” Spike’s hand dipped below the surface of the water, skating along the top edge of her thigh. “What’s this little chat of yours about?”

The tremors were beginning again, only this time, they were starting in her legs and they had nothing to do with the cold in the room or the injuries on her body. Determinedly, Buffy grabbed the vampire’s hand and set it on the edge of the tub. “You can’t do that if you want a coherent sentence out of me,” she warned. “And I want to get this out there.”

He smiled, though he knew she couldn’t see it. “Coherent sentence from the Slayer,” he mused. “This should be interestin’…”

Playfully, Buffy slapped at his knee, splashing the warm water over the side. “I’m being serious here.” She decided then that maybe it was a very good idea he was behind her. This was going to be so much easier if she didn’t have to look into those probing blue eyes.

“I’m pretty sure Giles knows now,” she started, her tone solemn as she began to focus on her task at hand. “About us, I mean. I didn’t come out and say as much to him, but he had most of it figured out.”
“Look, about that—.”

“I’m not blaming you.” She stopped, hesitating, dwelling on the words before selecting the ones that fit best. “I’m blaming me. I should’ve come clean about the whole thing when it started. Stupid Slayer logic.”

“It’s done now. You shouldn’t fuss about it.”

“I’m going to tell Xander and Anya in the morning. I’m going to make sure they all know. You deserve that after everything.”

“Pet, I don’t deserve anything—.”

“If you keep interrupting me, I’m never going to get this out, OK?” The tease in her tone was mirrored by the delicate trace of her fingers around his knee. “You’ve been very…open to me regarding what’s going on in your head, and I figure, maybe it’s only fair if my head is just as open. Only it’s not really my head that I mean. I mean…god, I really, really suck at this.” She sighed, burrowing herself deeper into the water, banging her head slightly against the wall of his chest.

“Just say it.” Everything in his body had stopped. No movement in his hands. The calm locking of his muscles as he waited. Only not so calm, because the hints she was dropping were driving him mad with hope. Expectations he hadn’t considered he’d be able to entertain until they were long gone from this place and he could devote himself properly to loving her, to being able to publicly love her. “It’s not that hard.”

Buffy’s breath was a feather against Spike’s shoulder as she turned her head, nuzzling his warming skin with her cheek. “Yes,” she said. “It is. Because I don’t do this. I’ve never been big with the words. I guess I’ve just learned that actions always speak so much louder. And I know you get that. But…I know I like hearing it, so the way I see it, you probably do, too, right?” She almost seemed to be waiting for a response, but answered herself after only a moment. “Except you have no idea what I’m talking about, so I’m just going to…get it out there.” A deep breath. “You’ve told me more than once that you love me. And that means more to me than you can possibly imagine. I just want you to know…you’re not alone on that.” Her lashes fluttered shut, her hand stealing beneath his leg to hold him in a gentle caress, almost as if she were afraid he would disappear if she didn’t. “I love you, Spike…”
It was the silence that was most unnerving. For too long, all she could hear was the water gently lapping against the side of the tub, the occasional hiss of a candle flame as it would jump in the chill air, and Buffy found herself holding her breath, hoping that the subtraction of that aural evidence would somehow make it possible to hear his reaction to her words. Not that it seemed that one was coming any time soon. Or it could just be that time had suddenly decided to stand still just so that it could mess with her head. In the Slayer world order, that was always a possibility.

She felt him move before anything, a tiny shift in his weight as his arm lifted from the tub's rim, easing back into the water to curl around her waist, tugging her gently closer against the slick sculpture of his hips. It meant she couldn't look up and see his face, to see what kind of response saying it out loud had garnered, and decided that choosing to not be facing him at this moment in time was not her smartest idea in the world. More than anything, she needed to know what he was thinking about it, and his staying silent was not helping matters any. Her lashes lifted, the urge to pull away extreme. "Spike? You haven't fallen asleep there, have you?" she asked softly, trying for playful and hoping it didn't sound as desperate to him as it did to her. "Still with me?"

"Still here," he replied, almost immediately. The baritone seemed to fill her skull, the words, though low, jostling their way through the confusion of her own thoughts to settle comfortably somewhere around the nape of her neck.

"And?"

His fingertips played absently along the curve of her side. "Thought you didn't want me interrupting you."

Though she thought she could detect a hint of tease behind his tone, his response was not what she had expected. "I'm done. We can now go back to our regularly scheduled interruptions."

That seemed to bring Spike back to life, his other arm lowering to position itself on her hip, deftly grasping them to turn her around in his arms. She could see him then, saw the dark shine in his eyes, and braced herself against his chest, watching as a single finger came up to trace the line of her jaw. "Say it again," he murmured, his gaze caught on the sight of her mouth. "Greedy much?" she teased.

"Yeah," he agreed with a matching smile. "I'm a demanding bastard. Now say it again."

The fears she'd momentarily felt vanished. Not a mistake to say it. His joy at hearing the declaration was written all over his face, etched in the strength of his grip. She could relax. "Well, gee, Mr. Vampire, sir," she said in a tone of feigned respect and innocence. "It was kind of hard for me to do the one time. I'm not sure I'm up to a repeat performance. It might be...traumatic."

His finger slid to the pretend pout she affected, tugging gently at her bottom lip. "Best way to get
over those pesky trauma issues is to tackle them head on, Slayer. Face your fear. Doesn't that Watcher of yours teach you anything?"

"I'm used to facing my fears with a nice, big, pointy piece of wood in my hand. That scores big points against the intimidation factor."

The gleam that suddenly danced in the azure of Spike's eyes matched the quirk of his mouth as his hand caught hers, sliding it down between their bodies, guiding it to his erection that pressed against both of their stomachs. He chuckled as her fingers curled instinctively around it, only to have the sound choke off, replaced by a low groan as she squeezed, his lashes fluttering closed once only to re-open and stare at her with darkening desire. "There," he said, voice thick. "Problem sorted. Now say it again."

She had grown used to the chill of his body under her fingers, but in the swelter of the bath, his flesh seemed to take on a new life, temporarily infused with a stolen warmth that felt dangerous beneath her touch, the flickering shadows from the candlelight etching him in golden outlines against the shimmering water. Bravado prompted Buffy's hand to slide up the length of Spike's cock, pumping it in one long, languorous sweep, watching as the muscles in his jaw twitched in his attempt to control himself. When she reached its tip, her palm brushed across the velvet head before letting him go for good, and she deliberately widened her eyes as she shook her head. "Nope, not gonna," she dared. "Too hard." With a sly grin, she rolled back around in his arms, reaching for the soap. "Besides, what happened to me washing up? If I don't do that soon here, the water will get cold."

His frustrated growl rumbled in his throat and he reached past her to take the soap from her thin fingers. "Make you a deal then," he said, his mouth suddenly right in her ear, lips snaking along the curve of her lobe as he spoke. "You keep on talkin' and I'll do the washin'." She could almost see the smile on his face. "Think that might take off enough of the burden so that you might be able give it another go?"

Buffy half-shrugged. "I don't know. Only one way to really find out."

Spike returned the soap to the side. "Hair first," he instructed. "Lie back."

Sliding her bottom along the slick porcelain, the Slayer found herself lying stretched out in the tub, gazing up at the platinum head bent over her as the vampire's fingers cradled the back of her head to lower it gently into the water, sweeping it up and over her temples, wetting it with a firm touch that eased away whatever tension remained in her neck and shoulders. Positioned like that, his face was in ebony shadows, eyes lost in a bottomless chasm, and she wondered briefly at his tenderness, how he could be such a contradiction of terms, but more importantly, how she could've been blind to it for so long. Sighing, her eyes fell closed. She didn't need sight to know how incredible this felt.

"So…where were we?" he asked, long fingers entangling in her hair.

"Looking for Chatty Buffy."

"Uh-huh. And have we found her?"

"Yep. She's asking me to ask you, why."

"Why what?" His hands vanished from her head to reappear under her arms, lifting her gently back into a sitting position between his legs.
Buffy opened her eyes. "Why you need me to say it again."

There was a long silence, during which time Spike picked up the shampoo, squeezed some into his palm, and then worked it across his hands before returning to her hair. "Never said this was about me, pet," he said, nimble fingers curling through the tresses, lathering her up as he massaged her scalp. "That's an assumption you made on your own."

"Then--," she started, beginning to twist around to look at him.

He stopped, grabbing her head to turn it back away. "Stop your squirmin'," he ordered. "Or you're goin' to get soap in your eye."

She waited until he started the lathering again. "Since when did this turn into a Buffy therapy session?" she asked.

His hands fell away, dropping to the water to rinse before easing her back into a prone position between his thighs. "It's not," he said, and his voice sounded hollow through the water, far away as he used it rinse away the soap. "I just don't want you to be afraid of the words. I happen to like 'em. And I've got a tendency to use them a lot when I'm given half the chance." Spike smiled. "Or haven't you sussed that one out yet?"

"But I'm not you, Spike," she argued. "I've never been the one to go all big into the insight, or just lay my heart out on the line for anyone to come along and see. That's not my style."

"Anymore."

She frowned, sitting up and swiveling to look at him. "Huh?"

The vampire tilted his head, eyes dark. "That's not your style…anymore."

"OK, lost me there."

Reaching up, he pushed the wet hair from her face, exposing the arch of her cheekbone to his palm. "You forget, luv. I was there for the whole first love deal with Peaches. That was a different Slayer back then. One who did wear her heart on her sleeve. 'Til it got trampled when the prat decided to play the noble card and did a runner for it."

"You weren't there when Angel…left." Her voice was low, her eyes wide, and all of a sudden, the room seemed too warm to Buffy. This was taking a far different turn than she had expected, the levity suddenly vanishing as his blue gaze probed hers.

Spike shook his head. "No," he agreed softly. "I got to see the mess he left behind. That grand scheme where his leaving was goin' to give you the chance to get on with your life backfired as hell, though. Guess he should've thought to leave behind the pieces of you that you might actually need some time in the future."

"I…was OK. Eventually."

His voice was as warm as the orange of the flickering candles. "Because you moved on? Don't forget, I was around when you tried to patch yourself up by shagging that unibrow bloke, and when that blew up in your face, I had to watch as you tried to make everything fit again by hooking up with Captain Cardboard." Sliding himself forward, he bent his legs to accommodate the nearness of their torsos, gathering her face between his hands to pull her closer. Gently, he brushed a kiss over her lips, and then inched back, dark blue gazing down into hazel. "Almost feel sorry for him," he said. "Poor sod's never seen the real Buffy." When she lifted her eyebrows in surprise, he
chuckled. "I said, almost."

"I'm not..." Her voice trailed away, realizing even as she said it that it wasn't really true. It wasn't so much of being afraid of the words themselves, as it was being afraid of what admitting them meant. "How do you do that?" she asked instead.

"Do what?"

"Make analyzing this...us...me...look so damn easy."

"It's not a trick, pet. It's just a matter of keepin' your eyes open to what's right in front of you."

She let her hands brush over his shoulders, her gaze slipping from his to look down at the smooth splendor of his skin. "I always thought my eyes were open," she said, her voice a low wash over his flesh. "But I never saw any of this coming." She lifted her eyes back up, swallowing down the azure of his. "I don't know if saying it's ever going to come easy to me, Spike. But, I do know that I love you, and I promise to at least always show you that, even if I have trouble sometimes getting out the words."

It was actually more than he'd been hoping for. When she'd turned the tables, making it a game, Spike had been more than happy for the whole thing to be an elaborate foreplay, using the washing as an excuse to touch her. He could feel her growing excitement under the pads of his fingers, but as soon as the conversation had returned to its more serious bend, she had stiffened, pulling away from him whether she realized it or not, and so he had decided to just follow it through. It wasn't meant to be any type of prod, not really, and so hearing her say it again, having that promise now there, a tangible lifeline for him to grasp and hold close, was a gift, and not one he was ready to just pass on by.

"Does that mean you're goin' to start listenin' to me for a change?" he quizzed, pushing her hair back to expose the wound on her shoulder, his accompanying smile a mellow tease.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "That is one horse that really is dead," she said, just as lightly. Grabbing the scrunchie from the side, she dangled it from her fingers, ducking her head as she gazed at him through her lashes. "I thought you were going to wash me. I'm only half done here."

Instead of taking it, Spike wrapped his hand around her wrist, pulling her back to him, nudging her legs so that they stretched out on top of his. "Far be it for me to leave a job half-done," he murmured, extracting the sponge from her grip to dip it down into the water.

When the mesh skated down her spine, Buffy sighed in pleasure, nuzzling down onto his chest so that he could continue the ministrations to her back. Each balmy swipe left a stripe of goosebumps down her skin, and the familiar tingling between her legs only reminded her of his arousal pressing into her abdomen. Bathtime, Buffy, she silently scolded herself. Fooling around time comes later. Except Spike seemed to have different ideas, gliding the scrunchie over the curve of her ass to rasp across the back of her thigh before sliding in between, delicately brushing against her outer lips in a wave of sensations that made the young woman gasp in surprise, pushing herself up on his chest to look down at him with wide eyes.

"What?" he asked innocently. "Thought you wanted me to wash you. That was the deal, wasn't it?"

"That didn't feel like washing."

"Oh?" The corner of his mouth lifted as he tugged her back down onto him. "Didn't you like it?"
Buffy couldn't help but smile. "I didn't say that…"

"So what're you fussin' for?" His hand returned, this time bereft of the mesh, and slid along the curve of her buttock, downward, easing between her slippery folds to trace the inner lips in warming ice. "Unless you like this better…?"

Her response was an immediate kiss, her lips to his, sucking at the fullness as the whimper rose in her throat, asking for more with that guttural cry than she had with any of the words she had previously uttered. Arms lifted, slid around porcelain shoulders, clinging in wet as her fingers played with the tiny hairs curling at the nape of his neck.

Though her injury was the farthest thing from Buffy's mind at the moment, it wasn't from Spike's, and he interrupted the kiss in order to pull away. She watched in puzzlement as he lowered her wounded arm back to her side, leaving the other in its new nest behind him, leaning forward to run his lips over the healing teeth marks.

"'Til the witches can magic this away for good," he said, answering her unspoken question, "we take it easy on this arm. I'm not havin' you bleedin' like a stuck pig in my bathwater."

"Oh." She seemed disappointed in his response. "So, I guess that means we're back to the plain old regular kind of bath, huh?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"Well, you said, you know, about taking it easy---." His mouth was on her neck, licking up its side, buried in the hollow below her ear, before she could finish the sentence. "Oh, but I can do easy, luv," Spike murmured into her skin. "You just haven't given me the chance yet."

The tingles that were charging over her skin seemed to multiply as the vamp's hand returned to her hip, cupping her ass as his mouth sucked greedily at the pulse point in her neck. Long fingers seemed to separate, dividing their attention so that his thumb and index remained clinging to her buttock while the other three resumed their careful exploration of the slickness between her thighs, Buffy's moisture mingling with the bath in a slippery coating that allowed his digits easier access to her heat.

"OK," she breathed, breath channeling into shallow pants. "So, about this---." Her voice turned into a squeak as he abandoned the pretense of holding her, his entire hand disappearing under the water so that his fingers' penetration could assume the depths he desired, sinking inside as his lips abandoned her neck for the base of her throat. Instinctively, Buffy thrust back against him, forcing him deeper, raising herself away so that her shoulders separated from him in a small splash.

Whether conscious or not, her movement resulted in a silent offering of her breasts, hardened nipples now only inches from Spike's waiting mouth, and he leaned forward, catching the left between his teeth to nip at its tip. Oh, he could do easy bloody well enough, but the desire to just tell his control to bugger off, to sink his teeth into the delectable flesh of her breast was still very much there, hanging around in the nether regions of his gut. It didn't help when she responded to his little bite with an arch of her back that only drove it deeper into his mouth, and the vampire's eyes glittered momentarily in gold. Easy, he reminded himself, battling back to calm sapphire. Easy. Even if she drives you mad.

With his free arm, Spike pulled her back against him, the delicious feel of her muscles tight against him, breasts flattened to chest as his mouth sought out hers, taking and sucking and exploring with
a sultry laziness that choked the air from her lungs. His hand inside her never stopped, and he expanded his penetration to include running his nail across her clit every time he pulled out, leaving it quivering and harder and waiting for more each time it left to bury back in her depths. And it was driving both of them insane for…

More, and not enough, and oh god more, Buffy thought. And the water was wrapping both of them, allowing her to slide up and down the solid mass of his body, his power a promise that she just wanted to grab and devour to keep for herself, but she knew she couldn't, shouldn't, not right to just steal what wasn't hers, even if it was obvious to both of them that they were ready, more than ready, and it would hardly be their first time, but oh, god, he'd said he was hers, and she was certainly his…and what was the point if they didn't…

Though the water had started to cool, the heat pouring from the Slayer's flesh kept it warm, lapping over her back to begin splashing over the rim, dotting the floor in tiny droplets that both were oblivious to. It was when she pulled away, lifting her hips from his, tearing herself from that mouth, that Spike felt the first sense of loss, and stared up at her with eyes that were almost black.

"You're not hurt, are you?" he asked, voice barely a rasp as his gaze went automatically to her injury, his fingers reaching to support her.

Wordlessly, she shook her head. "I know you wouldn't hurt me," she murmured and placed her hands on either side of his face, pulling him closer to run her lips across his forehead…over his brow…down the aquiline slope of his nose.

It was the choice of her words that suddenly fueled the charges that crawled just beneath his skin. Wouldn't…she'd said wouldn't…not couldn't, not like he couldn't because of the chip, but that he wouldn't because he specifically chose not to. The fact that she saw the difference, whether consciously or unconsciously, suddenly meant more than it had hearing her announce her feelings, because it meant…she understood. She got it. It wasn't until now that Spike realized just how badly he needed her to do so.

Her mouth was back on his, gently probing as she lowered her hips back down, her swollen outer lips sliding along his erection to position himself at her entrance. Now, now, her head was screaming, and fought the urge to make it quick, to impale herself on him, driving him deep. Easy, was what he'd said, and if he could do it, so could she.

And he was there, inching his way inside, stretching against her in such a mouth-watering fullness she wondered how she'd managed so long without him. Lean fingers dug into her powerful hips, guiding and holding back as her muscles tensed, straining to complete the motion as swiftly as possible so that she could begin the ride in earnest. It was only when she felt his pubic bone press against her clit, bearing into her, sending thousands of shocks shooting into her pelvis…up her spine…radiating throughout her tissue, did Buffy begin the slide back up, savoring the strength he offered in exchange for the taste of her tongue.

Clinging to him in the water, it was as if the world had fallen down around them, leaving them in a chaotic limbo of arms, and legs, and mouths, and tongues, and it was so wet, and tight, each stroke its own fractured universe of pleasure, never to stop, even as she began to quicken the pace.

His groans of pleasure became growls in her mouth, his nails digging deeper, his thrusts becoming stronger, until Spike had no thought of anything but the moment and the woman above him. When he felt the tightening of her inner muscles around him, the suddenness shocked him to the edge, driving him to a final thrust that slammed into her hips, rocketing both of them into separate worlds as they rode out their orgasms. He broke from her kiss, burying his face in her neck, away from her wound though the scent of it only added to his excitement, and felt the Slayer do the same,
murmuring incoherently against his skin as she did so.

When her breathing began to return to normal, Buffy pulled far enough away to gaze down at him, the hazel of her eyes completely overtaken by the ebony of her pupils. "I've got all my pieces back," she whispered. "Thank you."

He was mesmerized by the way the light was dancing in her damp hair and tilted his head to watch it play with the tendrils that clung to her shoulder. "Don't thank me," he said. "All I did was love you."

"Exactly. Without trying to change anything or make me feel bad about me being me. That's deserving of gratitude, I think." Buffy smiled. "Maybe it's my turn to be the one doing some washing here."

This time, he grinned. "Now that," Spike replied, "would be fun."

* * *

Even through the lessening rain, the hulking shape of the castle was unmistakable, and Riley breathed a sigh of relief that he'd managed to find the place without wrecking the car. Mr. Travers was going to be angry enough if he found out that he'd stolen the keys and taken it out. He wasn't even supposed to be involved in any of this.

Pale yellow gleamed from the windows, flickering to indicate candlelight, and the young man used that as a beacon to direct himself as he pulled behind the other cars. Killing the engine, he stared out through the window, his hand reaching to his side to grab the stake he'd brought with him. Gonna make this fast, he thought grimly. In, dust Spike, out before Buffy finds out. Of course, if Spike was with the others, Riley would just have to keep cover until he was alone. That shouldn't be too long. The vampire was the only smoker in the bunch; eventually, he would have to come outside to have a cigarette.

He'd try inside first, though. Maybe he'd get lucky and not have to wait in the rain to do this.

He heard the murmur of voices as soon as he stepped over the threshold, and crept down the hallway toward them. A lot of them, probably the whole gang, he thought, and stopped when he reached the door, pressing his ear silently to the crack by the hinges in an effort to discern who exactly was inside.

There was Giles…and another English guy, but not Spike, definitely too cultured…and Giles again…and Xander? Hard to tell, the voice seeming deeper through the wall…but then the man laughed, and Riley knew for sure it was Harris. The girls were a jumble, talking over each other, the occasional clink of metal against glass indicating that they were probably eating. It was suppertime, after all.

The conversation was difficult to make out, but if he concentrated, Riley could catch the occasional phrase. It took very little time to actually hear what he wanted.

Spike. Upstairs.

He didn't even wait for the rest, merely pivoted on his heel and made a beeline for the stairwell he'd seen when he came in. One flight, and he stopped, listening carefully for any signs of habitation. When he found none, he was up the next like a shot, and didn't even have to emerge from the twisting coil to hear the low rumble of Spike's laughter come drifting down the hall.

Riley's fingers tightened around the stake in his hands as he crept down the corridor. Wouldn't do
to announce his presence. Even with the chip, Spike was smart enough to find ways to avoid him. Probably even hazard a headache to defend himself. Riley had to surprise him; it was his best option for success.

His hand was on the doorknob when he heard her. It was ice across his muscles, her laughter crystalline even through the wall, slicing into his skin as precisely as a scalpel. They were both in there---their bedroom, probably---and they were laughing…and was that water?

Not possible, he thought. Buffy wouldn't do this. Except she had in the past. She'd had Angel. And she was the Slayer. Who knew what kind of vampire baggage came along with that? Riley sure as hell didn't; she never let him in on any of those kind of secrets, stealing out in the middle of the night for a slay when she thought he was asleep, when given the circumstances, she should've been asleep, or at the very least, cuddling with him. Not exactly balm for the old ego knowing she needed more than what he was giving her. And then there was the whole only letting him in so far, just enough to help a little, but not enough to really know, or to have a chance to make a difference in her life.

And now there was Spike.

He swallowed down the bile that burned in the back of his throat. Just go, his common sense was yelling. As long as she's in there, Buffy will never let you near Spike, even if she's against whatever hold he has over her. But he just didn't get it. For some inexplicable reason, she had a blind spot when it came to the chipped vampire, refusing to accept how much of a threat he still was, or how detrimental to the gang it was for him to hang around them. Hadn't she learned her lesson last year when he'd tried turning them all against each other?

There it was again. Laughter. Together. Both of them.

Obviously, she hadn't.

What could be so damn funny? It had been a long time since Riley had heard such carefree sounds coming from his girlfriend; even at their happiest, she'd always seemed so serious. He'd liked that to a degree, but now, hearing her like this, he wondered yet again just how much he'd missed. And what the hell was going on in that room. And there was the water again. If he didn't know better, he would've said it sounded like…splashing.

Common sense was losing. Riley's hand returned to the doorknob, and this time, he squeezed, ready to turn it and then suddenly not wanting to. But when the distinct splash came echoing out, followed almost immediately by Buffy's shriek, he responded on instinct, twisting it and pushing the door open, his eyes darting around the room to settle on the two blonds in the bathtub, both of them naked…both heads whirling to see who had interrupted them…

And two sets of eyes widened, Buffy's muscles frozen in surprise, Riley's locked in horror and shock.

The only one to move was Spike. Rolling his eyes, he grimaced and leaned back against the porcelain, carefully pulling the Slayer who had been straddling him off and over to the side, away from the door. "And they say I've got bad manners," he drawled…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Riley has shown up at Dall Rath and walked in on Buffy and Spike in the bath…

He was the last person she had ever expected to see. Well, not the last, because she had known she was going to have to deal with Riley once they returned to Sunnydale, but certainly the least likely to show up in her doorway in the middle of Scotland.

While she was in the tub.

Naked.

With Spike.

Crap.

Even having Giles walk in right now would’ve been preferable than having to see the hurt shock that now illuminated her boyfriend’s face. Ex-boyfriend, Buffy hastened to remind herself. Except, she hadn’t actually broken up with him yet, so technically maybe not an ex, but still, an ex in her head. And Spike’s. And what the hell was he even doing here? And who was keeping an eye on her mom and Dawn back on the Hellmouth? And…

Crap. She was still naked.

“Is it something about me?” Spike was asking her, his blond head swiveling away from the door to gaze at her. He was completely unruffled by the interruption, annoyance seemingly the only emotion registering in those sapphire depths. “Do people just automatically lose the ability to knock if I’m in a room?”

“Shut up, Spike,” she ordered, desperation hardening her voice.

He shrugged, letting his hand reach up to brush the hair from her face, a proprietorial glance at the man in the doorway sneaking from the corner of his eye. “I’m just sayin’---.”

“Shut up, Spike,” she ordered, desperation hardening her voice.

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“She said, shut up, Spike!” The tension crackled in Riley’s tone, danger and hurt edging it to precision, his knuckles white on the doorknob that was still in his hand. The young man’s gaze swept past him to Buffy. “What’s…” He couldn’t even finish the question, the words choking in his throat. He’d spent the last few days imagining some pretty bad stuff, but none of it compared to…this.

“Riley, I’m…” Too naked, can’t do this with so few clothes on, she thought and glanced over to where the towels were stacked next to the bed. Too far. OK, plan B. “Can you shut the door please?” she asked instead.

“Yeah, in or out here, just make up your mind,” Spike offered.

“It’s…a little cold,” she rushed, trying to soften the effect of the vampire’s words. In the sudden
draft that had filled the room, she folded her arms over her breasts, reminding her briefly of the wound on her shoulder. Unthinkingly, Buffy winced, a tiny line between her brows as she adjusted her limb so that the pain was lessened.

Spike’s nonchalance instantly vanished, replaced with his avid concern of earlier, and he pushed away her hand to inspect the injury. “Damn it, Buffy, are you deliberately tryin’ to get it bleedin’ again?” he demanded.

“It’s fine,” she said, trying to brush him away. “It’s just a twinge.”

“Twinge, my ass,” the vampire muttered, and leaned over the back of the tub to pick up the washcloth that had gotten knocked to the floor, oblivious that his nudity was on display to the other man in the room. “Told Rupert you’d be up here recuperatin’. You’re goin’ to make a liar of me yet, Slayer.”

Her shivering was starting to return, a combination of the incoming cold and the surprise of seeing Riley overtaking her muscles, and she swallowed hard, trying to rid her throat of the lump that had lodged itself there. This wasn’t supposed to happen like this, not without major prep work from her, not before she could break it to him gently. But somehow, her mouth didn’t want to work, lost between the dread that was slowly filling her at the upcoming conversation, and the reassuring calm from the vampire behind her.

The tremors did not go unnoticed, and Spike swore under his breath. “Told you to shut the bleedin’ door!” he barked at Riley as he hopped over the side of the tub, eyes glittering in anger as he yanked the towels from the bed and returned to the Slayer’s side. “Can’t you see she’s freezin’ here?”

Riley watched in amazement, eyes fixed on the tender way Spike was wrapping her up, being careful of the wound the ex-soldier had only now noticed. Buffy was still watching him, but there was sadness there, her lower lip caught between her teeth, gaze steady and apologetic, and Riley felt his stomach drop another two feet.

“You’re hurt,” he said, and it seemed too loud in the cold room. Ducking his head, he edged inside, pushing the door closed behind him. “Did Spike---?”

“No!” Her vehemence surprised him, though if he’d taken a moment to consider it, it shouldn’t have. He lifted his gaze back up, catching the sight of Spike grabbing his jeans from the floor to slide them on as Buffy perched herself on the edge of the bed, looking lost and impossibly small within the wide folds of the terry. “I mean,” she continued, in a calmer voice, “this is local demon-related. Brought on all by myself. Spike’s just…”

 “…taking care of it.” There was no mistaking the bitterness in Riley’s tone, and the softening that had started at the sight of witnessing Buffy hurt disappeared, his eyes frosty as they darted to the other man in the room. “Yeah. I can see that.”

“Somebody has to,” the vampire said. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, his dislike for the other man leaking through with every word.

“Spike,” the Slayer admonished. “Not really helping here.”

“Helping?” Riley was incredulous. “Is that what you people are calling it now?”

Her hazel eyes widened. “You…people? And what exactly do you mean by, ‘you people?’” She bristled, her initial worry about his reaction gone with his accusation, and realized asking the
question was enough to open the gates for the others to come streaming forth. “And what are you even doing here? You’re supposed to be back in Sunnydale---.”

“So is Spike,” he spat out. “Of course, when I heard him on the phone the other night…” He shook his head. “I knew something wasn’t right. How could you lie to me about him? Or, have you two been sneaking around my back for a while now? Pull the wool over the dumb boyfriend. After all, they grow them stupid out there in Iowa.”

“I didn’t tell you because I knew this was how you’d react to his being here.”

“And this surprises you?” Riley took a step into the room. “You’re obviously sleeping with Spike. How else am I supposed to react?”

For the first time, Buffy noticed the stake dangling from her ex’s hand, and her mouth thinned as she looked pointedly from it to his face. “You flew all the way to Scotland just to dust him, didn’t you?” she asked.

“I came all this way to protect you from him,” he countered. “Because you sure as hell don’t seem to be concerned with remembering what exactly he’s capable of.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know him, Riley. Not really. Or me, for that matter. Because if you did, you’d know that, first of all, I don’t need you to be playing Dudley Do-Right, trying to sweep in and rescue me when I very much don’t need to be rescued.”

“Is it a spell?” he asked, the pain in his eyes peeping from behind his anger. “Is that what’s making you act all crazy?”

“Because wingin’ it across the world with a stake clutched in your sweaty little meathook is a sure sign of your sanity,” the vampire drawled.

“Stay out of this, Spike,” Buffy warned. She sighed, pulling the towel closer around her frame, trying to stave away the tremors that still reverberated throughout her torso. Pleading hazel eyes gazed up at the young man by the door. “I am so sorry, Riley,” she said softly. “You’ve got to believe me, I was going to tell you the truth about everything when we got back to Sunnydale---.”

“And what’s that? The truth, I mean.” He waited, expectantly, for her response. Please oh please, be demon-related, he thought. Something I can blame this on. Someone I can blame that’s not Buffy.

Looking up at him, the joy from the last hour in the bath with Spike finished fading away, leaving her heart thudding nervously inside her chest. She took a deep breath, anything to calm her thundering nerves. “I don’t want to do it this---.”

“Are you in love with him?”

And there it was, the gauntlet, tossed so casually out there, as if this was something Riley had done every day of his life. All three of them could see it; all three had been expecting it. Not one of them had thought it would come quite so quickly.

With Buffy’s back to him, Spike couldn’t see her face, but he could hear her body, could feel the wild pace of her pulse as it skittered through her veins. It could mean anything---certainly getting interrupted so by the man you were cheating on could produce such an effect---but it made trying to figure out what she was going to say impossible to deduce. She’d only just admitted it to him, had said repeatedly how hard it was for her to say the words, and had still to tell two of her best friends even that they were involved. Did he really think she was going to tell the truth to Finn
now? The prat was armed, looking for trouble, and taking Buffy by surprise was the surest way to raise those walls she was so damn good at. No way was this going to turn out good for the vampire.

Riley *could* see her face, but it didn’t do any good, that blank sadness that had haunted her eyes ever since he’d stepped through the door still shielding her thoughts from him better than a brick wall. He had surprised himself by asking the question. Though it hadn’t been something he’d seriously considered, seeing her now…hearing her words…witnessing the unexpected tenderness between his girlfriend and the vampire…it really seemed like the only thing he could ask. He had to know. And he had to know now.

At least he’s not beating around the proverbial bush, Buffy thought grimly. But then again, Riley’s always been Action Man. I couldn’t really be expecting anything less. Hoped for, yes, but of course, I also hoped that this was something I wouldn’t have to be dealing with just yet. It would’ve been nice to get this Duncan business done and over with before I had to start considering how I was going to handle Riley.

“Look,” she finally said. “Let me get dressed here. Just…go downstairs and wait for me. I’ll explain---.”

“Are you in love with him?” Riley repeated. His jaw was tense. “It’s not a hard question, Buffy. Yes or no. And I’m not stepping one foot out of this room until you answer it.”

It hadn’t been a gauntlet. It had been a shoe. And he was demanding that Buffy drop its mate. And they all knew it.

She was farther away now than she had been in days, and Spike ached to reach out and grab her back. Not physically. Physically, the distance was only a few feet. But mentally…emotionally…she might as well be back on the Hellmouth. Those damn walls of hers…and all because of Finn. Part of him wanted to hate the wanker for pressing her like this, but another part---a bigger, more insecure part---was waiting in desperate anticipation to hear what she was going to say, mildly grateful for having the issue pressed. If she thought it was hard saying when it was just the two of them, how would she respond when they had an audience?

Her eyes told him before the words came out of her mouth. “I am so, so sorry. I didn’t want you to find out like this,” she said softly. “I wanted it to be…”

“…easy? Grow up, Buffy. There is no easy.” Not any more, Riley thought.

The room held its breath, waiting in thickening eagerness for her to speak. It almost seemed to exhale when she finally opened her mouth.

“Yes,” Buffy admitted. “I love Spike.”

The instant the first syllable came out of her mouth, his determination fled, dragging Riley’s feet along with it. Run, run, run, his heart was chanting, before it can hurt any worse. And his body obeyed, his fingers loosening around the stake to let it clatter to the floor, pivoting on his heel to yank the door open and bolt from the room.

“Riley!” she called after him, and was on her feet, halfway to the entrance when Spike grabbed her wrist.

“Let him go,” he said. When she looked back at his face, there was no anger in his blue eyes, only an odd grateful understanding that she didn’t have time to try and figure out. “It’ll be---.”
“No, not like this,” Buffy replied through gritted teeth, and yanked her arm from his grasp, ignoring the sudden pain in her shoulder as she rushed to the wardrobe and flung open the doors, blindly grabbing her clothes from within.

* * *

Her skin was raised in gooseflesh as she rushed from the stairwell, racing for the great hall to fling open the doors. Cold, too cold, but not the time to worry about that. Time to find him. Time to explain. Just have to find him.

Her entrance was a surprise, causing everyone at the table to turn and look at her. “Where is he?” she demanded, eyes scanning the room, stepping inside to peer into the far corners.

“Where’s who?” asked Willow.

“Riley,” the Slayer rushed. “Where’s Riley?”

Xander frowned. “Ummm…Sunnydale?”

Buffy shook her head, her breathing growing more ragged as she realized that her friends had no idea what she was talking about. “No, he’s here. He was just in my room---.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Giles rose from his seat and came around the table, his eyes narrowed in worry.

“I need to find Riley,” she said distractedly. “If he comes back here, don’t let him go anywhere.” And with that, she turned and ran from the room.

“Did I miss a memo?” Xander asked after she’d gone. “Or did that make as little sense to you guys as it did to me?”

“Count me in on the missage,” Willow said, eyes darting worriedly from the open door to Giles. “Do you think she’s delirious?”

“I don’t know,” the Watcher replied. “Spike didn’t exhibit any side effects from the bite, and the bath should’ve warmed her sufficiently to prevent any rise in her temperature that would explain such a thing.”

“Perhaps kelpie bites have different effects on humans,” Colin suggested.

“Too bad Frank left,” Anya commented. “He’d be able to tell us.”

Another arrival in the doorway captured the group’s attention. “Where’s Buffy?” Spike asked.

Giles’ eyes narrowed at the vampire’s appearance. His normally slicked back hair was a mass of damp curls, and the black tee that constituted his normal wardrobe clung to his chest in several wet patches. A quick glance downward showed his pale feet bare against the stone. “She just ran out,” he replied tersely, his gaze returning the vamp’s face. “You assured me she’d be resting. What in blazes happened up there?”

“Had us a little visitor,” Spike replied, turning back toward the hall.

The Watcher’s arm shot out, grabbing the vampire’s bicep and stopping his exit. “Riley’s actually here?” he asked.

“She mentioned that, did she?” He nodded. “Wanker showed up without an invite and got himself
an eyeful for his trouble. Tore out of there like a bat out of hell with the Slayer right on his heels.”

“Who is this Riley?” Colin asked, leaning into the group at the table.

“Buffy’s boyfriend,” Xander offered.

The younger Watcher immediately stiffened at the reply, eyes jerking to the doorway where the other Englishmen stood. No wonder the Slayer had been in such a blather. Someone, or someones rather, had obviously been caught out.

“Well, at least we know she’s not hallucinating now,” Willow said with a smile that was meant to ease the tension within the room. “But how, and why, no, scratch that. Just how. How did he get here?”

“He drove.” The adrenalin had run its course in her system, leaving Buffy slightly deflated as she appeared at Spike’s side in the doorway. “Just like he just now drove away.”

“So, you didn’t catch him then?” the vampire asked softly. Not that he’d really wanted her to, but her distress regarding the whole matter was not something she needed right now. And his being a prick about the whole thing would only make it worse.

“No.” Her voice was low, dejected. “I got out there just in time to wave goodbye to his taillights.” She shook her head. “This was so not the way I pictured this happening.”

“What? You expected him to throw you a coming out party?” Giles was amazed at his charge’s naivete, shaking his head in reproval. “I’m sorry, Buffy, but if you expect to behave in this manner, you really should be prepared to accept the consequences.”

“Lay off, Rupert—.”

“No, he’s right.” Her hazel eyes were shiny, exhaustion shading them darker as she looked up at him. “I should’ve been upfront with Riley from the start. At the very least, I should’ve said something to him when we talked the other night. Maybe that would’ve stopped him from racking up those frequent flyer miles.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room, until slowly, Xander raised his hand. “Not to sound like the village idiot here,” he said, “but what’s the big deal? So Riley showed up. What’s the big deal? Just one more muscle to help us with this whole black stallion mess.”

Nothing like getting thrown into the deep end, Buffy thought as she gazed at her friends at the table. First Giles, then Riley, and now Xander. Plus, can’t forget the “I love you” volleys with Spike. I don’t really do anything half-assed, now do I?

Taking a deep breath, the Slayer edged herself closer to the vampire at her side, relieved when his hand automatically came up to settle in the small of her back. It was a tiny gesture, probably unnoticed by the others, hidden as it was by their bodies, but for her, it was the pillar she needed to continue. “It’s a big deal,” she said slowly, and deliberately reached behind her to take the vampire’s hand in hers, interlocking their fingers as she let their arms fall to her side, “because Riley walked in on me and Spike.” She glanced up at him, catching the steady blue and holding it tight as she continued. “We’ve been kind of…involved with each other for awhile now.”

“What?” Xander’s voice rang clear in the great hall, his eyes wide. After a moment, he frowned, looking around at the others in the room. “OK, see, now I was expecting that to be a resounding chorus of many whats, not a resounding chorus of one what.”
Anya leaned over and affectionately patted her boyfriend’s hand. “That’s because the rest of us all know, sweetie,” she said.

“Wait,” came from a frowning Buffy. “You know?” Her gaze swept to the two witches. “How does Anya know?”

“Don’t worry, I guessed it,” the ex-demon replied.

“Yeah,” chimed Willow. “No offense, but Spike was getting to the point where even Anya could teach him a few things about subtlety.”

Xander’s head turned toward Colin. “What about you?” he asked. “How come you’re not joining the surprise brigade here?”

“Well…” The younger Watcher squirmed, uncomfortable under all the gazes that now settled on him, his face blushing as he did his best not to physically sink into his seat. “Their behavior was rather blatant. And when Spike reacted so strangely when the spell failed the first time—.”

“You’ve known since then?” Buffy’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t even know then.”

“That’s my job,” Colin defended with a bright fluster. “And when I tried discussing it with Rupert—.”

The Slayer whirled to face her Watcher. “You said this was all a surprise to you,” she accused.

“And it was. Just…not as surprising as it could’ve been had Colin not been so insistent with his suppositions.”

“And now Riley knows.” She shook her head, shrugging in resignation. “I’m so glad I tried keeping this all a secret.”

“So…you and Spike…” Xander’s voice trailed off, watching his best friend intently from the table.

Buffy nodded. “Me and Spike.”

At her side, the vampire’s eyes narrowed, his head tilting as he regarded the young man in curiosity. “How come your head’s not exploding, Harris?” he queried. “Would’ve expected at least a mild wobbler to come from you, maybe even one of those ever-so-dangerous fingers in my face, tellin’ me to stay away from your Slayer.”

The silence was deafening as they waited for his response. “Not that I’m thrilled about being left out of the loop again,” Xander finally said, “because I’m most definitely on the side of not on that issue. And can’t say I’d be dying to be in Riley’s shoes right about now. But I’m not completely blind.” He rolled his eyes at his friends’ exaggerated looks of surprise from around the room. “OK, ha ha, yes, I didn’t see it when apparently they were doing it right under all our noses. On the other hand, I have seen the way Spike’s been acting lately. Like…not an evil thing. Capable of acting like someone who might actually give a damn or two about something other than himself. And if that’s because of him being with Buffy, then…great. Which is not a word I would’ve ever thought I’d be using in association with my best friend having another vampire boyfriend.”

“And here I had my heart set on a good old-fashioned tellin’ off.” Spike shook his head. “You disappoint me, Harris.”

“Get used to it, Spike,” said Xander good-naturedly. “Besides, the finger-pointing thing should
probably come courtesy of someone who’s not dating an ex-demon himself, don’t you think?”

Willow’s eyes were wide in surprise. “Wow, Xander, that’s really…insightful of you,” she commented.

He grinned. “I’ve been known to be graced with the occasional revelation,” he said. “Even if it does kind of hurt the old noggin there.” His gaze returned to the blonds in the doorway. “So, I’m…kind of OK with this. I think. Plus, bonus for me, I get to go to being the big guy in the group again, because gotta say, standing next to Riley can be just a little intimidating.”

“Hey! Big Bad here! I can be plenty intimidatin’!”

“Because you’ll…what? Hit me with your best snark?” Xander shook his head. “Sorry, Spike. You lost me on the intimidating thing the first time you had to borrow my Bermudas.”

“That was your bloody dryer’s fault!”

“If you’d learned how to do the laundry instead of playing at Minnie the Moocher while you were living with me, you would never have shrunk them in the first place.”

“Told you then, and I’m tellin’ you again, I wasn’t your soddin’ housekeeper. Don’t do laundry, don’t do ironin’, and certainly wasn’t goin’ to organize those bloody—.”

As the genial argument continued around her, Buffy bit back the smile that rose to her lips. What the hell had she been worried about with Xander? From the sounds of the friendly banter falling around her ears, everything was going to be just fine.

* * *

He was reading at the small desk against the wall when the knock came at the door. “Come in!” Travers called out, and turned in his seat to see Ibbie poke her head in.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you,” she said, “but there’s a…gentleman downstairs who says he’s here to see you.”

Quentin frowned. “I’m not expecting anyone tonight.”

“I know, and normally I wouldn’t bother, but he’s…” She frowned. “…he’s a trifle worse for wear. And quite insistent.”

Sighing, Travers rose to his feet, removing his glasses to set them on the desk. “My apologies for the trouble,” he said as he followed her from the room and downstairs.

She led him to the front sitting room and hung back, glancing between him and the open door. “The surgery will be closed,” Ibbie explained. “But I’m sure I could find someone who would—.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he cut off with a smile, and stepped into the room. The sight of the portly man standing next to the fireplace immediately reverted his face to a frown, the multiple bruises that colored the arrival’s grizzled cheeks almost unnoticeable next to the blood-stained coat that hugged his rotund frame. “Or perhaps it will….” he murmured.

There was a moment of silence until he realized she was still standing behind him. “Thank you,” Travers said, stepping to the doorway and guiding the door closed. “We won’t be long.”

Once they were alone, Quentin immediately strode to the other man’s side, peering into his face to
examine his wounds more carefully. “What happened to you, Hornbrook?” he asked. “You made
no mention of this when we spoke earlier.”

“The Slayer happened to me,” Hornbrook replied. “The Slayer and that damn vampire…”
Though his feet were bare against the stone floor, Spike was oblivious to the cold, standing inside the door and surveying the water that was spilled around, the damp towel dropped haphazardly into a heap on the bed. Goin’ to need new sheets, he noted wryly. Won’t do for Buffy to have to put up with wet ones.

First things first, though. Had to empty the bath.

He’d come up here for a purpose, though not the one he’d shared with the Slayer. The near non-existent surprise of their announcement had been followed by a quick clearing of the table, with the girls shuttling Buffy into the kitchen and the two Watchers burying themselves back into their books. That had left Spike with Harris, and though the younger man had made it more than obvious he had few problems with the new arrangements, there was still a note of sticky discomfort in the air, quieting both of them until the vampire had made the excuse of cleaning the bedroom and took his leave, right after telling the Slayer where he was going. It was a valid reason to come up, but truth be told, not the only one. For some reason, Spike was convinced that the others needed some alone time, space to talk about him without his lurking that would only make them curb their words.

The one thing he was hoping it would do was give Buffy a chance to help get her head sorted about the whole mess. Though he certainly didn’t have a problem with how their arrangement came out—hell, it was Finn’s own fault—he knew Buffy did, and maybe talking it over with her girlfriends was what she needed to come to grips with it. At least, that’s what he hoped.

His back was to the door when the rap came, and the vampire glanced over his shoulder to see Xander hovering in the entrance, a thermos dangling from his finger. “Yeah?” Spike asked, reaching into the water to pull out the washcloth that had settled to the bottom of the tub.

“Can I come in?” He was shifting nervously from foot to foot, playing with the flask in his hand, and looking not at all like he actually wanted to enter.

The vampire frowned, immediately stiffening. “Something wrong?” he asked, wringing the cloth over the tub.

“No, nothing wrong, just…” Xander held up the thermos. “…thought you might be a little hungry.”

“Oh.” Spike shrugged. “Just set it on the side. I’ll get to it after I take care of this.” He began to turn away, then hesitated before shooting a brusque, “Thanks, mate,” back to the doorway.

It took him only a minute to realize that Harris hadn’t moved and he stopped his organization of the toiletries to face the other man head on. “What is it?” he demanded. “’Cause if you’re just bored and lookin’ for a show—-”
“Do you need some help with that?”

The offer took him by surprise, and Spike glanced back at the still-full tub before reverting his attention to his guest. “Something tells me you’ve got more on the brain than bein’ blood delivery boy or playin’ at housemaid,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “So spill it, Harris.”

This pulled Xander inside the door, grabbing the knob and shutting it closed behind him. He squared his shoulders as he looked over at the blond. “I was hoping we could talk. You know, mano et vampo. About Buffy. Well, about you and Buffy.”

Spike snorted. “Ahhh, here it comes. Figured your little act downstairs was too good to be true.”

“Hey, that was all about me being Mr. Sincerity down there,” came the retort. “And I’m beginning to think that maybe I should’ve slipped something into your little bloodshake there with the kind of welcome I’m getting.” He tossed him the thermos, stuffing his hands into his pockets once they were empty.

The vampire caught it with a clean jerk, his blue eyes narrowing as he regarded the other man. “You’re serious,” he said slowly. “You just want to…talk.”

“Well, yeah. It’s not like it would be the first time it happened, you know. Which is kind of what I wanted to talk about.”

“This isn’t the sort of chat that’s goin’ to end in some sick group hug, is it?” His lip curled in distaste.

“Only if you ask really nicely. Or annoy me to no end. Frankly, I see the latter as being more likely.”

Tossing the thermos onto the bed, Spike turned back to the full bath and picked up the empty buckets at its side. “If we’re goin’ to do this, you’re goin’ to work at the same time. Help me with the bailing here.”

Xander crossed to the tub and took one of the buckets from the vampire’s hand. “When I was being the gout man,” he started, “and you were telling me about this girl you were in love with…that was all about Buffy, wasn’t it?”

No point in hedging now. Everything was already out in the open. “Yeah.”

“And you didn’t tell me it was her because…?”

Spike’s scarred brow lifted. “Hello? Am I the only one who remembers the long, pointy stick? Wasn’t too interested in losin’ an eyeball there. Not that your aim was good enough for that anyway. With my luck, you would’ve just poked something that should by all rights be doin’ the pokin’.”

Xander stopped in his tracks, holding up a warning finger to the vampire in front of him. “OK, still coming to grips with the whole my best friend’s dating a vampire thing, so any references that conjure up images of Buffy getting…poked by you? I would greatly appreciate it if you could somehow find a way to keep those to yourself for now.”

Spike rolled his eyes, shaking his head in annoyance. “I’m just sayin’, don’t think you’d’ve been very receptive to hearin’ the truth about my feelings for Buffy back then.” He stepped out into the hallway. “Now stop your lollygaggin’ and get to hauling.”
Trotting after him, Xander frowned as the vampire stopped before one of the windows, pulling down the pane of glass to let in a fresh blast of wind from outside. “What’re you doing?” he asked.

“You feel like lugging all this downstairs when there’s a perfectly good window here, be my guest.” Hoisting the bucket to his shoulder, Spike poured the water through the opening, heedless to the wide-eyed surprise of the young man behind him.

“That’s the front of the castle. Someone could be standing down there!”

Cocking his head to listen, Spike waited a moment before shaking his blond curls. “No unholy screams so I’m callin’ it safe.” He brushed past Xander to go back into the room. “Sides, don’t think anyone’s goin’ to notice with the way it’s pissin’ rain out there.”

The vampire had filled a second load from the tub by the time Xander came back into the room. “I take it that my advice was all about you luring Buffy to the dark side of the force then,” the brunette commented.

“It would’ve been if I’d actually followed up on it—-.”

“Wait a minute.” Xander stood in the doorway, blocking the entrance, his brown eyes wide. “I impart to you my greatest words of wisdom regarding the fairer sex, and you just blow me off? Well, that’s a fine how-do-you-do.”

“I didn’t…” Spike grimaced at the younger’s choice of words. “…blow you off. Just didn’t work out that way, is all.”

“So you tried the grand romantic gesture then?”

“Didn’t need to,” he said, brushing his way past. “Buffy came around on her own.”

“But you were planning to.” Without bothering to refill his own pail, Xander hurried after the vampire, hanging on his heels even when the other man stopped to turn and face him.

“Not that it matters now, but yeah, I’d given it some thought.” His head tilted, brow wrinkling. “What’s the bug up your skirt, Harris?”

“Nothing. I was just…wondering if I was in any small way…responsible for you and Buffy…”

The worry that clouded the dark-haired man’s face would’ve been comical if Spike didn’t know how serious he was about it. So, yeah, he didn’t go off the deep end regarding the truth about their relationship, but that sure as hell didn’t mean he wanted to think he was the one who brought it all about. Any other time, the vampire would’ve just let him simmer in his own juices, and though the sarcastic comeback popped instantly to his lips, he bit it back, all of a sudden remembering the casual reference to him as one of Xander’s “friends” earlier in the great hall. And somehow…it didn’t seem like a friendly thing to do. Damn. He must be going soft.

“It wasn’t you,” he assured. “This thing between me and Buffy…it’s been stewing a long time. Before Scotland even, I think. Which is one reason why Soldier Boy took it the way he did. But it’s got nothin’ to do with you or what you said, so don’t fuss yourself about it.” OK, semi-truths there. Though his feelings for Buffy had been around for a while, Spike wasn’t entirely sure about the Slayer’s, but phrasing it this way took the bulk of the burden from the young man’s shoulders.

Xander’s relief was a loud exhalation. “OK. Because you know, I was just wondering and all.” He headed back into the bedroom, speaking as he walked. “So what were you going to do?”
“None of your business.”

“Aw, c’mon. You can tell me. Not like you actually did it. And it was my idea in the first place.”

“I don’t care. I’m not tellin’.”

“It can’t be so bad,” Xander pressed. “What was it? Stand outside her window blasting the Sex Pistols? Sweep her off her feet and into your crypt?” His face brightened. “Oh! Or maybe you were going to write her an epic love poem.” He laughed. “That would really…” As the muscles in Spike’s jaw twitched, his nostrils flaring, the young man’s voice trailed off even as his eyes widened in amused delight. “Holy gee willikers, Batman, you were going to write her a poem!”

The volume of his voice had risen in his glee, and the vampire marched back into the room, slamming the door shut behind him, blue eyes flashing. “Chip or no chip, you say one word to Buffy about that, your little demon girlfriend’s goin’ to be investing a lot of her hard-earned dosh in battery-operated substitutes, if you get my meanin’.”

Xander held up his hands in defense. “Hey, did I say I was going to blab? It’s just…” His lips quirked, unable to hold back the smile. “…funny.”

“It’s not funny,” Spike growled, storming back to the tub’s side and viciously refilling his bucket. “It’s a soddin’ nightmare.”

“What? Did she laugh at it?”

“She never saw it.” He glared at him in warning. “And she’s not goin’ to.”

“Why not? It can’t be that bad. And Buffy’s a sucker for poetry. There was this one guy in high school---,”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Already heard the Dickinson story, Harris. Just drop the whole subject, all right? The poem was a piece of rubbish, and no way am I goin’ to let Buffy know about it, not while I’ve got a drop of self-respect left in these bones.”

When the vampire left the room again, Xander tilted his head, watching the black-covered back thoughtfully. “Maybe it just needs some polishing. You know, buff it up for the ol’ Buffster,” he offered when Spike returned.

“Aren’t you s’posed to be helpin’ me here?” the vampire complained as he passed by to drain another pail of water from the tub. “Because this looks remarkably like you’re not.”

“I’m just saying---.”

“Don’t.”

“But---.”

“No buts.”

“If you want---.”

“And I don’t, so stop pushin’ me. You’re not seein’ it, and that’s final.”

“No such thing as final---.”

“Keep it up, Harris, and bathwater won’t be the only thing goin’ out that bloody window.”
Their bickering continued, floating down the hallway and into the stairwell, the tattoo of the rain getting broken by the semi-regular splashes of water hitting the ground below. With the easy gibes that passed between them, the casual onlooker would’ve wondered why two such friends were even arguing about the matter, its resolution barreling forward to the vampire’s inevitable collusion.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Xander refused to give in. This one was just too good to pass up.

* * *

Steam rose from the mug cupped in her hands, and gently, Willow blew across the top, cooling it with her breath before handing it over to Buffy. “It’s still hot,” she warned.

Sniffing at the contents, the Slayer grimaced. “And it still smells like the bottom of the refrigerator when Dawn forgets it’s her turn to clean it out,” she commented, holding the mug as far away from her as possible.

“That’s the hing,” said Tara. “It has a kind of distinctive odor.”

“It could be worse,” Anya offered. “You could have to be wearing it.” The other girls just looked at her questioningly, prompting her to explain. “Hing’s a popular remedy for indigestion,” she said. “Mix it with a spoonful of curd and smear it on your tummy. Works wonders.”

“So what you’re telling me is that the Pepto Bismol of the magic world is going to make this little lovebite of Duncan’s go away?” Buffy asked disbelievingly. “You’re kidding, right?”

“It doesn’t make it go away,” Willow corrected. “It just kind of…cauterizes the wound from the inside to prevent it from opening again. Plus, it’s supposed to have a numbing effect so that you can’t feel any more pain from it. But it still looks for all intents and purposes that it’s there.”

“The numbing comes from the hing spice,” the ex-vengeance demon said. “You should feel what it does when you get it in your belly button.”

Buffy bit back a smile. “Can I drink it hot, or do I have to wait for it to cool? Because at the moment, I’m thinking hot might be better. That way, it’ll burn off all my taste buds so that I can’t tell what I’m really drinking here.”

“It’s your call. Heat doesn’t affect its healing properties.”

The kitchen was silent as the Slayer sipped at the concoction, holding her breath as she did so in hopes that not smelling it would help its taste. It didn’t. Her face contorted as the liquid slid down her throat, and Buffy stuck out her tongue, hoping the cool air would somehow alleviate the lingering pungence in her mouth, an incoherent, “Ughhh,” ripping from her lungs.

Willow laughed. “I’m going to guess that’s not a face Spike has seen very often,” she said lightly. “Because not really a falling-in-love-with kind of face.”

“I’m so glad my discomfort amuses you,” the Slayer complained. It was only then that she realized what exactly the redhead had said. “Since when did joking about me and Spike become public domain?” she asked.

“Since you decided to throw Riley out with the bathwater,” Anya said. Three sets of wide eyes accompanied dropped jaws as the trio of girls gaped at her boldness, and she bristled. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t think it’s just a little bit humorous Riley finding Buffy and Spike like he did. Personally, I think it’s hysterical. I mean, can you imagine the look on his face?” She waited
expectantly for some support from the others, but finding none, she shrugged, her wide smile only fading slightly. “I just think it would’ve been priceless to have been a fly on that wall.”

“Can we just…not talk about Riley right now?” Buffy asked softly. It was hard enough remembering the hurt in his eyes, the pain and anger that had flashed in those hazel depths when she’d admitted her feelings about Spike. Part of her had been tempted to lie, to try and cover the whole thing up, to deny it was anything but a physical thing. But it wouldn’t have made anything easier. Because then she would have two hurt men on her hands, one of whom she loved, the other whom she cared for, and the young woman wasn’t sure even she was strong enough to have to deal with that. Not even a Slayer had that kind of strength.

“Let’s talk about something a little more angst-lite,” she said, forcing a smile. “Like kelpies and rituals that kill your boyfriends.” She took another sip from the mug. “Where did Frank take off to this time this time?”

“Once he got all bandaged up, Colin took him back down to the Otherworld tunnels,” Willow explained. “Frank said the stream has a healing effect on guardians and it would speed everything up so that he could help us with Duncan tomorrow.”

“Did he take the harness with him?”

“Well, considering you’re the only one who knows where it actually is,” said Anya, “the answer to that would be no.”

Buffy frowned. “Crap. I guess I should’ve said something before I went upstairs.”

“Colin told him you would t-t-take it to him tomorrow.”

“Not that he was very happy about that little arrangement, let me tell you.” Anya was on a roll. “Trying to reason with him that you were too hurt to be bothered with it right then was like trying to convince Xander that marshmallow fluff is not a basic food group. Very stubborn.”

“Did he tell you what the harness does before he left?” Her hazel eyes swept the small group, waiting for a response, but was met with only furtive glances and guilty smiles. The Slayer groaned. “Please tell me he at least filled you in on the whole Duncan thing before returning to the Kelpie Lagoon there. Give me that.”

 Yep. Three guardians, blah blah, lost the harness, blah blah, can change into anything they want, blah blah, and Duncan’s a kelpie?” The last was the only bit of Anya’s list that registered any emotion, her voice peaking in shock.

At Buffy’s nod over her cup, Willow shook her head. “What gets me is that Xander and Spike suspected him from the beginning. At least, that’s what Xander claimed when Frank gave us a demo and shapeshifted into Spike right in front of us. Why didn’t they say anything?”

“Would you have believed them?” the Slayer quizzed. “According to Spike, we were all acting pretty wacky. If I hadn’t seen all Duncan’s dead bodies buried out in the Kelpie Cave with my own eyes, I’m not sure I would. But murdering demon plus stolen mysterious artifact pretty much equals bad guy in just about anyone’s book, I think.”

“Oh!” The redhead’s face brightened. “We did get some answers regarding the closing spell, though. Giles and Colin were right about the physical requirements of it. Turns out that once the three are imbued with the magical spirits, they have to transfer the urn to the other side of the entrance where apparently there’s this trial they have to pass. That’s how the entrance gets closed.”
“And what’s the trial?”

“Ummm, we’re still working on that part.”

“And if the entrance gets closed while we’re all on the other side of it, how do we get back?”

“The magical spirits. They act as a kind of hall pass while they’re still in you. Once the trial is over, you bring the urn back to the stone triangle and voila! The spell is over.”

“Is that when Spike does his combustion trick?” The darting of her best friend’s eyes was all the answer Buffy needed, and she set down the mug on the counter so hard, some of its contents sloshed over the side. “We’ve got to fix this!” she demanded. “I did not go through all this All My Children-esque melodrama tonight just to lose Spike to a stupid magic fire. Can’t we just put a protection spell on him or something that will shield him from the effects of the closing ritual?”

Willow shook her head. “We don’t know how it would affect it,” she said. “For all we know, it could just transfer the fire to you or Xander.”

“And I am not having a crispy-fried boyfriend,” Anya said. “I’ve gone down that road before. You just end up with ashy bedsheets.”

“We’ve still got twenty-four hours until we can do the spell,” Tara said. “We’ll figure something out.”

“And if we don’t, we can just wait to do the spell until the next lunar opening we get,” her girlfriend added. “Gotta love those lunar openings.”

Though she nodded in agreement, Buffy kept silent, picking up her cup to finish draining off the healing potion. Dread was filling her torso, worry that they wouldn’t figure out what to do in time coursing through her arteries. Too much had happened; there was no way she was going to lose Spike over something as ridiculous this now, not when she’d only just found him. And found herself in the process.

“How’s the shoulder feeling?” Willow asked as Buffy set down her now empty mug.

Testing the joint, the Slayer winced before settling it gently back into place. “Still hurts,” she said. “Is this supposed to have worked this fast?”

The redhead blushed. “Actually, no. I was just hoping a change of topic might make it less tense-y in here.”

“I know what would make me less tense-y,” Buffy’s face was grim. “Pummeling a certain kelpie to a pulp before tossing him off to Spike to finish. That would definitely rate high on the relax-o-meter.”

“Or you could have sex with Spike,” offered Anya. “That always works for me.” At the Slayer’s raised eyebrow, the ex-demon rolled her eyes. “With Xander, of course. Not Spike. Although, I do have to say, not that I’m envious or anything, good job on that one. I’ll bet anything Spike’s much more compatible than Riley when it comes to orgasm potential.”

“Anya!”

“Oh please. Like the rest of you weren’t thinking exactly the same thing.”

“Um, no. Because, hello, gay now.”
“And that’s why you were hanging all over Duncan, right?” Anya smiled. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that one, missy.” She turned back to the Slayer. “I’m just saying, a century of experience, vampire stamina, that body. You’ve definitely upgraded your model, Buffy.”

In spite of the other girl’s bluntness, Buffy found herself smiling in agreement, the memory of Spike’s hands on her in the bath washing her in fire. She still felt like thrashing Duncan, but somehow, she had a feeling that Anya’s suggestion was going to work just as well.

* * *

He hated this form. As he stood by the fire, the tumbler of whiskey in his hands, the kelpie who had been Duncan stared at Travers, wishing yet again that this Hornbrook had been young or at the very least, fit. It hurt to breathe, and the bulky body he was forced to carry was uncomfortable, slow in reflexes and awkward to maneuver. He was going to be glad when he didn’t have to keep this shape anymore.

Quentin was regarding him in a mixture of worry and disbelief, the heavy lines etched into his brow as he frowned at his colleague. “My apologies for not believing you,” he said. “But I just find it inconceivable that Buffy Summers would inflict this kind of damage on another human. Especially someone who is a member of my Council.”

“Believe it. It was that vampire’s fault. She’s in love with him, and when he decided he was going to keep the harness for himself, he convinced her to try and get rid of me.” He hadn’t expected this loyalty Travers was exhibiting for his Slayer. When Duncan had conceived the plan in the cave, he had assumed Hornbrook’s word would be enough and yet, here he was, arguing over the finer points of his story, because Quentin refused to acknowledge that Buffy was capable of an attack of such viciousness toward a human. The fact that this part—the part where she was the reason behind his injuries—was actually true, just made it all the worse. Too bad he couldn’t admit to being a demon. Then, the bastard Travers would have to believe him.

“And she now has the harness.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re convinced she and Spike are—-.”

“In love.”

They hadn’t heard the door open, but both men looked around to see a soaking wet Riley Finn standing in the entrance, his face grim. “What was that, Mr. Finn?” queried Travers.

“Buffy and Spike are in love, sir,” the young man repeated. “I’ll vouch for that.” His voice was flat, his eyes dull, but the tension that locked his arms behind his back, almost as if he were standing before a superior officer, rippled through his tall body in dangerous waves.

Quentin’s eyes narrowed. “And you would know this because…?”

“Because she told me.”

This was his chance, and Duncan pounced on it. “I’m telling you, sir, it’s that Spike’s fault. He has some kind of control over her. She’ll do anything he says.”

He hadn’t wanted to believe, but there was too much evidence staring him back in the face. Hornbrook’s injuries were serious, and the man was a valued member of his board, loyal to a fault and excellent at his job. While Quentin knew little of Finn, it seemed odd that the young man
would travel so far if it wasn’t a serious matter; certainly finding out the woman you love was under the thrall of a powerful vampire would qualify as such.

And yet that meant Buffy Summers had turned traitor. Which couldn’t be. Slayers simply just didn’t…and then he remembered Faith, and his mouth thinned.

Slayers sometimes did.

Which meant he had to take action.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Riley has returned and confirmed for Travers that Buffy and Spike are involved, while the Slayer has taken a potion to help with the wound on her shoulder…

Even if she hadn't seen the smoke wafting in a diaphanous cloud down the hall, Buffy would've known Spike stood in the entrance as soon as she stepped from the great hall. It wasn't just Slayer senses, either. That would be too easy of an answer. No, she knew as she walked slowly down the corridor that the stampede charging across her skin was a direct result of whatever bond was growing between her and the vampire, that knowing where he was or how he was feeling without even needing to physically see him was a side effect of opening the door inside her to let him enter. It wasn't that admitting she loved him---to herself, to her friends, and most importantly, to him---had allowed her the freedom to relax, even if it had.

It was that, for the first time in what felt like forever, Buffy Summers felt whole.

She slowed her pace even further as she approached, hazel eyes sweeping over his bent form as he stared out into the raining night. He was in profile to her, his bleached hair a mass of tumbled curls, the strays at the nape of his neck begging for her fingers to reach out and twist them around her knuckles, while his face was an exercise of shadows, the golden candlelight from the wall sconces warming his normal pallor even as it disappeared amongst the angular lines of his face. His hands were on the jamb, supporting his weight as he leaned forward, his cigarette dangling almost forgotten between his fingers, and she dwelled briefly on the strength of those forearms, how they'd felt wrapped pressing into her as he'd taken the time to bathe her just…oh god, was it only an hour ago?

"How did sorority hour go?" Spike asked, his head turning so that he could watch her near, blue eyes swallowed into black. "The girls convince you you've cocked everything up, or have I passed inspection?"

"Well, let's just say that if I ever need to pass over the title of president of the Spike fan club, Anya will be more than happy to take it from me." She stopped behind him and circled her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his back, all the while inhaling deeply. Even the effects of the bath could do nothing to take away that smell that was so uniquely him; that curious blend would forever be enough to waken her senses in thrills. "What's the point of going outside for a cigarette if all your smoke ends up in the hallway?" she asked lightly.

He smiled, flicking the butt out into the rain, watching as the red tip arced into the night before disappearing in a tiny fleck of crimson. "It's not my fault," Spike said. "It's the wind's. Anyone's got a problem with it, they can just take it up with Mother Nature and give her an earful. I'm out of it."

With his hands now free, he turned in her embrace, leaning against the jamb as he pulled her gently back against him, burying his nose in her hair as his fingers curled protectively around her waist. Out in the open now, he thought. No need for pretense. Never lettin' her go again.

With her back to him, Buffy couldn't see his face and twisted slightly to gaze up at him. She could tell that his mind was miles away, his eyes thoughtful even as they gleamed beneath heavy lids.
There was a softness in his mouth, that half-smile playing with its luscious corner, that spoke of musings not of the bloody or violent kind. Her own face softened. "You know, I can see Spike, and I can feel Spike," she said quietly, a slight tinge of tease in her words, "but Spike's not really here right now, is he?"

He took a moment to respond, rolling the words around in his head before allowing them to slip out to her ears. "I'm sorry." His subdued tone echoed in the touch of his hand to the side of her face, palm against her jaw, his thumb brushing lightly over her bottom lip. He was fighting the urge to lean in and kiss her, to catch the fullness of her mouth between his teeth, and devour her on the spot, but Spike knew that if he didn't get this out now, he wasn't sure he ever would.

"For what?"

"For…the way…” No name-calling; be respectful, for her sake. "…Finn found out. About us."

"Oh." The reminder of Riley wiped the smile from Buffy's face, and she found herself leaning into Spike's hand, cradling her cheek against it as her breath softly fanned across his skin.

It was such a small movement on her part; to anyone else, it might have been completely dismissed. To Spike, however, it meant more, a monument of telling and trust screaming at him through his palm as he watched the pain flicker behind the luminous hazel. The Slayer was not one for seeking succor; so strong and so independent, she had rare need for it. But he knew this was her way of acquiescing to her current call for consolation. And he would give her whatever she wanted in order to satisfy it.

"Whatever you need…tonight…just tell me." He kept his voice low and even, though his insides were crawling to hold her even tighter. "You need space? You got it. Just say the word and I'm sleepin' on---."

"I need you," Buffy's head turned back to look up into his face. "We made our bed tonight by going public, so now you're going to have to lie in it. With me. Preferably naked."

Spike smiled, but his gaze flickered to her shoulder. "You're the one who's got to be careful now, luv," he said. "You don't need me hoggin' the bed when you should be gettin' your rest."

"I like the way you hog," she teased, and began tracing a path along his skin where his shirt rode up from his jeans. "And besides, I've been magicked up. Will and Tara gave me something for it so I don't have to worry about it hurting or bleeding anymore."

For once, Spike found himself grateful for the Slayer's friends. Talking with Harris had led to discussion of Buffy's relationship with Riley, and the unexpected confession from the young man that Finn suspected her dissatisfaction with the way things were between them before she'd even left Sunnydale had lightened the guilt he'd felt regarding how torn up she'd gotten by his sudden appearance. Not that he cared one way or the other how Soldier Boy found out. In fact, truth be told, he'd rather enjoyed the pained look on the other man's face at catching them the way he did. But still. This wasn't about him. This was about Buffy. And it sounded like her girlfriends had done their job in helping to ease some of her feelings about it. Gotta remember to pick them up a little thank you gift when we get back, he thought. Maybe nick something from the magic shop for them.

"So…are we going to stand here all night in the cold, or are you going to come upstairs with me and let me warm my feet up?" Buffy asked coyly, slipping away from his embrace, her fingers knotted in the hem of his shirt so that he was forced to come along with her. "I'm beginning to think I should be wearing double socks around this place."
"Nothin' wrong with socks," Spike said as they started up the narrow stairwell. Their fingertips curled against the other's, the tiniest of hooks connecting them lest one should slip. "Socks can be sexy." When she glanced back at him, waiting for his inevitable qualification, he chuckled. "Long as that's all you're wearing," he clarified.

* * *

The ringing from the table surprised them both. For a moment, Giles and Colin just looked at each other, matching frowns on their faces, before the younger Watcher rose to his feet and walked over to the table, picking up the phone that rested there. After a cursory glance at its display, he pressed the talk button and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

Giles saw his shoulders stiffen almost immediately, his head snapping back as if to attention, and crossed to stand by the other's side. Something was not good about this particular phone call, and he didn't want to miss a single word of it.

"Y-y-yes, sir," Colin was saying. "Not that I don't understand, but do you really think…Well, really, it's so much a matter of…Is that necessary? Because I can assure you, I have everything under con..." Whoever was on the other end wasn't allowing the young Englishman to finish any of his sentences, in spite of a concerted effort on Colin's part, and his color rose with each passing attempt. "I c-c-can explain. Surely, such lengths aren't…Yes. Yes, sir. No, I understand. And I'll inform Rup---Mr. Giles---so that we are both prepared…Good night, sir."

The lines were deep in Giles' forehead as he watched Colin turn off the phone and return it to the table. "Why did that not sound like good news?" he queried.

"Because it was Mr. Travers." The Watcher's eyes were bleak as he looked up at his colleague. "And he's here in Scotland."

His chest suddenly constricted, and Giles automatically reached up to remove his glasses, wiping them absently as he gazed intently at the other man. "What did he have to say?"

"Too much. And none of it good." A deflated Colin collapsed into a nearby chair, sighing heavily. "He wishes to see us first thing in the morning in town. He wants to discuss Buffy and Spike."

"Buffy and…Spike?"

"He knows. Don't ask me how or why because he didn't specify, but somehow Mr. Travers is aware of what has developed between them."

Giles sat in the opposite chair, returning his glasses to his nose as he peered at the younger man. "But that's not possible," he argued. "They've only just confirmed their relationship for us this evening. How could…" His voice trailed off, the possibilities tumbling in his head, but one kept fighting its way to the forefront, one that was leaving a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Riley. He was the only explanation. It was too much of a coincidence not to be him.

"There's more." Colin lifted his head to stare at Rupert. "He also knows that Buffy has the harness."

"What?" This time, Giles exploded, confusion brightening his eyes to a livid blue. How much exactly had Buffy told Riley when he'd been upstairs? It made no sense for the young man to be informed of the recent developments regarding the artifact, and yet there seemed no other possible way for Travers to have retained his information and acted so quickly on it. Furtively, he glanced around the room, leaning forward as he lowered his voice. "You don't think they've had us under
surveillance the entire time we've been here, do you?" he quizzed.

Colin shook his head. "I don't know. I was never informed of that, but then again, I wasn't
informed of a lot of things regarding this project, so there's really no telling. All I know is that Mr.
Travers wants both of us there in the morning. With Buffy."

"What about Spike?"

"We're to leave him here. For some reason, he…fears for our safety."

"That's ridiculous."

"I'm just relaying what Mr. Travers said." Again, Colin sighed heavily. "I've a feeling none of this
bodes very well for the satisfactory completion of our project."

And silently, Giles agreed.

* * *

When he hesitated in the doorway, Buffy looked back at him in surprise, the tiniest of lines
between her brows. "It's your room, too," she teased. "Not like you need an invitation."

"I know that, luv," he said, and let his blue eyes slip past her, sweeping across the now tidy room,
taking in the domesticated orderliness, from the his and her shoes lined up carefully next to the
bed, to the arrangement of his mousse beside her shampoo, to the absence of the phony pallet on
the floor. "It's just…everything's changed now. For good. You know that, right?"

"I think I figured that out somewhere around the time Riley got the full monty from you when you
reached for the washcloth," she teased quietly, biting back the giggle that automatically rose to her
lips. The look on her ex-boyfriend's face had been comical, to say the least, and…Mentally, she
chided herself. Not funny. Serious business there. Not fair to be laughing at…And unbidden, the
smile returned.

"And…you're sure you're fine with that?" He still wasn't moving, watching her intensely, waiting
for her to crack even the tiniest. Because in Spike's experience, that's what always happened. He
got what he wanted only to have fate step in and twist the knife by ripping it away from him.
"Rupes is hardly chuffed to bits about us, and your mates…"

"…will get over any problems they have with it, if there are any problems," she finished. "Not that
I think there are. For some reason, I almost think Xander was relieved to find out the truth."

"You know, he actually called me his friend tonight?"

This surprised her, and Buffy lifted her brows. "And I missed it?" she asked. "Was he drunk?"

"That's just it." Letting go of her hand, Spike ran a long hand through his hair, pulling at the curls in
frustration. "I didn't get into this looking for friends, Slayer. Hell, to be honest, I never thought I'd
get half as far as we've gone. And now…"

"…and now, Big Bad Spike is feeling scared," she teased, grabbing his hand again and pulling him
over the threshold.

"Not scared," he argued.

"Looks like scared to me." Stepping up to him, Buffy reached around his torso to nudge the door
closed, pressing her breasts into his chest at the same time, feeling her nipples harden at the contact with the black cotton of his shirt. Deliberately, she lifted her head, nuzzling it into the crook of his neck and inhaling deeply. "Smells like scared." Her mouth opened, the tip of her tongue a fine point along the outer curve of his ear. "Do you taste scared, too, I wonder?" she whispered.

The nearness of her was intoxicating, the barest touch of her tongue enough to dispel any rational thought in the wake of her promise, but Spike knew she was just playing with him, that she didn't really see what a muddle he thought all this was, and was trying to distract him with her body and her own needs. Not that his needs weren't as great; the hardness of his arousal scraping along the inside of his jeans was testimony to that. But he wanted her to get what he was saying before he was willing to allow this to go any further.

Taking her firmly by the waist, Spike eased her away from him, feeling the absence of her body against his like a cold slap across the face. "When I say everything's changed," he said, "I mean it. With you, me, your Watcher, your little friends---."

"Our little friends," Buffy corrected.

"Which is exactly my point! You're tellin' me, you don't think it's bang out of order for me, your former mortal enemy, creature of the night and all that rot, to be hangin' out with a group of do-gooding ex-Happy Meals, listenin' to them dish about whatever nasty's in town and bein' expected to throw in my two cents when they ask for it?"

Her words were measured. "Wasn't it you who didn't understand why I wanted to wait and break the news of us to the gang?" she asked quietly. "And you were right. They're more than OK with this. They like you, Spike. You gave them a chance to see past all the crap, and now you're surprised they're actually smart enough to see what I do?"

"It's not that---."

"It is that." Buffy felt the flush of the discussion warming her cheeks as she looked up into his face. "Look, it doesn't really matter why. There's no call for wigging out on me here. I'm glad of the changes, and I think, deep down, you are, too. And you're just too used to trying to be all big and bad that you don't want to admit it. But it's OK. My feelings aren't going to change because you happen to like hanging out with Xander---."

"I never bloody said that!"

This time, she couldn't help but laugh at the frustration twisting his face. "You know, you're cute when you're in denial," she said, and stood on her tiptoes to brush the softest of kisses across his mouth. "And if thinking that makes it easier, then I say go for it. Even if we both know it's a load of crap. Will you be wanting that white hat now, or later?" She laughed again as his lips pursed, ready to bite back with some sarcastic remark, and silenced him with another kiss, deeper this time, working over the tension in his mouth by pulling and sucking at his bottom lip.

Strong hands slid up her arms, pulling her closer, a hungry growl rumbling from his throat. She was laughing at him and it was infuriating, but no way could he resist a direct assault on his senses, not when her arousal emanated from her pores in palpable clouds. Just had to show her…

With more force than he felt, Spike broke from the kiss and stared down at her, watching as she so nonchalantly flipped her hair from her shoulder, exposing the edges of her injury to his inspection. "Not a white hat," he rumbled. "Demon, remember?"

She knew the game, saw the discomfort lurking behind the sapphire, too proud to say what was
really going through his head. As Buffy's smile faded, it was replaced with a mischievous gleam in her eye. This was easy to give; no reason for him to need to ask for it. Too much had been stripped from him already tonight, and she wasn't about to add to the pile by not playing along.

"But demons are supposed to be scary," she taunted, stepping back and away from him, gazing up at him through her lashes. "And you're…not."

He responded with a flash of gold in the blue and a quirk of his lips. "No?" Spike asked softly, and mirrored her step with his own, head lowered, the animal grace of his body wound in a tight coil that threatened to break free at any given moment. "You sure about that?"

"Sure," she murmured, and deliberately ran her tongue over her bottom lip, moistening it so that it glistened in the candlelight.

The effect made his mouth water, driving him ever forward, one lazy step at a time. "How long before the witches' little hocus pocus takes effect?" Spike murmured, transfixed by the tiny flutter of her skin at the base of her neck, her pulse drumming from the inside in an increasing tempo that threatened to break through the nebulous barrier.

"About ten minutes ago," Buffy replied. "I am officially in a painfree zone at the moment." Her smile returned. "Anyawas right. My arm's got this kind of tingly numbness shooting up it right now. Like when your foot's gone asleep and you stamp on it to wake it up. Very pins and needle-y."

"Oh." They were stopped now, the bed to their side, and though their bodies didn't touch, each felt wrapped in the other, the growing unevenness of her breath matched by the erratic racing of nerve endings over the vampire's skin. Lifting his hands, Spike's fingers began toying with the front of her blouse, slowly undoing the buttons as they played. "Does that mean you can't feel…anything?"

"Don't know," she breathed, or tried to, because all of a sudden, her lungs seemed not to be working, tightening at the first touch of his skin against hers. "Maybe we should test it."

The fabric fell from her shoulders, and though there was a distinct bite to the air, Buffy felt nothing but the searing of his fingertip as it traced a path around the curve of her breast, up to the scarlet marks of the wound on her shoulder, dancing over the crusted surfaces before trickling down her bicep.

"Feel that?" His voice was husky, thick with desire, his attention riveted to the honey sheath of her skin, glowing brightly in the candlelight. He didn't know how it was possible, but each time, seeing her like this felt like the first, like he'd somehow walked in on Diana bathing with her fellow huntresses and been stunned into silence by her perfection. So warm, so alive…

"Yes…" It was barely a whisper, her mouth too dry, her skin too hot, but it was all he needed to continue.

"What about this?" he asked, and lowered his head to skate his tongue around the bitemarks, the scent of her blood dizzying.

Buffy's fingers tangled in his hair, holding his mouth to her shoulder. "Yes," she repeated.

He fought back against her strength, pulling himself away to gaze down at her. As she watched, the ridges appeared in his brow, his eyes suddenly amber flames staring at her in hunger, canines elongating to razor points. The softness of his mouth remained the same, however, and Spike reached behind his head to take one of her hands, bringing it to his face and forcing her to feel the
changes with her own touch. "See?" he said, his voice almost inaudible. "Still a demon, luv." It was the last bastion; he only hoped she wouldn't ignore this final call to arms.

Her response was slow, a feather caress across his cheek...a deliberate lifting of her mouth to press gently against his...the careful exploration of her tongue around the needle of his fangs. There was a moment of hesitation, and then Buffy allowed her tongue to slip, catching, the tiniest of cuts suddenly filling both of their mouths with her blood.

It was the last thing he'd expected, and as the elixir burned down his throat, Spike tightened his resolve, ignoring the demon's scream for more, refraining from just sweeping her up into his arms in favor of allowing his hand to slide around to the small of her back, pressing their pelvises together so that his hard cock ground against her hip. Desire mingled with a bursting hunger, but through it ran an uncharacteristic gratitude, relief and disbelief coursing in and out of him as he broke from the kiss to slide his mouth across her cheek. She knew. Like she always knew. And she accepted it, which made all the rest of it just disappear.

"Love you, Buffy," he murmured into her neck, returning to his human visage as his fingers came up to tangle in the golden tresses of her hair. "Always."

"Show me," came the muffled response, her mouth buried against his own neck, small teeth nipping along its length as her tongue traced the veins there.

Fingers interlaced as they broke apart. "This'll be a first for us," Spike said. "So far, we've managed to do this anywhere but in this bed."

Her answering smile was slow, but wide. "Think it'll prove as sturdy as the snooker table?" she asked slyly, hooking her finger into the waistband of his jeans.

"The only thing sturdier than that snooker table is me," Spike joked, allowing himself to be pulled closer to her.

"Bet I could do some damage to you."

"Like to see you try, Slayer."

Hazel eyes glittered, catching the orange from the dancing flames to flash eerily golden before him. "Maybe next time." She tugged at the hem of his shirt, pulling it from his jeans as she slid her hands underneath to mold around the muscles of his back. "I think I like you whole for now."

Their heads moved in unison, bowing and reaching into the kiss, hands clutching at the other in a desperate search for strength. The pressure was light at first, questing as lips skated over lips, parting only when Spike's tongue darted out to search the wet chasm of her mouth. Ice melted into warmth, sucking at her breath, swallowing it down to leave her gasping, and it was only when she felt the burning in her lungs did Buffy break away, hazel now gone in a pool of black as she stared up at him.

Though she claimed there was no danger, he didn't want to hurt her, and held himself back as he wrapped his arms around her to ease her back onto the mattress. Lying there, she was outlined in gold, sculptured curves beckoning him to touch, and Spike's eyes gleamed in anticipation. Beautiful. And his. She'd said so.

"Are you just going to stand there and look at me all night?" Buffy asked, the slightest of laughs in her voice. When he stood so, there was no mistaking the wonder in his gaze, as if she was some exquisite treasure he didn't believe he'd found, and she would've sworn she was almost glowing
from the way it made her feel. Like she was breathtaking. If he'd had any breath to take.

"You're not cold?" When the Slayer shook her head, Spike pulled his tee over his head, baring the pale skin of his chest, and leaned forward, one fist supporting his weight on either side of her body. His mouth was watering, already savoring the texture of her hardened nipple against his tongue, and he dipped down, flicking the tip of the nearest in a gesture so light it made Buffy arch her back. Spike chuckled. "Greedy little wench, aren't you?"

She curled her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer. "More," she demanded.

His lips returned, sucking at her breast as his hand began tracing a line down the curve of her torso, increasing the pressure as his fingers slid beneath the waistband of her trousers to disappear in the heat. Buffy's moan was followed by her own hands joining his, undoing the fastenings and shedding the rest of her clothes in a movement that forced more of her soft flesh into his mouth.

Tugging at his shoulders, the Slayer pulled him away from his repast, forcing him to stretch out alongside her. "Your turn," she said with a smile.

Spike felt her hands light on his chest before trailing downward, and reached in for another kiss, this time deeper, exploring her mouth as lithe fingers popped the button, slid down the zipper, pushed the denim roughly over his hips even as her palms stroked the hard lines of his pelvis in a direct path for his ass. She held him as she had earlier in the bath, clinging in both need and fear, and he moved his lips across her cheek to settle just below her ear.

"Not goin' anywhere, luv," he whispered. "You're pretty much stuck with me from here on out."

Her laughter was hot against his neck. "Is that what we're calling it these days?" Before he could respond, she had pulled him on top, raising her feet to hook her toes through the denim and finish extracting them from his legs.

His cock twitched against the sudden exposure to her flesh, the scent of her arousal pricking his nostrils even as it made him salivate all the more. "You're killin' me here, Summers," he joked, and tried to lift himself away. "Can't put me so close to temptation. Not before---."

"If you're talking about foreplay," Buffy said, tugging him back against her, "I'm more than happy to take a raincheck." Her fingers tremored as she lifted them to his face, touching his brow with a gentle caress. "I told you downstairs. Tonight, I need you. All of you. Just…love me, Spike…please?"

How she did it, he had no idea, but the world slipped away with her words, all reasoning vanishing so that all was left was him, and her, and the bed, and her luscious mouth, so inviting…and close…

It took almost no movement for him to lower his head to hers, to delve into the kiss deeper than any of its predecessors, and only a little more to lift his hips, feeling his erection slide along her slippery folds, tiny hard heels digging into the small of his back as she spread her legs and invited him in. Suffocating in fire, that's what he was, unable to feel anything but wet and heat…her mouth…the tight channel now sheathing his cock…plunging into both as if to drown…knowing that he probably would if she wasn't there to draw him back.

There was no halfway with their lovemaking. Each stroke was deliberate, deep, her clit grinding against his pubic bone with every thrust, each time a mini explosion that went shooting up her torso, only to be forced to wait in excruciating agony for the next contact. Their bodies moved in a rhythm that prescribed either years of practice or a second of fate, and Buffy knew as she felt the muscles of his broad back flex beneath her hands that it had been inevitable, this coming together,
meeting the one who equaled her without eclipsing, who knew when to be there and when to not, who…knew her.

As their tempo increased, she held him against her, feeling her nipples pressing against his, her heart pounding in a staccato cadence to deafen both of them. "Spike…” she whispered, forcing herself to tear away from his mouth to gaze up at the darkening sapphire.

"Ssshhh,” he murmured, and lifted a hand to lay his fingertips across her swollen lips, caressing them in a feather movement that would've made her giggle if she could've found the air to breathe. He never stopped thrusting, replacing his fingers with his mouth, sucking and kissing as he quickened, driving harder and deeper as the sweat began to sheen against her skin, easing the friction between their chests as they rode it out.

She screamed into his mouth when she came, forcing her air down his throat just as he buried his cock inside her, his own orgasm jettisoning his hips into hers, an exchange neither understood the significance of, even as the world seemed to solidify back into stone around them. With his eyes closed, Spike seemed to be lost in everything Buffy---the slick glide of her skin against his, the musky scents of their sex mingling with the tang of her sweat, the taste of her tongue as their kiss eased into a sweltering caress. He could even hear her pulse racing, slowing as she drifted down from the crescendo of her climax, settling into that familiar even rhythm that was distinctively hers.

"Spike…” she tried again.

"You don't have to…” As much as he wanted to hear her say it again, he didn't want her to feel it necessary, to turn the words into some automated post-coital response that would eventually lose their meaning. Because he never wanted her to forget just what that little phrase really meant for him. And he'd risk everything to ensure she didn't.

"Let me…"

There was no color left in his eyes as he gazed down at her, two black pools drinking in the flush of her cheek, the glow of her skin in the candlelight. Gently, he stroked the damp hair away from her forehead, and marveled yet again how he'd managed to fall into such good fortune for a change.

"Always love you, pet,” he murmured.

Buffy smiled. "Am I ever going to be able to be the one to say it first?” she asked lightly.

"Told you I liked the words,” he teased with a responding grin.

She laughed, all the tension from the night gone, and pulled him against her, kissing his jaw as she murmured, "I do love you, Spike."

* * *

The exhaustion was catching up to him, but most of it was in his head and not his body, each thought an ache as he tried to shut them away, focusing instead on the push-ups he was forcing his muscles through. He'd started them as a distraction against the images that refused to leave his inner eye, and though his body was now starting to catch up with the tiredness of his head, it wasn't enough, pictures of Buffy and Spike still lingering like salt on an open wound.

When the knock came to his door, Riley was almost grateful for the diversion, hopping to his feet with an athletic grace and stepping the few feet to the door. His eyebrows lifted in surprise at the visitor standing in the hall. "Mr. Hornbrook," he said. "I thought you'd gone to bed for the night.”
Duncan/Hornbrook shuffled in his place. "Mr. Travers has made his arrangements for the morning," he said, his voice gruff. "As he was tired, I volunteered to come and fill you in on the details."

"Oh." Riley frowned. "I was under the impression he wanted me to stay out of Council business. That I wasn't to interfere."

"Well, it appears he's changed his mind, seeing as you've already decided to take that step on your own by seeing the Slayer this evening." He cleared his throat. "He wants to attempt to break the vampire's hold over the Slayer. He thought perhaps you would want to be a part of that." Inwardly, Duncan held his breath. He only knew bits and pieces of the story, and though he knew little of the young American himself, he was gambling that the obvious pain he'd encountered by going out to Dall Rath---a confession he'd made to Travers when the older man had pressed---would be enough to incite his approval of this plan. Duncan's plan. Because Travers talked too much. And right now, Duncan needed someone who wanted action.

It took him only a moment to decide. "Whatever he wants," Riley said grimly. "Just tell me what to do..."
The Soldier's Return

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Travers has requested a meeting with Giles, Buffy and Colin, while Duncan has coned Riley into a plan to get Spike…

Some time during the night, the storm had stopped, leaving the countryside crisp and shiny, a fine frost shielding the damp heather from the approaching sun. Any other time, Riley might have taken the time to appreciate the beauty of the mountains around him; now, though, he was a man with a mission, focused on the task he’d been assigned by Travers, preparing himself to help Buffy in any way that he could.

He was going to kill Spike.

His knuckles were white around the steering wheel, his eyes locked to the narrow road ahead. At his side, Duncan—in the shape of Hornbrook—peered through the window, eyes darting over the horizon. “Pull over here,” he ordered, motioning to a layby.

With the efficiency inherent from years of training, Riley did as he was told, turning the key in the ignition before glancing over at his partner in this expedition. The man looked better than he had the previous evening, the bruises on his face not quite as mottled, and he moved with an easier lumber that belied the wound Riley knew he still sported in his shoulder. He couldn’t help but wonder if he’d been hurt as badly as he claimed if he was healing so quickly, but hastily dismissed his internal questions, waiting for the next instruction in Travers’ plan.

“We’re going in the rest of the way on foot,” Duncan explained. “If we go in the front, they’ll be expecting us.” That, and we can’t risk running into the others as they’re leaving, he silently added. If that happens, this whole plan will be shot to hell.

“What about weapons?” Riley asked. “Not that I don’t think I can take Spike one on one, but I can’t kill him without at least a stake.”

“There’s an arsenal within the castle,” the kelpie said. “You can get to that without being observed and get what you need from there.”

“What about you? Aren’t you coming with me?” The young man’s face was furrowed, an insetting doubt beginning to peal through his brain. Orders were orders, but these were starting to not make sense. Safety in numbers, and all.

Duncan chuckled. “I’m not really at my fighting best at the moment,” he said, gesturing to the assorted bruises on his face as he tried to steer Riley back to the task at hand. He smiled as the other visibly relaxed and continued, “Besides, Mr. Travers was very clear on what our roles in this plan are. Your job is Spike. Mine is the harness.” Well, partially true. With Buffy and the two Watchers in town, Spike was really the only threat within the castle; the young Xander was hardly dangerous, and the girls were, well, just girls. If it weren’t for his wounds, markers that would remain on his form no matter which shape he took, Duncan would’ve taken care of Spike himself. As it was, he had to be satisfied with Finn filling his place. Regardless, whether the vampire died or not, Duncan needed him occupied while he searched for the harness. He couldn’t risk any more
interruptions. He only hoped that the remaining guardian had died out on the mountain.

* * *

She couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face as she pushed open the door. He was still asleep, arm flung over his head so that the muscles of his chest stretched in a hungry line that made her mouth water, the blankets kicked to the floor so that the bottom of his bare feet greeted her as she stepped inside. The sweats she’d bought him at the market hung low on his hips—put on as an afterthought in anticipation of unwanted callers in the morning—and Buffy could tell even before she stepped into the room that he would be waking with an erection. Silently, she shook her head. She wasn’t sure if it was just a guy thing, a vampire thing, or a Spike thing, but he got hard and stayed hard more than anyone she had ever known. What that was going to mean for her, though, sent a warm tingle down the inside of her thighs.

He moved before she’d made a sound, rolling onto his side and opening his eyes to gaze at her in the doorway. “Mornin’,” he croaked, the vestiges of sleep hoarsening his voice. His lids were heavy, eyes dark, sweeping lazily over her as Spike rested his head on his bicep. “Don’t we look thoroughly edible today.”

Buffy blushed as the most recent memories of what exactly had been in the vampire’s mouth just a few hours before came rushing to the foreground of her mind’s eye. “I look like I’ve been up half the night being ravished by a handsome but insatiable vampire,” she corrected, crossing to the bed and setting the thermos on the nightstand.

As soon as she was within range, his hand came up to begin caressing her thigh, kneading the muscles there as the corner of his mouth lifted. “I seem to recall someone waking me up around six with a lovely little tongue bath,” he murmured. “So, which one of us is the insatiable one?”

Her color deepened. “Still, not exactly the best image for me to be putting forth when I have to go out and face the masses. Tends to lower my credibility as a card-carrying member of the legally sane.”

Spike frowned. “What masses?” he queried. “Since when does doin’ research require masses?”

“Not research,” she replied. “And actually, it’s just a mass of one. I’m being dragged before the English Inquisition again.” At his continued confusion, she elaborated, “Travers is in town. Pissed as hell apparently, and looking for Slayer blood because somehow he found out about you and me.”

Spike’s frown disappeared, to be replaced with a vague annoyance as he rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s one mystery solved. Least now we know how Whitebread got here,” he said. His fingers curled around the back of her leg, tugging her gently forward so that she fell to a sitting position on the edge of the mattress. “Does this mean you’re goin’ to be squarin’ off with him as well?”

Buffy shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Probably, if that’s really how Travers found out. Giles seems to think so, at least.”

“Just give me a minute to get dressed then.” He was halfway up when her hand stopped him, settling on his chest in a warm splay. “What?”

Her mouth was grim. “You can’t go.”

“Why not? Tuck me under a blanket in the back seat. I’m not lettin’ you face this one on your own. If this is about the both of us, then the both of us should be there.”
“I agree, but Travers said not to bring you.”

The confession hung between them, its blade swinging from one to the other, neither liking that it was there. The muscles twitched in Spike’s jaw as he stared up at Buffy. “They think you’re in some thrall, don’t they?” he queried, his voice low, dangerous.

“Nobody’s said---.”

Abruptly, he rolled in the opposite direction, jumping to his feet on the far side of the bed and storming to the wardrobe. “Can’t leave well enough alone,” he was muttering as he yanked out a shirt. “It’s fine to set me up as their little spell lackey, but am I good enough---?”

Her small hand on his forearm cut him off, and the vampire froze in mid-dressing, blond head turning to look down at her. “Travers doesn’t know the whole story,” she said firmly. “I’m going to tell him in no uncertain terms that there’s no brainwashing going on here. If you go, you’ll just… lose your temper. And that won’t look good for the I’m-totally-safe-around-Spike argument I’m going to have to make.”

“You shouldn’t have to do this on your own. That’s my job, remember? Watch your back.”

Her head tilted, golden hair tumbling over her shoulder. “So you can watch it from here,” she countered. “Keep an eye on the gang for me. Duncan’s still out there somewhere, and he knows I’ve got the harness now. There’s no telling what he might do.”

“Thought you were going to give it back to the guardian.”

“I am. But I don’t have time for that this morning. We’re running late as it is. Giles has gone into over-effi cient Watcher mode, being all English and proper and ‘we’ll get some answers this time, by gum.’ So between him and Colin the bluster bunny, I’ve got no time for dawdling.”

The prospect of other methods of dawdling brought a gleam to Spike’s eye, and his hand came up to brush the hair away from her face. “If you want,” he said, “I can take it back to our resident kelpie watchdog. One less thing for you to worry about when you get back.”

Buffy shook her head. “That would be a good idea except for two things. One, Frank doesn’t seem to trust anyone here but me. Apparently, he only told the guys the bare minimum of factoids last night before skedaddling for a midnight swim, so I’m not sure how he’d react if someone other than me showed up with the harness.” She took a deep breath. “And two, I’m sorta taking it with me.”

She was answered with another frown. “You’re not seriously considerin’ givin’ it to that wanker, are you?” he asked. “After the way they set us up here?”

“No,” she assured. “I made a deal with Frank. I intend to stick to it. But the way I figure it, it’s a bargaining chip for me with Travers. Maybe he’s got information on how to stop you from turning into combusto boy with the closing spell. Plus, it gives me some credibility in not being under your thrall. And---.”

Chuckling, Spike held up his hand to cut her off. “I got it, I got it. Lots of reasons to take it with. Right.”

“Besides, he already knows I have it---.”

That threw him for a loop. “How’s that? Only people around here who know you’ve even got it are me and Red.”
“Willow told the others. Both Colin and Giles know I’ve got the harness as well. Oh, and Frank.”

“So, basically everyone in Dall Rath.” His eyes narrowed. “You don’t think Junior’s decided to play for both teams, do you?”

Shaking her head, Buffy stepped away from him, heading back for the door. “Not with how nervous he’s acting down there,” she said. “But not knowing who Travers’ source is, is just another reason why I have to go see him.”

His voice stopped her in the entrance. “What? So no goodbye kiss?”

Looking back over her shoulder, she saw him gazing at her, blond head tilted as he watched her with barely disguised desire, and felt the tremors return to her own body. “You promise it’s just one kiss?” she asked with a half-smile. “Because I’m in big enough trouble as it is. If I’m late because I can’t keep my hands off you---.”

He was at her side in a flash. “Nah,” he drawled, head bowing so that his mouth grazed the side of her neck in the faintest of caresses. “You’ll be late because *I* can’t keep my hands off you.”

---

So far, so good. Hornbrook had been right about slipping into the weapons cache undetected. The trickle of voices from the other end of the hall showed no indication of lessening, laughter and light conversation drifting along the stone walls in invisible curls. For a moment, Riley felt a pang of anger at being excluded from the camaraderie, that his friends were in there laughing without him, that he was most likely the current butt of all their jokes. Stupid Soldier Boy, he could imagine Spike saying with that annoying smirk on his face. Not even man enough to hold onto his girl the first time she spends any kind of time away from him.

Not that he really blamed Buffy. He’d spent the night tossing and turning, doing everything he could to rationalize her behavior, and finally settled on it being a Slayer/vampire thing. It was really the only explanation that made sense. Well, it was really the only explanation that made sense to him. And even he could begrudgingly admit that Spike wasn’t exactly hideous. Plus, he had that whole bad boy, dangerous vibe Buffy had seemed to favor in the past. If he’d decided to make Buffy his little sex slave, it probably hadn’t been that difficult to convince her, which meant…

He shook his head, returning his attention to the weapons before him. No. Not going down that road. Slayer/vampire thing. Had to be.

Hornbrook had told him that Spike usually spent his mornings upstairs, away from the others, which worked out well for Riley. Of course, he’d thought the same thing last night and look where that had gotten him. Still, there was no disputing the nocturnal tendencies of the vampire, and he was going to lay odds that Spike was still asleep. It would make his job a lot easier. As long as Buffy wasn’t up there, too.

The only part of this plan that was bothering him---well, not the only part, but the biggest part---was the absence of one of the cars that had been out front the previous evening. Someone wasn’t here, and though the daylight pretty much prevented it from being Spike, it was a detail out of place, something that could throw a wrench into the entire arrangement Travers had made. Maybe someone just ran into town for some supplies, Riley reasoned, sliding a stake into his belt before reaching for a long dagger. Yeah, that had to be it.
Why did this man always make her feel like such a child? Buffy wondered as she looked up at Travers standing next to the fireplace. His face was grim, his eyes cold, and he stared at her with a barely contained disappointment, worthy of a gold star from the Parenting Guilt Trip Hall of Fame. And he wasn’t even related to her. It wasn’t fair.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Quentin asked, his gaze steady.

Buffy’s eyes darted from him to the two Watchers who stood behind him, looking very much like Tweedledum and Tweedledee with their hands stuffed deep into their pockets, their eyes locked on the carpet in front of them. She was alone on this one; Travers had made it clear that he wanted no interference from either of his employees as soon as they had stepped into the room.

“Does it matter?” she countered. “You’ve already made up your mind about it, so what does hearing what I have to say make a difference?”

Travers shook his head. “I’ve done no such thing, Miss Summers. I came here with an open mind, ready to hear both sides. It’s your rather erratic behavior that has me most concerned, though. I would think a Slayer with such experience as yours would tend to be just a little more…rational.”

He ignored the snort of amusement from Colin behind him, and instead took a step closer to her. “So you’re not denying your involvement with the vampire?”

She could end the thing right now by lying, she knew. Tell them what they want to hear, pack up, and then just deal with the fallout when she got back to Sunnydale. It’s not like she hadn’t been lying about it before. Except…that was before. Giles knew the truth. Colin knew the truth. And most importantly, Buffy knew the truth. And no way was she going to deny Spike again.

“Spike’s on our side now,” she argued. “And since when did you start paying attention to jealous ex-boyfriends with unresolved demon issues anyway? Whatever Riley told you---.”

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. “Mr. Finn only confirmed for me what I had already retained from another source,” he said. “And you’re avoiding the issue.”

“The issue is that there is no issue.” Her face was tight, her hands clenching into fists in her lap, and she was beginning to wonder if Spike should’ve come along to make sure she didn’t lose her temper. Breathe, Buffy. Don’t let him get to you. “Who I see is my business, not Council business. And as long as it doesn’t interfere with my slaying, you have no right---.”

“Oh, but it does. Or are you going to dispute the fact that you have the harness in your possession?”

“You mean the harness you tried to bribe Spike into stealing for you?” she shot back. “The one we weren’t even supposed to know about? Is that the harness you’re referring to?”

His only reaction was a tightening around his mouth. “I can see, Miss Summers, that as usual, you have managed your resources in such a way as to surprise me. Again. You were never meant to learn about the harness’ existence in the first place.”

He hardly looked surprised. If anything, he looked annoyed, and it was pissing Buffy off to no end. “Just like I wasn’t supposed to learn about your little spell switcheroo, right? Let me tell you something, Mr. Travers. Promising the world and then not following through are not really the best methods for inspiring loyalty in your employees,” she said. “Spike’s not stupid. Even he could see that you were just playing him with the chip-free world you were painting. What I don’t understand is what is so important about this harness in the first place, that you’d convince my stoolie ex-boyfriend to snoop around for you. Because he’s the only one I can think of who could sell me out.
“Mr. Finn’s involvement in these matters is at his own behest, Miss Summers. I had already decided to come to Scotland on my own when he arrived in my offices. When he claimed you were in danger, I decided to allow him to accompany me here. But his…excursion to Dall Rath was done without my knowledge, so any conspiracy theories you may be harboring regarding our ‘partnership’ can be completely discarded. They are unfounded and untrue.”

“Why then were you coming to Scotland?” It was the first time Giles had spoken since arriving at the bed and breakfast, and he stepped forward so that he could look at his former employer directly. “Buffy only obtained the harness yesterday.”

“Ooo, good question,” the Slayer cooed. “I’d love to hear the answer to this one.”

“We had lost communication with our contact regarding the harness business here,” Travers explained, not even skipping a beat. “And our attempts to reach Mr. Sadler were unsuccessful.”

“Poor signal,” Colin muttered, his eyes darting to his superior only to hastily return to his favorite spot on the floor.

“Are you talking about Hornbrook?” Buffy asked. “Because I can answer that one for you. He’s dead. Been dead for days, by the look of things.” When all three Englishmen turned their gazes to stare at her, she straightened defensively on the divan.

“Why did you not mention this sooner?” Giles quizzed.

“Nobody asked.”

“And how do you know this?” This one came from Colin.

“His was one of the bodies I dug up out at the Kelpie Cave.”

“How then do you explain his contacting me regarding your alliance with the vampire just yesterday? Or the beating you gave him when he told you he’d expose your relationship?” Each word was clipped, bitten in careful precision as Quentin contained his temper. “He told me everything, Miss Summers. And for you to say otherwise---.”

“Hang on. I beat him? I’ve barely said two words to the man. The only thing my fist has been anywhere near lately has been…” Her voice trailed off as all of a sudden, everything made sense, and her hazel gaze snapped to her Watcher, the look in her eye telling him even before the name came out of her mouth.

“Duncan.”

* * *

He couldn’t find it. As he pressed himself into the wall of the stairwell, Duncan closed his eyes, fighting to control the urge to just scream out in frustration, his fingers clawing into the stone behind him. The Slayer bitch had won again. Either she had given the harness to the guardian---in which case he could pretty much say goodbye to ever getting it back---or she’d hidden it too damn well for him to find on such short notice. Fucking bitch.

His time was running short. Eavesdropping on the others in the great hall had revealed nothing, and Finn was on the upper level, preparing to deal with the vampire. While he rather fancied the idea of seeing Spike get the beating of a lifetime from the vengeful ex-boyfriend, the small niggle that he
might actually need the bleached one at this point wouldn’t leave the back of Duncan’s brain. If Buffy had told anyone about the harness, he would be the one. He just hoped Finn didn’t kill him so quickly that the vampire didn’t talk about it first…

* * *

When he heard the footsteps in the hall, Spike rolled his eyes. Great. So much for having some peace and quiet while Buffy was gone. Probably Harris wanting to bug him some more about the poem. Right, he thought as he rose to his feet. Goin’ to head this one off at the pass.

He should’ve expected something when he felt the knob begin turning under his hand, even before his fingers had tightened his grip. “Look,” Spike said as he swung the door open. “I already told you, you can see the soddin’ po---.” He froze at the sight of the unexpected visitor before him.

“Hello, Spike,” said Riley.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Riley and Duncan have come to Dall Rath, while Buffy has deduced that Duncan is now posing as Hornbrook…

“Drive faster!” she hissed, fingers turned into claws around the leather seat in front of her.

“Any bloody faster, and I’ll rip out the transmission on this damned road!” Giles growled.

In the passenger seat, a white-faced Colin held a handkerchief to his mouth, every once in a while gulping at the air as he fought to quell his nausea. “It won’t do anyone any good if we die before we get there,” he stuttered.

“And it won’t do any of you any good if Spike is dead before we get there,” Buffy warned, and threw herself back against her seat. Ever since they had discovered Riley and Hornbrook’s---make that Duncan’s---absence from the bed and breakfast, she had been on autopilot, immediately ending the meeting with Travers and rushing the two Watchers out to their own vehicle. She didn’t know what the kelpie’s exact plan was, but she knew it wasn’t going to be good; the Council head had made it quite clear that Riley had been visibly distraught at the prospect of her and Spike being involved.

For a brief second, she felt sorry for her ex, being duped into helping the demon in retrieving the harness, his misery getting exploited by Duncan to further the kelpie’s own goals, but that was quickly shoved aside. He asked for it by flying out here in the first place, Buffy thought grimly. He shouldn’t have abandoned Mom and Dawn, not to mention the Hellmouth, just because his feelings got a little hurt. The fact that home was now not only Slayer-free, but Slayer-backup-free, did nothing to distract her current worry, though. The only thing she could think was, if he’d just stayed in Sunnydale, everything would be fine right now.

She just hoped she got back to the castle in time to stop him from doing something stupid.

* * *

“Well, well, well,” Spike drawled, head tilting as his gaze flickered over the tense man before him, resting only a moment longer on the dagger that was cradled in the palm of his hand before returning to Riley’s uninviting aspect. “Not really big on the knockin’, are you?”

He felt him move before he saw it, and had leapt back and out of the way by the time Riley lunged, putting the bed between them as he saw Finn go sprawling to the floor, tucking at the last minute to avoid his head colliding with the stone and rolling to safety against the far wall. Blue eyes sweeping the perimeter of the room, Spike assessed his situation with a century’s experience of getting out of tight scrapes before settling his gaze on the other person in the room.

“Is this about Buffy?” he asked innocently. “Or does this have more to do with that oversized Iowa ego takin’ control of that pea-sized brain of yours?” He pretended to sniff at the air. “If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say that’s pure testosterone I’m smellin’.”
“You’re a dead man, Spike,” Riley hissed, sparking a derisive laugh from his opponent.

“Welcome to the land of obvious, Soldier Boy,” he replied, spreading his arms in supplication. “Part of what bein’ a vampire’s all about.”

Slowly, the ex-soldier rose to his feet, switching the knife from one hand to the other, and then back again, as he regained his composure. “And would the other part have anything to do with trying to bag as many Slayers as you can?”

Spike considered this for a moment, before half-nodding, half-shrugging. “Yeah, that about covers it,” he said nonchalantly. “Don’t tell me you stopped by for a little refresher course in Vamp Psych 101, ‘cause hate to break it to you, but my class is all booked.” His eyes glittered. “Guess you missed your shot.”

The double meaning wasn’t lost on Riley, and his mouth thinned as his jaw locked. Don’t lose it, he warned himself. Don’t give him the edge. “It won’t work, Spike,” he threatened. “Your little quips aren’t going to distract me. I am going to kill you.”

“Slayer’s the one with the quipping habit. Not me. Maybe the change in time zones got you all confused.” He stopped, cutting himself off as if a sudden thought had just occurred to him. “Oh, wait. No, you’re right.” The vamp smiled. “Looks like that’s just one more thing Buffy and I have in common.”

The boy was off his game, Spike decided, as he dove to the side to avoid the next attack. Both moves so far had been telegraphed far enough in advance for him to effectively dodge, and though he wasn’t any closer to the still-open door, he knew that if he could just stay out of the way of either Finn’s fist or knife long enough to make a break for it, he could get downstairs to the rest of the gang and see if they could talk some sense into the deluded pillock. They wanted to be his friend? They could bloody well talk their other friend out of killing him.

“How’d you do it?” Riley was demanding. “Is it a thrall thing? Tell me it’s a thrall thing. That’ll make killing you just so much more right.”

“You don’t want to know the answer to that, mate. Don’t think your fragile sensitivities could handle it.”

Riley snorted in contempt. “I think you’d be surprised what I can handle.”

He knew he shouldn’t, but seeing the prat’s smug face staring at him and knowing he couldn’t smash his fist through it made Spike want to lash out in other ways. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t asked for it, so really, it was his own fault.

“You wanna know how I got to Buffy?” he asked, cocking his head. “Simple. I just gave her what she wanted. What she needed. You know. Respect. Space to be her own Slayer. That kind of thing. Seems they were missin’ from her life.”

“I respect Buffy---.”

“Which is why you abandoned her sis and her mum to the dangers of the Hellmouth to go racin’ across the globe to protect your little ego, right?” Spike shook his head in mock dismay. “Nothin’ says I love you like leavin’ those she holds nearest and dearest to the mercy of a world of nasties. Remind me not to buy your book on one hundred ways to please your lover.”

Another lunge from Riley had the vampire dancing closer to the door, keeping it in sight of the corner of his eye. “You know nothing about love, Spike,” the ex-soldier spat, feeling the first
twinge of doubt spark his step. Three swings and he had yet to lay a finger on the demon. But he wasn’t out yet. “You’re depraved, and immoral, and incapable of feeling anything for Buffy that could even come close to what real love is all about.”

Name-calling he could handle; hell, there’d been a time in his undead life he’d taken pride in being called depraved. But it was the accusation that what he felt for Buffy wasn’t real, that his feelings lacked the depth necessary for what she needed, that stung, clawing Spike’s hands into fists, his nails digging into the palms until he could feel his own blood begin to drip down his cuticles. Remember the chip, remember the chip, he intoned, every muscle in his body screaming otherwise.

Deliberately, he grinned, a wicked smirk mirrored in the azure depths of his eyes. “I think Buffy would disagree with that little assessment,” he said. “Too bad you didn’t show up a tad earlier last night. You missed quite the show.”

“I saw enough.”

“See, and now, I’m beginnin’ to think that maybe you didn’t. Although, I gotta ask, you know, man to man here.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Has the Slayer always been such a screamer? Not that I’m arguin’ because it makes her come all that much harder, and I guess it was the shaggin’ of a lifetime, but still, she would’ve brought down the bloody roof if I’d let her.” He shook his head in wonder. “And those special muscles she’s got…? Shoulda given a bloke some warning. Girl’s nothin’ short of a miracle in the sack. Frankly, I’m surprised she didn’t snap you in two.”

This time, Riley’s feint started before the words were even out of Spike’s mouth, and as the vampire dropped to roll out of the way, he felt the sharp edge of the knife graze against his arm, followed almost instantly by the pungent scent of blood. Damn, he thought as he glanced at the crimson trickle. Too caught up in my own sarcasm. Gotta be a little more careful about that.

The sight of the slight injury to the vampire was enough to bolster Riley’s confidence, whirling to face Spike again, knife at the ready. Though the room was small, it was that fact that had given the vampire the advantage; the lower ceiling made the taller man more self-conscious of how he was moving, slower in his reflexes as he fought to ensure he didn’t accidentally bang his head. Being smaller and generally more lithe, Spike was more in his element. Plus, he knew the layout, so when Riley drew his first blood, it was enough to renew his hope that he could finish what he had set out to do.

“Look, you tosser…” Spike ground out. The time for games was over. “Face the soddin’ music. Buffy’s moved on. Not that she ever loved you anyway, but the least you could do is be a man about it, and…Back. The hell. Off.”

“That’s what you’d like, isn’t it? Just because you can fool Buffy, doesn’t mean you can fool her friends—.”

“Our friends. And there’s no foolin’ involved. Mutual trust and respect’s what we got. Well, that and the unlimited sexual compatibility. Gotta give that one some credit there.”

Riley’s laugh was a ragged rasp in the air. “Was it out of this respect you convinced her to steal an artifact from the Council?”

For the first time since the other man’s arrival, Spike was thrown, his brow wrinkling in confusion. “What in bloody hell are you talkin’ about?”

“Like you don’t know. But Mr. Travers is on to you, and your little plan to run away with Buffy
“Are you completely off your box? We don’t even know what the thing is for. Why would we want to run with it? And who in the name of everything evil and unholy would be claimin’ we would?”

“Mr. Hornbrook---.”

“Hornbrook’s dead, so not exactly a prime source of information these days.”

“You’re lying.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Because you’re a vampire maybe? Or maybe, because you can’t handle the fact that as soon as I can tell Buffy the truth about you, about how you’re just using her to further your own agenda, she’ll stake you faster than you can squeeze out one more ‘bloody hell.’”

Spike stared at him through hooded eyes, his teeth clicking as he fought to control his temper. “Only agenda I’ve got is to make sure Buffy’s happy and safe,” he said, his voice low and dangerously calm. “Which means I’m goin’ to explain this usin’ short, simple words that’ll hopefully penetrate that thick, cornfed skull of yours. ‘Cause, bugger if I know why, she still cares what happens to your sorry ass, and I’m not goin’ to be the one who lets her down on that.”

It was a backhanded reference to Riley’s decision to kill Spike, in spite of Buffy’s avowal the previous evening, and both of them knew it, staring at the other in measured dislike. “There’s nothing to explain,” Riley finally said. “I’m telling you, Mr. Hornbrook’s not dead.”

“And I’m tellin’ you, Buffy saw the body herself. Bloke got himself killed by the same demon who stole the damn harness in the first place. Remember that bite on her shoulder? Well, she’s not the only thing he’s been sinkin’ his teeth into, apparently.”

“He told me---.”

“Then you’re talkin’ to ghosts, you git, ‘cause I’m tellin’ you he’s dead.”

“But he’s here,” Riley argued. “He came with me so that he could get the harness.”

It was the last puzzle piece Spike needed to splice together the story of what exactly had happened, and why Buffy had been called on the carpet the way she had. “You realize you’re makin’ Harris look like Albert-fuckin’-Einstein, don’t you, Finn?” he said, shaking his head. “The wanker’s usin’ you. Took advantage of the situation to have you keep me occupied so I wouldn’t suss him out.”

Riley was triumphant. “Aha! So you admit, Hornbrook is actually alive then.”

“No, sorry, he’s still dead. Ever heard of a kelpie, Soldier Boy? That’s what we’ve been dealin’ with here. They’re shapeshifters.” He enunciated the last word with careful deliberation. “And the one you’ve decide to partner up with is the same one who’s gunnin’ for Buffy.” The vampire grinned. “Nice show on gettin’ back on her good side, though. Sneakin’ with the enemy? She’s goin’ to loooove that.”

“What’re you talking about?” Though he was still tense, still ready to attack him, the argument Spike was making was confusing him. He’s just trying to cloud the issue, Riley thought. Stop listening to him. “It’s not going to work, Spike. You’re just interested in saving your own skin.”
“Well, you got me there. Doesn’t change the fact that it’s still the truth, though.”

“It wasn’t even Mr. Hornbrook’s idea to come out here, you know. It was Mr. Travers’.”

“The same Travers who called Rupes and Junior last night requestin’ a powwow with them and Buffy this morning?”

The missing car. Buffy wasn’t even here. But Hornbrook had said…

“That wasn’t part of the plan---.”

“Maybe not your plan, but you can go ask the others downstairs if she’s here or not. They’ll back me up.” Spike frowned as he watched Riley slowly lower the weapon in his hand. Not the response he’d been expecting, but certainly not one he was going to argue with.

“Hornbrook’s…looking for the harness right now…”

This wiped the frown from the vampire’s face, making him laugh out loud instead. “Then he’s bang out of luck, ‘cause Buffy took it with her.”

He didn’t want to believe him; the last thing Riley needed right now was to have to side with Spike about anything. But if this was true, and he was just a pawn in some plot he knew nothing about, killing the vampire would be playing right into his hands. Hadn’t he just spent the last hour listening to the man coax and goad him into staking Spike? Not that the desire hadn’t been there already, and not that it was gone now, but the other’s thirst for it seemed to be just as great. And what made it worse was that, by lying to him about Buffy, it could only mean he was her enemy as well. And he couldn’t do that to her, even now. He still loved her.

“So, if Mr. Hornbrook’s dead,” Riley finally said, his voice low and deliberate, “who the hell did I drive here with?”

* * *

That was the problem with humans, Duncan decided as he crept away from the open bedroom door. Send them in to kill someone, and they waste all their time talking instead.

The ex-boyfriend was useless to him now. Spike had divulged just enough information, cast just enough doubt to make Finn pause, and now the vampire was playing it for all it was worth, calling it a truce for Buffy’s sake while they “sussed” out what the hell was going on. And what was worse, Finn was actually listening to him. Whatever happened to good old-fashioned vengeance? Duncan thought miserably. A little slice and dice amongst enemies? When did it get so damn chatty?

The only good thing to come from the two men talking was at least now he knew what had happened with the harness. The Slayer still had it. Which meant it was still possible for Duncan to get it back. Unless she ended up giving it to the old man. In which case, even better for him. Killing Travers would be infinitely easier than either Buffy or Spike, and anything that made the kelpie’s life simpler at this point was to be embraced. He just had to wait until she returned.

* * *

She was out of the car even before it had completely stopped, allowing for the slowing momentum as her foot hit the earth, using it to begin propelling her toward the castle, her strong arms pumping as she ran for the door.
Colin frowned as he unbuckled his seatbelt, shaking his head as he watched Buffy’s retreating back. “I don’t think spying that car in the layby really helped matters much,” he commented. “Do you suppose he’s actually here?”

“If he is, Buffy will find him,” Giles replied as he turned off the car’s engine. “And God help him if she does.”

“If something has happened to Spike,” Colin muttered as he followed his elder to the entrance, “God help us all.”

* * *

The two girls collided as Buffy rushed in, knocking both of them to their feet. “Will!” she cried out, jumping immediately back up and rushing to her friend’s side, offering her a hand to help her up. “Oh, my god, I’m so sorry. Are you OK?”

The redhead’s smile was wan as she rubbed at the back of her head. “I think I might have loosened a screw or two in the old noggin,” she joked, but when Buffy turned to bolt for the stairwell, her hand shot out, grabbing the Slayer’s arm. “Where are you going?”

“Spike…Riley…big mess…” Yanking her arm free, a flustered Buffy was halfway down the hall before Willow could speak again.

“Spike’s fine!” she called out. When the blonde stopped to gaze back at her, the witch offered a small smile. “He’s in the great hall.”

“Oh.” Her head was whirling, the adrenalin still coursing through her system as she slowly stepped back toward Willow. “And…um…I know this might sound a little, I don’t know, wacky, but---.”

“Riley’s fine, too.”

Her ex’s name stopped her in her tracks. “He’s here?”

The redhead nodded. “Now, before you start totally freaking out on me, I want you to take a deep breath.” She waited, watching expectantly for her friend to comply. “I mean it, Buffy, relax and hear me out.”

“OK, any sentence that ends with ‘hear me out’ can never lead to hugs and kisses.” Determinedly, she crossed the distance between them. “What’s going on?”

“Everything’s fine,” Willow assured, and began to inch her way back toward the great hall. “We took a vote and decided it was better if we caught you when you got in, so that we could…you know, prep you.”

“Prep me? For what?”

“For what you’re about to see.” She stumbled slightly as Buffy brushed past her. “Just remember, we had good reason to do what we did, so don’t get mad, ‘kay?”

She barely heard the last few words as she reached the door and shoved it open, jaw already dropping to speak. When she saw the spectacle before her, though, the Slayer instantly froze, hazel eyes widening as they darted from one end of the table to the other.

“What the hell is happening here?” she demanded as she drank in the sight of Riley and Spike both tied up in chairs, sitting at opposite ends of the long dining table, their eyes locked on the other in
sullen aversion.

Xander was the first to reach her side, a wide smile on his amiable face. “I know it looks bad,” he started, “but in all fairness, this wasn’t completely our idea.”

“Darn right,” Spike growled. “Blame it on the farmboy.”

“Hey!” Riley shot back. “I just suggested they tie you up. I never said a word about me having to go through this.”

“Like I can even lay a hand on you—.”

“Like you wouldn’t try even with that chip in your head…”

“I told you we should’ve gagged them,” Anya said, rolling her eyes as she joined them at the doorway. She looked at the other blonde. “Can you please do something about this? They’re your boyfriends.”

“Can we start with something easy?” Buffy asked. “Like, why are they tied up in the first place?”

“Because neither one of them trusts the other not to kill him,” Xander replied.

“I’m not the one who showed up unannounced, twice now, with stakes and daggers, lookin’ for blood,” Spike said.

“No, you’re the one who tried throwing Riley into the fireplace,” Anya said.

At Buffy’s raised eyebrow, Spike shrugged. “It was there, he was there, it was too good an opportunity to miss.” He looked pointedly at the other man. “Not like I didn’t get a headache for my troubles.”

“OK,” Buffy said. “Now that we’ve gotten that established, does someone mind filling me in on why Riley’s here in the first place?” She stepped up to the table, folding her arms across her chest, and addressed him directly. “Like, maybe, Riley can.”

His lips were thin, his nostrils flaring, but for some reason, he couldn’t meet her eyes, fixing them instead on the bleached vampire opposite him. “He told me it was Mr. Travers’ plan—.”

“Who told you?”

“Mr. Hornbrook.”

“OK, first of all, that’s not Hornbrook.”

This time, he looked at her. “I know that now,” Riley said. “But when he showed up last night, the things he said…” His gaze darted back to Spike. “…made sense.”

“It made sense to come here and kill Spike?” She held up a hand. “Wait. Never mind. I don’t want to know the answer to that.”

“Our Galloping Gourmet is still lurkin’ about here someplace,” the vampire offered, turning an annoyed cerulean gaze toward the group of Scoobies congregating at the door. “I could’ve probably sniffed him out if he was still in the castle, but not when I’m trussed up here like last year’s Christmas turkey.”

“It was for your own good,” Xander said.
“He’s after the harness, isn’t he?” Buffy directed her question to Riley, who nodded in response. She took a deep breath. “Guess he didn’t figure on me taking it with me,” she murmured.

“Did you give it to Travers?” Spike asked.

She shook her head. “We had a little meeting interruptus when we realized Duncan was back in the mix. And that he’d decided to bring Riley along to play this time.”

“We’ve been filling him in on the big picture here,” Willow volunteered. “Apparently, Duncan, aka Hornbrook, is still sporting some pretty nasty bruises from your little skirmish yesterday.”

“Well, that’s at least one point in our favor.” Now that she could stop worrying about ex-lovers killing current ones, Buffy was back onto the kelpie problem, eyes darting to random points in the room as she began to pace the length of the table. No matter which way she turned, it all kept coming back to one thing, and it was about time that one thing got taken out of the equation.

“OK,” she said, turning her back on the two men tied up at the table to regard her friends in the door. “Here’s the immediate plan. Duncan’s still around here someplace, I’m sure of it. He didn’t go to all this trouble to just walk away empty-handed. Which means we have to find him. Split up. Girl/guy teams. We can’t risk Duncan using his charm thing against us by putting all our ovaries in one basket. And take weapons. He’s hurt, but he’s still dangerous. Remember, he could be anywhere, look like anything.”

“Way to go for giving us the easy job,” Xander muttered.

“What are you going to do?” Willow asked.

Buffy’s gaze darted to the two Watchers who had come up behind the young people, her mouth tight. “I’m getting rid of the temptation,” she said. “Frank’s getting his harness back as of right now.”

She was nearly out the door when Spike’s call stopped her. “Hey! Still tied up here, y’know!” he shouted, then eased back against his bonds when she turned to look at him. “You’re not just goin’ to leave us like this while you get to have all the fun, are you, pet?”

It took her a moment of considering the two men before she would reply. “What guarantees are you going to give us that you’re not going to kill each other if we let you go?” Buffy asked.

“Because I don’t have time for male posturing right now, so if you want to help, you’re going to have to shelve those alpha male tendencies of yours for awhile.” Her gaze hopped between the two. “That goes for both of you.”

Spike shrugged. “I’ll give you my word for it, but only for as long as Captain Cardboard there keeps his hands to himself.”

“Riley?”

In spite of his steady hatred for the vampire across from him, the young man was smart enough to realize that revenge was not his best option right now, and slowly nodded in acquiescence. “But if I see him do one thing to threaten you, Buffy---.”

“You won’t, you nit.” Spike’s tone was low, his barely concealed disgust at the mere suggestion curling his lip. “But same goes for you.”

It was the best she was going to get, and she knew it. With a quick smile at Spike, she turned on her heel and walked down to Riley’s end of the table, leaning over so that her words would be
slightly more private. “There’s a lot of stuff going on now,” Buffy said softly. “And I know that I’m the one to blame for how you’re feeling, but you’re going to have to work with me—-with us--- on getting it sorted out. That means playing for the team, Riley. So if you can’t do that, you need to tell me now and get your tail out of here before you get in the way even more.”

“What about him?” The ex-soldier nodded brusquely at the vampire across the table.

Buffy glanced back over her shoulder and saw her friends starting to untie Spike, his blue eyes locked on the pair opposite him. Her smile was automatic, a response to what she knew already, and it brought a corresponding quirk of the vampire’s own lips. Riley might not get it, but she sure as hell did, and by the looks of things, so did her friends. She swung back to look at her ex.

“Spike’s one of us,” she said simply.

* * *

“Frank!”

Her voice seemed hollow in the mouth of the tunnel, and awkwardly, Buffy stuffed the amulet and paper back into her pocket, the muffled clarion call of the harness pealing through the heavy sack as it shifted against her body. The cavern seemed deserted, and she silently prayed that he’d been telling the truth the previous evening in his plans for returning to the stream. Now is not the time to be lying to me again, Frank, she thought grimly. Don’t make me resort to, “Here, kelpie, kelpie…”

Calling out his name again, the Slayer began walking down the bank, further into the depths of the tunnel, balancing her flashlight with the bag. She had to be quick about this; the rest of the gang was upstairs, combing through the various floors and rooms in search of the missing Duncan, and she wanted to get into the hunt as soon as possible. It wasn’t just a matter of wanting to rid herself of her kelpie infestation; the worry that Riley and Spike might somehow end up at each other’s throats was still very much there, in spite of their mutual promises to behave. And the sooner she could be there to referee, the better.

The splash in front of her brought her to a halt, and Buffy watched as a dripping Frank emerged from the stream, her gaze automatically scanning his torso for signs of yesterday’s battle. They were still there, but much fainter, and he no longer moved as if in pain. Guess those really are healing waters, she thought.

“You’re looking much better,” he commented, his dark gaze sweeping over her form before resting on the site of her earlier injury. “How is your shoulder?”

“Good,” she replied with a small, tight smile. “Looks like you got your own bit of mending done as well.”

He nodded, but it was obvious he was most interested in the bag she held in her arms. “The harness?” he asked.

“Yep. Just like I promised.”

“Does that mean the traitor is dead?”

She didn’t have a chance to respond. The arrow came swooshing through the air, cleanly missing her shoulder to embed itself in Frank’s abdomen, causing him to grunt in pain, bending slightly as his hand flew to the wound, the blood already seeping through the claws.

Buffy whirled, the bag still clutched to her chest, to see Duncan, back in his shape of the cook, standing at the bend in the tunnel, crossbow in his arms, a wide smile on his face.
“So sorry to interrupt,” he said lightly. “But my ears were burning…”
Tho' Cruel Fate Should Bid Us Part

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Riley has called a semi-truce in light of Duncan’s plans for Buffy and the harness, and the Slayer has taken the harness back to Frank, only to be interrupted by Duncan’s arrival…

She could hear Frank’s ragged breathing behind her, the pungent aroma of his blood already filling the air, but remained impassive, staring at Duncan in cool detachment as he carefully reloaded the crossbow. There was a good thirty feet between them, and though the light from her flashlight kept him in outline, it was the ambient luminance within the tunnel itself that kept his details visible to her. He was making no effort to close the gap, nonchalantly standing there as his dark eyes flitted from Buffy, to the guardian behind her, and then back to her, almost as if he was waiting for something. For what, though, she had no idea.

“Having a good day?” Duncan asked casually, a small smile playing on his lips. “It’s quite lovely out. Must be the after-effects of the storm last night.”

“Actually, I’m a little tired,” Buffy replied, playing along with his repartee. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Yes, I heard Spike gave you quite the workout.” He chuckled at her obvious surprise at his candor. “You missed a great fight earlier. I have to admit, even though Mr. Finn didn’t succeed in actually killing Spike, listening to the two of them go back and forth on the subject of you almost made up for it. Nothing like a little strife and chaos to bring color into the world.”

“Speaking of color, can I say? Black and blue really works for you.” She smiled, shaking her head to brush back the hair that had fallen across her cheek. “I would’ve thought you were more of a fall, but hey, if winter colors look good on you, too, I say go for it.”

They both heard the scraping behind her at the same time, and Buffy watched as Duncan stiffened, readying the weapon in his arms as it trained on the guardian behind her. “Don’t even think about shifting,” he told Frank, the mirth gone from his voice. “I’ll have an arrow through your head faster than you can blink.”

“You OK back there, Frank?” Buffy asked, her hazel eyes never leaving the demon in front of her.

“Other than bleeding all over the ground, I’m fine,” he replied, but she could hear the faint edge of pain in his voice and wondered just how bad it really was. For some reason, she got the impression the guardian was used to being the stoic; if he was severely injured, she wasn’t sure he would let on exactly how serious it was until it was probably too late.

“I can put him out of his misery, if you like,” Duncan offered. “Then we can just make this between you and me.”

“Isn’t that the way it is now?” she countered. “I have the harness, you want it. That looks like just you and me, to me.”
“Ah, but our guardian friend would also like the harness. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To ‘get rid of the temptation’?” Casually, he tossed her words back at her, smiling at her sudden frown. “You know, you didn’t need to bother with the amulet to get in here. The harness would’ve just let you pass right on through. Probably would’ve made your load just a little bit lighter, as well.”

Buffy’s frown deepened. “What’re you talking about?”

“Mr. Travers didn’t tell you? Well, then maybe he doesn’t know. That’s entirely possible. The man is very…narrow in his perspective.”

“Tell me what?” There was no hiding the irritation in her voice, and the increasing sense that Duncan was just toying with her was doing nothing to ease it.

“The harness’ true power. Why your Council is so eager to get its greedy little hands on it.”

“Give me the harness, Buffy.”

Although Frank’s words were a mere whisper, within the walls of the cavern, they bounced like an echoing bullet, falling on the other kelpie’s ears in spite of the distance that separated them. Distracted, she never saw Duncan’s finger move, and it wasn’t until the arrow was swishing over her head that Buffy realized he’d shot again.

It connected with the guardian’s flesh in a gurgled cry, and the Slayer heard him fall with a thump to the ground, his breathing choking into a fluidic wheeze that told of blood seeping into lungs. She wanted to look around, to inspect the damage that had been done, but knew she couldn’t; one glance away from Duncan and there was no telling what he might do.

“Told you,” the cook said lightly. “Now it really is just you and me.”

Grimly, Buffy inched herself sideways, toward the stone wall and away from the edge of the water, containing the rage surging through her body at Duncan’s unnecessary cruelty with deep, controlling breaths. It wouldn’t do to lose her temper in front of the kelpie; as much as she detested what he had done, she had to keep her focus here. Which meant coming up with a plan.

In her search for Frank, she had ventured further through the entrance to the Otherworld than any previous sojourn, twisting along the path that ran by the stream. The banks were still as treacherous as they were in the spot she and Spike had originally been attacked, only now the path was narrower, the walls sloping in, so that maneuverability was far from optimal. Even without the harness in her hands, a fight between her and Duncan would be difficult; the fact that she was also minimally armed did nothing to boost her confidence in success.

When her gaze flickered to the water, Duncan chuckled, shaking his head. “Not your best idea,” he said. “I’m primarily a water creature, remember? I’d have your tight little body in my hands before you could even come up for air.”

He was right, and it only served to infuriate her more. There was little room for escape within the confines of the tunnel, and a battle would be short-lived if he got close enough to touch her. Her only options lay in either getting the crossbow from him, or stalling him in hopes that one of the others might wonder what was taking her so long and come down after her. Right now, she was going to go with the latter.

“So what’s so special about this thing anyway?” Buffy asked casually, giving the bag a shake so that the bells rang a muffled call through the cavern. “Seems like everyone’s going to a lot of trouble for something that looks like it belongs on Santa’s sleigh.”
“It offers what everyone seeks. It offers power.”

The Slayer rolled her eyes. “Well, big duh, there. That’s what all these demon artifact thingamabobs try to deliver. I’m just curious as to what makes this one so much different from the others.”

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe I want some,” she shrugged. “Ever think of that? Maybe I’ll just keep it for myself.”

Duncan chuckled. “I’m afraid it doesn’t really go with your ensemble, Buffy. Now, be a good little Slayer and toss it here.”

“Or…what?”

“Or I’ll kill you.”

“You’re just going to kill me anyway, so why should I make this any easier for you?”

It took him a moment to respond. “Because if you don’t cooperate, I promise you that as soon as I get out of here, I’ll kill each and every one of your friends. Starting with Spike.”

She was used to threats. Usually they were empty ones, offered up by over-confident vampires with a hidden deathwish, but still, they were nothing Buffy wasn’t accustomed to hearing every day of her life as the Slayer. The only problem now was, for once, she was in the weaker position, against a demon she knew would have no qualms on following through on his promises, and her usual sarcastic banter might not be enough to save her this time.

“You wouldn’t stand a chance with Spike,” she said, holding her chin high. “He’d wipe up the floor with you.”

“Not only could I do it,” Duncan replied gleefully, “but with the harness, I could even get him to kill himself. I wouldn’t have to lift a finger. How’s that for romantic? The reformed vampire finds true love in the Slayer and then stakes himself when he discovers she’s dead.” His smile was wide. “I actually think I like that. Thank you so much for giving me the idea.”

OK, not going to plan, Buffy thought. She had no idea how the harness would ever be able to convince Spike to off himself, and right now, she was beginning to think she didn’t want to know. The only thing she was certain of at the moment was that she had to keep it away from Duncan. If it was capable of what he claimed, there was no way she could let it get out into her world.

“Buffy…” Frank’s voice was merely a breath, her name a faint disturbance in the air, but just the sound of it was enough to wipe the smile from Duncan’s face.

“Aren’t you dead yet?” he complained, readying the weapon as he turned it toward the guardian on the ground.

“No!” The single word came out as a shot, and Buffy glared at the cook as she edged herself back toward Frank. “Leave him be.”

Duncan’s lips thinned to a white line as he debated how to proceed. “Fine,” he finally said. “You want him to suffer all that much longer, be my guest. His pain can be on your head.”

She almost slipped on the pool of blood that surrounded the downed kelpie, and carefully avoided getting any more of it than necessary on her boot as she squatted at his side, her gaze darting from
Duncan to the two wounds that marred the guardian’s torso. He’d taken the second arrow high up on the chest, and clutched at it now as his other hand reached forward to pull her closer.

“He must not…get…the harness…” Frank murmured, the blood dripping from the side of his mouth as he spoke.

Buffy’s eyes were hard as she glanced back at Duncan. “I know.”

“Save…it…”

Hearing him speak actually hurt, knowing his lungs—or whatever it was that kelpies used for breathing—were slowly filling with blood, and the Slayer returned her gaze to his face, the unspoken apology for not being able to help him written behind her eyes. “Can it really do what he says it does?” she asked softly.

Frank’s nod was almost imperceptible. “There is…a way…to save it…”

She immediately stiffened. “How?”

From his vantage point at the bend in the tunnel, Duncan saw Buffy get pulled in toward the dying kelpie, golden hair falling over her face to obstruct it from his view, and frowned as for the first time, he failed to hear what the guardian was saying.

It wasn’t much, just a single word, but it landed on the Slayer’s ear with a simplistic clarity that made her wonder why she hadn’t thought of it herself.

“Run…”

* * *

They were the last two to be armed, and Spike rubbed at the rope burns on his wrists as he watched Colin hand a studded club to Willow, hiding his smile of amusement as she immediately dropped it.

“Maybe something a little less of the heavy,” she said, with an embarrassed blush as the Watcher leaned over and picked it up.

“Just hurry it up,” Spike said. “At this rate, Finn’s goin’ to be the one to find the nasty, and then I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Still don’t see why we have to take the dungeon,” Willow grumbled as she took the dagger Colin offered.

“Because me and Buffy are the two who know the layout of it the best,” the vampire countered. “And since you’re stuck with me—.” He stopped, the other man’s sudden frown catching his attention. “What is it?”

“Well, I know the dagger I’m missing is the one Mr. Finn stole to kill—.” The Watcher cut himself off, glancing at the vampire out of the corner of his eye before rushing forward. “But there seems to be a crossbow missing as well.” His gaze narrowed, scanning the wall as he began to count under his breath.

“So?”

“So I didn’t give one out.” There was a pause, and then Colin’s eyes jumped to the beginning
again, this time his numeration more deliberate, his lips clearly moving as he audibly tallied his
stock.

“Maybe your inventory is off,” Spike commented impatiently. “Can you do this later? We’ve got
us a kelpie to catch.”

“Perhaps Buffy took it,” Colin murmured, reaching for a sword for the vampire.

Willow grabbed Spike’s arm, stopping him from taking the weapon, and her eyes were wide when
he looked back at her. “Buffy didn’t take any weapons,” she said. “And this is Colin’s inventory
we’re talking here.” At the confusion in his face, she added, “Flow-chart-for-everything Colin?”

She didn’t need to say another word. Whipping around on his heel, Spike had bolted from the
weapons cache, his boots echoing against the stone floor as he ran down the hallway, before Colin
had even managed to turn around, his frown deepening as he watched the redhead follow after him.

“Where are you going?” he called after their retreating backs.

“To the tunnels,” she yelled back. “To check on Buffy!”

“Wait! You’re going to need…” They were gone already before he could finish the sentence. “…
the other amulet.”

* * *

It took a moment for it to register, but even when it did, Duncan couldn’t believe what he was
actually seeing, his muscles locked in surprise. She was running? And the kick of it was…she was
running away from him, further into the tunnels, headed deeper through the entrance and toward
the Otherworld. Before he could react, she was already gone, the muffled voice of the bells within
the bag clanging her exit in a tinny cry, and it was only then that he sprang into action.

His healing wounds made quick movements painful, but he sprinted as best he could, hesitating
when he reached the side of the guardian. Gazing down at him, Duncan’s lip curled in disgust, and
he kicked at the kelpie’s side, rolling him closer to the dangerous bank and the rushing water of the
stream. “You had to make this difficult, didn’t you,” he said viciously. “You couldn’t leave well
enough alone.”

Another kick and Frank was in the water, a scarlet trail floating atop the surface as he quietly
submerged. For a few minutes, bubbles broke through the ripples his plunge had made, but the
other demon wasn’t there to witness their fade, already gone around the bend of the tunnel in
pursuit of Buffy and the harness.

* * *

He was the first one through the barrier, pushing his way past the unsuspecting Colin to rush into
the darkness of the passageway, leaving Willow and the Watcher to trail after. His mind burned in
red, hatred for Duncan for so far evading capture, fear that Buffy had been injured in some surprise
attack on the part of the kelpie, but most of all, fury with himself for not knowing that this was the
sort of stunt the cook would pull in the first place.

Should’ve gone with her, Spike ranted silently as he dove through the winding curves. S’posed to
watch her back, and what do I do? I leave her open for that wanker to make his move. Stupid,
stupid, stupid. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

“Buffy!” he yelled as soon as he broke free from the tunnel, skidding to a halt before the edge of
the stream as he quickly scanned the open space. He could hear the footsteps of the others coming behind, but didn’t care, his only attention focused on finding her, his vampire visage automatically coming to the fore in order to better sense her out.

It was deserted, but she’d been there; he could still smell her delicate scent, even as it was fading from the moist air. What frightened him, though, was the overlaying aroma that almost obliterated it.

Blood. Lots of it.

It wasn’t human; he could take some small comfort in that, at least. But just because she might have managed to wound the demon, it didn’t mean she wasn’t hurt herself, lying somewhere within the depths of the tunnel too hurt to even cry out. Or unconscious. Or bleeding to death.

Each scenario his head created became worse than the previous, until by the time Willow and Colin appeared in the cavern, Spike felt that he couldn’t even see straight, his nerves racing in an erratic pattern across his skin. “I’m goin’ after her,” he said as he returned to his human face, and grabbed the flashlight from the Watcher’s hand before turning to head down the tunnel.

The splashing from the stream caught all their attention, halting the vampire in his steps as he leapt toward the edge. If it was Buffy, he wanted to be the one to pull her to safety; after letting her down like this, it was the least he could do. But if it was Duncan, he was going to rip his soddin’ throat out. And take great pleasure in every single tear.

It was neither. The dark claw of the guardian kelpie grabbed the bank, pulling his bleeding form from the water and onto the shore, oblivious to the cuts the jagged edges was making along his body. Willow rushed forward and knelt at Frank’s side, worried eyes scanning the score of injuries that dotted his flesh.

“Where’s Buffy?” Spike demanded, oblivious to the demon’s pain.

Speaking for him was difficult, but his mouth worked anyway, taking care to form the words so that they would understand him without the need for repeating himself. “Heads for…the Otherworld,” he said.

“What?” Colin stepped forth, shock wrinkling his brow. “Why in heaven’s name would she do that?”

“She had…no other choice. The traitor…barred the way and…was armed.”

Cursing under his breath, Spike whirled away, stomping toward the depths of the tunnels. “I’ll give him armed,” he muttered.

“Wait…” The guardian’s command seemed stronger this time, and though the vampire stopped, he only half-turned, the tension within his wiry frame attempting to pull him further along. “If you go…you will die,” Frank continued, his dark eyes jumping to meet Spike’s blue ones.

“What about Buffy?” he demanded.

“She has…the harness. She will be safe unless…”

“…unless that blighter catches up with her,” Spike finished bitterly. Furious, he began pacing along the bank, nostrils flaring as he kicked at the loose earth, doing everything he could not to drive his fist through the stone wall behind him.
“She’ll be OK,” Willow assured, but there was no confidence in her voice, and when the vampire turned his angry visage toward her, she ducked her head, unable to meet his eyes.

“This is bloody ridiculous!” Spike spat. “I’m not goin’ to just sit around here, twiddlin’ my thumbs, waitin’ to see if she’s---.”

“There is…a way for you…to help her.” The water lapped against Frank’s legs as he spoke, colored red from the blood that still flowed from his wounds, but he held himself up as he stared back at the trio.

“The only way I want to help is to go after---.”

“But you can.” He didn’t shrink under their gazes, instead turning his eyes to Colin. “With your closing spell.”

* * *

The sudden shift in light as she emerged from the tunnel blinded Buffy, causing her to halt for the first time since taking flight, bringing her hand up to shield her eyes from the brilliance. It took a moment for her to adjust but when she did, her eyes widened, taking in the glorious countryside that spread before her, the expanse of emerald plains that seemed to stretch all the way to the horizon, broken only by the occasional flower-laden knoll. Overhead, the sun blazed down in golden dignity, warming her through for the first time since arriving in Scotland. Except I’m not in Scotland anymore, she thought. This has got to be the Otherworld. And all I can say is…wow.

Somewhere, back in the stretches of the tunnel, Duncan still followed, but Buffy knew she had gained quite some distance on him, his wounds slowing his pace enough for her to stay far ahead. Now, though, she was unsure what to do. Her priority was getting the harness to safety, but what that meant around here, she had no idea. Plus, every step she took announced her presence clearer than if she was singing at the top of her lungs. Maybe I can hide, she wondered, glancing around. But there seemed no appropriate place, and she knew that the longer she looked, the closer Duncan got.

Better to just run, she decided, put some more distance between us so that he can’t hear me anymore. She wasn’t sure what kind of tracking abilities kelpies had, but somehow, she didn’t think they could be that great; she’d been able to approach him out during the storm the previous day with little effort on her part. Still, anything that helped her at this point was good, so adjusting the weight of the sack in her arms, she broke off into another trot, grateful that she was in the shape she was, refusing to let her mind dwell on the possibility of failing.

It just wasn’t an option at this point. Not when she was on this side of the entrance. And not when Spike was on the other…
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has run with the harness to the Otherworld with Duncan chasing after her, and a wounded Frank has informed Spike and the others that there is a way for them to go after her…

He had yet to stop moving. Prowling around the edges of the cavern, Spike’s muscles screamed for release, fettered by the warning from the guardian that further egress into the entrance without preparation would only result in death, and it was all he could do not to roar aloud in frustration. Buffy was alone, unarmed, with a shapeshifting kelpie on her heels, and he was stuck here babysitting an injured demon while Willow went for the first aid kit and Colin went for the rest of the gang. Not only wasn’t it fair, it was a bloody waste of his talents, and if it wasn’t for the Slayer’s odd affection and respect for this Frank, Spike would’ve been the first to ignore his cautionary words and ventured to the Otherworld on his own, consequences be damned.

“She’s strong. Resourceful,” the guardian said, watching the other demon as he paced. “She will be all right until you can reach her.”

Sapphire flashed as his gaze flickered over Frank’s prone form at the edge of the stream, the kelpie’s body half in, half out of the water. With every passing second, the guardian seemed stronger, and though the blood still flowed freely from his wounds, his pain appeared to be waning, making his voice stronger, his words firmer.

“She’d be even better if she’d just stayed put,” he barked in response. “Or better yet, held off on handin’ over that damn harness ‘til we had Duncan under wraps for good.” Spike frowned when an unmistakable smile appeared on Frank’s face. “What’s so funny?” he demanded.

“You…make an interesting team,” came the reply. “In many ways, she is just as impetuous as you, and yet…she trusts me.”

“Slayer’s got a soft spot for people who save her life.” His eyes were hard. “I don’t.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would.” Frank grimaced as he tried to shift his weight against the bank without causing even more damage to his flesh. “She is doing the right thing, you know. The harness---.”

“I don’t care about that bloody harness!” Spike stopped near the edge of the water, the veins in his neck bulging as he struggled to contain his temper. “I just…need her to be safe. And takin’ off in the opposite direction of everyone who can help her is about as far away from safe as she can get.” Not to mention as far from him, but right now, that wasn’t the point and he knew it. “What could she have been thinkin’?” he continued. “She’s not the sort to just run from a fight, and if that’s what that wanker wanted…” He shook his head, his mind a tumble of questions, questions, and more unanswered questions, with nary an answer in sight.

“It…couldn’t be helped.” For the first time since being left alone with the vampire, Frank turned his gaze away, looking instead at the water rolling over his legs, his thoughts retreating even if his body couldn’t.
Spike’s head tilted, his eyes narrowing. “Thought you said Buffy didn’t have a choice,” he said slowly, and the suspicion bled into his voice as he slowly squatted to his haunches, his study of the wounded kelpie never wavering.

“Fleeing to the Otherworld was her best option.”

“Best…” The vampire played with the word, rolling it over his tongue and dragging it out as tiny flecks of gold glinted within his eyes. “Funny. You told the others…only.” He waited for some semblance of a response from the guardian, but was met with an awkward silence that drew his reach to the other’s arm. “What’re you not tellin’ me here, Frank?” The stress he put on the name was the only indication of the barely checked restraint he was enforcing on his muscles, the desire to pull and rip the kelpie’s arm from the socket almost overwhelming. If Buffy had been there, she would’ve recognized the silky tones of his voice that predicated his more violent tendencies and probably pulled him away then. As it was, he had to hold himself back.

“There was no harm,” Frank finally said, his voice barely perceptible in the wide space of the cavern, his eyes unblinking.

The possibility of what he was hearing tightened Spike’s grip, and the scarlet anger began to lick around the edges of his control. “Were you touching her?” Pause. “Was this your suggestion?”

“There was no harm,” the guardian repeated, a little louder this time. “I did not hurt her.”

In a clean jerk, Spike hauled him from the water, his face twisted into a furious snarl. “This is your---,” he started, only to be interrupted by the emergence of the others from the dungeons.

“Spike!” Giles shouted, shock and anger bulleting his voice. “Put him down!”

Willow came rushing from behind, up to the vampire’s side. “He needs to stay in the water,” she ordered, boldly tugging at his arm to get him to release the kelpie. “That’s the only thing keeping him alive right now.”

“Wanker doesn’t deserve to be alive,” Spike said through gritted teeth, ignoring the shocked surprise of the rest of the group. He gave his captive a rough shake, sending tiny droplets of blood spattering through the air. “Tell ‘em what you did.”

“I did…nothing wrong.” The blood was dripping from Frank’s body, pooling at his feet that dragged along the earth. Though he was easily several feet taller than the vampire, his injuries made him a ragdoll within the other’s grasp, and he could only stare at his attacker, his bold adherence to his innocent culpability firming his gaze. Unwavering, he seemed to be holding his own; it was only the growing wheeze of his breath that spoke of his worsening condition.

“Put him down,” Giles repeated, wrapping his hand around Spike’s forearm and forcing him to open his grip.

With a muffled thud, Frank crumpled to the ground and rolled back into the water, floating almost lifelessly as it began to lap over his limbs. His breathing was labored again, rasping in his chest, but his dark eyes remained calm, locked on the pale countenance of the vampire before him.

“What is going on here?” Colin asked, stepping forward from the throng. “We left you to watch him, Spike, not to try and kill him.”

Tearing his eyes from the guardian, Spike turned to face the others. “Buffy didn’t go gallivantin’ off to the Otherworld because she wanted to,” he said. “She did it ‘cause Frankie boy made her.”
“How is that possible?” Riley asked, braving a step forward to square off with the vampire, immediately prompting Xander to jump to the front of the fray. He desperately wanted to add on a, “nobody can make Buffy do anything she doesn’t want to,” but the realization that it was the exact opposite of that belief that steered him across the world just to confront Spike stayed his tongue. Instead, he added, “This…demon has done nothing but help us by telling us what happened to her. So much for being on the good guy side, Spike. Figures you’d show your true colors when Buffy’s not around to witness it.”

“It’s the kelpie magic touch,” Xander explained, planting himself between the pair, ensuring that there wouldn’t be a repeat performance of their earlier display in the great hall as he saw the vampire’s hands curl into fists out of the corner of his eye. “All he has to do is lay a finger on her, and he can get her to do whatever he wants.”

“And the pillock wanted her to run,” Spike added.

“And I still believe…it was the best option,” Frank defended. “The harness—.”

“That soddin’ harness!” The vamp whirled on his heel to glare down at the kelpie. “Buffy’s more important than some fancy party favor.”

“As much as I’m sure it pains you to hear this…no, she’s not.”

“What exactly is the power behind the harness?” Giles’ voice was low, his words directed to the guardian. “Why is it so important for us to keep it from Duncan?”


“Time to spill, Frankie,” Spike said, eyes glittering, folding his arms across his chest, daring the other to disagree with him. “No more secrets. Not if you don’t want to end up going to the glue factory for good this time.”

He didn’t wish to speak, that much was obvious, his dark eyes darting from one grim face to the next. But in his weakened condition and knowing that they would not continue until they were satisfied, the guardian sighed, realizing defeat on this issue was inevitable. “The power of the harness lies in its control over its subject,” he said softly. “It’s been imbued with the essence of kelpie power. The ability to manipulate the will of others.”

“That’s like what we read,” Tara offered. “About how to get a kelpie to do your work for you.”

“But if it’s to control kelpies,” Anya asked, “what good is it going to do out in our world? Is there some secret kelpie population that we don’t know about?”

“No, you don’t understand the magnitude of what I’m saying here.” Frank sighed. “Its power isn’t limited to my kind. Place the harness on anything…and you gain control over it. Indefinitely.”

The group was stunned into silence, the only sound in the cavern the hollow trickle of the water, as each mulled over the implications of what he was suggesting. It was the ultimate in dominion, manacles that would chain any number of creatures to its master. In the right hands, it would prove a valuable defense mechanism, but in the wrong...

“Well, at least we understand now why Mr. Travers has been so persistent,” Colin murmured. “But surely it’s merely a temporary effect. It would only be good for as long as the bearer wore it.”

Frank shook his head. “Once someone has been shackled with the harness, its effect is permanent. Only death can nullify its power, which is why, theoretically, it is possible to create an entire army
using its charm. That is why the traitor must not be allowed to obtain it,” he added. “He is unscrupulous. His motives are not noble.”

“Does Buffy know about this?” Spike queried, and snorted in disgust at the shake of the guardian’s head. “Nice to know that trust goes both ways,” he muttered.

“There was no time for explanations,” Frank said simply. “The thief was---.”

“---armed, yeah, we got it.” The vampire’s anger toward the kelpie seemed to dissipate slightly in light of the new revelation, the severity of the situation---and of Buffy’s---refocusing his attention. “Right, then. No more piddlin’ about. Tell us what we need to know to get through so we can help her out.”

“You said something about our closing spell?” Colin asked. “How is that going to aid us in reaching Buffy?”

“There are hazards within the entrance that will kill those who attempt to venture through who do not belong,” Frank explained. “Your closing spell will fortify its participants with Otherworld essence in order to allow them safe passage.”

“And how exactly do you know this?” This came from Giles, a deep furrow across his brow as he regarded the demon in hesitant curiosity.

“We learned of the spell’s secrets from the witch who conducted it the first time.”

“And she just…told you this?”

Frank’s gaze was hooded. “We…have our way of getting information,” he replied obliquely. In light of their reaction to the true reason for their friend’s flight, the guardian suspected they would be less than amenable to discussing the finer points of the kelpie’s innate necromantic skills. Better to just stick with the generalities. “Merely do your spell, and you will be able to venture forth to help the Slayer.”

“But we can’t.” A range of eyes turned to look at Tara, but she didn’t shrink from their scrutiny. “Buffy was part of the triad. Without her, the spell won’t work.”

“Someone must take her place then,” Colin said. “She was selected because we believed her strength would be enough to protect her from the power of the living spirit. Whoever takes her place---.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Oh, no!” Spike barked, whirling to face off with Riley again, prompting Xander to edge his way back between the two. “Don’t think I’m lettin’ you anywhere near her after the stunts you’ve pulled. You’re not exactly the poster child for sound judgment these days, Finn.”

Riley’s lip curled into a sneer. “Must be something in the water then,” he commented. “Because I’d say that lack of good judgment is just flying around here.”

“The only thing I’m regrettin’ my judgment on is not managin’ to get that cornbread mug of yours shoved into that fireplace faster---.”

“Spike…” The brunette put his hand flat on the vampire’s chest, holding him back and pressing him away, forcing him to take a few steps back from the group so that they could have a little more privacy. “Outside of you and Buffy, Riley’s the strongest one here. If anyone can do this, he can.”
Xander shook his head. “We both know Riley’s our best shot at not only getting the spell to work, but to come out of it with all our skin still intact. And, whether you want to admit it or not, he really does love Buffy. Hasn’t he shown he’d do just about anything to protect her?”

“Protect his ego, more like it,” Spike muttered, but bit his tongue against saying anything further. Xander was right; he didn’t want to admit it, but somewhere deep down, the vamp knew this was probably the best choice. Riley would fight tooth and nail for Buffy, and of the options they had at hand, he would be the best to have in a scrap, should things come to a direct clash. Didn’t mean he had to like it, though.

“Besides, Buffy told you two to play nice, and I do believe I heard some kind of promise come out of that pasty face of yours agreeing with her. So, do what needs to be done here, Spike.” His eyes were calm, but kind. “Prove to us---prove to Riley---that we’re not all just making a huge mistake by putting our faith in you.”

The words could’ve stung, but the vampire could see the ingenuousness in the other man’s face, and pursed his lips to hold back the retort that sprang automatically to his lips. Right. Made a promise to Buffy. Was goin’ to keep it even if it meant his head exploded in the process. And for some reason, somewhere buried deep beneath his driving dedication to the Slayer was the desire to do just what Xander had said. Prove it to them all, he would. Especially that prat Finn.

“But we still can’t do it,” Willow said, green eyes darting from Giles to Spike, and back to Giles again. “We haven’t figured out how to stop the spontaneous combustion phase yet. If they do this, Spike’s going to go up in flames as soon as they get back.”

The Watcher turned to Frank. “I don’t suppose you know how to circumvent that aspect of the spell,” he said.

When the guardian shook his head, the vampire merely mirrored it with his own headshake. “Doesn’t matter,” he declared. “I’m doin’ it anyway.”

“But you’ll---,”

Blazing blue eyes choked the redhead’s words in her throat as Spike swung his head to look at her. “Do it anyway,” he finished for her. “And if it bothers the lot of you that much, you’ve got the time while we’re gone to suss out how to stop it.”

“We’re going to have to wait until the sun sets,” Willow said. “Our window won’t open until then.”

“That gives us time for you to tell us everything you do know about the spell,” Giles said, folding his arms across his chest as he regarded Frank. “We have a lot of questions.”

“Whatever you want.” There was no point in any further games. If he’d been asked, he would’ve professed only anxiety for the safety of the harness; pressed, however, and Frank knew he would admit to a certain worry for the Slayer as well. The dedication she inspired in those around her was contagious, he decided. That had to be the only reason he was concerning himself in her aid. “Just ask.”

* * *

Waiting was the worst. Not a patient creature at the best of times, Spike found himself standing in the doorway of the castle to Dall Rath, lighting cigarette after cigarette in a desperate attempt to keep himself distracted until sunset, only smoking them down halfway before dashing them to dust.
beneath his boot, igniting the next before he had even finished tamping the last. Giles and Colin had pulled aside Finn to give him the lowdown on the spell, the details that Frank had not provided, giving him the wherewithal to understand completely what he was getting himself into, while the witches were making the magical preparations. Anya and Xander had taken over the tending of the guardian’s injuries, which had left Spike officially to his own devices. Hence…the chain smoking.

His skin crawled with an itch that couldn’t be scratched, not until they were through the entrance and readying to face the trials Frank had described. The trials involved defeating a magical-bonded creature, capturing and entrapping it within the urn, which would mean a fight, and at this moment in time, that’s what Spike wanted most of all. Actually, he wanted Duncan’s blood on his hands, but he’d settle for what he could get until he could have his chance with the kelpie; he only hoped that Buffy would be able to evade the blighter’s pursuit until they could get there and help her out.

Buffy…Just thinking of her name hurt, the sense of failure for having not been there eating at his gut with razor-sharp teeth. He knew the others were worried about the bursting into fire problem the spell still gave them, but Spike didn’t care. What they failed to realize that without Buffy here, he might as well be a big pile of dust. He’d only just got her and the promise of the light she would bring to his life was worth whatever risk it took to get her back. Because if he failed…

No. Not going to fail. She would be safe. He wouldn’t have it any other way.

“You know, you’re entitled to a last meal, as well,” Xander said from the hallway behind him. When Spike glanced back at him, blue eyes narrowed, the dark-haired man flushed. “Probably not the funniest thing to ever come out of my mouth,” he commented. “Sorry.”

“No too far off the mark, though,” the vampire replied, exhaling the smoke loudly. “Not unless the witches sort something before we get back.”

“I think you’ve sent Giles into shock.” Xander stepped out into the brisk afternoon sunshine, squinting as he gazed out over the heather that bowed gently in the breeze. “The last thing he expected was for you to serve yourself up flambé-style in order to save Buffy.”

“That’s ‘cause he doesn’t get it.”

“He’s starting to, though.” Brown eyes were kind as they swung back to look at the vampire. “As much of a word man Giles is, he’s much more of a believer in actions. Doing what you did down there is going to help when we get back to Sunnydale, mark my words. He might even throw you and the Buffster a little congratulatory party, you keep it up.”

“Look, Xander…” It was one of the few times he’d ever called the young man by his first name, but right now, Spike wasn’t in the mood for being coddled, or lied to. He’d had enough of both to last him a lifetime.

“I know what you’re going to say, and stop.”

“And you stop livin’ in denial. Odds are---.”

“If you know anything about us, you know that we actually do our best work when we’re working against the odds,” Xander interrupted. “How many times did we kick your evil-doing butt, back in the day? Frank said the Council thought this trial would take a few hours, plus with having to help Buffy, that gives Willow and the rest plenty of time to counteract the recipe for Kentucky Fried Spike we’re cooking here. Don’t be going into this with such a negative attitude, Spike. Buffy doesn’t need that right now.”
He couldn’t help his grin as he dropped his cigarette to the floor, mashing it into ash with the others. “Didn’t know you were the resident cheerleader of the bunch,” he said. “That rub off from your high school bird?”

Xander smiled, ducking his head at the slight gibe. “Just don’t be mentioning Cordy’s name in front of Anya,” he warned. “For some reason, she goes all banshee whenever the subject comes up.”

“You want to do something for me, you just make sure Captain Cardboard stays as far from me as possible,” Spike said, his seriousness returned. “He gets in my way or in any way bollocks this up, I swear mine won’t be the only dead body coming back from the Otherworld.”

“Riley wants this to work just as badly as you do.”

“I’m just sayin’—.”

“You’re new to this playing-nicely-with-friends game, Spike, so I’m going to cut you a little bit of slack here. But when it comes to Riley, the one thing you have to realize is that deep down, he’s basically just a good guy who happens to love Buffy, too. OK, so he wasn’t the long haul guy for her, and maybe it’s a little hard for him to see past that right now. But he’s not going to do anything to put her in any more danger than she’s already in. You’re going to have work with us on this one.”

“If he’d stayed back on the Hellmouth, we wouldn’t be in this mess right now.”

“And that’s still not the point, Mr. Deadman Sulking. We’re a team. You, me, and Riley. Operation Kick the Kelpie’s Ass. If you’re in, you’re going to be in all the way, or I’m going to tell Giles this won’t work and we’ll leave Buffy to manage with Duncan on her own.” It was an idle threat, but Xander knew exactly what strings to pull when it came to the blond vampire, and the Slayer string was the strongest. He knew it was going to work.

“Below the belt,” Spike growled, but the set of his mouth told the younger man that he’d accepted the conditions proposed. Besides, he’d made a promise to Buffy. No way would he let someone as insignificant as Riley Finn be the reason he broke it. “If I didn’t know better,” he went on, “I’d almost say you’d been takin’ lessons on negotiation tactics from your girlfriend there. Isn’t below the belt her favorite holiday place?” The last was said with a crooked grin, a hint of mockery in his voice.

“It’s her favorite anytime place,” Xander quipped. “And no, I learned that one all on my own little lonesome.” His smile was broad. “Hang out with demons long enough and some of it’s bound to rub off one way or another.”

“Maybe we should work on your style sense next,” Spike said as he began to saunter back toward the dungeon.

“As soon as you learn that black on black is not the piece de resistance of the fashion world, we’ll talk.”

“Hey, I own other colored shirts, you know. Just haven’t gotten around to wearin’ them yet.”


“Well, yeah. So?”

“I rest my case, Spike.”
Though the players were different, the tableau was the same.

A triangle of stones was arranged on the shore of the underground stream, with Xander, Spike, and Riley seated at each of the points within it, the same clay urn at its center. At the points along the outside, the Watchers and Tara stood with lit candles, while Willow was off to the side, the spell book open in her hands.

“Ready,” the redhead murmured, her eyes fixed on the group before her. “Keep your eyes on the urn,” she instructed before lowering her gaze to the text.

The men within the cairn watched the clay pot begin to quiver as the witch started the incantation, the dull music of its bottom vibrating against the earth drowning out the song of the stream. Every word she uttered only quickened its pace, setting the nerves of the participants on fire, until, as the last sound fell from Willow’s lips, its dance halted and the familiar tendrils of Otherworld essence slithered upward from its mouth, entwining and slinking toward the ceiling before breaking apart to slam into each of the triad’s chests.

This was where the similarities to their first attempt stopped. Each of the three stiffened as they were possessed, heads thrown back, eyes closed, veins bulging in their necks that spoke of untold tension within their bodies. A keening began to fill the air, but it came not from any of the men but from the now-still urn, rising in volume until those outside the triangle clapped their hands over their ears in an attempt to close it out. The only one not affected was Frank, who watched from his vantage point at the edge of the water, eyes dark and calm.

Just when the others thought they wouldn’t be able to handle the high-pitched wail any longer, it stopped, ending simultaneously with the impromptu extinguishment of the candles, leaving the group in what should have been darkness. Instead, three points of white light came from the triangle, one in each of the chests of the men, and as the rigidity began to ease from their bodies, the luminance faded, seemingly swallowed by their flesh.

“Xander?” Anya’s voice was barely a whisper, and she stepped forward from the wall, her heart pounding in her chest as she watched her boyfriend sit unmoving within the cairn.

“Why aren’t they moving?” Tara murmured, eyes darting from one to the next. “Did it work?”

As if in response, the trio’s lids opened simultaneously, the faintest of white glows buried in the pupils. “Well, that was interestin’,” Spike drawled.

“How do you feel?” asked Giles.

The first thing the vampire did was look down at his tee, running the flat of his palm over the smooth fabric. “Well, not losin’ my shirt’s a good start,” he commented.

“The burning must’ve been an effect of the spell’s failure the first time,” Colin observed.

“Burning?” Riley frowned. “Nobody mentioned anything burning except for Spike.”

“And we’re not goin’ to mention that again, either,” Spike bit back. Slowly, he rose to his feet, stretching his arms as he seemed to test his body. “I’m goin’ to say it worked this time. I feel---.”

“Wow.” Xander’s eyes were wide, his cheeks faintly flushed. “That was…wow.”

“If Xander’s been rendered speechless, I’m going to agree with Spike and say it must’ve worked,”
Giles said. Setting down his candle, he stepped away from the triangle, and glanced down the darkness of the tunnel before turning back to the three men. “Right. On your way then. No dawdling.”

Spike was the first one to move, followed almost immediately by Riley, and the pair had paced off several steps toward the Otherworld entrance before Xander had even risen.

“Don’t forget the urn,” Tara prompted him.

“Oh, yeah.” He grabbed it as he straightened, and right away, felt it slip within his grasp, visibly bobbling it.

Like a shot, Spike was at his side, yanking the pot from the younger man before it could hit the floor with an annoyed growl. “This’ll be over before it starts if you break the soddin’ thing,” he complained.

“I’ll carry it,” Riley said, turning back to take the urn from the vampire.

“I thought I was the official urn-bearer,” Xander argued, reaching out to take back ownership.

“You’re goin’ to be the official spell-breaker when you drop it,” Spike shot back, and batted his hand away from the urn. “I’ll be the one…”

As the three bickered between them, Anya tilted her head, watching the spectacle with a small grimace. “This is not starting out well,” she commented to Willow at her side.

“You don’t think they’re going to kill each other before they make it to Buffy, do you?” the redhead queried.

“I’d be surprised if they make it around the first bend,” Colin said, and together, the gang watched as the first of what was probably going to be many skirmishes amongst the trio began.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike, Xander, and Riley have undergone the beginning of the closing spell in order to safely traverse the entrance of the Otherworld in order to help Buffy, who has run there with the harness, Duncan right on her heels…

Though the sun had set hours earlier, there was no drop in temperature, one plus Buffy was grateful for as she realized just how unprepared she really was for this particular flight. Not your brightest idea, she chided herself. You have no idea what you’re doing here, who you’re looking for, or even what to expect. Whatever you thought you were doing when you started running, you were either on drugs or…

And her mind flickered back to the moment in the tunnel, and without fail, felt the what-should-have-been-familiar touch of the kelpie on her arm as if he was standing next to her at that very minute. He hadn’t…except he had, and the Slayer frowned as a flash of disappointment in Frank cut through her, knowing why he’d resorted to such a method to convince her to run yet not happy that he’d actually done so. If anyone understood what duty really meant, she did, but did that mean he had to resort to some kind of Jedi mind trick in order to get her to help? Of course, they hadn’t really had the time to stand around and debate the issue, but if he’d asked, maybe told her about what to expect by doing it, she would certainly have considered it. And now here she was, stranger in a strange but gorgeous land, with a stolen artifact nobody knew she was bringing back, looking for…god knew who. Or what.

In all the time she’d already spent in the Otherworld, Buffy had yet to encounter another creature, eventually slowing her run when she realized she couldn’t even see Duncan behind her any longer. The stream beneath Dall Rath had ended almost immediately upon her emergence, but another had picked up the trail, gurgling and meandering through the grassy hills in indigo wonder. Knowing what she did of kelpie make-up, she decided to follow the path of the water, paralleling its course with enough distance between them so that she didn’t have to worry about a surprise attack from there, but close enough so that she never lost it from her sight. Now, bathed in the soft darkness of the night, though, exhaustion was beginning to seep into her bones, and she wondered if she should stray in order to find shelter to safely rest.

There had been a few caves along the way, and though she didn’t imagine that they were completely safe, Buffy knew that they offered her the best chance for some undisturbed sleep, keeping her eyes alert for the next break in the grass. It took only a few minutes to spy one, and steering herself toward it, she disappeared into its dark mouth, senses heightened in anticipation of unseen dangers, only to be met with complete silence. For the first time since taking flight, she lowered the bag from her arms, the small shift causing them to ring in a muted call, and settled herself next to it. It wouldn’t do as a pillow—-not when every move she made would only set it clanging yet again—-but there was no way she could abandon the job she’d set out to do, so curling her body around it, being careful not to jar its placement, Buffy rested her head against her arm and closed her eyes to the Otherworld night.

Immediately, images of Spike rose before her inner eye, and the question about what was going on back at Dall Rath finally broke through the Slayer’s concentration. She had been studiously
avoiding thinking of the subject during her trek; it was easier to just focus on the task at hand rather than to worry about things she had no control over. She didn’t doubt that Frank was dead, which meant the others would have no idea what had happened to her. She suspected that Spike wasn’t going to react well to that, just like she knew she would respond poorly if all of a sudden she didn’t even know if he was still alive. Betcha Riley takes the brunt of that frustration, she thought. Except Spike promised, and she knew he would stick to it. Even if nobody else believed it.

I’m just going to have to make this as fast as possible, Buffy decided as she felt the first veil of sleep cloud her head. In and out. No reason to dawdle. God, I’m starting to sound like Giles…

* * *

Passing from the tunnel into the Otherworld was all it took to bring the trio to a grinding halt.

The differences Spike had professed had been felt by all, but once the issue of the urn had been resolved, the three had walked the path along the stream in silence, faces grim, focused on the duty before them. Find Buffy. Kill Duncan. Go through the trial. Return to the dungeon. It seemed fairly straightforward, each task clear in the men’s minds, and even as they had the end of the tunnel in their sights, they continued to dwell on just that.

But the reality of it hit them like a railroad train as soon as they emerged into the warm night.

Xander had known before he’d opened his eyes back in the cavern that something was different. All of a sudden, he went from feeling fear, anxiety, and just a little bit of excitement about what the spell was going to do to him, to knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he could take whatever it offered, that all he had to do was try his hand at it and everything would turn out all right. It wasn’t just feeling stronger---although that was certainly a big part of it---but more of a calm knowing suffusing his being. The same phrase kept flitting through his head---it was, it will be, and always shall---and though he didn’t even try to pretend he knew what it was talking about or that it was in any way an original thought, it gave him a sense of purpose as he strode through the tunnel. Toward his task. Toward his friend.

Riley’s revelation was more subtle. He’d always been aware of his own strength, especially the changes in it when he’d come off the government crap they’d shoved into his body, so waking from the effects of the spell feeling more powerful didn’t seem all that unusual, more of a step back to the way things used to be. And, if he was being honest with himself, the briefest of thoughts---if only Buffy could see me now, she could see that I can be who she needs---flickered across his brain before being lost in the very real argument that had ensued about the urn. It had taken all his self-control to come out of that one without laying a finger on Spike, and though he had in the end been the one to carry the pot through the tunnel, the whole experience had only distilled his thoughts into one coherent point. The mission. This was about the mission. Save Buffy and get her home.

And then there was Spike. His power of observation was only one of the reasons he’d managed to survive a century, so as soon as he’d opened his eyes, had seen the faint white glow that seemed to outline everything he saw, he knew it had worked. Physically, he felt very much the same, still strong, still a vampire; it was the external changes that had driven the awareness of the spell’s success home. He had always been sensitive to the living flesh that surrounded him; now, all of a sudden, he seemed too conscious of the dead, the smells of the men who had been killed weeks earlier by the guardians suddenly flooding his nostrils, the gritty feel of the dried blood in the earth beneath his seat an ever-present reminder of the mortalities the cavern had seen. Shoving them quickly aside, he’d concentrated on the issue of the urn, yielding to Giles’ intervention when it came, and then led the others as they began the trek through the entrance. None of the changes...
mattered to him at that point. He had only one thing on his mind. Buffy. Had to be there to back her up this time. Couldn’t let the wanker win. The fact that he wasn’t expected to survive the closing didn’t even register. He wasn’t going to fail her a second time.

One step from the tunnel, though, and each of the three halted in his tracks, the sudden plethora of sensations coursing through their bodies almost crushing in their intensity. If they had felt different in the cavern, the exposure to the actual air of the Otherworld magnified those changes a thousandfold, leaving each breathless—or figuratively breathless, as was the case for Spike—eyes wide, and in sudden awe of the world surrounding them.

“OK, tell me this isn’t just me,” Riley said, shattering the quiet.

“If you mean, feeling like you’ve just walked into the world’s biggest Krispy Kreme after having been starved for months, and then being told they’re free,” Xander said. “Then, yeah. I’m right there with you.”

“And here I thought we were goin’ to be needin’ a bit of a kip when we got here,” Spike commented, lifting his head to stare up at the star-laden sky.

“I feel like I could go all night.”

“Me, too.”

The vampire looked at his two partners. “Then let’s get on with it,” he said. “Not like my sunlight issue’s gone away or anything, so the faster we get this sorted, the better my chance of going poof in a nice cozy dungeon surrounded by friends than out in the middle of bleedin’ nowhere with you two at my side. So…how do we want to start this thing?”

“We start with finding Buffy,” said Xander. “Unless the mystical trial thingy decides to make its presence known first. But we’ve got all night to get that done.”

“I agree.” Riley’s voice was firm. “Buffy comes first.”

“Good to know we’ve got some common ground then.” For a moment, Spike contemplated reaching into his pockets for his cigarettes, more out of habit than anything else, but immediately brushed the desire away. Not here. Somehow, it didn’t seem…right.

“She’s had a headstart on us. We’re going to have to make double-time if we want to catch up.”

“How do we know which direction she went in?” Xander scanned the horizon, and if it wasn’t for the faint glow deep in its depths, his dark eyes would’ve been lost in the velvety night.

“That way.”

They spoke in unison, pointing in the exact same direction towards the grassy plain, and both Riley and Spike frowned as they swiveled their heads, gazing in a mixture of curiosity and skepticism as two sets of eyes scanned the other’s face. “I can smell her,” Spike said slowly. “What’s your excuse?”

It took a moment for the ex-soldier to respond. “I don’t know how to explain it,” he finally said. “It’s like, I’m…aware of everything living that’s passed through here. And Buffy’s…trail is practically glowing. You don’t see it?” This last was asked with just a trace of hopefulness, the desire to not be alone on this peeking through his words. He visibly deflated though when the others shook their heads. “Still…it’s there. We have to follow it.”
“No argument from me.” Spike’s head tilted, unable to let the issue go. “You can see it?”

“That’s what I said.”

“And…anything else? Smell her perfume, hear her heartbeat…any of that?”

“No.”

“What ‘bout how far she’s gone? Can you suss that?”

Riley’s face was grim. “Far enough. The trail is faintest here by the entrance. But it disappears over that hill.”

“What about the kelpie? We didn’t find him on the way here so he must still be after her.”

“There’s another that runs close to hers. Could be---.”

“Uh, guys.”

There was a slight waver in Xander’s voice and when his comrades looked over at him, they saw the young man staring off into the horizon, eyes lifted, jaw slightly dropped. Quickly, their own eyes followed his path forward and up, and immediately both froze.

“Maybe…not just yet,” Spike said slowly, as life began to return to his muscles. Carefully, he edged himself sideways, taking a position several feet away from the other men, seeing Riley set down the urn and do the same in the opposite direction out of the corner of his eye.

“This isn’t the trial, you don’t think?” Xander asked, glued to his spot in a sudden fear that curdled his gut.

“Somehow, I don’t think eight feet of ugly is goin’ to fit in that itty, bitty urn,” the vampire drawled. “So my money’s on no.”

“What was that Giles said about not needing weapons,” Riley muttered, shaking his head for his own lapse in persistence. Outside of the urn, the three had come through the entrance empty-handed---Frank had insisted---and here they were, thirty seconds in the Otherworld, facing…well, he wasn’t sure what they were facing. Except that it was big. Really, really big. And brandishing a sword bigger than Spike.

If it wasn’t for the now-getting-annoying white outline that seemed to etch everything now, Spike wasn’t sure that he would’ve been able to see their new arrival that clearly against the night sky. Definitely a relative of Frankie, he thought ruefully, eyes scanning the heavily muscled shoulders as they swung the blade in dangerous sweeps before it. Black skinned, hairless, with tiny beady eyes glittering back at them, the biggest difference lay in the lack of needle-like teeth in its mouth. Instead, a gaping maw grimaced back at them. Probably took one too many to the face, Spike decided.

An abashed smile creased Xander’s face and he held up his hands as if in surrender. “We come in peace,” he said in a voice too loud, his words over-articulated. “We have no desire to fight you.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Like that ever really works,” he sniped.

“Nothing wrong with trying a little reason,” Riley countered, and held up his own hands to mirror Xander’s.
“Have you both gone completely bonkers?” the vampire demanded. “It probably doesn’t even understand a bloody word we’re sayin’—.”

“You trespass,” the creature said, a sibilance to its words that made them bleed through the night air.

Spike shrugged. “Or maybe it does,” he commented, and held up his own hands in mimicry of his compatriots.

“We’re looking for our friend,” Xander tried, but jumped backward as the creature took a step toward him.

“You have no friends here,” it said. “You trespass.”

“Yeah, yeah, got that the first time, mate.” Spike was growing annoyed. This was taking far too long.

“Maybe you’ve seen her,” Riley tried. “Blonde, very pretty, carrying a big…” He audibly swallowed as the creature turned its head to look at him. “…bag…”

“I have seen no one. You---.”

“---trespass, yeah, don’t you know any other songs?” Spike complained, and dropping his hands, took a strong step toward it. “Like, how ‘bout cryin’ uncle?” A single leap through the air had him tackling the demon, sending both of them flying to the ground, but not before it had launched its sword, the blade whistling in a straight path before embedding itself in Xander’s abdomen.

The blow should’ve sent him reeling backward. It didn’t. As it was, the young man remained riveted to his spot, screaming from the impact, his hands automatically going down to clutch at the hilt protruding from his stomach. His eyes were wide as they darted from a surprised Riley and an even more surprised Spike.

“Harris…mate…I didn’t…” the vampire tried, but quickly lost his words as fury overtook him, his fists pummeling at the demon in his grasp, his own demon within jumping to the fore. His fault. Again. None of this was goin’ to bloody work because he couldn’t work as part of a team. And Harris was goin’ to die as a result. Not fair.

“Ow.” It was almost a question, not that loud and definitely not that firm, but after only a moment, Xander frowned, looking down at his stomach. “No, wait. Not ow.”

Rushing to his friend’s side, Riley’s eyes scanned to the area surrounding the sword. “Where’s the blood?” he questioned softly, and lifted his gaze to meet Xander’s confused brown orbs. “You’re not bleeding.”

“How’s that…” But his words trailed away, his hands tightening around the blade’s base, and with one clean yank, Xander pulled it from his flesh.

The metal of the sword was clean, no bodily fluids clinging to it, no pieces of skin torn along its edge. Gingerly, Riley lifted the hem of Xander’s shirt to inspect the site of the injury and felt the air stop in his lungs as it was met with the smooth expanse of the other man’s stomach.

“How is that possible?” The ex-soldier’s voice was crisp in awe, his shoulders straightening as he involuntarily took a step back, away from his friend.

Before Xander could reply, a roar from Spike diverted their attention, and they both turned in time
to see the vampire grab the creature’s head and give it a vicious yank, audibly breaking its neck in a cracking snap. His eyes glittered in gold as he let it drop lifeless to the ground, kicking at its torso one last time. “That’s for stabbin’ my friend,” he growled. “Not to mention for bein’ an all-around pain in my ass.”

“Spike.”

He seemed to become aware of them for the first time since witnessing the blade’s flight, and immediately reverted to his human face, head tilting in curiosity as he saw the sword, not in Xander’s body, but dangling from his hand. “Hey,” he said. “You’re not dead.” He closed the distance between them, eyes locked on the wound-free abdomen of his friend. “Why aren’t you dead?”

Xander’s body twisted away as Spike began poking skeptically at the brunette’s stomach. “Stop that,” he chided. “That tickles.”

“That thing sliced through you like butter,” the vampire continued, walking around him to look at his back. When he lifted the shirt, Xander skittered away, out of his reach. “So why aren’t you one of the walkin’ wounded here?” Spike added.

“Maybe it’s the spell,” Riley offered. “The way Giles explained it to me, each of us is inhabited by an aspect of the Otherworld. Xander got the immortal part.”

His brown eyes widened. “I got made into a god?” he said in wonder.

Spike snorted. “Great,” he muttered. “From empty vessel to unkillable bein’ in less than twenty-four hours. Talk about gettin’ a swelled head. You’re goin’ to be unbearable now, aren’t you?”

“But it makes sense.” Riley was on a roll, the pieces suddenly fitting together for him, and his eyes almost glowed as he rushed forward with his explanation. “That’s why I feel so…attuned to everything. Because I got the living part of the equation.” He turned to the vampire. “You’re the dead. What have you noticed?”

The memories of what he’d sensed in the cavern came rushing back. “Some of the same,” Spike admitted. “Makes sense.” He turned his azure gaze back to Xander. “But don’t be gettin’ any big ideas about provin’ your godness, or I swear, when we get back, I’ll thump you into next week, I don’t care what kind of headache I get.”

The threat was good-natured, and Riley’s eyes narrowed as he saw the answering grin on Xander’s face. He’d heard what Spike had said as he was killing the demon, the bandying around of the term friend as if it was an everyday occurrence. And now, witnessing the camaraderie between the two men, he found himself greeted with the same sense of out-of-placement that he’d felt when walking in on Spike and Buffy. Like there was something there that he was missing. Like everyone else was on a different page of the book, and they were all waiting for him to catch up. It was disconcerting, to say the least, especially knowing Xander’s predilection for hating vampires. He was the last person Riley would ever expect to embrace Spike’s presence in their lives.

And yet here he was. And seemingly enjoying every second of it.

“We should be going,” he said, turning away to step over to the urn and pick it up, desperate for anything that would get him away from the current mood. “Buffy’s still out there someplace.”

The mention of the Slayer’s name was all that was needed to sober the other men up. “Right,” Spike said, and glanced down at the sword still clutched in Xander’s hand. “You goin’ to be able to
manage that?” he asked.

Tentatively, Xander hefted its weight, giving it a practice swoosh through the air. “Yeah,” he said. “I think it’s OK.”

“At least we have a weapon now,” Riley added. “That should count for something.”

As they walked past the dead body of the demon, Xander glanced down at its inert form. “I wonder what it wanted,” he mused. “What its purpose was.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Spike said dryly. “It’s dead.” He didn’t want to be bothered with issues that were already gone. Right now, he just wanted to find Buffy. Every step was just another reminder that this wasn’t their home, that their real home was an entire dimension away. He only hoped they found her in time to make sure she could get back to it in one piece...
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike, Xander, and Riley have arrived in the Otherworld to close the entrance and to help Buffy with Duncan…

“Do you think some of the effects might last after we get out of here? I bet Anya would love that. And man, what I wouldn’t give to have some of those guys from high school see me now. See how they like getting a wedgie from God Xander himself, make ‘em pay for being such jerks to me. Oh! And I could help Buffy with patrol! Be her number one back-up man. SuperXan to the rescue! Faster than a speeding stake. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall demons in a single bound.” His laughter filtered through the night air. “Yep, not too shabby for being an empty vessel.” Slipping into a bad Scottish accent, he brandished his sword. “I am Xander McLeod, of the Clan McLeod…”

Gritting his teeth, Spike stuffed his hands deep into his pockets, quickening his step to lengthen the gap between him and the young man prattling along behind him. “Can’t you do something to shut him up?” he demanded from Riley as he came up to his side.

Riley glanced down at the vampire before reverting his gaze to the trail ahead of them. “You’re his new best friend,” he said tightly. “You shut him up.”

“My way of shutting him up involves him losin’ some teeth and me with a blindin’ headache,” Spike grumbled.

“Doesn’t sound so bad to me.”

They lapsed back into the uncomfortable silence that had wrapped around them since venturing into the Otherworld, the only sound in the clear air the joyful chattering of the young man in the rear of the pack. He hadn’t stopped since his unexpected discovery of his newfound status, and the glee in his words was wearing thin on his partners. When the splash came from the stream at their side, Spike almost sighed in relief, automatically turning to face the water, stepping back as Xander pushed his way to the front.

“Are we some kind of mystical demon-nip or something?” the vampire complained. “This makes the fifth soddin’ nasty to jump us in the last half hour. ‘Course, if these buggers could be killed by talkin’ it to death, we’d be all set.” He stared pointedly at Xander brushing past, oblivious to their irritation.

“The guardian warned us that there would be obstacles on the way to the trial,” Riley said, backing away as he cradled the urn in his arm.

“Obstacles I can deal with,” Spike muttered. “Annoying demons who just slow us down are another thing entirely.”

When the second kelpie-like creature had attacked them, Xander had rushed forward before the other two could stop him, swinging his weapon in a clean arc that had severed the demon’s head from his body, turning to face them with a huge grin across his face. “Didja see that?” he’d
announced, picking up the new sword the demon had dropped and handing it to the vampire. “I’d say this empty vessel was pretty darn full.”

“Certainly full of something,” Spike had muttered.

Since then, they had just stepped back when the attacks came, allowing the brunette to have his go at the third while they watched in silence, almost interfering with the fourth when it decided to make Xander’s hand its new chewtoy. He’d emerged from that fight with his arm drenched in demon slobber, but still as animated as when he’d started. Not even nearly becoming a giant loogy could drag him down.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Riley said as they watched Xander raise his sword. “Maybe it’ll cut off his head. Without a mouth, he can’t talk.”

Spike’s lips quirked in an unbidden smile, and was about to come back with his own rejoinder when he saw the demon pull back its weapon to swing, its path clearly lined up with Xander’s neck. Maybe it was a learning curve or something, but this one wasn’t offering up any warning before going in for the kill, and the over-confident young man was oblivious to the danger that stood before him.

Before he could even think, Spike had leapt forward, tackling Harris and sending them both flying away from the creature, its sword cleaving the air just above their heads in an audible whistle. They landed in a tangle, Xander’s cry of pain muffled by the vampire’s forearm across his throat, and it took only a moment for Spike to return to his feet, whirling to face off with the new enemy before lunging again and sending both of them into the stream.

In a flash, Riley was at Xander’s side, helping him back up, frowning as they both turned to watch a livid vampire use the demon’s blade to skewer him in a vicious slice. When the dead body fell with a splash, coloring the water in crimson, Spike turned an angry visage to the pair on the bank.

“What the hell are you playin’ at?” he demanded as he waded his way back to the shore. “Do you have any idea how close you came to bein’ separated from your second favorite body part there?”

“Your chip didn’t fire.” Riley’s voice was low, edged in steel with just a hint of fear creeping around the corners, and slowly he placed himself between Xander and the vampire, using his larger frame to shield the brunette from Spike’s advancing step.

“What’s that?” His dark brows knitted together as his eyes darted to Xander, watching as the young man rubbed at his neck. “I didn’t hurt you with that, did I?”

“Well, yeah, you kind of did.”

“But…” His voice trailed off, the realization that Soldier Boy was right hitting his gut like a sledge. The chip hadn’t gone off, and in the rush to make sure Xander came through this whole thing in one piece, he hadn’t given it another thought. “Must be the spell rubbish in us,” Spike mused out loud. “Messin’ with my head. You’re not wholly human anymore so I can wollop you as much as I want without turning into the king of pain here. Not that I’m goin’ to,” he hastened to add when he saw Xander’s eyes widen. “But that’s got to be the explanation for it all.”

“Does that mean you can hit Riley, too?” The question came out of Xander’s mouth before he could stop it, and felt instant regret as he saw the wicked gleam appear in Spike’s eyes, his blue gaze sweeping over the tall form that stood between them with new interest. It was obvious he was contemplating the possibility, and Xander found himself holding his breath, momentarily forgetting about the newfound alliance the vampire had made with the gang, only to exhale loudly
when Spike shook his head.

“Made a promise to Buffy,” he said, turning away to pull his shirt over his head. “Not goin’ to go breakin’ it now just ‘cause the opportunity’s there.” The muscles in his back flexed as he wrung the water out from his tee. “Besides,” he went on, “can’t very well close the entrance if there’s only two of us, now can we?”

“Speaking of closing the entrance,” Xander said, eager to change the subject. “Any idea on how much longer we’re goin’ to have to wait until we find our---.”

“Spike! Look out!”

He reacted to the warning instinctively, dropping to the ground only to feel the presence of a sixth demon soar above his body. Jerking his head around, the vampire rolled out of the way as he saw Riley shove the urn into Xander’s hand, grabbing the sword away at the same time, and rushed forward to plant his boot in the small of the creature’s back, sending it sprawling just as it was starting to rise from its leap. The fight took only seconds; a clean sweep of the blade sliced through the attacker’s midsection, neatly dissecting him into two pieces, and Spike frowned as he slowly rose to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said hesitantly, wiping the dirt from his hands onto his jeans. His eyes narrowed as Riley turned away, the question of why exactly his rival had been so quick to defend him lingering in the blue depths.

“Made a promise to Buffy,” Riley said quietly.

Xander’s gaze leapt between the two men, and made up his mind almost immediately. “I’m going to scout on ahead,” he said. “See what I can come across. Buffy’s just following the stream, right?”

Riley nodded. “Just keep your eyes open,” he warned. “The attacks are coming faster now. You have to be on your toes.”

“Yeah, or you’re goin’ to lose ‘em,” Spike added. “And I’m not carryin’ your ass if that happens. You don’t have a long, pointy stick this time to make me your beck and call vamp.” He knew what Harris was doing and in a way, was almost grateful. Not that he really relished having Finn all to himself, but too much needed to be said between them and with the chip working in the vampire’s favor at the moment, now was the time to say it.

“Thanks again,” he repeated once Xander had ambled off. “Could’ve been a nasty one back there.” The gratitude was more for appearances’ sake; Spike knew that reiterating it—even if he’d had enough trouble with it the first time—would make this whole conversation go down a little easier. For both of them.

“You said it yourself. It’s going to take all three of us to finish this spell,” Riley said, keeping his eyes straight ahead as he felt the vampire fall into step beside him. “And it’s not like you didn’t just do the same thing for Xander.”

“Somehow, I don’t think him pullin’ a Marie Antoinette was s’posed to be part of the whole god thing. Not that havin’ him quiet for a change wasn’t appealing, but still---.”

“I’m never going to like you, Spike.” His voice was cold, his words terse, prompting the same sort of response from the vampire at his side.

“Feeling’s mutual, Soldier Boy.”
“Tell me this…thing between you and Buffy didn’t start back in Sunnydale. Give me that, at least.”

“It didn’t. Well…not for her, anyway.”

“She deserves so much better than you. Hell, she deserves better than me, but I guess I thought…” Riley’s voice was quiet, his self-control only registering by the rigid tension in his shoulders. “You think you love her, don’t you?”

“No.” The single word was brusque, and ice-cold, and Spike turned blazing eyes to glare at the man next to him. “I know I love her. And the sooner you get that through that thick skull of yours, the easier all this will be.”

“It’ll never be easy.” He swallowed, the sudden lump in his throat burning like bile. “I can’t believe I’m even having this conversation with you. I must be channeling my inner masochist or something.”

“Well, if you need help in takin’ some pain,” Spike drawled, “we don’t seem to have my pesky little chip problem holding us back. Nothin’ sayin’ we couldn’t have us a little scrap here and now.” He bridled under Riley’s accusatory stare. “What? It was a joke!” His gaze returned to the night ahead, before he muttered, “Mostly.”

“I just don’t understand how she could let you touch her,” Riley continued. Now that he’d started, he didn’t seem capable of holding back the frustration that had been mounting since his arrival in Scotland. “This vampire fascination she has is just…wrong. And twisted. How she could do this to me—.”

Spike’s hand around the other man’s upper arm jerked him to a halt. “You can say whatever you want about me,” he warned, his voice low so that Xander ahead couldn’t hear. “Not like I give a toss what you think. But don’t for a second think that any of this has been easy for Buffy. It’s been eatin’ her up, wondering how she was goin’ to tell you. And for you to try and turn this around on her, after everything, just goes to show you’re an even more self-absorbed prat than I gave you credit for.” The glint in his eye was dangerous. “Get over yourself, Finn. Life’ll be a lot simpler for everyone when you do.”

They stood in silence for a moment before Riley carefully extracted his arm from Spike’s grasp. “Not that it matters,” the young man said. “But I always knew she wasn’t completely happy. With me. I just thought…if I could change just enough, I could be what she wanted. What she needed.” Riley shook his head. “Not that I expect you to understand. You have no idea what it’s like knowing you’re not good enough for the woman you love, knowing you’re just…second-best.”

Memories of Dru fawning over Angelus while Spike had been in the wheelchair came flooding into his head, followed quickly by the fleeting images of Cecily as she just stared disdainfully at him during his confession, and it took all his willpower to shove them aside. Finn wasn’t looking for commiseration and any attempts on the vampire’s part to tell him how mistaken he was would only be met with disbelief. But Soldier Boy was wrong. He knew exactly what he was feeling.

“I’ll never hurt Buffy,” Spike said quietly, turning away to begin following after Xander again. “You’re goin’ to have to believe me on that one.”

“You better not,” Riley replied. His tone was grim as he fell into step beside the vampire. “Because I will kill you if I find out you have.”

“If I do,” and this time Spike looked up at him, waiting for him to return his gaze before continuing. “You have my permission to do it.”
She’d been dreaming of Spike, hazy clouds of cool fingers dancing over her skin, blue eyes that seemed to appear from nowhere, that deep chuckle of his that seemed to resonate from somewhere deep within his chest. No guilt, no pain. Just carefree playing that was oblivious to the dangers that surrounded them.

That had to be the reason she was so slow to wake, even when her Slayer senses seemed to have been kicked into overdrive.

As her eyes flickered open, trying to adjust to the darkness that surrounded her, it took Buffy a moment to remember exactly where she was. Only when she moved, jarring the bag she was curled around so that the bells inside jingled faintly against the fabric, did everything come back, and she immediately sat up, hair swinging over her shoulders as she scanned the cave. It was dark. Too dark. Even when she’d settled herself in for her short nap, she’d been able to see the light from outside trickling in through its mouth. Now…there was nothing.

Silently, she stood, tensing her body in preparation for a fight. The tingles running over her skin told her she wasn’t alone, but no matter which direction she turned, there was no lessening of the sensations, no way for her to tell where exactly it was standing. Or lying. Or squatting. Hell, the stupid thing could be jumping up and down on a pogo stick and she wouldn’t have a clue; that’s how dark it was inside the bowels of the cave.

“You might as well give it up now,” she called out, her voice echoing against the walls. “I know you’re here.” The chuckle that answered her came from behind Buffy, causing her to whirl to face it, then freezing as its familiarity glided over her arms like a lover’s caress.

Duncan.

“One thing I do like about you, Buffy,” he said, and this time there was no mistaking where he was, “your confidence. Now, is that because you’re American, or is it a Slayer thing? Because if all the young American girls are like you, I do believe I’m going to have to make that the first stop on my trip around the world. Maybe…Sunnydale? Isn’t that where you’re from? I’m sure I’ll feel right at home on the Hellmouth.”

“You are home, Duncan,” she replied, and edged herself forward, making sure to place herself between him and the harness. “And you’re not going anywhere near Sunnydale. Not while I’ve got a say in the matter.”

“Remind me to tell Sunnydale to have you removed from their welcoming committee,” he chortled.

She heard the click of the crossbow’s trigger before the arrow ever left its sheath, and instinctively threw herself sideways, tucking to roll herself to safety, only to be met with the very real solidity of the cave’s wall. It dazed her momentarily, making her shake her head as if to clear it, but just as quickly, Buffy was back up, feet parted in a fighting stance, knowing now the parameters of her space so that if another missile came flying at her, she’d be able to avoid it without turning herself into wall putty at the same time. Not that she was going to let him have another chance at her. She just had to get her hands on him first.

Somewhere at the rear of the cave, the arrow hit the wall, sending a cascade of loose dirt in a rainfall to the floor. “I don’t know why you have to make this so difficult,” Duncan said. “It’s just a silly little harness. Not even of your world.”

“Exactly. Not of my world. Which is why it needs to be brought back.”
She threw herself to the floor as she heard another arrow whistle through the air, but its course was so far from her position that Buffy laughed, ignoring the dirt that fell into her hair when it hit the ceiling above. “You really need to brush up on your---,” she started.

She never got to finish the sentence. Even as she was laughing, he’d reloaded the crossbow, firing again so quickly under her words that she didn’t hear it coming. The sharp pain as it embedded itself in her calf strangled the words in Buffy’s throat, eliciting instead a sharp cry of pain, and she rolled sideways, feeling the shaft of the arrow snap off, the blood already dripping down the inside of her trousers in sticky rivulets into her shoe.

“I take it from that delightful little shriek of yours that I actually managed to hit you this time,” Duncan commented. He was closer now, and Buffy inched herself against the wall, pressing herself against it as she reached down and yanked the arrow from her flesh, grimacing in silence at the fiery knives of pain shooting up her leg as she did so. Getting poked like a stuck pig was not part of the plan, she thought irritably. Of course, don’t really have a plan here, more flying by the seat of my pants, but still, even if I did, this would most definitely not be part of it.

Another arrow whistling overhead sent even more soil to the ground, and Buffy held her breath so as not to cough in the dust that suddenly seemed to proliferate the air. Not going to let him know where I am this time. Not going to give him that advantage again.

“Have you managed to rid yourself of the harness already then?” he asked, his voice even nearer. “You’re moving far too quickly to be bearing its burden.”

She bit back the quip that came automatically to her lips. Self-restraint, thy name is Buffy, she thought.

Another arrow. More dirt. It was getting increasingly difficult to breathe, and this time, a good portion of what had been dislodged landed directly on her head, sending her scooting off to the side during the noise it created so that he wouldn’t be able to accurately determine her position. Now that he’d ventured deeper into the cave, the entrance was unblocked, allowing some of the ambient light to return to the darkness. Not only could she focus on his stealthy footsteps, but now she could see the faint outlines of his body against the wall, and Buffy prepared to launch herself for his legs.

But if she could see him, he could see her, and before she could react, Duncan had whirled, aiming the crossbow directly at her, sending his last missile streaking through the dust.

The force of it drove her back as it drilled itself through her shoulder and buried itself into the wall behind her, pinning Buffy like some hapless butterfly waiting for the second to secure its remaining wing. Her hand came up to the injury as she cried out, tears of pain springing to her eyes, blinking them rapidly away as she saw Duncan smile at his success. Shouldn’t have fallen asleep, she thought dizzily, feeling the world beginning to spin slightly around her as the blood spilled from her body. Should’ve just kept on going. Stupid Buffy.

Lowering the weapon, Duncan sniffed appreciatively at the air, his lips curling into a smile as he began advancing toward her. “Wonder how your vampire lover would react if he could see you now,” he commented. “All that blood. Do you think he’d be able to restrain himself from sucking you dry?”

Buffy lifted her eyes, refusing to allow him to see just how helpless she really was. She was firmly stuck; any more wriggling on her part would make the blood flow even faster, and she was losing too much as it was. “If Spike was here,” she said, “you wouldn’t be standing right now. Especially since you can’t rely on your little crutch there.” She nodded toward the crossbow that dangled from
his hand.

Glancing at the empty quiver, Duncan shrugged. “I’ve bagged my limit, it appears,” he said, and tossed it aside.

Inwardly, she cringed when she heard the clarion call of the harness ring through the cave as the weapon landed with a soft thud against the edge of the bag. She watched as the kelpie’s face creased into a smile, his dark eyes gleaming even in the dim light, swiveling his head to pounce on his new discovery.

“Well, well, so maybe you weren’t able to get rid of it yet after all.” He was at its side in a moment, heedless to its ringing as he scooped it into his arms and turned to look back at her with a hungry grin. “Thank you ever so much for keeping an eye on it for me.”

Her fingers tightened around the arrow, the sudden realization that Duncan was going to kill her sharpening her senses just enough to drive away the growing sleepiness in her limbs. He was walking toward her now, his smile fading with each step, and she knew that her time was short. She had to do this fast, or she wouldn’t be able to do it at all.

“Such a shame it had to come to this,” Duncan murmured, stopping before her to gaze down at the gold of her hair as it caught what faint light filtered into the dim cave. The sudden possibility of a use for the harness darted through his head, the possibility intriguing, and he couldn’t help the return of his grin. Wouldn’t Spike just hate that, he thought. Oh, but wouldn’t it be fun to see the vampire’s face, right before Duncan told Buffy to kill him…

Lifting the flap of the bag, the kelpie extracted the string of bells, squatting as he did so. “I’d wager you’d look lovely wearing this,” he said softly, and leaned forward, ready to slip the harness over the Slayer’s head.

It burned as she wrenched it from her flesh, but Buffy was unaware of the pain as she focused her strength on burying the arrow into the arm of the demon before her. He screamed in agonizing surprise, eyes widening, and almost dropped the harness as he stumbled back. Now free, she gathered what remaining strength she had to position the heel of her boot against his stomach, sending him flying against the opposite wall before slumping into the pool of her blood that had gathered at her back.

He knew he should kill her. Seeing her chest heaving from the exertion of kicking him, Duncan suspected the Slayer had expended what strength she had to fight off his attack. But what if he was wrong? He had the harness now. He should just run. The first arrow had landed in her leg; there was no way she would be able to keep up with him on foot. And if he tried to get close to her again, he wasn’t completely certain he wouldn’t fall prey to yet another thrust from her powerful legs.

Buffy watched as he rose to his feet, weaving slightly as he clutched the harness to his chest. With a grimace, Duncan pulled the arrow from his arm, tossing it to the ground, and gave her a little salute before turning away. “Have fun dying,” he joked as he stepped toward the mouth of the cave. “So sorry to miss it.”

The sight of his back disappearing through the mouth of the cave was the last thing she saw before everything went black.

* * *

They had ignored him for most of the last hour, buried in their stacks of books, each and every one
of them searching for the answer that would stop Spike from becoming a ball of fire upon the spell’s completion. From his vantage point in the stream, though, Frank could hear every word of their conversation, heard the doubts they shared about the vampire’s odds of survival, and felt more than one twinge of remorse for forcing their hand. It was for the sake of both our worlds, he reminded himself. The thief would only use the harness for evil. Buffy would not want that.

They were speaking of her now, and the guardian pricked his ears as he strained to pick up the thread.

“…get through,” the redheaded witch was saying.

“She’ll just come through with Spike or Xander, won’t she?” That was the other witch, the soft-spoken one.

“Just because they’ve got a pass, doesn’t mean Buffy will,” the other countered. “What if it won’t let her back?”

They continued their debate, but the meaning of it had already settled in Frank’s head. There was a chance that the completion of their closing spell would strand the Slayer on the other side, caught in his world when all she had ever wanted to do was help him. Well, maybe not all. She had her own motives as well. But her presence there was his responsibility. And it was up to him to ensure that she was paid appropriately.

With a silent splash, the guardian slid his body under the surface of the water, his limbs slicing carefully through the stream as he began swimming toward his home. He had a duty, an honor to uphold. He would not fail her.
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike, Riley, and Xander have yet to find either Buffy or the trial to close the entrance, while Buffy has had an encounter with Duncan, leaving her passed out in the cave and him in possession of the harness…

He saw them almost as soon as he emerged from the cave. Well, he saw the young man. The others were trailing far enough behind that it took Duncan a good minute to realize that Xander was not alone.

Damn, he thought, as he froze in his step, melting against the darkness of the cave as he surveyed the landscape. Although he had briefly dwelled on the possibility of someone coming in after the Slayer, he had hoped that it wouldn’t happen until after he’d already left. And the fact that there was three of them he had to contend with did little to ease the sudden rush of nerves that gripped the kelpie’s flesh. He didn’t like being cornered; he much preferred being the one doing the cornering, but then again, that was probably a generalization that could be said about just about anybody. Damn.

The blood was dripping down his arm, and the bruise he knew he was sporting on his abdomen from Buffy’s well-placed kick ached with a surety of internal damage. He still hadn’t recovered fully from her assault the previous day; these added injuries were only making things worse. With the added worry of her rescuers---and he had to admit to being mildly amused at seeing both the vampire and the ex-boyfriend in the entourage---the doubt that he was going to get out of here both alive and with the harness began to tickle at the base of his brain.

The harness…

His eyes flickered from Xander to the two other men walking so far behind, and then back to the brunette again. He was armed, but the sword was of little consequence if he could just get close enough.

A sly smile creased the kelpie’s face. Yes, escaping might yet be possible…

* * *

He wasn’t sure if the fact that he couldn’t hear them speaking anymore was a good thing or not. On the one hand, it could mean that Spike and Riley had hashed out their differences about the Buffy situation and everything was copasetic now. Maybe not best buds, but hopefully not at each other’s throats. On the other hand, it could also mean that they’d given up on words and were right now duking it out. Knowing the pair of them the way he did, Xander knew that was a more than real option. He just couldn’t bring himself to turn around and look to make sure.

And then again, he could’ve just walked far enough ahead that their voices weren’t audible any longer. That was always a possibility, too.

“Xander!”
Although it was hardly surprising, her voice wasn’t exactly what he’d been expecting, and the young man halted in his footsteps, swiveling his head toward the sound, his eyes widening as he saw a bloody Buffy stumble toward him. The harness was clutched to her chest, but the only thing he could see was the very real wound in her bicep, jagged pieces of her flesh oozing and spreading crimson as she collapsed against his chest.

“Buff! What happened?” he asked in a rush, feeling the tremor in her muscles as she fought to stay vertical. Dropping the sword to the ground, he began pulling off the long-sleeved shirt that covered his tee, only to be stopped by her quivering hand.

“Duncan…” she breathed. “He…back there…I hurt him, but…” She stopped, gulping at the air, her eyelids fluttering closed, and Xander’s hands gripped her shoulders tightly as she seemed to weave before him.

“You’re hurt,” he said unnecessarily. “We’ve got to get you back. Spike and Riley are here. We’ll--.” He cut himself off as her strength seemed to fail her, falling against him yet again, the harness a cold weight between them.

“Can’t…hold this…” she murmured, and turned beseeching eyes up to her friend. Slowly, her arms lifted, raising the bells. “Could you…please…?”

* * *

Their arguing had stopped just minutes earlier, and now they walked in silence, both faces grim, both bodies tense, two sets of eyes determined to stay on the path before them and not stray to the man at the side. Xander had long disappeared from view, and Spike was beginning to think now was just about the time to catch up to the boy when they rounded the crest of a hill and spied him in the distance.

Riley immediately stopped, eyes narrowing as he focused on the horizon. “What’s he doing?” he asked, all memory of his dissension with the vampire gone in the face of his confusion. “That looks like Buffy he’s talking to, but…” He shook his head, and broke his gaze away, darting to the side and back in front again. Buffy’s trail had been burning brighter as they’d progressed, but somewhere between them and Xander, it veered off to their left, disappearing into a flowered knoll, not to reappear. Yet, the blonde form who now stood in the distance was undoubtedly her, and he didn’t understand how that could be.

A few steps closer, and Spike had halted, the excitement about seeing the Slayer that had permeated his undead flesh doused by a clawing fear in the pit of his stomach. “That’s not Buffy,” he said through clenched teeth.

It looked like Buffy; there was no mistaking that. But where the Slayer breathed of fire, thrummed against his flesh in shades of crimson and gold, this was a pale imitation, a copy bereft of the energy that was so her. And if it wasn’t her, there left only one other explanation, one he didn’t want to waste time dwelling on because that would mean…

“Hey!” Riley frowned as Spike suddenly bolted toward the pair across the glen, a flurry of black and white against the night sky. How’d he know that? he wondered as his own feet took flight, following after. Too far away for vampire senses to kick in, and he can’t see her trail like I can. But the questions were sliced through by the sudden sight of gold twinkling around Xander’s neck, a faint chime of clarion calls ringing through the air.

* * *
He was still twenty feet away when he skidded to a halt, muscles tense in anticipation of what was to come. It wasn’t the sight of the harness that now hung around Xander’s neck; it was the smug smile of satisfaction that defiled the beautiful face of his Slayer behind him. Not his Slayer, Spike reminded himself. That fucking Duncan.

“Are you totally thick?” he demanded of the young man, choosing to ignore the blonde for the moment. “Do you not remember a bloody thing Frankie boy told us about that?” He gesticulated wildly at the harness.


He watched as Duncan in Buffy’s body snaked his hand up Xander’s arm and noted with pleasure the fresh wound that adorned its arm. “Don’t listen to him,” the kelpie was saying, its cajoling voice so carefully mimicking the Slayer’s. “I told you. He’s been against us from the start. We have to kill him.”

“And why would Buffy put that thing around your neck in the first place?” Spike argued. “It’s just tryin’ to use you to get past us, mate.”

“She’s hurt!”

“No, he’s hurt. And with any luck, the Slayer’s the one who did it to him.” He let his eyes slide to the blonde, nostrils flaring in barely controlled anger. “You better hope she’s still alive,” he threatened. “Or you’re goin’ to be havin’ bodily fluids comin’ out of more holes than you can count.”

Duncan’s grip tightened. “He’s lying,” he murmured into the brunette’s ear. “Just like he always does. I’m your friend, Xander. He’s a vampire. We kill vampires, remember? You have to help me kill him.”

“She’s right.” Slowly, Xander raised the sword, easing himself away from the blonde to take a step toward Spike. “You’re evil. You always have been, you always will be.”

“Evil, huh?” The more the kelpie spoke, the more automated Xander’s responses seemed to be. It was as if everything that had happened since they came to Scotland had been swept aside, leaving the angry young man who hated vampires in its wake, responding with answers that could’ve sprung from any moment prior to their budding friendship. For a second, Spike felt a flash of regret, missing the camaraderie that had developed between the two. It was quickly replaced, however, with a determined fury not to let Duncan win. Keep the boy talkin’, he thought. Keep him distracted ‘til I’ve got a clean shot at killin’ the wanker myself.

“Was it evil who just saved your sorry hide back there?” the vamp shot out. “You’d be the headless horseman right now if it wasn’t for me. And was it evil who let you see his bloody awful poetry?” He felt Riley come to a halt behind him, but didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. All the frustration---at himself, at the changes in his relationships with the Scoobies---came pouring out in his words, sparking them against the night.

“I told you how much I loved Buffy and how it was tearin’ me up that I couldn’t show her properly. You think I would’ve spilled my guts like that if I didn’t think of you as my friend? You think I would’ve embarrassed myself by showin’ you the tripe I tried passing off as poetry if I didn’t in some small way value your opinion?” Azure blazed against his pale skin, skin taut as even the muscles in his face tensed.
“You were using me to get to Buffy,” Xander said calmly, too calmly. He took another step closer. “It didn’t mean anything. It wouldn’t surprise me if you go boasting to all your demon buddies back in Sunnydale how you pulled one over on the silly Slayer.”

“Boasting?” Even Spike couldn’t keep the astonishment from his voice and he began prowling back and forth in front of the pair by the stream, the energy radiating off him in waves. “You think I’m proud of what’s happened? Hello! Scourge of Europe makin’ nice-nice with the local do-gooders doesn’t really rate high on the demon scale of crimes against humanity, so I think boasting’s about the last thing I’m goin’ to be doin’ back in Sunny D.” He took a deep, unnecessary breath, his hands clawing into fists at his side. “But…it’s done, it’s over with, and whether you like or not, you Stepford prat, I’m your friend---.”

“You don’t know what a friend is---.”

“---which means,” he went on as if he’d never been interrupted, “that not only do you get to benefit from my sharin’ secrets that would make that little bird of yours blush, but you also have to put up with me tellin’ you how completely and utterly daft you are when you let yourself get sucked in by the biggest wanker this side of the Hellmouth.” He let his gaze slide pointedly to the blonde. “Who, by the way, does the worst Slayer impersonation I’ve ever seen. Even Captain Cardboard here could do Buffy better.”

“Put down the weapon, Xander,” Riley said, keeping his voice even. “You have to believe us when we tell you that isn’t Buffy. It’s manipulating you with that harness. Don’t you remember what the guardian said?”

“You’re just angry with me because I picked a vampire over you,” the faux Buffy said, settling her eyes on the tall young man. She turned to Xander. “I’ll prove it’s not the harness.” Thin fingers slid under the bells, removing it from his neck and cradling it in her arms. She wasn’t even pretending to be overly weakened anymore; although the injuries were still serious, there wasn’t any need for the theatrics since the new arrivals could see through her façade. Didn’t matter, though. Not when she had control over the best friend.

“That doesn’t make a bloody difference,” Spike said. “And you know it. Not that it won’t be my pleasure to kill you to break him from your thrall, but---.” A gentle breeze wafted across his skin, breaking his concentration from the scenario at hand as the aromas tickled his nose, jerking his head to the side to stare with narrowed eyes at a flower-covered rise on the horizon. The sudden salivation in his mouth was instinctual, but the realization of what it meant gripped his unbeating heart in dread, leaving him to feel the cold of his flesh in a more shattering certainty than anything he’d felt in the last century.

Blood.

Slayer blood.

*Her* blood.

And too much of it.

Riley noticed the difference in him immediately. “What is it?” he asked the vampire, not breaking his gaze from the pair in front of them.

“Not a what…a who…” he growled. “Buffy…” With a harsh thrust, Spike shoved the sword he’d been carrying at the ex-soldier. “Stay here,” he ordered as he began to run. “Don’t let the bastard get away.”
When Xander stepped forward to follow after the blond vamp, Riley found himself automatically lifting his weapon and barring the way, listening to the retreating footsteps behind him. “You’re not killing him,” he warned. “Buffy wouldn’t want that.”

“Oh, but I do,” crooned the faux Buffy. “Go get him, Xander.”

A quick slice through the air of his weapon punctuated Riley’s terse words as he forced the brunette back with a cautionary parry. God, he thought. This is the last thing I ever thought I’d be saying, but he was right about this not being Buffy, so… “Can’t let you do that, Xan,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re just going to have to go through me first.”

* * *

He would’ve been the first to admit that the scent was the ultimate aphrodisiac, an elixir of life that sharpened the edges of everything else as it flooded through the system, and maybe, if it had been five years earlier and this was Spike’s first introduction to this particular Slayer, he would have glорied in the anticipation of feeling it glide past his lips, course down his throat, soothe the icy rage inside with its heat.

Now, though, it was different. It was Buffy. And that was her life honing the air, creating a stench so thick of copper and fire that Spike had to stop and collect his thoughts as he stepped into the cave.

It was dark, but not overwhelmingly so, the light from the sky outside affording just enough illumination for him to see fairly clearly. He didn’t need eyes to find her, though. Not when her scent was making him dizzy. Not when the pulse of her heartbeat seemed to skip every couple of seconds, like it was having trouble keeping up with the rest of her body.

Not when she needed him.

She had slumped sideways against the wall, her injured shoulder exposed to the open air, and Spike saw the blood staining her shirt as he rushed to kneel at her side. It still flowed, although not as freely, and without thinking, he pulled his shirt over his head, tearing the still-damp cotton into pieces in order to staunch the blood’s course. It wasn’t the best solution---he wasn’t sure how well wet fabric could catch the viscous fluid---but it was the only one he could think of at the moment, his fear about her condition tremoring his hands as he pressed it into the wound.

“Buffy,” he murmured, cradling her shoulders into his side as his other arm slipped behind her back. “C’mon, pet, time to wake up now. We got us a demon to go kill.”

No response. Just her shallow breath fanning across his palm as Spike pushed back the hair that clung to her cheek. His thumb feathered across her chin, blue eyes quickly scanning her face for more trauma before sliding down her body, over her stomach, finally stopping at the dark stain that spread along her calf. There it was. He knew there’d been too much blood for just the single wound.

“Buffy.” A little louder this time, a little more insistent. He wanted to give her a little slap to wake her up, to make her snap out of it, but not knowing if it was going to hurt her held him back, prompting him instead to roll her against his chest, relieving the pressure on her shoulder to slide his arm under her knees. Taking care not to exacerbate the bleeding, Spike rose, carrying her toward the mouth of the cave. Lying in your own blood’s not good for anybody, he thought grimly. Just needs a bit of fresh air to bring her around.

A tiny groan escaped the Slayer’s throat as he laid her on the ground, her head turning to the side as
her body settled. In the moonlight, the pallor of her skin was more pronounced, the shadows under her eyes darker, and Spike returned to his determined ministration of her wounds, desperate to distract himself from the growing fear that gnawed inside. Calm down, he reminded himself. No need to panic. Just concentrate. Pulse. Check her pulse again.

It was steadier than it had been in the cave, stronger than he’d thought, and though he couldn’t smell the beginnings of death anywhere on her, it didn’t stop the possibility from being there. No need to panic, he repeated. Just…play it cool. Wake her up. Once she’s up, everything will be fine.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the metallic clang of swords echoing in the night, the underlying baritones of the two men arguing a quiet blanket beneath it, but was oblivious to its implications. Frankly, he was oblivious to anything but the prone form of the blonde before him, and decided to hell with a headache, reaching up to begin lightly patting her cheek.

“Don’t need any more beauty sleep, luv,” he said. “You’re beautiful enough as it is, so let’s just say sayonara to Mr. Sandman and come back to the real world, all right?” His gaze flickered to the outcropping of flowers around them before returning to her face. “Or the Otherworld, as the case may be.”

Still nothing. Only the pale visage of the woman he loved lost in unconsciousness. And the panic was starting to return, his emotions already frayed from the confrontations with both Riley and Xander. Too much, too soon. Must stay in control.

“Buffy…please…” His voice was taking on a pleading quality, one that would’ve made him cringe under any other circumstances, but Spike’s mounting anxiety was gaining the better of him, leaning him toward her, searching for a sign that she would wake, anything to ease the sense of loss already filling him. “Luv, don’t do this to me. Don’t even think about packin’ it in. Not to that wanker. Not---.”

She moaned again then, this time her lids fluttering open to stare blankly at the tall grass at her side. “Spike?” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

His hand was instantly on her face, turning her head to look up at him. “Right here,” he soothed, fighting back the urge to crush her to his chest in a tight hug. Instead, he leaned forward, raining kisses over her brow before his lips swept down the bridge of her nose to light at her mouth, relief pouring into the gentle caress as he maintained the contact, needing to feel her beneath him, needing her to know just how much he really loved her. And how grateful he was she was still alive.

When he finally pulled away, he watched as her gaze danced over his bare torso, the tiniest of lines appearing between her brows.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she said, her voice faint but undeniably stronger than he’d expected, “but where’s your shirt?”

“Stoppin’ the blood from pouring out of your body.”

She smiled, not wide, but definitely there. “Is it just Scotland or do you always go through this many shirts?” she teased. “Because if it’s you, picking out Christmas and birthday gifts is going to be cake.”

He couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled from his lips, a heady mixture of relief and amusement as the fear dissipated from his muscles. A joking Slayer meant an OK Slayer, and any doubts that Spike had about her ability to recover from her injuries vanished with his fading chuckles.
Grimacing, Buffy struggled to lift herself up onto her elbows, wincing from the exertion. Like a shot, his hands were on her shoulders, guiding her back down to the earth, replacing the cotton that had slipped from her wound.

“Gotta take it easy for a bit,” Spike scolded, but the gentle caress of the back of his hand against her cheek belied the gruffness of his words. He tried for making the mood lighter. “Let your body catch up and do some of that fancy super-Slayer healin’ you’re always bragging about,” he added with a half-smile.

“I don’t brag,” she pouted.

“And Harris doesn’t stuff his face twenty-four hours a day. Now shut up and let your blood cells do their clotting.”

Though his eyes were dark, there was no mistaking the love in them as he gazed down at her. Several minutes passed in silence as they just looked at each other, each passing second strengthening her heartbeat, evening her breathing. His voice was softer when he finally spoke up again. “Don’t scare me like that again, all right? Don’t think for a second I’m givin’ you up that easy, not after what I’ve had to put up with today.”

Something in his words made her stiffen, eyes flying wide as she pushed back against his hands. “Crap!” she cried out. “Duncan! He’s here. He’s---.”

“---over there with Finn and Harris,” Spike finished. “Yeah, we know.”

“And you haven’t killed him yet?” The incredulity in her voice rang against his ears and Spike stiffened at the hidden accusation.

“We just got here!” he defended. “And for your information, there’s been a slight...hitch.” He didn’t know how much she knew about the harness, but somehow he suspected that hearing one of her best friends was now playing Punch to the demon’s Judy would not fill her with feelings of joy. The longer he could stay away from that topic, the happier he was going to be.

“I don’t want to hear about hitches. I want to hear about dead kelpies who think shooting Slayers is the sport of champions.” With more strength than he realized she had, Buffy pushed against him, knocking him back onto his bottom before rolling herself into a sitting position, holding it for a moment as the world swam around her. OK, too fast, she thought. Maybe I’ll stand just a little bit slower.

“Why does she have to make everything so bloody difficult,” Spike muttered, but there was no malice in his tone as he jumped to his feet, hurrying to guide her the remaining distance up, steadying her with a strong arm as she straightened. Her heart was racing, evidence of her effort even if she refused to acknowledge it vocally, and the vampire shook his head. Stubborn little bint. But an alive, stubborn little bint, his inner voice reminded him, which at this point in time, is all that really matters.

“You’re in no shape to be fightin’ him,” Spike chastised as they began walking toward the fray.

“So you can have the pleasure for me,” she said. She would’ve loved to argue with him about this, but as she slowly limped across the grass, Buffy knew he was right. The pain from the wound in her calf shot up her leg with every step, while the ache in her shoulder throbbed with an insistent rhythm that most likely promised another scar on her Slayer body. The strength of Spike against her side, across her back, fortified her will, sending a wonderful comfort throughout her limbs that made bearing the pain all that much easier, and she couldn’t help the sigh that escaped her lips as
she leaned her head against him.

“Thank you,” she whispered, a delicate sound on the evening breeze, knowing that she wouldn’t have to elaborate, that he would know what the gratitude was for.

His lips brushed across the top of her head. “Any time, Slayer,” Spike murmured.

* * *

Riley was beginning to feel the burn of fighting with Xander, the brunette’s unflagging attacks obviously another side effect of the closing spell. “This is getting ridiculous,” he grunted, as he deflected a blow aimed for his head. If it wasn’t for the fact that the young man was now determined to kill the same vampire he’d just spent the last twelve hours defending, Riley wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to tell a difference in him. He seemed completely normal, just…more focused. Like he’d been given a mission. And run with it. Too well. “I’m your friend, Xander. You’ve got to listen to me.”

“As soon as you start making some sense, I’m all ears.” He danced back before lunging forward, this time directing his blow for the ex-soldier’s legs, only to be stopped by the forceful contact of Riley’s sword against his own. “Just call me Dumbo.”

“With emphasis on the dumb.”

“Why are you protecting him? You hate Spike as much as I do. C’mon, Riley. Be a pal and let me pass. It’ll put all of us out of his misery.” His brown eyes shone with sudden inspiration. “You could get Buffy back if he wasn’t around.”

For a moment, Riley faltered, the prospect of a return to their pre-Scotland status beckoning with an allure that made him forget momentarily where he was. Buffy back. It was all that he really wanted, wasn’t it? And yet a small voice piped up from the back of his head, refusing to be ignored this time. You want Buffy to be happy, it said. And like it or not, she’s made it clear that Spike is the one who does that. What would she think of you if you let Xander kill him? Do you really think that she’d come running back into your arms, crying her eyes out? No, she’d have you on the ground in a second, beating you senseless because you let it happen, holding you personally responsible for her misery. It would be as bad as if you staked Spike yourself. Damn. Well, so much for that…

He woke from his reverie just in time to dodge another blow, bouncing back on the balls of his feet as he stared at the other man. “Buffy wants Spike,” he said simply. “End of story.”

“You forgot ‘dead.’ Buffy wants Spike dead. She told us, remember?”

“No, the demon told you. And I thought Spike was your friend now. Why would you want to kill your friend?”

“It’s just another lie from the stable of lies he’s been telling all of us since he blew into Sunnydale. Just like he lied to Buffy about how he felt about her.”

He didn’t believe he said it, even as the words came tumbling out of his mouth. “Spike loves Buffy,” Riley replied.

Xander snorted. “Spike doesn’t know what love is.”

“Then why did he risk his skin by going through with this closing spell just to help Buffy?” he demanded. “Giles told me he doesn’t think they’ll figure out how to stop him from bursting into
flame once we get back. And Spike’s not stupid. He knew he had lousy odds doing this, but he did it anyway. For Buffy’s sake.” It was the argument that had been rolling around in Riley’s head ever since they’d sat down in the triangle of stones, the one thing he couldn’t explain away. The rest of it—the sex, the so-called connection between the pair—he could reason into one of his convenient little slots, tuck it away as explicable if not logical. But this…this broke through the boundaries, defied any rationalization he could come up with, leaving him with only the very real—and increasingly obvious—belief that the vampire truly did love the Slayer.

Not that that actually mattered. For Buffy’s sake, he knew he had to give Spike the benefit of the doubt. It was just a little easier if he could allow himself to think there might be some genuine feeling from the vamp. Not that any of this was easy. Not by a long shot.

The brunette had no response for him, and instead came at the ex-soldier again, renewing his attack with increased vigor. Neither was aware of the approaching duo until Buffy’s voice crackled through the air.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Immediately, Xander stopped, brows knitting together as he gazed at the wounded Slayer leaning against Spike. Whipping his head around, he scanned the area behind him, only to turn back in confusion. “How’d you get up there?” he asked. “And where’s the harness?”

The vampire’s gaze had followed Xander’s, and he stiffened as his lips pursed together. “Thought I told you not to let him get away,” he barked at Riley.

“I didn’t—.” His voice cut off as he saw the wide, empty space along the shore of the stream, realizing that sometime during his clash with Xander, the kelpie had managed to slip away. Guilty eyes turned back to meet two sets of furious ones. “Sorry,” he said. “Guess I’ve been a little busy keeping Braveheart here away from Spike.”

It was then that he saw the fresh blood staining her clothes, and instinctively took a step closer to her, hand in mid-reach before he checked his movement, the obvious curl of the young woman against the demon at her side reminding him yet again that she wasn’t his anymore. “Are you all right?” Riley asked instead.

She half-nodded, half-shrugged. “I’m going to live. That’s always a bonus,” she said with a small smile. “Now, will someone please tell me what’s going on here? I did not undergo kelpie acupuncture just to have Duncan get away with the harness again.”

“Step aside, Buffy.” Xander stepped forward, weapon poised, his brown eyes locked on Spike. “I’ll finish him off, just like you said.”

The vampire rolled his eyes. “Oh, bollocks,” he muttered. “I don’t have time for this.” Easing himself away from the Slayer, Spike moved toward the young man approaching him. “This is going to hurt you a helluva lot more than it’s going to hurt me, mate,” he directed toward the brunette, and with a flying kick, he had knocked the sword from Xander’s grasp, landing just to his side and swinging with a strong left hook before the other could turn around.

Buffy watched as an unconscious Xander crumpled to the ground before turning surprised eyes to the vampire. “You hit him,” she said, stunned. “And your chip didn’t go off.”

“It’s a long story, luv, and we’ve got a chef on the run here. Let’s say we fill you in while we go after him, OK?” He glanced at Riley. “Don’t s’pose you can do your little seeing eye trick and suss out where he went?” he asked. “Seein’ as how you’re the one who let him get away in the first
Biting back the retort that sprang to his lips, Riley swept his gaze over the land around them, before turning back to gaze at the water. “He went in the stream,” he said. “Probably on his way back to the castle.”

“And you can see that?” At her ex’s sheepish nod, Buffy turned her gaze to Spike. “This story is sounding like it’s going to be a doozy.”

“You haven’t heard the half of it, pet.” When he saw her sway slightly, Spike was at her side in a flash, steadying her with a strong arm around her shoulders.

“Does it explain why Xander wants to kill you?” she asked, leaning into him. Unthinking, her hand curled around his waist, her thumb absently stroking the skin it found there.

He nodded, then looked to Riley standing off to the side. “Think you can manage draggin’ his ass along with us?” he quizzed, jerking his head toward the brunette on the ground.

It took him a moment to respond, his eyes locked on the possessive bent of Buffy’s head against Spike’s bare chest. “Yeah,” Riley finally said, his throat all of a sudden too dry. “I got it.”
O, Lay Thy Life in Mine, Lass

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: A wounded Buffy has reunited with the trio and the four are now in pursuit of Duncan and the harness...

As soon as she jerked herself free from him, stopping to stand there with her hands on her hips, hazel eyes flaring even in the darkened night air, Spike knew he’d been right in saving that little tidbit for last.

“Are you completely crazy?” Buffy demanded, forgetting for the first time since venturing from the cave the pain from her injuries. “Why would you do such a reckless thing?”

“Didn’t have much of a choice,” the vampire retorted. “You were gone, Duncan was gone, Frankie was pretty much chopped liver. Our list of options was pretty much a list of one.”

She swiveled her head to stare at Riley, who had stopped in front of them to look back at the arguing pair, Xander’s still unconscious form flung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “And you let him?” she asked, and then held up her hand. “Wait. Never mind. Look who I’m asking here. The guy who hopped a midnight plane to nowhere.” She ignored the pressed set of his mouth, the flaring of his nostrils while he held back his rebuttal, and turned back to the vampire. “Knowing you took such a risk does not thrill me, Spike.”

“Not ten minutes ago, you were happy we were here, Slayer.”

“And ten minutes ago, I didn’t know you’d decided to go kamikaze on me. Not to mention dragging Xander along for the ride so that he could become Duncan’s little finger puppet.” As if in response to his name, the brunette moaned, eliciting quiet from the trio as they all swiveled their heads to look at him, waiting to see if he would awaken. When he didn’t, Buffy rushed forward as if nothing had happened. “Which part of this plan resembles sanity to you? Because I’m wandering blind on this one. You should’ve stayed in Dall Rath. Why you would---”

His lips choked off the words in her throat, bruising and searching as he pulled her against him, his hands gliding and caressing along her arms, and Buffy stiffened as she remembered Riley’s proximity. Not fair to him, she thought as she eased herself away, her cheeks aflame as she did her best to appear...
unaffected by the embrace. A sly glance at her ex out of the corner of her eye, however, told her that it was pointless; his discomfort in watching the tender scene screamed silently from every muscle in his body.

Riley cleared his throat, tearing his gaze away from the pair to look forward in the direction of the tunnels back to Dall Rath. “It’s not a foregone conclusion,” he offered, voice tight. “Giles and Willow are researching while we’re here—.”

“They’ve been researching this for days,” she interrupted. “And they still haven’t come up with anything. What difference is a couple hours going to make?”

“A couple hours can be a lifetime,” Spike said softly, catching her chin to turn her head back to him. His eyes were dark, shiny, the white glow from the closing spell delineating them in silver as he scanned the planes of her face, almost as if he was trying to etch them into his memory. The pad of his thumb brushed over her swollen bottom lip, coaxing it to relax from the firm set she had returned it to when she’d pulled away from their kiss. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be by wastin’ your energy on bein’ mad about something you can’t change.”

She held his gaze for a long moment before grimacing. “I hate it when you’re right,” she grumbled, and then sighed. “What if we didn’t do the trial?” The tiniest glimmer of hope crept into her voice as she looked down at the urn she now held. “The spell wouldn’t get finished and maybe then you wouldn’t go poof.”

His eyes narrowing, Spike tilted his head, mulling over the possibility that seemed so obvious and yet heretofore had not been considered. “Never thought of that,” he said slowly.

“Wait a minute.” Riley frowned, uncomfortably shifting his weight as the burden of the man on his shoulder ground into his torso. “You’re telling me you’d actually consider not closing the entrance after everything we’ve done here? What about the guardian? He’s counting on us.”

A snort of derision came from the vampire’s throat. “This the same guardian who charmed Buffy into coming through in the first place?” he countered. “We wouldn’t be in this mess if he’d just kept his hands to himself.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the Slayer intervened. “Our priority at this point is catching up to Duncan and killing him once and for all. You said that was the only way to break his hold over Xander?” She waited for the nod of assent from the two men. “And you haven’t even found the trial yet. Just those demon things coming from the water, right?”

“And we haven’t even been attacked by those since we realized Spike’s chip wasn’t working on us,” Riley clarified.

“I wonder why none of them bothered me,” Buffy mused, a small line appearing between her brows.

“Does it matter? Think you’d be grateful not to have to be fussed with them.” Letting his arm return to her waist, the vampire began guiding her back along the stream. “Let’s just get this show on the road. The sooner we get rid of that pillock, the happier I’m goin’ to be.”

Buffy glanced over her shoulder as they walked by Riley. “You OK?” she asked, gesturing with a small nod toward Xander’s unconscious form.

“I’m fine,” he replied. He wasn’t—the young man was heavier than he looked—but he wasn’t about to give Spike the satisfaction of knowing he couldn’t pull his own weight on this. Or
Xander’s weight, for that matter.

* * *

Swimming with the harness was far from simple, weighing him down and slowing his pace until Duncan began to debate whether or not it might not be easier to just walk along the bottom of the stream. It was deep enough for that along its center, but the bottom was mucky and the kelpie feared that the pull at his feet would tire him more quickly; his strength was flagging enough as it was. No, better to keep on swimming, and just take it slow and steady. It wasn’t as if he had to worry about the completion of the closing spell with the harness now in his possession. That was going to be his free pass through just about anything, now.

He wasn’t worried about the humans---and vampire---catching up to him, nor was he anxious about the ones waiting on the other end. He’d merely bide his time within the stream until they all left, then use the powers of the harness to go through whatever magical barriers they erected over the tunnel to the dungeon. Escaping would be simple, as long as he stuck with just that. No more playing around with trying to kill any of Dall Rath’s tenants. That had gotten him into too much trouble as it was.

The water began to muddy, indicating Duncan was nearing the caves that led to the human world. He would miss the beauty of the Otherworld, that was certain, but the power that lay promised to him as the new owner of the harness was more appealing, thoughts of harems of beautiful human girls catering to his every whim dancing before his mind eye. They were fragile creatures, but not without their charms. It was only a shame he couldn’t have taken the Slayer along for the ride. Perhaps one of the others...the redhead maybe, or young Xander’s girlfriend. Now that one was a spitfire.

So lost in his daydreams, he didn’t see the shadows darken before him, and it wasn’t until he caught the gleam against a dark orb did Duncan realize he was no longer alone in the waters. Quickly, he dodged to the side, hoping to evade notice with this one as he had the two others he’d come across on his trek. But the claw around his ankle stayed his movement, jerking him to a halt, and he glanced back to see the battle-scarred guardian glaring at him in contempt.

Frank’s lips curled back into a snarl, the glint of glee at his success shining in his eyes. He was taken off-guard, though, when Duncan lashed out with his other foot, his heel connecting with the guardian’s jaw, the impact whipping his head to the side. His fingers loosened, and the thief took the opportunity to take a strong stroke toward the surface, breaking the grip around his leg as he fought to get away.

Swimming through the water had worked wonders in healing some of the superficial wounds that adorned the guardian’s body. Though he was still fairly badly injured, he could see that the thief was as well. Even better than that, he could see that the thief had the harness. Although that meant that the Slayer was most likely dead---and the twinge of guilt at being the cause of it burned in Frank’s gullet as he shoved the thought aside---it also meant that this could end here and now. All he had to do was kill the traitor.

Their heads broke through the surface almost simultaneously, and the guardian frowned as he watched Duncan leap to the shore. Fighting on land would be taxing; he much would’ve preferred remaining in the water. But that was where the harness was, and so that was where he would follow…

* * *

Because they walked in silence, they heard it far sooner than they saw it. Growls and grunts
shattered the night quiet, carrying on the same slight breeze that had alerted Spike to the scent of Buffy’s blood, and the sounds brought tension to the muscles of the group, each one suddenly wary of what they might be approaching.

Spike was the first to see it, the pair blacker than the sky behind them, and noted with a returning ire that Duncan had now reverted to his kelpie form. His eyes flared when he saw the guardian stumble to the ground, and his body jerked forward, anxious to join the fray.

“Is that Frank?” Buffy asked, gaze narrowed as she peered into the darkness.

“The wonder kelpie himself,” the vampire muttered, and stepped in front of her, staring down into her eyes as he cupped her face. “Stay here,” he ordered quietly. “I’m going to finish this once and for all.”

“You can’t do this on your own,” she said. “Take Riley.”

Spike shook his head. “You’re in no shape to be putting up a defense in case the Galloping Gourmet up there makes a runner for it.” His gaze flickered back to the other man. “You’ll watch her.” It wasn’t a question; it wasn’t an order. It was a tacit understanding between the two that no matter what, they would do everything in their power to protect Buffy, albeit at varying ranges.

She, however, was having nothing of it. “I’m feeling stronger,” she argued. “I hardly need a babysitter.”

“Then think of it as me protectin’ his ass then,” Spike shot back. “He’s been totin’ Harris around for the last half hour, as well as having to play Errol Flynn back there while I got you out of that cave. He’s tired, which means he’s a liability---.”

“Hey!”

“---and I don’t want to have to be watchin’ his back as well as my own,” the vamp finished, ignoring the protest from Riley. “So he stays.” Before she could respond, his head descended, mouth settling over hers in a firm kiss, his tongue seeking entry even as she opened to let him in. The caress was short but searing, his fears and desires for her scalding in each sweep, setting the nerves of her skin alight as her hands came up to clutch at his biceps. When he pulled away, his lips skated across her cheek to rest at her ear, nipping the corner of her jaw in the process. “I’ll be right back,” he murmured, and then he was gone, the sword hanging dangerously from his hand as he strode in pale glory toward the pair in the distance.

Carefully, Riley set Xander’s unconscious form on the ground, balancing his weapon as he stepped between Buffy and the fight, studiously avoiding looking at her flushed face. “As long as that…boyfriend of yours doesn’t decide to showboat,” he said tightly, his throat almost choking on the description of the vampire, “this shouldn’t take too long.”

She sighed, oblivious to her ex’s discomfort as she stared at Spike’s pale back sauntering toward the battling demons, and rubbed her hands over her suddenly chilled arms. “It’s those showboating tendencies that I’m worried about,” she said softly.

* * *

“You should’ve just died back under Dall Rath,” Duncan grunted as he leveled a foot at the guardian’s abdomen.

At the last moment, Frank rolled away, edging his way toward the harness the thief had been forced to abandon to the side. “You are not worthy to have my death on your hands,” he said, and
eased himself up onto his haunches. In spite of his injuries, he was holding his own against the traitor, the only indication of effort on his part the slight raggedness to his breath.

Duncan rolled his eyes. “You guardians are so full of yourselves,” he mocked, and began circling around him, maintaining his wracked body between the kelpie on the ground and the harness. “It’s all about your duty, your honor. Where was your precious honor when you sent the Slayer scurrying into the Otherworld? I’m surprised Spike didn’t kill you on the spot when he found that bit of information out.”

“Not that the idea didn’t occur to me,” the vampire drawled from behind them, “but turns out he’s more useful alive than dead.”

Whirling, Duncan found himself facing the bleached demon, and watched as the moonlight glinted off the blade he so casually sliced through the air in a practiced stroke. His lips curled into a sneer. “Shouldn’t you be tending your beloved Slayer?” he hissed. “Or, and please tell me this is true, were you too late to save her? She was a little worse for wear when I last parted her company.”

Spike shook his head. “You should’ve learned by now Buffy always bounces back. It’s goin’ to take something a helluva lot more dangerous than you to be the one who brings her down.” His eyes flickered to the guardian. “How you doin’ there, Frankie boy?”

“I’ve been better,” Frank replied from his position on the ground. There was no longer any doubt in his mind as to how this battle would finish. The vampire glowed in the moonlight from barely contained fury, every sinew of his undead flesh an exercise in danger as he advanced on the thief. As long as he could keep the other kelpie occupied, Frank would be able to retrieve the harness with little problem.

Another swish of the sword and Spike was several feet closer, closing the gap in lightning moves that surprised the kelpie in their quickness. “You have no idea how long I’ve been wanting to do this,” the vampire murmured, and before Duncan could react, he lunged forward, driving the tip into his shoulder and then extracting it in a sticky gurgle, the blood bubbling in blackened rivulets around the edges of the hole it left behind.

He screamed in pain, his hands automatically going to the fresh wound, and lifted blazing eyes to stare at Spike.

“Just a little taste test of what Buffy’s goin’ through,” the vampire drawled, eyes hard in hate. “Care to try another one?”

Another sweep, and a scarlet line appeared on Duncan’s calf, sending the kelpie diving forward in rage, under the retreating weapon, to tackle the vampire around the knees before he could move away, sending both of them sprawling to the earth and the sword flying through the air. Immediately, Spike vamped, eyes glittering golden as his mouth contorted into a snarl.

“Payback’s a bitch,” he commented, and brought up his feet to plant them against the kelpie’s abdomen, flipping him back over his head to land flat on his back behind him. He kept hold of the demon’s arms, however, and felt the joint in one of its shoulders snap from the socket, smiling widely at the yelp of pain that came from the kelpie’s mouth. As he released the limb, Spike rolled to his side, pouncing to retrieve the sword from a nearby patch of flowers before turning back to face him.

Duncan’s breathing was labored, his strength already sapped from the battles with Buffy and the guardian. Having a vampire attacking him at full-force was going to kill him, he knew, and he found himself summoning upon his reserves to shapeshift, believing that would be his only method
of escape. Something small, he thought desperately. Perhaps a bird…to fly away…

Spike was faster. Almost as if he knew what the kelpie was considering, he raised the blade over his head, bringing it down in a clean arc to slice through the downed demon’s wrist, severing his left hand from his arm in a gush of blood.

The metamorphosis Duncan had been instigating halted in a curdling scream, ringing through the night as he rolled to get out of the way of the approaching vampire. Dark eyes lifted to stare into the smiling face.

“Really, if you think about it, this is all your fault,” Spike said casually, tilting his head. “Told you to keep your hands off her, but you just didn’t listen, did you?” He tsked his tongue in mock reproval. “Something tells me, though, that maybe that’s not enough to teach you your lesson.”

He was ready for it this time. As the sword came down a second time, Duncan tucked himself into a ball and threw himself toward Spike, his bleeding arm held tight against his torso as he made contact with the vampire’s shins.

The blade swung wildly as Spike stumbled backwards, and he fumbled at the weapon, grabbing it by the honed edge before he lost it completely. It sank into his palm, and he snarled at the sting, quickly switching hands before bringing the cut up to his mouth and sucking at it viciously. “Any time you feel like helpin’ here, Frankie,” he called out, “be my guest.”

“You seem to have everything under control,” the guardian replied. During the battle, he had edged himself closer to the harness, and was just then reaching out to grab it, the sight of the golden bells causing his heart to thump wildly. Finally. He would be able to save his honor. Now if the vampire would just go ahead and kill the traitor, he thought, life could back to normal.

* * *

“What in hell is he doing over there?” Buffy asked, a perplexed frown wrinkling her forehead. Her eyes were glued to the tableau of demons in the distance, watching as a certain platinum head began circling one of the downed kelpies, the moonlight catching glints of silver off the sword that hung from his hand.

Riley’s face was grim. “From this angle, I’d say he’s showboating,” he said dryly.

“This is so not the time for this,” she retorted, and began marching forward, only to be stopped by her ex’s hand around her forearm.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to kill Duncan,” she retorted. “And then I’m going to beat some sense into a certain show-off vampire.”

Behind them, Xander started to stir, and the pair looked back to see his eyes flicker open. “Knew he was evil,” they heard him mutter as his hand came up to his head. “The vamp is going down.”

“Great,” Buffy said under her breath. Pulling her arm from Riley’s grasp, she took advantage of his distraction to make a bolt for the fighting. “Spike!” she yelled as she ran. “Hurry your ass up!”

* * *

He heard her call his name and silently cursed her impatience. Got everything under control here, he thought irritably as he ran his sword through yet another of the cook’s limbs. Don’t know what
she’s so hot and bothered about.

His blue eyes were trained on the bleeding kelpie, darting from one injury to the next, savoring the damage he’d inflicted. Numerous stab wounds dotted his flesh, and Spike was starting to hope he could make a pattern of the various punctures before the blighter up and died on him when he saw Buffy come to a halt on Duncan’s opposite side, arms folded across her chest, that what-the-hell-do-you-think-you’re-doing look plastered across her face.

“You look luscious when you’re all brassed off like that, pet,” he said with a smirk.

“Stop goofing around,” she said. “You’re acting like a kid who plays with his food before eating it. Stick a fork in him. He’s done.” She noticed for the first time the severed hand resting just several feet away, and her eyes widened, jumping back to see the amputation on the kelpie. “What’s with turning him into Captain Hook?” she demanded.

Spike shrugged. “Thought he needed a reminder to keep his hands off you,” he said.

“He needs to be dead. Our resident zombie’s awake.”

A quick glance over her shoulder saw Riley struggling to keep Xander from rushing to join the fight. “Bloody hell,” the vamp muttered, before returning his gaze to the kelpie before him. “Fine. Have it your way, Slayer.”

And before Duncan could move, the sword came down between his shoulder blades, burying itself in his flesh, pinning him to the cold, hard ground.

With a quirk of his lips, Spike looked up into Buffy’s face. “Better?”

“Other than being a tad on the extreme side, I’d say much.”

The vampire shrugged. “You’re the one who said ‘stick a fork in him.’ Figured I’d improvise.”

Though she shook her head, there was no mistaking the amusement that flickered in Buffy’s eyes as she watched him step around to join her. “You’re impossible,” she commented as he pulled her against him.

“And you love it…” Spike replied, the words almost lost as he buried his mouth in the curve of her neck.

* * *

Brown eyes widened in shock as he saw Riley’s fist come hurtling through the air toward his face. “Hey!” Xander yelled, throwing himself stomach first to the ground in a desperate attempt to avoid the blow. “What did I do? What did I do?” he screeched, his voice rising an octave in fear.

Riley stopped, freezing in mid-punch as he frowned at the young man cowering in the grass, his arms over his head as if to shield himself from a massive beating from the ex-soldier. “Xander?” he questioned hesitantly. “You…OK?”

Xander peeked between his arms. “Am I OK?” he squawked. “Am I OK? You’re the one who’s gone all Rambo on me.”

“I’m trying to keep you from killing Spike.”

That made him pause. “Why would I want to kill Spike? I thought that was your thing.” He sat up,
head swiveling as he surveyed his surroundings. “Where is Spike, anyway?”

Relaxing his stance but still alert to any trouble, Riley ignored the question. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Xander’s face wrinkled into a frown as he thought, and it took a full ten seconds before his eyes went wide, jerking his head to stare up at the other man. “Buffy’s hurt!” he exclaimed. “She’s---.”

“---right here,” the Slayer finished as she stepped up behind Riley. “How’re you feeling?”

“Frankly, a little confused.” Xander’s gaze darted between them, jumping to Spike’s approach, with a harness-laden Frank limping along behind. “Did I miss something here?”

“Only all the important stuff,” the vampire said dryly. “As usual.”

“Well, at least that’s one thing back to normal,” Buffy said with a sigh, rubbing tiredly at her face. “Which leaves us the million dollar question. What now? Do we go ahead and close the entrance, or do we take a chance and try it again later when we know how to keep Spike safe?”

The vampire was about to respond, but his attention was captured by a splash from the water. Turning his head, his eyes narrowed as they watched the creature emerge from the stream, and his lips pursed. “Think that,” he said, gesturing toward the dripping form approaching them, “pretty much gives us our answer.”
On a Bank of Flowers

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike has killed Duncan and Frank has the harness back. The group was debating whether or not to do the spell when something came from the stream...

In many ways, it resembled the demons they’d been fighting since stepping foot into the Otherworld. A sleek ebony coat, large dark eyes, the toothless mouth. There, the similarities ended, though. Where the ones who’d attacked had towered even over Riley, this one barely came to Buffy’s shoulder, its slighter form and leaner muscles making it appear as a stray pet rather than a threat.

The biggest difference, however, was that this one stayed away, hovering near the edge of the stream as it watched the group with mild curiosity, eyes wide as they moved from person to person. There was no malice in the black depths, but neither was there fear, and Buffy felt the tension that had sprung to her limbs at its arrival begin to ease.

“Well, no wonder Xander had no problem killing the other ones,” she commented with just a hint of amusement. “This is like a baby kelpie or something. Except…didn’t you guys say the others were armed?” She turned away from the stream to look back at the three men who were staring at the new arrival. “We seem to be minus some swashbuckling here.”

“That’s not like the others,” Xander said, his eyes fixed on the creature. “Saying they’re the same is like equating Ewoks with Bigfoot.”

“The fuilafior,” Frank murmured. His grip on the harness had loosened, his attention transfixed in a combination of awe and disbelief. Buffy noticed he had taken a step away from the stream, and even now, seemed ready to run should the new demon approach any closer.

“What was that?” she asked.

“The fuilafior,” he repeated, a little bit louder, a little clearer, and the word brought an instant frown to Spike’s face.

“Please tell me that’s not part of our trial,” he said to the guardian.

Buffy grabbed his arm, pulling him around to look at her. “You know what it is?”

He shook his head. “But I know my Gaelic, which makes me just a tad uncomfortable if that’s s’posed to be what we’re sent here to catch.”

“Why? What’s a foo…fue…” She grimaced as her tongue refused to wrap around the word. “What is it?”

“A myth,” Frank said softly, shaking his head. “Not real.”

Spike snorted in contempt. “Standin’ there in the flesh makes it pretty damn real to me, Frankie boy. And anything that’s name means ‘blood from the water’ doesn’t make me pleased as punch.
"We’re supposed to be killing it,” an annoyed Riley reminded the vampire. “Don’t be getting delusions of grandeur about your own importance just because you happened to get rid of that other kelpie. This doesn’t happen without all three of us contributing. Giles and Colin made that perfectly clear.”

“What exactly did they say?” Buffy asked. “I missed this part of the research. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. Just…would be kind of nice to know since we’re now stuck here, faced with the decision of whether or not we’re actually going to go through with it or not.”

“They didn’t know what kind of creature we’d encounter,” her ex explained. “All the texts referred to it as being ‘magically bonded’—.”

“The fuilafior were said to be created from magic,” Frank interrupted, the reverence deepening his voice as his gaze returned to the creature on the bank. “That is most likely what the books meant.”

“You weren’t offerin’ any of this back in the castle,” Spike said. “If you knew so much about our little closing spell here, why didn’t you speak up then?”

“I didn’t know then,” the guardian argued. “All my information regarding your spell came from the first witch who attempted it. And she had no idea what they would find here.”

“So you’re supposed to kill this thing?” Buffy asked, glancing back at the creature still watching them from the side of the stream.

“We’re supposed to capture it and put it in the urn somehow,” Riley said, and shrugged sheepishly. “We just…assumed it meant kill.”

Doubtfully, the Slayer looked from the fuilafior, to the small pot in her hand, before lifting her skeptical hazel gaze to the men. “Um, I don’t think so,” she commented. “Unless some mystical Cuisinart suddenly materializes to slice and dice him up into small enough bits to fit in here, there is no way that’s happening.” She sighed. “Look, I’m going to make a judgment call on this one, and Frank, I’m sorry, but it’s probably not going to have you doing cartwheels. The best chance we’ve got for Spike not bursting into flame when we get back is by not finishing the spell in the first place. So, let’s not. Let’s just ignore whatever this thing is, and whatever might show up on our way, and head on back to the castle. We can try closing the entrance again once we know how to protect Spike. Frank’s got the harness back, and as long as we’re careful about keeping an eye on the stream, there’s no reason this whole thing can’t wait.” She paused, waiting for some kind of reaction from the others, an argument as to why she was wrong. None came. Giving them a short, sharp nod, Buffy turned away, preparing to return to their journey along the stream’s bank. “Good. Let’s just go then. I hear the call of a long, hot bath in my very near future.”

Two steps forward, however, and the Slayer found herself face to face with the fuilafior, bringing herself up short as it barred her path. She frowned, and took a step sideways, only to have the creature mirror her movement, blocking the way. A step back in the other direction was met with the exact same reaction, and her lips pursed in exasperation.

“Someone else try going past it,” she instructed, never letting her gaze stray from the demon before her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Spike’s pale form immediately step forward, ready to circumvent the nearby stand-off. The creature saw it as well, and casually lifted the arm closest to the vampire, a single finger drawing invisible circles in the air.
There was no flash of electricity, no squeal of magic piercing their eardrums. Spike couldn’t even say that it really hurt all that much. But, as soon as he’d drawn level with the fuilafior, he was stopped, picked up like a ragdoll by some unseen child, and deposited ten feet back, landing on his rear with an indelicate grunt.

“Now whose turn is it to be the puppet gallery’s main attraction?” Xander commented, reaching out a hand to help the vampire back to his feet.

“Think our new friend here doesn’t want to be left alone,” Spike said when Buffy stepped back to re-join the group. “Which means we’re back to the original plan.”

Her displeasure was immediate. Avoiding completing the spell had seemed like the best opportunity for saving the vamp, and now the choice appeared to have been taken out of their hands. “Could it be another obstacle?” she quizzed, not really believing it but ready to grasp at straws. “How many of those things did you kill, anyway?”

Xander did a quick tally on his fingers, his lips moving noiselessly as he counted them off in his head. “Six,” he announced, and was met with a crestfallen Slayer.

“Which is a multiple of three,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Well, I’ll say one thing for this place. At least it’s consistent.”

“So, because Spike killed that last demon, we’ve now completed some…supernatural obstacle quota?” As he said it, it sounded catty even to him, but Riley was past playing the gracious loser. No reason to hold back on his true feelings anymore, not when he was pretty sure he’d lost any chance with Buffy.

“Hey!” Spike barked, stepping in front of him. “I killed number five. You were the one who offed the last thing that went bump in the night here. So if this is anyone’s fault, it’s yours.”

“Nobody’s to blame,” Buffy interjected with a roll of her eyes. Frankly, she was getting a little tired of all the posturing going on between the two, and their petty arguments were doing none of them any good in finding a solution to their present predicament. “You did what you had to do, which means…we see this through to the end, and then deal with the consequences once it’s over.” She gave the three of them a shooing motion with her hands. “Now, go do…whatever it is you have to do to let us get past it.”

She waited expectantly, hazel eyes darting between the three, watching as each suddenly seemed incapable of meeting her gaze. Her brows lifted. “You do know what to do, don’t you?” she said, folding her arms over her breasts.

“It’s like Riley said, Buff,” Xander finally offered, an embarrassed flush to his cheeks. “We figured we had to kill the thing. We just thought it would be an itsy bitsy thing.”

“So go kill it.”

“And then what?” Riley asked. “You said it yourself, Buffy. It’s not going to fit into that urn.”

She sighed. “Maybe once he’s dead, the urn expands to accommodate him. Or he shrinks. Or he could get turned into some kind of Otherworld dust like vamps do. Or something. How am I supposed to know? It’s magic. I’m sure if this is what you’re meant to catch, something magicky will probably happen. That’s usually the way it works. Have none of you been paying any attention to the various disasters we’ve averted on the Hellmouth? Just…do it. We’ll deal with the fallout later.”
They stood frozen for another moment before Spike shrugged, picking up the sword that had flown out of his hands when he’d been barred from passing. “Looks like a grand night for carnage,” he said, strolling toward the stream. He didn’t get five feet from it, however, before the weapon was ripped from his grasp, sluicing through the air to bury itself tip first in the earth behind the creature.

The vampire stopped, shoulders stiffening. “He seems to prefer a good old-fashioned round of fisticuffs.” He smiled, eyes turning golden as the ridges molded onto his forehead. “My kind of demon.”

Buffy watched as a snarl ripped from Spike’s throat, his pallid muscles shifting in feline deadliness as he lunged for the creature. They grappled in tense harmony, rolling to the ground in a nearly silent tumble before the fuilafior backhanded him in a blow that sent the vampire flying.

“Thought this was s’posed to be a joint effort,” he shot back to the other two men as he hopped to his feet.

His tone spurred them into action, driving them forward in a flurry of fists and kicks. Buffy bit back the smile that rose to her lips as she surveyed the battle before her. Under normal circumstances, watching Spike fight was exhilarating, every move graceful, each swing carrying with it a deadly promise. Riley himself was an accomplished fighter, and what Xander lacked in technique, he more than made up for in enthusiasm.

Now, however, was a different story.

Each press forward was met with an almost nonchalant reaction from the demon, repelling each man with little effort. They were spending more time soaring through the air and picking themselves up off the ground than actually fighting, and if it wasn’t for the fact that none of them seemed to be taking any actual damage from the blows, Buffy would’ve stepped in and intervened herself.

Actually, and she had to bite down on her lip to restrain the smile, she was having problems not laughing out loud at the whole thing. The show presenting itself before her didn’t look like a demon fight; it more closely resembled some sort of primitive Scottish game where the men stood around and threw tree trunks. Except in this case, the men were the things getting thrown. How do you score something like that? she thought absently. Distance probably, maybe landings. They’d probably get extra points if they could actually stick their landings as well. Oops, there goes Xander again…

Her distracted musings were cut short when Spike caught his hand on one of the fuilafior’s claws, eliciting a growled, “Bloody hell.” Only then did she say a word.

“Stop!” she ordered, rushing forward to pull the vampire away from the fray, ignoring Riley and Xander as they rose from their respective seats on the ground. Grabbing his hand, she held it palm up, inspecting the slice across its fine sinew. Immediately, her head jerked up, eyes staring into his.

“This isn’t a fresh wound,” she accused.

“Never said it was,” Spike replied, pulling away to lift the vampire away from the fray, ignoring Riley and Xander as they rose from their respective seats on the ground. Grabbing his hand, she held it palm up, inspecting the slice across its fine sinew. Immediately, her head jerked up, eyes staring into his. “This isn’t a fresh wound,” she accused.

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“It looked like any of the other attacks, the pair falling to the ground, the demon rearing its hand
back to send the vampire airborne again. This time, though, Spike pre-empted the strike by throwing a quick punch into the demon’s maw, the blood still seeping between his fingers in tiny rivulets that appeared black in the moonlight. None of his previous hits had done more than slightly daze his opponent, but it didn’t stop him from trying again. He just wasn’t the sort to give up.

This blow was different. As soon as the vampire’s flesh made contact, the creature screamed, yanking itself away from Spike as if burned, scrambling along the stream to a safe distance several yards away, gazing back at them for the first time in fear.

“What did you do?” Xander asked, amazed, as he came up behind the vamp. “Why’s he turning tail all of a sudden?”

“Bugger if I know,” Spike muttered, eyes glittering in confusion as he slowly rose to his feet. He looked down at his still-clenched fist, turning it over in the light, once…twice…and then opened it to see the blood still oozing from the cut. There wasn’t even a lot of it---his healing capabilities were already kicking in---but it still managed to shine against his skin before disappearing between the crevices of his fingers to drip leisurely to the earth.

“Did you hit some kind of soft spot?” Riley quizzed.

Xander shook his head. “Couldn’t be,” he replied. “Even I got a punch in that landed on his mouth.”

“What did you say its name meant again?” Buffy’s voice was a ghost at his side, her hazel gaze settled on the blood that dripped from his fist, and when Spike caught the tiny line between her brows as her head turned to look at the fuilafior, the connection between the two sparked inside his skull.

He had grabbed the nearest sword and turned back to face the other two men with it raised before they could react. “Whoa,” Xander said, holding up his hands. “I thought we’d already established that going all Zorro was about as effective against this thing as throwing marshmallows.”

“Not for him,” Spike said, a grim smile on his face as he advanced. “This is for you.”

“What?” The suspicion creased Riley’s normally placid features. “Just because your chip isn’t working, doesn’t mean---.”

“Shut your gob, you stupid git.” Holding out his injured hand, the vampire slowly ran the edge of the blade over the slice already there, opening it up wider so that the blood flowed even more freely. “I’ve finally sussed out how to get at that thing on the damage front.”

“Not that I’m arguing against your self-mutilation, but what does one have to do with the other?” The ex-soldier seemed fascinated by the display Spike was making, the vamp clenching and unclenching his hand to make the wound bleed more profusely. When he seemed satisfied with what he had, he lifted his amber gaze to stare at the others in anticipation, causing both Xander and Riley to take an involuntary step backwards.

“Blood from the water,” Frank murmured, and turned wide obsidian eyes toward Spike, a newfound respect for the other demon glinting in their depths. He’d always assumed he was more a creature of visceral instincts, and to show an intellect like he had---even knowing the true meaning behind the fuilafior’s name---surprised him. His gaze flickered to Buffy, the understanding of the appeal the vampire held for her deepening before he turned to the other two men.
“Your blood has been infused with the spirits of the Otherworld,” the guardian explained.
“Combined, it will carry with it the essence that governs my world. That should be what it takes to
defeat your foe since he is a mythical creation.”

Xander grimaced. “Isn’t there a less painful way for us to do this?” he complained. “It can’t just be
our blood that’s been sanctified here. What about spit? That’s a bodily fluid. Maybe we could just
all spit on him.” He looked around expectantly, the hope glimmering on his face as he waited for a
response.

“OK,” Buffy said. “First of all, can I just say, ewww? That’s disgusting, even coming from you,
Xan. And secondly, you both saw how that thing reacted when Spike hit him that last time. And
the only difference was the blood on his hand. So stop with the sissy talk and let’s get on with
this.”

“Could be worse, Slayer,” Spike said, a mischievous grin spreading his lips. “He could’ve
suggested other bodily fluids.”

“Oh!” Xander brightened. “I didn’t think of that! It’d be like when you get stung by a jellyfish,
right? I think I saw that on TV somewhere. Something about the ammonia.”

It took her a moment to realize what they were saying, but when she did, Buffy’s eyes widened
before her nose and mouth scrunched into a moue of distaste. “And again with the ewwwww!” She
couldn’t keep the shock at what they were suggesting out of her voice as she continued. “All bodily
fluid talk ends now. Blood. This is about blood. Nothing else. No spit, no…nothing else. Capisce?”

As Spike took another step closer toward the other men, Riley stepped back again. “No offense---,
he started.

With an exasperated growl, Buffy set the urn to the ground and yanked the sword from Spike,
marching to her ex to grab his hand in hers before running the blade cleanly across his palm.
“Baby,” she muttered before turning to Xander and repeating the action.

His smile was one of delight as the blond vamp watched her glow in indignation, her face intent on
her tasks at hand. When it came to getting things done, nobody really did it in the same style as the
Slayer. Never had, never would. She was one of a kind. And his.

“Right,” he said when she finally stepped away. “Think the best way for us to do this without it
goin’ all to cock is to go at it all together. United front and all that rot.”

When the men turned around, they saw that the fuilafior had returned to its previous post, no
longer afraid, as if the recent memory of the blood in its mouth had been wiped from its mind. “Is
this a count of three kind of plan?” Xander asked.

“This is get-the-soddin’-thing-done kind of plan,” Spike replied, and immediately charged toward
their adversary.

Only seconds separated the vampire’s attack from the others’, and Buffy found herself holding her
breath as she watched fists and feet become a blur against the demon, the delineation between the
warring bodies unclear in the rush. She didn’t doubt that this was the way; she only feared what the
outcome might actually be.

It had been noticeable before, not that she’d really paid that much attention to the strange white
outlines in the trio’s eyes, but the moment that each of their hands made contact with the demon’s
flesh, the white flared to silver, absorbing all color as the spectacle seemed to stop in time, every
one of its players consumed by some inner power that locked their muscles in unrelenting arrest. The fuilaflor’s scream rose in an agonizing wail, perforating the air with its pain, and as the young woman watched, its body began to steam, blazing from some inner fire, the wisps eddying and tunneling and swirling into the air before whisking its way to the abandoned urn at her feet.

Its brays lingered even after its body was gone, fading into the night’s ether like a cirrus draft whispered away by the wind. Only when the world was completely silent were Spike and the others released from whatever mortis had held them, sinking to the earth in a spent exhaustion, chests heaving from battling the forces within.

She was at Spike’s side in a millisecond, dropping to her knees while she watched Riley sit back on his heels, Xander curl his fingers into the grass. “You all right?” she murmured, thin hands sweeping over the angles of the vampire’s face, looking for something—anything—out of the ordinary before beginning their search down his bare torso, the tactile reinforcement to the visible testimony necessary to keep her own nerves in check.

Slowly, Spike reached up and secured her hands in his, oblivious to the open wound in his palm as he entwined their fingers, and leaned his forehead heavily against hers. “You Summers women are all a bunch of fussbudgets,” he said wearily, the faintest hint of a smile in his voice even as his eyes remained closed. Gone was his game face, vanished with the last vestiges of the clash, and when his lids finally lifted, the white had diminished back to a faint glow around the sapphire.

“Did it work?” Xander asked, his breathing still labored. He was still doubled over, holding on to the ground as if it was going to fall out from underneath him, and the question of when the world had decided to play tilt-a-whirl with his brain tumbled around inside his skull with all the comfort of a skittering bag of marbles “Please tell me it worked. I don’t think I have it in me to do that again.”

“It worked,” Buffy affirmed. “That should be it now. The entrance should be closed.”

Riley shook his head. “It just seems a little extreme to me,” he commented, looking down at his hand. “Why the cutting and the blood?”

The vampire rolled his eyes at the farmboy’s narrow-sightedness. “‘Cause it’s always about the blood, you nit,” he drawled. “How’ve you lasted so long on the Hellmouth not knowing that?”

“Just once I wish it was about the donuts,” Xander muttered, finally able to settle back onto his bottom. He shook his injured hand, trying to cool the faint sting still remaining from the slice. “Can I just say that at this moment in time, the Hellmouth is seeming a lot more Xander-friendly to me than Scotland? I just want to get back to a place where I don’t have to worry about getting beat up by drunk rugby players, or being smote with gout, or getting turned into the bad guy’s butt monkey—-.”

“Actually, there was that whole deal with Dracula,” Buffy offered, interrupting.

“---or getting the paper cut from hell,” he finished, ignoring his friend’s lighthearted reference.

Behind them, Frank cleared his throat. “Not that I’ve really had the opportunity to share this bit of information yet,” he said, “but there’s something I really do need to tell you about this closing of yours.”

Her eyes narrowed as the Slayer pulled herself away from Spike. “Now is not the time to be telling me bad news, Frank,” she warned. “I am sooo not in the mood for that.”
“Not…bad news, but not…great news…exactly…” His gaze darted from the urn, to the men on the ground, and then back to Buffy. “One aspect of suggesting using the power of the closing spell to come aid you escaped my…attention earlier,” he said. “While it’s true that Spike and the others can return to your world relatively…unscathed, the same unfortunately can’t be said…for you.” He seemed to visibly cringe as this time he was met with four sets of angry eyes, not just hers.

“What do you mean?” Xander demanded. “Are you saying we did all this for nothing? I thought we’d be able to take her back with us. Carry her or something.”

Frank shook his head. “The entrance will bar any living creature to pass through it that wasn’t a direct part of the spell,” he explained.

“Thought you said this wasn’t bad news,” Spike said, and there was no mistaking the menace in his tone. “’Cause it’s soundin’ remarkably like it.”

“Buffy can still go back,” Frank assured. “Just not with you. I will have to be the one to take her.”

“Are you saying guardians can still go through the entrance even though we’ve sealed it?” Buffy asked.

He shook his head. “No. But we can use the power of the harness to pass. The closure is a magical construct. The harness affords its bearer the authority to ignore magic.”

“You are not puttin’ that thing on the Slayer!”

She had to physically restrain Spike from going after the guardian, his fatigue forgotten in light of the coming threat from the kelpie’s mouth. “That wasn’t what he was suggesting,” she said, locking gazes with the other demon. “Because Frank’s not that stupid, are you, Frank?”

“No, no, not at all,” he rushed. “I can carry you while wearing the harness myself. That will work sufficiently.”

Everyone visibly relaxed. “Well, that’s all right then,” Spike said.

“Except…”

“No. No soddin’ excepts.”

“…I doubt I’ll be able to make the trek back on foot,” Frank apologized. “It would be too tiring.”

“You’re telling me I’m going to have to swim for it?” She was liking this less and less with every word that came out of his mouth.

“No, I can carry you once we reach the tunnel. That’s where we’ll have to part company with the others, I’m afraid. The dangers of traversing through the entrance are still very much real and in your weakened condition, it would be a risk to allow you to walk all the way to the new seal.” He tried to smile. “I’ll carry you above the water, obviously, since you lack the capacity for breathing under the surface for extended periods of time as I do. I don’t think your friends would look too kindly on me if I were to return with a drowned Slayer in my arms.”

His joke fell on deaf ears. Instead, Buffy was frozen from the sudden realization that they had actually done it. The guys were about to walk back to Dall Rath, and they were going to take their places within that damn triangle of stones, and Spike was going to go bye-bye in a grand puff of smoke, and what was she going to be left with? Ashes. And an ex-boyfriend who would be more than willing to pick up the pieces but left her feeling cold and empty, and…she was going to have
to spend her last few hours in this whole adventure away from Spike, in the arms of a different
demon, without being able to give him a proper good-bye.

Unless Willow or Giles came up with a solution.

Deep down, though, she didn’t believe it would happen. So much time had already been wasted in
their quest for a resolution with no visible results. What could possibly have happened back in the
dungeon that would change anything?

Spike felt the change in her body immediately, the tension knotting her shoulders, the thin set of
her lips as she lifted her gaze to stare at Riley and Xander. “I have a favor to ask of you guys,” he
heard her say softly…
One Fond Kiss and Then We Sever

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The trial has been completed, leaving Buffy only able to return via the aid of Frank and the harness, and Spike walking back to a certain flaming death...

“I don’t like it,” Riley grumbled, one by one pulling blades of grass from the bank of the stream, then tearing them into minute scraps which fluttered to the surface of the water before beginning again. “We don’t have time for this.”

“No, it’s Buffy and Spike who don’t have the time,” Xander replied. “This is kinda it for them.” He stood away from the water’s edge, eyes warily darting back to it every once in a while on the off-chance that another nasty was going to leap from its depths and attack. Not that he really thought anything would, but when one was transporting a stolen mythical creature away from its homeland in order to bind it to a broken doorway, one had to be prepared for just about anything.

“There’s only a few more hours until dawn,” Riley continued, ignoring his companion’s argument. “If we don’t get back inside before the sun hits Spike, all of this trial business would’ve been for nothing.” The sudden image of the bleached vamp bursting into flame made him pause for a second, a momentary gush of bittersweet revenge saturating his mouth, but he quickly shook the image away when he saw Buffy’s tear-streaked face as she watched the fire from the side. This is not about striking back, he reminded himself silently. This is about completing the mission.

“This is going to be hard enough for Buffy as it is,” Xander continued. “The least we can do is give them some privacy for a little while.” He had known it was going to come to this; Spike had been very vocal about what he thought was going to happen when they’d been killing time before doing the spell. But it didn’t mean he was looking forward to giving his best friend the poem the vampire had written when they got back to the castle. He’d tried telling Spike that getting it after the fact would most likely hurt her even more, but the blond had been adamant. Funny how he’d changed his tune about the worth of his words when all of a sudden, they were the only tangible gift he had left to give her. So, Xander had given his word to play messenger boy. And really, really hoped he didn’t have to be the one to watch Buffy cry when she read it. He had a feeling it was going to rip her to finer shreds more than saying good-bye the first time.

There was no doubt in Riley’s mind what she had wanted the privacy for, even when she’d been requesting the favor in the first place. One last moment alone, she’d said, one last…clothing would be optional, of course. So he’d protested loudly, too loudly, getting sad headshakes from both Xander and that damn guardian, like they understood something that he didn’t, a petulant child who was refusing to accept the punishment that had been meted him. But this was more than just about them, he’d wanted to rage. This is about...

And the thoughts had failed him, the veracity of why exactly he was opposing the suggestion a not-too-gentle reminder of what he had lost over the past few days. The last thing he needed at the moment was to add his self-respect to that list. Although, in light of some of his behaviors around Spike since his arrival in Scotland, maybe it was too late for that particular item.

“So I still don’t like it,” he muttered, and threw the handful of foliage in his grip to the water, ignoring
Xander’s hand as it came down on his shoulder.

“Nobody expects you to, man,” he said quietly.

* * *

She didn’t know whether to scream about his insensitivity to her feelings, or cry about their impending separation, or laugh at the irony of the whole situation. He was leaving her, just like all the rest of them had, and so yeah, he’d made the choice because he couldn’t bear not helping her, but then hadn’t Angel left because of the whole “I’m doing this for your own good” thing, too? Everybody was always trying to tell her what she needed, what would make her happy, taking away her choices until she was forced to just live with those they inflicted upon her. No wonder her relationships never worked out right. Buffy never really got a say in the matter.

This time it was supposed to be different. This was Spike, and they fit, yin and yang, and there’d never been any doubt as to his trust in her, his deference and respect for her abilities, his pride in watching her excel. He’d been able to keep up, without making her feel little about it, surprising her at every turn, and yet not, because it was Spike, and she knew him better than any of her previous boyfriends---maybe not the specifics, but him, the essence of him---and it wasn’t supposed to end this way. The only bright side to this whole debacle---if any of it could even have a bright side---was at least he wasn’t going without saying good-bye first. That would be a first for her.

And she wasn’t going to cry, damn it.

They were still on the grass by the stream where they’d caught the fuilafior, left alone as Frank returned to the water, and Xander and Riley walked on ahead over the knoll until they were out of sight and earshot. Buffy lay back amidst the soft green, staring up at the stars that twinkled in the sky, while Spike was stretched out on his side next to her, head propped up in his uninjured hand as he gazed down at her.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” he murmured. “Don’t ruin what we’ve got left by broodin’ on it. I’ll start thinkin’ I didn’t teach you anything.” His attempt to lighten the mood fell with a dull weight, and inwardly, he winced when she closed her eyes against him, shutting him out as she continued to drift among the remonstrations dancing around her skull.

“I don’t know how you can be so cavalier about all this,” she said bitterly. “Oh, wait. Yes, I can. You’re not the one who’s getting left behind to be alone. Again. I guess I never knew it was easier to deal when you’re the leaver, and not the leave-ee. File that one away for future reference.”

“None of it’s easy, pet.” His voice was gruff, awash with frustration and pain, and he lifted his hand to cup her chin, pulling her head toward him. When her lids fluttered open, revealing the hardened shine of grey-green staring back at him, the ache that had settled in his chest began to swell throughout his torso, the desire to just say sod it all and stay in the Otherworld for good suddenly too appealing to ignore. “Easy would be makin’ a runner for that cave and holin’ ourselves up there and saying bugger off to Harris and Wonderbread when they come to drag us back.”

The fantasy he offered brought a wistful curve to her mouth. “We could make them go back on their own,” she suggested. “Although that would mean the spell never gets completed, so Xander would still be all god-like. I’m not sure the world is ready for that.”

Spike grinned, remembering Harris’ earlier ramblings. “Somehow, I don’t think the boy would have a problem dealin’.”
“Or Anya, for that matter,” she added.

Both of them drifted in the sea of their daydream—or nightdream, as the case may be—and while the delicacies of remaining in the Otherworld promised a fleeting sweet satisfaction, the underlying acidity of truth corroded its edges, reminding them of duties, and serious lackage of all-night butcher shops, and...damn it, duties...

“Would whining about life being rotten and unfair be considered childish right about now?” Buffy asked, the tiniest of catches in her voice as her gaze scanned his face. “Or is that just me allowing my inner Dawn to come out?”

“I think a smidge of whinging wouldn’t be entirely uncalled for.” His thumb traced the bottom curve of her lip. “Though I can think of better things you can do with this gorgeous mouth of yours.”

The smell of his dried blood pricked her nostrils, disturbing the dust of her settled fears, and she reached up to drag his hand away from her face, holding it before her as she outlined the lean lines against the velvet sky. It was already healing and hadn’t required the bandage that she’d forced both Xander and Riley to wear, but it still looked nasty, a vicious slash disturbing the ordered lines of his palm. Probably will leave a scar, she thought, before catching herself, the afterthought---Of course not, won’t be around long enough to scar---filling her mouth with salty bitterness.

Slowly, she pulled his hand down to her face, her warm breath blanketing his flesh, before allowing her lips to linger along the length of the injury, the tip of her tongue darting out to capture the roughened texture of his skin at its edges.

It wasn’t meant to be erotic. So, all right, one of the purposes to having some alone time had been to feel him inside her one last time, but not at that exact moment. Not when she had so much she wanted to say to him. Sex with Spike had been the farthest thing from her mind when she’d caressed his hand. But the taste of him, the scents of blood, and smoke, and musk that was uniquely his, all swirled to a crescendo within her breast that compelled her to roll onto her good side and press her body against his. Solid, touchable, concrete. Still here. And if she had to sink into his skin in order to take the memory of his every muscle back to Sunnydale with her, then that’s what she would do. Because she couldn’t forget. Wouldn’t. Impossible to unlearn everything he had taught her, everything he had shown, everything he had promised. And she wasn’t about to waste another moment of the few they had left together by dwelling on the hole that was starting to bore into her heart.

The kisses were almost chaste, gossamer trails across his lips, over the harsh angles of his cheekbones, along his brow. He merely laid there, eyes closed, absorbing her heartbeat until his own flesh strummed in unison and it was impossible not to reach out and touch her, his fingers floating on the contours of her waist before settling on her hip. He was wary of her injuries, knowing she would ignore them for want of attention elsewhere, but unwilling to be the reason for any more pain for the young woman. Not that this wasn’t killing him in degrees anyway. But there was no regret for his actions. To be honest, he’d not given the risks to himself any consideration in light of what he felt he had to do for the Slayer, and that certainly didn’t change now. She was going to be all right. She would live. And that was all that mattered to Spike.

“Buffy...luv...” he murmured, pulling just far enough away to gaze at her through hooded eyes.

“No,” she protested just as quietly, lids flying open to search the shadows of his face. “Don’t make me stop. Please.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it...just...” He lowered his head to rest it on his arm, reaching up to push back
that stray lock of hair that always seemed to be falling against her cheek. God, she was so beautiful.

“Don’t…hate me for havin’ done this, all right? Brassed off, sure, I expect that. Don’t think you’ve
gone a day since meetin’ me when you weren’t pissed off about something. And it’s not that I
think I’m goin’ to be in any position to be holdin’ onto anything, but…somehow, thinking…after
everything…you went back to the William the Bloody loathing…” He swallowed, the words
suddenly choking him, and was grateful he didn’t actually need to breathe because at the moment,
he didn’t think he’d be able to manage it. “I don’t have any right to be askin’ for anything, I know--
-.”

“I love you, Spike. Nothing’s going to change that.”

“Even if I said I’d do it all again in a second? I would, you know. S’long as I knew you’d be safe
on the other side, flyin’ home to see your mum and Bit. They need you, need your strength.” He
smiled. “Not to mention, someone’s got to keep an eye on Harris and the witches. Those bunch get
into more trouble than they know how to deal with. And don’t even get me started on Rupert.”

“But I need you there as well, you idiot.” She seemed suddenly transfixed by the almost invisible
scar on his chin, the jagged white line that spoke of more violent moments, and wondered why she
hadn’t yet asked him how he’d gotten it. Not that she really knew any of the stories behind his
scars, at least not the ones that had come from someone’s hand other than her own, and now she
wasn’t even going to have the opportunity to ask. “I need you,” she repeated, and blinked too
rapidly to fight back the burning behind her eyeballs.

“You don’t,” Spike whispered, and though his smile lessened, the silver etched around the sapphire
in his eyes seemed to throb from some inner indebtedness, catching the tiny hairs on her arms and
gently tugging as if to remind her that he was still there. “You’re strong, and wondrous, and you
managed just fine on your own before these old bones of mine ever came into the picture. You’ll
manage just fine again once they’re gone.” His finger caressed her cheek. “But I do thank you for
sayin’ so.”

“You expect me to just manage? You show me what’s possible, make me feel alive, only to take it
all away, and you think I can go back to how things were?” Sparks flew in the hazel depths, her
breathing starting to quicken. “What happened to watching my back? Or being there just to hold
me? How could you open that door inside me and then say, ‘Sorry, pet, gotta dash?’” Faster, and
without thinking, the words came tumbling out. “Don’t you dare think for a second that I don’t
need you, Spike. That’s a copout and you know it. And I don’t care if you need to think that in
order to make this more dealable for you. Right now, I’m feeling just a little bit selfish, and I’m not
going to let you set one foot back into that tunnel until you understand what you’ve really done.”

“And what’s that, luv?”

Her next kiss was far from controlled, and where before she had been searching for the anchor to
hold the memories of his features in her mind, now she sought to show him, to demonstrate with
the unspoken words they both knew so well just how much she loved him, needing that last
reminder to hold on to, like a child clinging to its security blanket.

His mouth opened, sucking her in with a heady languor, deliberately slowing her down to a literal
crawl. He wanted her to enjoy this, to make it last; hell, truth of it was, he didn’t want it to bloody
end. And kissing him like that would set about the explosions and fireworks a far sight sooner than
he needed at this point.

Tender hands slid around her waist, up the inside of her shirt to stroke the length of her spine in
feather brushes. He marveled again at how tiny she was, but when she moved, Spike felt the play
of muscles beneath her skin, the promise of power as she pressed her breasts against his bare chest,
and remembered the exquisite agony of other muscles squeezing around him. He would take these sensations---Buffy’s strength, her leonine grace combined with the conviction of a woman who knew what she wanted---and play them over and over in his head like a favorite song until his last second in this dimension…and he would be grateful for each and every single one of them.

She couldn’t seem to get enough of him. Her hands were in his hair, tangling with the curls at the base of his neck, trying with every sweep of her tongue to drive him harder, mewling in the back of her throat when he refused to comply. She needed him, and she needed him now, and it felt like Spike was doing everything in his power to keep that from happening, those hands running up and down her back both urging her on while holding her back.

“Please…” she murmured into his mouth, her breath a furnace as the vise around her chest tightened, expelling what little air she had in rapidfire bursts. “Don’t want to wait…”

Spike chuckled. “What happened to the old sayin’, ‘Good things come to those who wait?’”

“I like the one Mom uses. ‘A stitch in time saves nine.’” Buffy laughed against his cheek. “Except I could never figure out nine what. Could be kittens. Could be snowballs. You don’t happen to know what that one means, do you?”

“Sorry, pet.” Actually he did, but the last thing he wanted to get into right now was a discussion on the intellectual dissection of a saying that was older than he was. Somehow, he thought that might be a mood breaker.

Her fingers trailed across the bridge of his nose. “Make love to me, Spike,” she said softly, and this time couldn’t stop the tears from spilling from the corner of her eyes, catching in her hair in tiny droplets that clung to their spherical holds for seconds before collapsing into damp. “Make it so that I won’t ever forget.”

Time was not on their side. The dawn was encroaching on hundreds of spidery legs, and the internal clock Spike had relied upon over the last century was screaming at him to find shelter from the sun before it got too late. Already too late, he wanted to snipe back at it, but instead lifted himself to a sitting position to gaze down at the golden beauty in the grass. Carefully, his fingers glided to her waist, undoing the fastenings of her trousers before easing them down her slim legs, heedful of the arrow wound in her calf. This would be no wild ride, no death-defying feat of acrobatics that would’ve amazed even the most hardened circus performer. This would be soft, and gentle, and all for her. Well, and maybe a little for him.

“I love you, Buffy,” he said, lowering his mouth to the satin of her exposed stomach, nudging the hem of her shirt up, out of the way, as he tasted and licked the salty ambrosia for one last time.

“I love you, too, Spike,” she murmured in response. Her hands fell beneath his shoulders, tugging him up so that their eyes were level, his hips pressed into hers. In spite of being far from happy at the moment, she forced herself to smile, and tugged at a stray curl at the nape of his neck. “Now shut up and show me.”

* * *

She didn’t want to open her eyes. Once that happened, it would all become too real again, and right now, that was the last thing Buffy wanted. Keep ‘em closed and keep the world at bay, and she could pretend that they were just lying in one of the cemeteries in Sunnydale, or better yet, in her back yard, and any moment now he was going to roll her over onto her back and start again, that mouth sliding down the column of her throat to lap at the hollow at the base like some sought-after oasis, those hands pinching and tweaking and gliding and making her forget where her body ended...
and his began, his mussed hair tickling her thighs as he nuzzled at the juncture between her legs.

She sighed, and felt the breath bounce back from the curve of his neck where she rested to warm her cheeks. Yep. She could just about stay like this forever.

“Buffy…” His arms tightened around her bare back, his voice almost lost in the tangle of her hair. “Luv…we have to go.”

It worked better than a bucket of cold water. Immediately stiffening, the Slayer’s eyes flew open, her body arching away before she fought to recover control, throwing her leg over his hips to straddle him. “No,” she said petulantly, her lower lip jutting in what she hoped was an irresistible pout. “One more.” She squirmed against his returning arousal as if to accentuate her point.

For a moment, he considered it, heavy eyes staring up at her while he savored the slickness that was now running up and down the length of his erection, but the fingers of the approaching sun were starting to point in his direction and if he was going to go out in a blaze of fire, he wanted at least something good to come of it.

“We can’t,” Spike said with more conviction than he felt, and dug his fingers into her hips, sliding her off as delicately as he could. Reaching for his jeans, he added, “The others are goin’ to be expectin’ us. You know that.” Oh yeah, the world was officially ending for William the Bloody. The voice of reason? Turning down another go with the Slayer? The poof would be laughing out his ass if he could see him now.

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” she groused.

“We’ve still got all the time it’s goin’ to take us to get back to the tunnel. Let’s just enjoy that.” Straws. That’s what he was grabbing. Silently, he prayed that she would help him in dealing with this by stopping with the arguing. If she asked one more time, Spike didn’t think he’d have it in him to say no again.

It wasn’t enough, and both of them knew it. Still, as Buffy slid her legs back into her trousers, she knew she was going to have to be satisfied with what she had been able to steal from fate. She was going to have to remember to thank Xander back at the castle for convincing Riley to let them have this little break.

Standing, she stretched in feline curves, working out the kinks in her back from having sex on the uneven earth. She frowned when Spike began walking away, heading in the opposite direction of the tunnel. “Where are you going?” she asked.

He stopped, nodding toward the dead kelpie pinned in the distance. “Don’t fancy leavin’ a weapon behind when we’re not sure what’s comin’ up,” he said. “And our former cook sure as hell doesn’t need it.”

She followed after him, catching up in seconds to grab at his hand. When he hesitated, glancing down at her in query, Buffy just smiled and continued walking, squeezing his fingers in hers. Just a moment. Another stolen one. She wasn’t going to let go again until circumstances forced her. And even then, she wasn’t sure how she was going to find the strength to do it.

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” she mused, striving for some semblance of normalcy. “Nothing big or bad jumped out at me when I came through.”

“That’s because you had the harness, pet,” Spike replied. “Frankie said it was what was protectin’ you. You had a free pass, even if you didn’t know it. We, on the other hand, had hell on the way
in. Well, Harris pretty much had hell. He didn’t really let me and Finn have a say in the matter when he found out he was all unkillable.”

“One of those multi-purpose demon artifacts.” Desperate for anything to lighten the mood, she launched into a faux television announcer voice. “Need a break? Tired of being a blip on the Demon Radar? Get the Harness 2000, available only from FrankCo. Guard yourself from the evil baddies that come creeping to your bed. Say goodbye to those pesky magical spells wrecking your social life. No more---.”

His stopping took her by surprise and she turned to see him staring at her, head tilted. “What did you say?” he asked.

“Huh?” Her head scrambled. “I don’t know, was it important?” Buffy confessed. “I was just kind of rambling. I have a tendency to do that when I get stuck in a sitch that turns me into frustration girl. You know that. Stuff kind of just comes out of my mouth. Like the Energizer bunny. It just keeps going, and going, and---.”

“About sayin’ goodbye to magic.”

“Oh. Isn’t that what Frank said?” She matched his frown, confusion darkening her eyes. “That’s why he can take me through the sealed entrance, right? Because the magic just kind of falls apart around the harness.”

“As well as protects you from it,” Spike added slowly.

“Yeah…” It took only a moment of staring into those depths to understand where he was leading her, and Buffy’s eyes widened, her jaw dropping at the same time. Hope. That’s what he was suggesting. And it almost hurt to reach out and grab it. “You don’t think…?”

He shrugged. “Would it hurt to try?”

“But Will’s always going on about scales, and energy keeping in balance.” It was coming too fast now, the possibilities and potential problems a whirlwind that refused to settle inside her skull. “If whatever wants to burn you up can’t, won’t it try going for someone else? Like Xander? Or Riley?”

“Probably.” He visibly deflated before his gaze flickered past Buffy’s shoulder, his eyes narrowing as his brain continued to tick over. “But if it’s so hot and bothered for a dead body, I think we might be able to oblige it…”
Farewell, Thou Stream

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: The trial has been completed, Duncan is dead, and everyone is headed back to Dall Rath to finish the closing spell, and to deal with Spike’s potential burning…

She wanted so desperately to close her eyes. Just for a second. A nanosecond even. A fraction of a nanosecond. Anything to relieve the exhaustion that was slowly turning her flesh into stone. But she couldn’t; she didn’t dare, not when they were still dwelling in the land of no answers. And so Willow continued to read, so much slower than when they had started, but reading nonetheless, the multitude of candles that they’d set up throughout the underground cavern casting flickering orange stripes across the already yellowed pages, her eyes sliding across the words that sometimes seemed to be dancing the two-step before settling into something that closely resembled the foxtrot. M’s are really funny looking letters, she thought, not for the first time. I wonder if that’s why they named the candy after them. M and M, and M, and M, and ooo, pretty…

When the hand settled on her shoulder, she jumped, dropping the book that had been propped up in her lap, the sudden surge of adrenalin through her system acting faster to wake her up than a mochaccino from the Espresso Pump.

“I’m up!” she squeaked, and proceeded to bump heads with Colin as they both leaned over at the same time to pick up the text.

“So sorry,” he apologized in a rush, handing it back to her as she rubbed at her temple. “I thought you heard me come back.”

“Guess I was just all absorby with the reading,” the redhead said with a small smile. “You know how fascinating translating Peloponnesian death rituals can be.” When the aroma hit her nostrils, her mouth instantly salivated, and her eyes widened in delight at the steaming thermos the Watcher was uncapping. “Please tell me that’s tea.”

Colin smiled. “I thought you and Rupert could use a little pick-me-up,” he said as he handed it to her.

The first sip, however, had Willow choking, her eyes watering, and she stared up at the Englishman in a combination of shock and dismay. “What’s…in that?” she gasped. Air. She needed air. Except that just reminded her that her throat was now on fire. Not good. Not good at all. But at least she was awake.

Quickly, Colin took back the flask and gave it a sniff. “Oh, my,” he murmured, and looked back over his shoulder at where Giles was frowning into his own thermos. “Be right back.”

As she watched, he strode over, mumbled a few words that sounded remarkably like “sorry” and “my fault,” and then returned with the other thermos, proffering it like some tithe of pardon, an embarrassed flush creeping over his cheeks. “Wrong flask,” he said in explanation.

“Do I want to know what was in the other one?” Willow asked, tentatively sniffing the contents
before lifting it to her mouth.

Colin glanced back at the other Watcher. “Um, I’ll say no.”

As she sipped at the hot liquid, the witch’s wistful gaze flickered to the sleeping forms of Anya and Tara against the cavern wall, the blankets Colin had brought down on one of his earlier forays upstairs wrapped tightly around them. They had been reluctant to take a break from the research—well, Tara had, at least; Anya was too worried about Xander to really be much good anyway—and though Willow had insisted that they get some rest, she was beginning to wish that maybe she hadn’t been so nice about it. Or that she could join them. Joining would definitely be better.

They still had no solution to Spike’s combustion problem. Text after text after text had revealed absolutely nothing, except that the Council was really a bunch of super-clever, super-sneaky, kind of evil jerks for discovering the spell in the first place. Giles had even driven into town at one point to talk to Travers when he’d been unable to reach him on the phone, but that had borne exactly zilch. They had never had any intention of Spike surviving, so had made no effort to find countermeasures for that particular aspect of the magic.

When Giles had returned to Dall Rath, he’d hit the books with more vigor than Willow had witnessed since their arrival in Scotland, delving into more arcane texts in search of an answer. The look he’d shot Tara and Anya when they’d decided to sleep had been surprisingly dangerous, and the redhead found herself wondering why he was being so diligent in their pursuit for something that would save the vampire. He had been acting oddly ever since Spike had made his announcement about going in after Buffy, regardless of the consequences to him, and Willow couldn’t help but think that maybe Giles was finally beginning to see what Buffy had been all along. Too bad it was too late to do the Slayer any good.

A glance at her watch told her that the sun was rising outside, and that breakfast would be calling their names if the others didn’t return from the Otherworld soon. Colin had already volunteered to whip something up, but Giles had put him off, telling him that they would wait until the spell was completed before eating. Willow just hoped it would be soon. For every minute that passed, she feared that the odds of them coming back at all got worse. The thought that some auxiliary plan might need to be made to retrieve even more of their numbers was daunting.

A splash from the stream tore her gaze away from the page, and Willow lifted her head to see the guardian kelpie emerge from the water with Buffy clinging to his neck. For the first time, she spied the artifact that was the root of the whole mess also hanging from his neck, the golden bells of the harness ringing softly through the underground cavern as he set the Slayer carefully down to the ground.

“Buffy!” she called out, scrambling to her feet, heedless of the book as she rushed to her best friend’s side.

Giles beat her there, removing his jacket to place it around his charge’s shivering form. “Willow, go fetch her some dry clothes,” he ordered, his tone brooking no argument.

As he handed the retreating witch the amulet and incantation for the covering over the entrance to the tunnel, Colin turned back to face the dripping wet Slayer with a frown. “You’re hurt,” he commented unnecessarily, noting the blood stains on her shoulder and pants.

“I’m fine,” Buffy replied, brushing away his concern with a distracted wave of her hand. Her brow creased as she quickly scanned the cavern. “Where’s Spike and the others?”

“Not back yet.” Giles’ voice was tight. “We were unsure as to their success as we were…reluctant
to take a break from our research to investigate. But they found you, I take it.”

She nodded. “And thumped little bunny foo foo to seal up the entrance as well, so you can stop the worrying about that. Now please tell me you found a surefire way to get around Spike’s fire indemnity clause in that stupid spell.” She was holding her breath as she waited, and when, after a furtive glance between the two Watchers, Giles shook his head, she let it out in a long, vocal hiss and looked back at Frank. “Guess that means we really do have to go to Plan B.”

Colin frowned as he watched the guardian slowly remove the harness from around his neck. “Plan…B?” he queried. The sight of the gold artifact was mesmerizing, but though he would’ve loved to discuss it further with the kelpie, perhaps even touch it for a moment---he was getting quite addicted to this whole field experience extravaganza---there were more pressing matters at hand.

“Well, I’ve been more affectionately calling it the ‘whatever the hell I can do to keep Spike from certain incineration plan,’” she said. “But Frank seems to prefer ‘plan B.’” Buffy shrugged. “We don’t even know if it’s going to work. But without having something concrete from you, I…” She sighed, exhaustion weeping from her pores, and rubbed tiredly at her eyes. “…we have to try. Spike doing this in the first place does not take me to my happy place. I’m not just going to sit back and watch him go up in flame if there’s something I can do to stop it.”

Tiredly, Giles removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. This was not one of those moments he liked playing devil’s advocate. “Buffy, this was something Spike decided---,” he started, only to be cut off by a sharp wave of her hand.

“Save it. He and I have already had this argument. I don’t agree with what you guys did, especially since it did absolutely nothing in getting me back through the entrance.”

“Actually, that’s not true.” It was the first time Frank had spoken since returning, but he didn’t buckle beneath her direct gaze. Her friends deserved to know the actual circumstances, if only to better aid her, he decided. She was far more affected by this impending separation than she was letting on, and they would be more appropriately concerned for her wellbeing if they understood the extent of it. “If they had not chosen to do the closing spell, Duncan would have the harness now and you would most likely be dead.”

It was the final word that caught Giles’ ear, and he straightened, flashing blue eyes staring at the Slayer. “Dead?” he repeated. “What exactly happened in there?”

“It was no big. Duncan got a little arrow happy, is all. Frank and Spike were able to stop him.”

“Once Spike rescued you from the cave,” the kelpie prompted. “And stopped all your bleeding.”

“Bleeding?”

Buffy turned annoyed eyes to the guardian. “Not really helping here, o favorite kelpie of mine.”

The kelpie ducked his head. “Sorry.” Perhaps that had been just a little too far.

“Like I said,” she continued, swiveling back to look at her mentor, “I’m fine. What’s not fine is---.” She broke off, stiffening for a moment before taking a step toward the side of the stream. Her hazel gaze sharpened, sweeping across the bank, following the curve of the water as every muscle in her body tensed, ready to spring.

Frank watched the confusion pass between the two Englishmen as they watched their Slayer move almost hypnotically away from them, but refrained from saying what he knew to be true. He’d seen
her react this way from the beginning; the fact that those closest to her were still partially blind to Buffy’s sensory appreciation for the blond vampire was almost sad. Because that’s what she was reacting to. There were no cognitive signs as of yet, but the kelpie knew that they would come. She was never wrong in this.

It was their voices they heard first, a harsh rumble of arguing, indistinct words floating to their ears in a mishmash of baritones. As it grew louder, some of them became audible—there seemed to be an inordinate number of “bloody hells” and “you’re not listening” among the phrases they caught—until an explosive-sounding Riley cut all of it off.

“I swear, if you two don’t shut up this minute, I’m going to set fire to Spike myself and finish the business of cutting off your head, Xander! I don’t care if you’re immortal now!”

Giles frowned as they came from around the bend, only casually noting the urgency in Buffy’s step as she rushed forward to meet them, his gaze captured instead by the unexpected addition to the ménage. While Riley and Xander both carried swords—weapons they had most definitely not gone in with—with the ex-soldier also balancing the urn in the crook of his arm like a football, Spike was burdened with an overlarge dead demon thrown over his bare shoulder. A cursory examination confirmed it was a kelpie, though the Watcher found his lips pursing at the very glut of stab wounds that adorned its flesh, the absence of one of its hands yet another indication of some serious swordplay.

“What took you so long?” Buffy demanded as Spike dumped the kelpie’s body to the earth. Once his load was gone, she threw herself at the vampire, hugging him tightly as his arms came around her back, his nose burying itself in her hair, both of them completely disregarding her damp state.

“See, it’s like this,” Xander started.

“I am not listening to this again!” Riley growled, and marched over to the two Watchers, thrusting the urn into Colin’s hands. “We’re here now. Let’s just get this over with. If I have to listen to these two argue for one more minute…”

“What is…that?” Giles asked, motioning toward the corpse on the ground.

“Our last shot at saving Spike.” Her voice was grim, harder than she wanted, all traces of humor wiped away as she found herself just moments away from having to face her potential loss. Not going to break, she thought. There’s still a chance at fixing this. I’m not going to break.

Without stepping away from physical contact with Spike, she told the Watchers what they had discussed on their return to the tunnel, eyes flicking to the wall when Anya and Tara woke, not even breaking stride when Willow re-appeared with dry clothes and a towel. “We don’t even know if it’ll work,” Buffy finished. “But, since you guys came up with nada, and Frank’s given us the green light for us to use the harness for this, I say we give it a go.” She paused, swallowing the lump in her throat. “We already know the worst that can happen. We don’t have anything to lose at this point.” And everything to gain if it works, she added silently.

Colin and Giles regarded each other for a moment before responding. “It would have to be timed very carefully,” the younger man finally said. “If the harness inhibits magic, it might interfere with the completion of the spell, should Spike be wearing it when he enters the stone triangle.”

“And we’re unsure when the…burning might occur,” Giles added. “It’s quite likely that it might happen before we can hand it over to him.”

Buffy nodded. “We know that.” Her quick glance back at Spike was met with a corresponding nod.
“But it’s all we have.”

“Then we should probably proceed then.” Colin stepped away, scurrying to retrieve the magic supplies by the wall, while the others took their respective places near the cairn.

The only ones not to move were Buffy and Spike. Turning in his arms, the blonde lifted her head, drinking in the dark shadows under his eyes, the slight quirk of his lips as he brought up his hand to gently stroke her cheek. “Don’t die,” she instructed, and felt the resurgence of the tears she thought spent in the Otherworld pricking at her eyes. Damn it, she thought. I didn’t want to do this now. I wanted him to see me being strong. Being his Slayer. Stop crying, Buffy. Be a grown-up about this.

Spike chuckled. “Already dead, luv,” he murmured. “What you mean is, don’t fry.”

She laughed, in spite of the pain, and slapped playfully at his bare chest. “Leave it to you to argue with me to the end,” she teased, some of the lightness returning to her voice.

His mouth brushed her temple before descending down the side of her face. “Someone’s got to keep you on your toes,” he murmured.

Did it make a difference that there was a possibility this was her last ever kiss from Spike? Buffy thought as their lips met. Did it change it? Make it better? Make it worse? All of the above, she decided as her mouth opened, allowing him entrance. Her arms lifted, tightening around his neck, deepening the contact between them, and she squeezed her eyes tight, willing the tears that spilled to evaporate before the couple broke apart and the others could see her weakness. No, she corrected. Before Spike could see her weakness. He was being so brave about the whole thing, cracking his usual jokes, smiling with that gorgeous mouth even if it didn’t quite reach the azure just a few inches above; the least she could give him was an equally brave front. And besides, she reminded herself, there’s still the possibility that this crazy idea might actually work.

The clearing of Giles’ throat behind her was enough to pull her from the caress, her breathing heavy as she met his dark gaze. “Love you,” she mouthed, and watched as his head came back down, his lips settling at her ear, the anticipation of what he was going to say sending icy tingles across her skin.

“See you in a few, pet. Be ready for the shagging of a lifetime.”

* * *

In many ways, the tableau was an exact replica of the one that had started the spell. The Watchers and Tara stood at each outer corner of the cairn, their candles lit, while inside, each of the original participants sat in anticipation of its conclusion. The inclusion of the dead kelpie on the ground in front of Spike, however, disrupted the orderliness of the presentation, while hovering at the triangle’s perimeter were Anya bearing the urn, and Buffy clutching the harness.

Willow’s eyes swept over the group as she balanced the book in her arms, all signs of her previous exhaustion now gone. “Ready?” she asked, doing her best Pollyanna impression in light of the wan pallor on her best friend’s face. Buffy was doing her best to appear strong, but the redhead could see she was fighting a losing battle, her hope that the circumvention would work wavering as the moment grew near.

“Just get on with it, Red,” Spike said. He wasn’t watching the center of the triangle as he had when they’d done the spell the previous night. This time, his dark eyes were locked on Buffy’s face, his mouth firm, and there was no denying the why of what he was doing. If Spike was going to go out
in a blaze of glory, he was going to make damn sure that her face was going to be the last thing he saw, every line etched into his skin, every curve a memory to his touch. Part of him—the part he was presenting to her, the strong side—honestly believed that this diversionary tactic was going to work, but, conversely, the vampire was far from stupid. He knew it could fail. But he refused to let go of the hope. He had too much to risk here, and if Buffy could be strong, then so could he. For her sake.

A short nod from Willow, and Anya was stepping forward, leaning to place the urn in the midst of the three men before pulling quickly back, glancing at the witch as the redhead began the practiced Gaelic phrases. Almost immediately, the urn reacted, locking the bodies of Spike, Xander, and Riley in the familiar rigor that they were coming to recognize, the keening splitting the air as the ghostlike tendrils of the Otherworld spirits seeped from their chests, swirling and eddying to entwine in a dance above the urn.

Buffy hovered just beside Spike, muscles tense as her eyes darted from the vampire to the urn, to the wisps hanging in the air, before returning back to Spike. So far, so good. Not vampire flambé, but the important part of the spell wasn’t over yet. Timing. Timing was everything.

Everything seemed to happen at once.

As the last word fell from Willow’s lips…

…the candles extinguished, leaving the only illumination in the room the leftover glows from the trio’s chests within the triangle…

…the wailing rose to a shriek that echoed against the stone walls, bouncing and reverberating in a thunderous rhythm that drew nails of fire across everyone’s skin…

…the essences of the Otherworld combined in a brilliant flash before disappearing into the bowels of the urn…

…Buffy darted forward and dropped the harness in the incognizant vampire’s lap, being careful not to allow its clarion noose to slip around his neck as she did so…

…and the fire leapt from nowhere, igniting as if from the earth itself, to surround the pot at the center of the cairn, licking in scarlet and orange and yellow as it pulsed from some inner life.

Everyone outside the triangle seemed to hold their breath as the fire danced, crackling as it rolled higher and higher, finally drawing itself from the circumference of the urn to blaze in a single finger in front of Spike. His eyes were still closed, his body still locked within the effects of the spell, and where Riley and Xander were slowly relaxing, he seemed to tense even further.

Work, work, work, Buffy intoned silently, her face grim, hazel focused on the inferno that seemed to be taking far too long to do whatever it was there to do. The only thing she hated more than waiting for something to happen was the fact that she couldn’t tear her eyes away from it to look at Spike, so fearful that she was going to miss its response that she was sacrificing one last sweep of his handsome face in order to not to.

When it moved, it was like lightning. Standing there one minute, and the next, kindling the dead flesh of the kelpie in flames that stretched taller than Buffy, the sudden stench of charred demon scorching the air.

Immediately, Spike collapsed, all tension vanished as his unconscious body spilled over the edges of the stones. The Slayer’s hands were beneath his shoulders in a second, pulling him away from
the fire that was already starting to lick at his legs, dragging him to safety along the far wall before he became a victim of secondhand magic.

She didn’t even hear the scramblings behind her as she knelt over him, the frantic rush of bodies as the gang beat out the spreading blaze, the ringing of the bells as someone pulled the harness to safety. The only thing Buffy was aware of was the fact that no light in the cavern meant she couldn’t actually see his face very well, a dim outline that her fingers jumped to trace. Still here. Alive. Well, undead. But still here. That was the important thing. Now if he would only wake up.

“Spike,” she murmured, and wished that he had a pulse, just that she could confirm that he was still with her. Don’t be silly, she chastised herself. He’s not dust, ergo, he’s still with you. He’s just… asleep.

Except she could hear both Xander and Riley talking behind her. If they were awake, why wasn’t he?

“Spike,” she repeated, a little bit louder. Light flared from behind her, the soft glow of candles as they were lit, one by one, illuminating the planes of the vampire’s face. It was then that she saw the flutter of his lashes, so dark against his pale skin, and felt herself smiling, her hand sweeping across his forehead as if she had to push back his hair.

“Wake up, lazybones,” Buffy teased, the relief and joy at seeing the silver-free blue gazing up at her a balm to the burning that had been searing her stomach. Over. It was all over. And he was in her arms, perfectly all right, and she could start thinking about tomorrow again, the tomorrow she’d deliberately stopped contemplating as soon as the possibility that he wasn’t going to be there arose. “I believe you promised me the shagging of a lifetime. Don’t think for a second I’m going to let you welch on that one, mister.”

It took him a moment to respond, one hand struggling to reach up and capture hers within its grasp as if the mere exertion was more than he could bear. Linking his fingers through hers, Spike lowered his arm, moaning as he tried to shift his weight, the faintest of grimaces marring his features before reverting back to the weak smile that had accompanied his waking.

“In the words of the formerly immortal Harris,” the vampire said tiredly, eyes trained on the soft hazel of her aspect, “please tell me that worked because I am bloody well not going through that rubbish again.”
He dropped his keys on the desk as if he’d never left. “You didn’t really get a grand tour your first visit,” Giles said, shrugging out of his coat. He motioned to the various rooms as he spoke. “The bathroom is through there, my bedroom is upstairs, and the kitchen you can pretty much see for yourself. And I’ve been told the couch is actually quite comfortable. Of course, I’ve also been told it’s a distant relative to an Iron Maiden, but that assessment came from Spike, so I’m sure you’ll take that for whatever it’s worth.” He paused, turning to look back at the man lingering on the threshold. “Don’t tell me after all this time that you’re actually a vampire and I’m going to have to invite you in,” he admonished Colin, though the mocking tone of his voice was softened by a slight twinkle behind his glasses.

The younger Watcher flushed, ducking his head as he stepped inside, setting the satchel in his hand by the door as he closed it behind him. “I suppose I’m still just a little overwhelmed that you would offer your hospitality so,” he said. “I’ve told you. I can always find lodging at a hotel until I find a more permanent solution.”

Giles cut him off with a brief wave of his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, striding toward the kitchen. “The Council hardly pays enough to warrant such an extravagance when it’s completely unnecessary.” His voice filtered from the other room. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Besides,” Giles continued, “this will give us time to go over some details before you begin your assignment in earnest. Outside of Dall Rath, you’ve not had any field experience, and your exposure to Slayers has been…” He wasn’t sure exactly how to finish that sentence. Colin’s only dealings thus far had been with Buffy; how could he characterize that contact without debasing either one of them?

“Limited, yes.” He picked up a small statue perched rather precariously on the corner of Giles’ desk. Curious. He’d never seen one of these outside of a museum. “To be honest, I never expected Mr. Travers to give me this opportunity. He was most displeased with our failure to hand over the harness to him.”

“You’re not having second thoughts regarding our story?” The older Englishman came to the doorway, eyes narrowing as he gazed speculatively at his new protégé. “You must understand----.”

“No, no,” Colin rushed to assure. “I firmly believe that the Council was wrong to want the harness in the first place. Telling them that it got destroyed in the fire was really our only way to ensure its continued safety. Not that I don’t think the guardian will protect it,” he hastened to add. “But until the balance of three is restored in guarding the entrance to the Otherworld, the fewer outside worries they have, the better it will be for them.”
Slowly, Giles nodded. “You’re going to be a fine Watcher, Colin,” he said. “You’ve learned a lesson already that took me years to acquire.” He retreated back into the kitchen, the other Englishman right on his heels.

“Rupert, regarding Buffy…are you prepared for the…changes you’re going to have to deal with?” Colin queried, surprised at his own boldness for bringing up the issue in the first place. In spite of numerous attempts by the others to discuss it, Rupert had been rather close-mouthed about the subject during the time between the completion of the closing and their return to Sunnydale. Even when Buffy had announced she would be travelling back in the hold of the plane with Spike, her Watcher had remained mute, ignoring the faint screams and jolts that came from the nether regions of the aircraft, not even scolding Xander for his joke about the Slayer and vampire knocking the plane out of the sky with their “shenanigans.” When they’d landed, he’d merely given the pair of them perfunctory orders to meet at the Magic Box the following day, heading to his own transport without paying too much attention to their hand-holding as they walked to their ride.

It took him a moment to answer. The steam rose from the cups in gentle swirls as Giles set aside the kettle, reaching into the cupboard overhead for the biscuits he hoped were still reasonably fresh. “I expect that it won’t be that much different,” he finally said thoughtfully. “Except I’ll most likely have to tolerate Spike’s presence during the meetings. And restock on Weetabix more frequently. For some reason, I suspect I’ll be finding my supplies suddenly disappearing again.”

“Oh, come now,” Colin admonished. “Surely, it’ll have farther reachings than that. They’ve been inseparable since the entrance was closed. You don’t think—.”

“I trust them,” Giles interrupted, and then flushed in mild embarrassment as if a child caught out in a lie. “Well, I trust Buffy. Spike…may take more time.”

He seemed too absorbed in stirring his tea all of a sudden, the clink of the spoon against the side of the mug tinny in the tight quarters of the kitchen. Reaching past him, Colin picked up his own cup, warming his hands against the hot china, and waited for the other man to speak, only to realize very quickly that he wasn’t going to. Oh well, he thought, as he turned back to the living room. I did try.

“He really does love her,” Giles said quietly. When Colin glanced at him, the older Watcher was staring into his cup, his face impassive. “And she’s happy, surprisingly enough. I’d wanted so much more for her…well, I still want more for her. But…he’s not going to hurt her. He’s proven that he’s willing to place her needs far above his own. I suppose I can’t ask for much more than that.”

“You gain a powerful ally as well,” Colin offered, trying to alleviate the other’s strain. “Spike’s far more educated than any of us ever gave him credit for. He’ll be useful to you in research.”

The laughter came unchecked to Giles’ lips, the corner of his mouth lifting into a wry smile. “Yes, because if there’s one thing Spike loves more than unlife itself, it’s research,” he said mockingly. His frown relaxed, easing into pensive contemplation. “I sincerely hope you don’t have to worry as much with your charge,” he continued, his mood a trifle lighter as he sipped at his tea. “Of course, you have a distinct advantage. Your Slayer is only fourteen. Far too young to be considering romantic attachments to the demons she’s been chosen to destroy.”

Colin chuckled. “Let’s just hope so,” he said. “But she’s not a Slayer, remember, merely a Potential. There’s a possibility I shall never have to face the tribulations you have had with Buffy.”

“I still can’t believe she’s here in Sunnydale,” Giles mused. “Imagine the odds.”
“I must say, lucky for me she was. I get to train Amanda…” His voice trailed off, his brow furrowed, as his mind worked behind his eyes. “Damn it,” he muttered after a moment. “Why can’t I ever remember her last name?” He shook his head. “Oh, well. I’m sure it will come to me. What was I saying?”

Giles couldn’t help his smile. “How lucky you are to be on the Hellmouth.”

Colin brightened. “Oh, of course! I get to get my hands into some proper training, and I get to have you as a mentor. Very lucky, if you ask me.”

“Yes, quite.” His tone was dry. “Tossed into the lion’s den, I would’ve thought, though.”

“After the introduction to field experience I’ve had? I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

* * *

“What’d you get me?” Dawn squealed even before Buffy had completely stepped inside. Her eyes were bright with excitement, the smile too-wide on her young face, and the energy was rolling off her in waves as she watched her sister drop her bag beside the door. “Tell me it’s something good. A kilt? A cute Scottish boy? What?”

* * *

Joyce was wiping her hands on a towel when Buffy burst into the kitchen, a welcoming smile on her face. “You’re back early,” she commented. “I guess I’m going to have to move that exercise equipment out of your room.”

That stopped Buffy in her tracks, her eyes wide. “What? I called. You knew---.” She stopped when Joyce laughed, her face relaxing as she realized she was being teased. “Ha ha. Very funny.”

“You’re so easy,” Joyce said and crossed the room to her oldest daughter, wrapping her in a light hug. “Welcome home.”

“How’re you feeling?” She’d been dying to find out the result of all the tests her mother had undergone in her absence, and with her anxieties about Spike safely banished to the world of non-existence, Buffy was now ready to refocus her worries elsewhere.

“Wonderful. Those doctors the Council brought in are amazing. They’ve actually managed to pinpoint the problem. Of course, it’s going to mean some more hospital time, but they say that this should be it.” She held Buffy out at arm’s length, scrutinizing her with a mother’s eye. “You haven’t been eating enough,” she chastised.

“No, I have, but we kind of…lost our cook the last few days we were there,” she said in explanation. “A…haggis accident. Very tragic.”

“Oh. Well, I’ve got a huge dinner planned. If you want to call Willow and the guys---.”
“Listen, Mom, can I ask you a fa---?”

“Geez, Buffy, did you forget how to close doors while you were gone?” Dawn griped as she came into the room and perched herself on one of the stools. She had slipped the gift shirt over her head before entering, the slogan, “I’d rather be Firkin than working,” now emblazoned across her teenaged chest. “And why is that big black van still parked out front? They’re not whisking you away again, are they? Because if they are, I get dibs on your stereo this time. Mom was totally hogging---.”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” Buffy said to Joyce, ignoring her sister’s rambling. “Spike’s crypt isn’t really great for door-to-door drop-off service, and seeing as it’s still daylight outside, I was wondering if it would be OK if he crashed here until sunset?” She gnawed at her bottom lip. They had decided to break the news of their relationship to her mom slowly, not because she was worried that she didn’t like Spike---for some reason, Joyce’s liking of the vampire had never been in question---but because Buffy hadn’t known what exactly her health situation was going to be. Though Joyce had been optimistic on the phone, until she saw her with her own two eyes, Buffy hadn’t wanted to burden her with unnecessary worries about her daughter dating another vampire. There would be plenty of time for spilling of boyfriend details later.

“Of course,” Joyce said in answer to her request.

“Spike’s outside?” Dawn squealed, immediately brightening. “Can I go get him?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. She’d forgotten about the whole crush thing her little sis had going for the blond vampire. This would probably be the first boyfriend the Slayer had ever had that Dawn actually liked, although, in the long run, that might actually work in their favor. “Tell me again why you’re not in school today,” she complained.

“Well, duh, because it’s Saturday.” She was halfway to the door, not even bothering to wait for Buffy’s OK to fetch the vamp. “I’ll bet Spike got me something cool,” she said, her voice trailing back into the kitchen.

“Does this mean you and Spike have ironed out some of the kinks in your…relationship?” Joyce asked once they were alone.

“You could say that.” She paused. “We kind of came to an…understanding while we were in Scotland.” The sudden yawn that overtook her surprised both of them. “Spike said jet lag was easier coming in this direction,” she whined. “I am so going to rub this in his face. Once I have the energy to actually do any rubbing.”

“Look what Spike got me!” Dawn chirped as she came bounding back into the room, the vampire in question sauntering in behind her. She held up the brown leather pouch, its tassels swinging wildly. “He says it’s called a sporran. You wear it over your kilt.” Her blue eyes shot daggers at her sister. “Not that I have a kilt.”

“‘Lo, Joyce,” Spike said.

Buffy’s eyes widened as she watched him lean in and kiss her mother on the cheek in greeting, and went even larger when he pulled a small wrapped box from his duster pocket and pressed it into her hand.

“From the fair land of the Scots,” he said with a smile, affecting a thick brogue.

“Why, thank you, Spike. That’s very thoughtful of you.”
“I got you something, too!” Buffy protested. “It’s just…packed.” Folding her arms across her chest, her gaze locked with Spike’s as he perched himself on the kitchen counter, his coat splayed around his black-clad legs. “And when did you find time to go shopping?” she asked pointedly. “And please tell me you didn’t pay for that out of the money you took from Giles.”

“Told Red to pick some stuff up for me,” he replied with a nonchalant shrug, and though he was doing his best to appear casual, there was no mistaking the glitter of amusement in his eyes as they swept over the Slayer. “And I used my own dosh, thank you very much. Got paid, remember?”

“You’re just jealous because he’s a better gift giver than you are,” Dawn said.

“He is not!”

“I dunno. Leather sporran or cheap pub t-shirt?” He pretended to seriously consider the options. “I think I’m gonna win on this one, pet.”

“It’s hardly a competition, Spike.”

His blue eyes danced as they met Dawn’s. “Methinks big sis is a sore loser.”

He was teasing her and she knew it, but it was impossible not to rise to the bait. “Don’t make me bring up the slapjack again,” she warned lightheartedly.

Dawn’s giggles erupted. “Spike plays slapjack?”

“It was a long flight,” he growled.

Buffy affected a pretend pout. “Aw, does Spikey not like being reminded of losing at such a baby game?”

“It’s not like I lost on games that actually mattered, Slayer. Games that require actual skill, as opposed to the ability to beat at a stupid piece of flimsy cardboard.”

“Like what?”

His eyebrow lifted. “I seem to remember a game of snooker—.”

Dawn’s head swiveled to stare at her sister, oblivious to the sudden flush in Buffy’s cheeks. “Spike taught you how to play snooker? How cool is that!”

“It was just…one lesson. And we never actually finished the game.” Her eyes were locked on his, the pounding of her heart suddenly really, really loud in her ears. Memories of felt scraping against her bottom, his weight pressing down onto her, flooded her head, and it was all she could do to remember to keep breathing.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I seem to remember both of us finishin’ something there.” His eyes sparkled, the same recollections coursing through his mind. He was grinning now, savoring the dance as they kept up the pretense, oblivious to the other women in the room as he lost himself in the game.

“Will you teach me how to play?” Dawn asked the blond vampire.

“No!” Her voice was too loud, her veto too adamant, and Buffy found herself blushing under the curious stares from her family. “I mean,” she hastened to add, “I don’t think you’re going to find that many snooker tables hanging around Sunnydale.”
The awkward silence that followed was broken by Joyce’s stepping forward to Spike’s side. “You’re staying for supper then, right, Spike?” she asked.

Buffy jerked at the question, eyes shooting wide. “Oh, he’d---.”


“What about the rest of the gang?”

She was still gazing at his audacity when her mother asked the question. They’d had an agreement. Slowly. This was supposed to happen slowly. At this rate, she and Spike were going to be having sex on the dining room table before dessert. With her mother and little sister doing dishes in the next room. Which, all of a sudden, didn’t sound like such a bad idea. The sex part, not the close familial proximity part. Her gaze wandered to the kitchen door, the edge of the table just barely in her sight. I wonder if we’d break it, she mused.

“I’ll give them a ring,” Buffy said distractedly.

He could smell her growing excitement, and felt his own body respond in kind. Wonder what she’s considerin’, Spike thought, following her eyes to the doorway, wishing he could see what had captured her attention. Get a reaction like that one and it’s gotta be good.

“Why don’t you go get some Spike some blankets,” Joyce was saying to her daughters. “That cot is still set up down in the basement. He can get some sleep down there without having to worry about the sunshine.” She waited until both girls were gone before turning her wide smile to Spike. “Nice touch with the gift. I’m going to bet that was your idea.”

Probably the last thing he’d ever expected to hear come from her mouth. “Excuse me?” the vamp queried, his own smile wiped from his face as his mind raced to try and catch up to wherever Joyce was leading.

“This thing between you and Buffy. You’re going to have to be far more subtle if she insists on keeping up with this charade. You’re not going to fool anybody.”

Spike shook his head. There were a lot of reasons he’d always had a soft spot for Joyce, not the least of which was her ability to see past all the bullshit. “Told her it was a bloody waste of time,” he said. “But you know Buffy. She gets an idea in her head and it takes a crowbar to get it out of there.” His eyes twinkled. “Can’t imagine where she gets it from.” With a nimble jump, he hopped from the countertop, tilting his head as he regarded her. “It’s not a casual thing, you know,” he continued slowly, measuring his words. “I love your daughter. She’s a remarkable woman.”

She smiled. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know, Spike.” Turning back to the counter, she felt him brush past her on his way to the basement. “Oh, and Spike?” she called as his hand reached for the doorknob. She waited until he’d turned around to look at her before continuing. “Just so you know? I still know where I can get my hands on a good strong axe if I find I ever need one.”

The chuckle rumbled from his chest. “You Summers women are all the same. The bane of my existence, and the light in my eye.” And with that, the vampire gave her a small salute and disappeared down the stairwell.

She hadn’t had this much fun on the Hellmouth in ages. It had been decided before dinner that a night of frolicking and festivities at the Bronze was in order, so when Spike had emerged from the
basement wearing one of the shirts she’d bought for him in Scotland, the dark blue of the cotton singing against his pale skin, drawing the sapphire of his eyes to focus in a crystal clarity that made her feel like she was drowning, Buffy had felt her heart skip a beat, the world suddenly falling to the wayside around her. Eating had taken far too long and when the time came to leave, she could barely mumble a hurried good-bye to her—oddly enough---amused mother before pulling him out on to the front porch. Her mouth on his had been voracious, and he’d laughed as he’d kissed her back, hands digging into her hips after merely seconds to pull her down and away.

“Got all night, luv,” he’d teased, before scooping her hand into his and dragging her down the steps.

That had been three hours ago, and now she was hot, and sweaty, and desperately trying to get her make-up to look half as good as when she’d arrived. From the sink beside her, Willow handed her a third tissue and watched as Buffy wiped the color from her mouth to begin again.

“It’s not like he even cares,” the redhead commented. “You could go back out there looking like Minnie Pearl and Spike would still be completely incapable of even seeing anybody else.”

She couldn’t help her smile. The Bronze was packed that night, even for a Saturday, and though there were tons of pretty girls around, all Spike’s attention had been focused on Buffy, his hand almost always somewhere on her person no matter what they were doing---in the small of her back when they danced, pressing her hips into his; at the back of her neck, a single finger tracing the delicate line of her nape when they sat at the table with the rest of the gang; kneading her upper arms when she leaned back against him, waiting for her turn at the pool table. When he wasn’t there, she felt the lack as a pull from somewhere deep inside her stomach, and would inevitably turn from whatever she was doing to scan for his presence.

The casual acceptance by the rest of the gang certainly made it easier, Buffy decided. Xander and Spike were still bickering, but the tone had changed, no longer the derisive, “I hate you” mocking, but an irreverent, “I know how to push your buttons so I will” banter. There was give and take, with each man at one point having the upper hand, while the girls just laughed or rolled their eyes at their faux posturing.

Even Tara had joined in with the teasing, drawn out by the almost gentle manipulations of the vampire as he set about to include her in ways no one but Willow usually did. At one point, Buffy had caught him gazing at the blonde in a fond sadness, as if she was someone he’d known a long time previous and lost, but when he realized she’d been noticed, he’d merely shrugged the mood from his shoulders, a quirk on his lips, and proceeded to drag the Slayer back out on the dance floor. That was something for her to file away for future potential discussions, she’d decided. Like finding out where each and every one of those scars on his body came from. The minutiae that was Spike.

“Can I ask you a question?” Buffy said, looking into the mirror to gaze at her friend’s countenance. “Did Giles seem extra…wigged by the whole sitch between me and Spike when we got back from kelpie land?”

Willow’s smile was a small acknowledgment that she’d known this query would be coming. “I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about Giles,” she said. “You didn’t see him while you guys were gone. What Spike did impressed him.”

“Impressed him, it’s OK for him to date my Slayer? Or impressed him, I can’t wait to sink a stake into his chest?”

“More like, I can see that he’s not going to hurt her so I don’t have to spend my nights drenched in
sweat from worry, kind of impressed.”

Hazel eyes lowered, suddenly intent on the water swirling down the sink as she washed her hands. “It’s just…I want everything to be all right now. And the way Riley left…”

“You’re not really blaming him for not sticking around, are you? Finding out about you and Spike really sliced into him. And then with the literal slicing when you guys were in the Otherworld?” She grimaced, shaking her head. “Not really conducive to a cozy, let’s be pals vibe, if you know what I mean.”

That part still saddened her. While Spike had rested from the repercussions of the closing spell, Buffy and Riley had sat down and tried to talk it out. She’d tried going through all the speeches she’d been practicing, but at each and every junction, he’d cut her off.

“It’s all right,” he’d kept saying. “I get it.” Then, when he’d left to catch his own plane back to California, the only words from his mouth had been, “Don’t worry about me. Just…be happy.” Like that annoying song, except that she knew Riley really meant it.

The bathroom door opened as a pair of giggling girls stumbled in, the music from the bandstand filtering into the now-cramped space. “Let’s go do the whole last dance thing,” Buffy said with a smile, sweeping away the disquiet in her head with a toss of her hair as she slid her lipstick back into her purse. “I’m suddenly missing the smell of leather.”

* * *

She knew something was wrong even before she was halfway to the table, stopping at the edge of the dance floor and swinging a clouded gaze around the room in search of his familiar bleached head. Even when Willow reached back and grabbed her arm, dragging her the rest of the way to their table, Buffy had known what was going to come out of Xander’s mouth before it ever opened to speak.

“Now, before you start freaking out, everything is fine,” he said, his brown eyes level. “What happened? Where’s Spike?”

“Someone came in that Spike knew, a big wrinkly guy. Said some Truva demons found out Spike was back in town and decided to trash his crypt as a welcome home present.” He grabbed Buffy’s arm as she picked up her coat. “Relax. They’re not there now. But Spike had to go check it out. Everything is fine,” he stressed. “Sit down, have a drink, listen to the tunes. Spike’s a big vamp. He can take care of himself.” He frowned when Buffy pivoted on her heel and began heading for the front door of the club. “Damn,” he muttered.

“Pay up,” Anya said gleefully, extending her open palm.

Willow frowned as Xander pulled a five from his wallet and handed it to his girlfriend. “What’s…going on?” she asked.

“I won the bet,” Anya replied. “I told Xander Buffy wouldn’t even sit down before she went off after Spike.”

“I even did the ‘everything is fine’ bit like he said to,” Xander complained. “Twice.”

Anya patted his arm affectionately. “You did good,” she said. “Spike’s just got to learn to put some more thought into these little surprises of his, that’s all. If he gets interrupted because Buffy didn’t buy his incredibly lame story, then that’s his own fault.”
“Surprise?” More confusion from Willow. “What kind of a surprise?”

Xander grinned, in spite of his failure to keep the Slayer from bolting. “A grand romantic gesture kind of surprise. To say, welcome back to the Hellmouth.”

* * *

Stupid Truva demons, she thought as she marched through the cemetery. Always messing things up. First the chocolate sauce incident with Spike and then…She stopped, smiling. No, on second thought, just messed things up tonight. The Hershey escapade had been kind of fun. But she still hoped one was still lurking around when she got there just so she could kill it good and dead for cutting short her fun evening.

His crypt loomed in front of her but before she could decide whether to knock or just go barging in, her attention was diverted by a piece of paper, pinned to the outer wall with a long knife, fluttering in the slight breeze that drifted through the graveyard. She frowned, taking a step nearer, and tilted her head to better read the script that flowed across its edge.

_Buffy_.

Immediately, she stiffened, head whipping around to scan the area for activity, her Slayer senses on alert. Nothing. Just the quiet peace of the dead sleeping in their graves. But, if she concentrated…

Her eyes fluttered closed, and Buffy found herself leaning toward the wall of the crypt, her hand reaching out instinctively to tangle in the ivy that crept up the stone. He was there. Inside. Moving around. And he was alone.

Lids lifting, she gazed at the note stuck to the wall for only a moment before grasping the dagger’s hilt, pulling it easily from its bed. The paper remained speared by the blade, and she slid it off, opening it from its single to fold to read its contents.

_Pet,_

_Confession time. No Truvas. Just needed to slip away for a bit to get things set up around here without the added distraction of you hanging around. I left things in quite a mess when we left, if you remember, and it’s hardly fit for entertaining anyone as beautiful as you in its current state. But I have to say, the idea of saying good-bye---even just for a few hours---leaves a sour taste in my mouth after what happened in the Otherworld, so forgive me if I didn’t this one time. Not that this is one. Not going through that again, not if I can help it. So, in honor of our first night back, I’m suggesting a tribute to our Highland jaunt, our own Scottish fling if you will. And to set the mood, a poem, by my new favorite country’s national bard, Robert Burns…_

_O, my love is like a red, red rose,_
That is newly sprung in June.
_O, my love is like the melody._
That is sweetly played in tune.

_As fair are you, my lovely lass,_
So deep in love am I,
And I will love you still, my Dear,
Till all the seas go dry.

_Till all the seas go dry, my Dear,_)
And the rocks melt with the sun!
O I will love you still, my Dear,
While the sands of life shall run.

Love, Spike

P.S. In case you haven’t already guessed, adding the poem to this note instead of giving it to you inside was a stalling tactic because I know you left the Bronze as soon as you realized I wasn’t there. Patience is unfortunately not one of your better virtues, so I’ve got to buy the time I need from somewhere. Now get that lovely bottom of yours in here so we can start this night properly.

The first thought that went through her head was totally irrational. Spike’s handwriting is prettier than mine is. The second made her smile. He gave me another poem. And the third made her shake her head. The vamp knows me way too well.

Tucking the note into her pocket, Buffy pushed against the crypt door, the squeak from its hinges sending light shivers down her spine. “Spike?” she called out, and then stopped as her feet crossed the threshold.

Every candle he owned must’ve been lit, scattered around the perimeter of the room like golden sentinels, fluttering in bittersweet symphony in the draft she couldn’t feel on her skin. They illuminated most of the space, leaving the corners deep in shadow, and displayed the rose petals layered across the stone floor in white and burgundy, those farthest from the glow appearing black in the absence of light.

“Did you run all the way here?”

His voice came from the blackness farthest away, a honeyed caress across her flesh, and Buffy smiled as she peered in his direction. “Would it make a difference if I did?” she teased, taking a small step forward.

“Stay there.”

The command was gentle, but it stilled her feet, locking her in place at the bottom step. “You’re in a bossy mood tonight.”

“I just want this to be right,” he replied.

“How did you get all this arranged?” Her gaze flickered through the room. “I think I should be the one asking you if you ran all the way here.”

“I made some calls before we left Dall Rath. All I had to do was set up the candles.” He chuckled. “Betcha Junior’s still lookin’ for his phone.”

“So what’s with the invisible man act? Don’t tell me you’ve gone all shy.”

“I want to make one thing clear, luv. What you’re about to see is a one time only offer. Do not, and I repeat, do not expect to ever have a repeat performance of what you’re about to see. No cameras, no flash photography, and we’ll be just fine. Understand?”

It was an odd appeal, but now her curiosity was piqued. “Whatever you say,” she said, biting at her bottom lip.

She saw his skin first, the light catching the pale luminance of his bare chest and arms as he stepped forward into the orange spills across the floor. His bottom half was still bathed in
darkness, and it was only when he’d moved a few more feet, stopping in arrogant beauty to fold his arms over his chest and gaze at her expectantly, did she realize why he’d made the request in the first place.

Spike was wearing a kilt. And nothing else.

It was impossible to tell in the dancing candlelight exactly what colors were contained in the tartan. Red, and black, and a thinner, dark stripe that could’ve been anything from blue to green, dominated the scheme, but without seeing it closer, there was no way for Buffy to be certain of the others. It hung low on his waist, wrapped casually around his slim hips to drape in gentle folds around his legs, stopping above his well-muscled calves. The quick question—*I wonder what he’s wearing underneath it*—came unbidden to her head.

“You already *have* a kilt!” she accused.

His head tilted. “No, I don’t. I borrowed this one special for the occasion, which is why you are not to get used to seein’ me in it. First thing tomorrow, it goes back to its rightful owner, and I go back to my nice faithful jeans.”

Hazel glittered in the dim light and Buffy stepped forward, her tongue darting out to lick her bottom lip. “Why do men look so good in these things?” she purred as she closed the distance between them. “Is it the whole plaid thing? Because normally, I’d say men in skirts were definitely not my thing. But now…” She shook her head. “I think I’m going to have to re-evaluate my perspective on drag queens.”

Spike didn’t move, only lowered his arms as she approached, inhaling the sweaty musk of her skin. “Not the same, luv,” he murmured, his voice husky. “Kilts are more…manly, for starters. All about the rugged Highlands, you know.” He hissed as she traced a nail around the inside of the fabric at his waist, feeling his erection stiffen in anticipation of more of her touch. He’d been pretty good about keeping it in control until she arrived; somehow, he had a feeling that the tent effect might spoil his presentation. Now, though, there was no reason for him to hold back. She was here, and everything was ready, and he needed her.

“So this is our…Scottish fling, you said?” The catch in her voice wasn’t the only indication of her mounting desire. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her skin was crawling with millions of silky fingers, fingers she was wishing were his.

He didn’t answer. Instead, she watched as his eyes fell to her mouth, lashes low, hiding the blue from her scrutiny as he ducked to capture her bottom lip between his teeth, nibbling at the tender flesh before sliding into the kiss. Her nails dug into his waist, torn between the satin of his skin and the itch of the tartan, inviting him in to search the depths of her mouth, tongues sweeping and tasting, the memory of every previous caress erased with the urgency of this one.

The growl rumbled from Spike’s chest as he pulled away, taking both her small hands in one of his to lead her from the upper chamber and toward the ladder that went downstairs. He’d been planning this ever since they’d forced him to rest after the spell, thinking of ways to make their first night back on the Hellmouth special, and though he hated the kilt with a passion he usually reserved for the poofter, he had to admit it had been worth it to see the reaction on her face, to hear the exhilaration surging through her veins. Who knows? he thought as he guided her down the rungs. She just might be able to talk me into borrowing this bloody thing again if this is the kind of reception it’s goin’ to get.

Spike had taken the same care with the downstairs décor, rose petals and candles lending an ambience the space normally lacked. The bed was freshly made—had to thank Clem for going out
and buying a new set of sheets, fresh start and all that---and the corner of Buffy’s mouth lifted when she saw the black satin. Not really a surprise with that one.

“Here I thought you would’ve had plaid blankets,” she said, running her fingers along the silky edge. “And where’s the space heater? It’s not nearly cold enough down here to really be Scotland, you know.”

He stood behind her, pressing his arousal into her hips as his hands slid around the front of her stomach. “Think you’ll like it better this way,” he murmured into her neck. “Don’t have to sleep with socks on.”

The breath caught in her throat as his hand cupped her breast. “Thought you…” Buffy gasped as he caught her nipple between his fingers. “…liked the socks.”

“Like you,” Spike growled and before she could stop him, he’d pulled her top over her shoulders, exposing her bare skin to the chill of the air. His hands descended immediately to her skirt, tugging at the button to loosen it from her hips, and stepped back just enough to let it drop to the floor.

When she turned in the circle of his arms, she caught him just as he grabbed the edge of his tartan. “What’re you doing?” she asked.

For a moment, he looked confused. “Takin’ the bloody thing off,” he replied.

Buffy shook her head. “Uh uh. You have any idea how long I’ve waited to see you in this? Leave it on.”

His smile was slow, his nostrils flaring as his tongue ran along the edge of his teeth. “That’s one to remember,” he drawled. “Slayer likes to play dress-up.”

“Slayer likes you,” she taunted, oh so casually tossing his words back at him. Gripping his hand in hers, she leaned herself back onto the bed, tugging his weight down on top of her so that she was pinned to the mattress, the kilt bunched in heavy folds between them. Reaching down, Buffy grabbed its hem, dragging it upward, allowing her nails to skate along the back of Spike’s thigh.

The sharp exhalation at the contact caused his eyes to glitter, his mouth to descend to hers as he swallowed her down in a ravenous kiss. He hated the fact that she was keeping him from touching her, the wool of the kilt an uncomfortable itch just begging to be scratched, but he had to admit, as she exposed the curve of his ass to the air, the contrast her smooth skin made from the fabric actually made him harder, his cock straining to reach her. She was healed quite well from their adventures in the Otherworld and while the lovemaking they had shared when they’d believed it to be their last had been shattering, Spike was dying to just be able to let his passions go, to pound her into the mattress with the force he knew she could take, to make her feel just what loving her did to him.

Only when she felt the need to breathe did Buffy break from the kiss, chest heaving as Spike slid his mouth down her neck to suckle at the pulse point in the hollow of her throat. Too many wounds had kept them from truly being able to let go with the other over the past few days; even their romps in the hold of the plane had been subdued compared to what she knew they were careful of. Now, though, it was time for a different story.

Using her cheek to nudge at the top of his head, Buffy lowered her shoulder, forcing him to break the contact from her skin with an audible sucking sound that promised of infinite pleasures should it continue. “Spike,” she breathed, and waited for him to look at her, drinking in the sapphire almost completely lost to the black of his dilated pupils. She smiled, lifting one hand to caress his
swollen bottom lip. “Don’t hold back,” she said. “Just…don’t…please?”

The next few minutes were lost in a flurry of hands that couldn’t stop the caressing, raking over skin that in turns chilled and burned, losing what last barriers between them prevented the joining both wanted, both needed. With the kilt twisted into a knot against their stomachs, Buffy grasped the firm musculature of Spike’s ass, eyes fluttering shut as he positioned his dripping cock at the seeping entrance between her legs, back arching as he buried himself inside her.

Too much…and not enough…filling and pounding inside her as she clung to his back, trying to remember to breathe as each stroke throbbed inside her, his mouth never stopping its exploration of her skin, sultry and sweltering, threatening to melt her muscles into the comforter they hadn’t even bothered to pull away. No holding back. No holds barred. All the walls were now down, pulled apart with bloody fingers to lay in shards at their feet as they rode out their union in a frenzy of grunts and screams, oblivious to everything else in the world but the other, drowning in the tomorrows that their bodies promised.

Spike felt her come the first time when she clenched around his cock, her channel tightening around him to the point where he hesitated, holding himself there for the briefest of moments while the shudders overtook the Slayer’s flesh. The sight of her neck as she threw back her head, the gold of her hair splayed against the black satin, made his mouth water, the flecks in his eyes dance as he struggled to contain the demon rising to the front, and instead, renewed the rhythm, sliding in and out, daring and driving her to crescendo a second time within his embrace, even as his own orgasm threatened to explode.

“Yesss….” Buffy hissed and pulled his mouth to hers, sucking his tongue down as she forced him to quicken his pace, thrusting and riding the sensations that eddied around them…through them…crying out loud when the second climax coursed through her body, wracking and tremoring as his closely followed.

The kilt was damp with her sweat and juices, pooled around their hips as Spike slowly pulled himself out, his body trembling as it unsheathed itself from her warmth, jumping from the raw contact of the fabric against his sensitive cock.

Buffy giggled, the sheen of perspiration making her cheeks glow. “Aw, don’t tell me we broke widdle Spikey,” she teased, reaching down to drag the material back over his dwindling erection.

The vampire snarled, but the smile that twisted his lips belied the effect, and he grabbed her by the hips to roll her onto her side, keeping her hands firmly away from the kilt as he did so. “Not so little,” he growled, dipping in to claim her lips one more time. “And very, very far from broken.”

Her sigh of contentment fanned across his cheek. “I love you,” Buffy murmured as she nestled into his shoulder. “Have I mentioned that lately?”

Spike smiled. “Think that might’ve come up once or twice in the past few days,” he replied. His nerves were still racing, the power that she’d gripped him lingering in his muscles like a fine wine, and he was anxious to go again. But she had settled against his chest, curling herself into his flesh, and as his arm snaked around to draw her closer, the vampire decided that this was almost better. No, not almost. Definitely.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you something ever since I left the Bronze,” Buffy said, her voice soft, but the curiosity unmistakable.

“Ask me anything. No holdin’ back, remember?”
“OK.” She lifted her head to gaze down at him. “I still don’t know what in the hell happened to you down at Willy’s that night. Not that considering the possibilities of why someone would want you to take a shower in chocolate sauce didn’t give me hours of entertainment, but I’m going to bet the real story is oodles better than anything I could come up with.”

Spike shook his head. “Nope. Ask me anything but that.”

She slapped at his chest, the slight sting of the contact surprising him. “Since when are we keeping secrets here?”

“Since it’s something that makes me look like a total git.”

There was a moment of silence, and Buffy set her chin down on his shoulder, hazel eyes contemplative. “Make you a deal,” she finally said. “You tell me the story and next time, I’ll wear the kilt.”

His eyes glittered, narrowing just ever so slightly as images of a naked Buffy with the tartan draped between her legs, rubbing against her clit, playing across her nipples, jumped into his head, immediately causing his erection to return. “Next time’s goin’ to be tonight,” he warned. Her sly smile told him that she’d known that when she made the offer. With an unnecessary sigh, Spike pulled her down into his shoulder, inhaling the scent of her hair as he mentally shook his head. She was never going to respect him after this, he just knew it. “Fine,” he said. “But you can’t look at me while I do this.”

Buffy giggled. “I won’t. I promise.”

“And none of this gets back to the others. Especially Harris.” God, please, especially not the boy.

“I won’t breathe a word to anyone.”

Silence.

She almost thought he wasn’t going to do it, his body so stiff beneath her cheek. Just when she was about to lift her head, Buffy felt the rise of his chest as he readied himself to speak.

“It goes like this. I was on my way to the butcher’s…”

The End

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