Immortal

by TheSigyn

Summary

While Buffy is living in Rome, she meets the Immortal, a mysterious figure with a dark past who may or may not be evil. But Captain Jack Harkness isn’t some common vampire, and Buffy Summers isn’t just a girl. Each is haunted by grief, by memories and regrets that cannot be dismissed. Immortality is more than just not dying. It’s learning to live again. Not exactly an Angel season 5 rewrite, more a "What else is happening behind the scenes." Crossover with Torchwood. Should be enjoyable even to those who only know Buffy. Based on a challenge by Sunnydalesis.

Notes

This chapter takes place after Torchwood, Children of Earth, and during Angel, Season Five, before Damage.
Jack

I come back to life pretty easily these days, so within seconds of being staked through the heart, I was conscious again. I hadn’t really been expecting the kill. Yeah, I knew I had enemies in Rome, but I had enemies everywhere. Most don’t play the ‘kill ‘em’ card. Most know better, anymore. My normal guy incognito shtick never stuck in Rome, anyway. There are way too many ancient mysteries at play, and way too many of them recognize me.

The cute blonde chick who staked me had spotted me at the club. Our eyes had caught, but she hadn’t let me near. She’d skirted around me, narrowing her eyes, pointedly flirting with other men, but she kept watching me when she thought I wasn’t looking. I’d thought she might be someone from Torchwood London. They were still active, 2003, and they didn’t like me playing around outside their carefully monitored plans. Like they had any jurisdiction over me. The Jack they had on the payroll was still in Cardiff, contentedly chasing around after an open dimensional rift. I think I might even have had a boyfriend, at the time. I can’t remember, off hand. It was before Ianto. That I know.

I’d guessed the blonde was planning on following me after I left the club, which was why I left alone. I had quite a number of choice prospects in the offing, but if there’s ever any risk, it’s always better if I face it alone. I can’t be killed. Random civilians I’m taking home? Oh, yeah, they can die, no trouble. I’ve had experience.

I gave her an alleyway to corner me in. I’d known she was going to. But given Rome, I’d assumed she was going to threaten me, or offer me a job. I wasn’t looking for work, but she wasn’t to know that. I turned and waited for her. To her credit, she didn’t bother to look chagrined when she saw I’d caught her following. “So,” she’d said, her shoulders square. “You’re the Immortal.”

“Mostly what they call me here,” I said. “Yeah.”

“Let’s see about that.” And she attacked. I’d expected a gun, but no such cookie. She launched herself at me, wild, animal, a wooden stake in her hand, and I knew two things. One, I knew what she was. And two, I was outclassed. Skills and experience aside, I’m only human. Slayers had access to ancient dimensional energy that left me in the dust, immortal or no.
“Wait,” I tried to say, but she wasn’t in the mood for waiting. The girl had me staked through the heart before I’d gotten in my third blow. I could have pulled my gun, but... I hate killing if I don’t have to. No one else comes back from that.

I came back, of course. The blonde had only barely enough time to confirm her kill before I was creeping back into action. She was prodding me gently with her foot as I came to. I’d died with my eyes open, so she didn’t notice. “Hard to kill. Right,” the blonde said with sarcasm. She tossed her hair with a scornful laugh. “So much for immortal. That was easy.”

I shook the fog from my head. “I’m easy to kill,” I said. “I just don’t stay dead.” She jumped back. Again to her credit, she looked startled and worried, but not shocked. Clearly things coming back to life was no new thing for her. So. A pro, then. Good to know I wasn’t being hunted down by an amateur. I glared down at the stake protruding from my chest. “Wooden stake?” I glared at her. “I’m not a vampire, bitch.” I grabbed hold of it and pulled it slowly out, grunting with the pain of it. “Unh... ow.” It left my flesh with a sucking pop and I dropped it with a clatter on the pavement. It wasn’t that I didn’t feel pain anymore. I was just so damn used to it. “Thanks for attacking from the front. I hate it when anything happens to this coat,” I panted. “Stake holes in the back would have really pissed me off.”

The blonde glared at me. “Okay. So you wanna tell me how I kill you, or do I just have to keep being inventive?”

“Be as inventive as you like,” I said. “Won’t do you any good.” I climbed to my feet and held out my blood stained hand. “Captain Jack Harkness,” I introduced myself.

“Is that your real name?”

It wasn’t. “It’s as good as any,” I said. “And you, I presume, are a vampire slayer.”

She smirked. “What gave it away?” she asked. “The pointy stick, or the fact that I’m here to kill you?”

“The superhuman strength, since you ask. The here to kill me thing is actually throwing me for a loop, but hey, who am I to judge. Do you have a name, slayer?”

She flinched as if I’d slapped her, though why, I couldn’t fathom. “Buffy Summers,” she dropped. It was an odd name, but I’d heard lots stranger. “And why won’t you die?”

“Why are you trying to kill me?” I countered.

“It’s my job. I kill nasties.”

“Yeah, well, I know that about slayers. Who says I’m a nasty?”

“Well, everyone,” Buffy said. “It’s rumored all over town that the Immortal is back. The most deadly, the most dangerous, the most unholy thing the universe has ever known.” I was actually proud. All of that was definitely me. “The demon underground is terrified, and lots of the humans are, too. I promised some friends of mine I’d look into it.” She looked me over. “So. Carbon dated wardrobe, creepy little ving in the back of my head when I look at you, and I saw you checking out victims, so... knew my job.”

“I like my wardrobe,” I said. “Pseudo World War II military is actually hard to maintain, so don’t knock it. I don’t know a thing about your ving, but the eyes sometimes creep folks out. And I was just looking for some company. I don’t eat people. Well... not the way you mean.”
“And all the stories of you eating hearts and draining souls?”

“I’m betting most of that was from my ex-lovers,” I laughed.

Now she looked a little ashamed, but still wary. “Are you trying to claim you’re one of the good guys?”

“Good and bad are relative terms,” I said. I know by now I can never call myself good. “But I’m not trying to eat anyone. Who was so scared of me?”

“Like I said. Some friends of mine.”

“Alien friends?” I asked. She frowned. Right. Slayer. Tend not to attract aliens. More dimensional shift stuff. “Demon friends?” I pushed at my chest, checking out my wound. I was almost healed up already, though my shirt was ruined. Stupid misunderstanding. But at least wearing dark blue, the blood stains could be mistaken for coffee. I bent down to pick up the stake.

“Witches, in this case.”

“Oh, well, witches don’t like me at all,” I said. “They can’t read me well, and in most of their divinations, I show up as dead. Hence the stake, I suppose.” I handed it back to her, which surprised her. I hadn’t realized she’d still been on guard to kill me – we’d been having such a pleasant conversation. “So you thought I was a vampire?”

“Aren’t you?”

I shook my head. “I’m only human.” 51st century human, which meant there was a little sexual evolution going on, but for the most part I was no better than anyone else.

“But immortal.”

“That’s just a bonus.”

She looked at me. “Sell your soul for it?”

“No. It just happened. If anything, my soul’s kinda fused. Fixed point in time and space.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I’d often wondered that myself. “Well. I just... am.”

“And I say again... what the hell?”

I sighed. It was kind of hard to explain. “I got caught in the crossfire of a temporal causality, and...” I stopped. Slayers were run by the Watcher’s Council, and they were couched in legend and mythology. Temporal mechanics were not taught in watcher schools. “Some blonde chick cursed me, thinking she was saving my life,” I said instead. “Left me stuck like this.”

“Another ex-lover?”

“Oddly enough, yes.”

“How long ago?”

“Complicated. For me, a long, long time.”
“In years?”

“In centuries,” I said. I decided not to get into the millennia. That little fact can creep people out more than my eyes.

She regarded me. “And you’re really not trying to eat people.”

I snapped on my grin. She was cute. “Eat out, maybe,” I said.

She rolled her eyes, but she wasn’t disgusted. Point one to the immortal. “All right,” she said. “Sorry I staked you. Guess I’m glad you really are immortal.”

I chuckled. “You’d be the first,” I said. “You wanna get a drink?”

“I just killed you,” Buffy said. “And now you’re trying to get into my pants?”

Point to the slayer. This was gonna be fun. “I was gonna talk shop, but hey, if you’re interested. I left behind a few choice prospects at the club to give you your chance. Least you can do is sip some cinzano with me, ‘cause thanks to you I’m going home alone.”

“I won’t promise you I’ll be sipping anything,” she said. “But we can find somewhere to sit and talk, yeah.”

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We did, eventually, find a place to sit and sip something, but Buffy was oddly keen on coffee more than liquor. We managed to find an all night café she knew about, and she ordered a macchiato.

Coffee. It had to be coffee, didn’t it. Well, Buffy was a stunner, and interesting, and I was bored. I wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass just because of a few olfactory flashbacks, now would I. But I needed a bit more, if I was going to be facing both Buffy and coffee, so I ordered myself a caffè corretto with a shot of sambuca. I needed the booze. We sat at a table outside, sipping our coffee, and Buffy asked me how I knew she was a slayer.

“Well, they’re thick as thieves these days, aren’t they?” I asked. “I heard something in the underground. Some kind of disruption in the power distribution?”

“All the potentials were activated at once,” Buffy said. “It was necessary.”

“Yeah, I thought there was some kind of temporal closure on the slayer’s energy. That only one girl could contain it at a time.... So that limitation was lifted?”

“Stretched,” Buffy said. “We’re still trying to figure out what that means.”

I regarded her. We. Not they. She was senior. That meant really pro. She hadn’t just had this land on her in the last six months. “So you were the slayer when that all went down, were you?” I asked. She didn’t blush, but there was still an acknowledgment in her expression, without really agreeing with me. I smiled at her, sympathetic. “Must have been a bad apocalypse on the horizon, to have to drag all that power up.” She stared into her coffee. I grinned. “And now you have to figure out what to do with it. So that’s what’s been rumbling in the underground. How many slayers?”

“We still don’t know.”

“You know these slayer chicks keep getting landed in prison, right? Give your average fifteen
year old girl unlimited strength, and you know she’s gonna get in trouble with it.”

“We’re trying to find them. Train them.” She didn’t say contain them but I heard it anyway.

“It’s still all a bit out of hand, though, isn’t it.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” she snapped.

I knew what that was like. I let the silence settle between us for a moment. “It’s okay, you know,” I said. “An apocalypse is like that. I’ve... had to do some pretty... unsavory things to save the world now and again. You’re not getting judgement from me.”

She glared at me, but the irritation was now scorn rather than defensiveness. “You’ve saved the world.”

“You think you have the monopoly on apocalypses, slayer?” I asked. “I used to guard this rift up in Great Britain. There was an apocalypse at least once a year, it seemed. This dumb world is always on the edge of oblivion.” I looked around. “Sometimes, slayer... I think it deserves it.”

“Don’t call me slayer,” Buffy said.

That came out of nowhere. “What?”

“Don’t call me slayer. I don’t like it. You can say I’m a slayer, that’s fine, but don’t address me by it.”

“Don’t want to be defined by it, huh?”

She stared at me. “Just don’t call me slayer.” She took another sip of her coffee. “So this rift, in Great Britain. Is that like a hellmouth?”

“Sort of,” I told her. “A hellmouth mostly opens on other dimensions. Demon dimensions, you call them. With the rift there’s a lot of stuff that falls through time and space, so it’s mostly displaced time flotsam and a lot of aliens. A few dimensional slips, yeah, but... apart from Abaddon, which was a fucking doozy, I can’t think of many demons I had to fight.”

“I fought an alien, once,” Buffy said. “Really creepy thing that had a mouth like a lamprey or something. It tried to kill my mom.”

And just like that, she went from woman to girl. With a single mention of her mother she jumped from nubile and seductive young woman with immaculate breasts to college girl in over her head. One of the worst things about living forever was that pretty soon, everyone started looking like children. I knew I’d get over it again – she was hot after all – but I had to fight myself from getting all paternal. Once I started down that road, things tended to get complicated. If I let it happen all the time I’d never get laid. Or I’d totally fuck up all my lovers and implant a lot of Daddy Issues. Me, I try to leave my lovers better off than when I found them, but it wasn’t always possible.

It was a trick finding lovers these days, anyway. Finding anyone my age was impossible. I always have to force myself to think the words sexually mature rather than the words younger than my great-grandkids. I stopped tracking my offspring after they got past grandchild. Some part of me was always afraid that I’d end up seducing one of my own descendants, but given how long I was going to live – forever – that was eventually going to be inevitable. Unless I wanted to spend forever on my genealogy, which... no. That would be painful as fuck. I tried to get a vasectomy in the seventies, but no such luck. Fixed point in time and space meant the damn thing just healed back to fully functional. Condoms were definitely my friend, but I’d still had too many kids over
the years. It was impossible to keep track of all of their offspring’s offspring. After a certain amount of time, of course, a matching gene here or there was no longer incest, just humanity. I tried to be careful. There were some surnames I tried to avoid, but really, it was going to be impossible to keep track forever.

I’d never had any offspring with the surname of Summers, though, so Buffy was still fair game if I could just keep myself sensible. The coffee wasn’t helping. “You kill it?” I asked, rather than get into that story about her mom.

“Yeah. Evil snot monster from outer space was totally slain,” Buffy said. “And I take it you took out your demon doozy?”

Took out was a pathetically tiny term for pouring the energy of my personal temporal anomaly into a massive satanic demon the size of a small town whose shadow alone ate life, killing me so thoroughly that it took me days to come back, but, “Yeah,” I said. “Totally got ‘em.”

“So, we are pretty much on the same team, then,” Buffy said.

“We were. I’m done with the planet saving for a bit.”

She nodded. “Why?”

I looked at her very seriously. “I’m not sure it’s worth saving, at the moment,” I confessed.

“Why not?”

“Hasn’t happened yet,” I said. “That’s why I’m here now, instead of... later.”

She looked confused. “Don’t get it.”

I wasn’t sure if I should spring the time-traveling thing at her. The incident that was still haunting me took place some seven months in my own past, but would take place some six years in the future for Buffy, and I didn’t want to get into that yet. It was a sordid page in my history, anyway, and one I’d have retooled away if it wasn’t for a promise I made to a dying young man. “Let’s just say, I’m out of the biz, for the time being. I’m here on... a sabbatical.”

“Rome’s a good place for it.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“No. My sister’s in school here. It... just seemed as good a place as any. A few vampires to take out now and then, a nice demon underground, plenty of sanctuaries if we get in over our heads.” She shrugged. “We were looking for a new place to start over.”

“Start over?” I asked. “What ended?”

She looked down into her coffee again. “Everything. We stopped the bad guy. There was nothing else to do.”

I could tell there was more she wasn’t saying. Lots more. Just like there was lots more I wasn’t saying. “Well,” I said. “Since the bad guy’s been stopped, and the Immortal evil you’ve been sent to stake was really just a hot guy in a great coat...” Buffy smiled, but she looked sad. She was awful young to look so world weary. I wanted to hold that sadness. I couldn’t do shit for my own. Maybe I could fix hers. “What do you say, you and I go take a walk? I could show you this little square I know, where—”
“You can stop right there, Jack,” she said. She stood up. This could be either very good, or very bad, depending on the kind of girl she was. I stood up with her.

“What do you mean?”

“I just wanted to figure out what you were,” she said. “Nice coffee, plausible story, and you haven’t gone for my throat. Okay. We’re good. As of this point, I’m pretty sure you’re no more evil than any average single guy in Rome.”

“Well, I do have my good points—”

“But that’s as far this is going, you got that?”

“We can go as far and as fast as you want, Buffy,” I said. I came closer to her. “But there are always things that go bump in the night. You’ve seen them. I’ve seen them. Bumping in the night is... something you and I instinctively understand.”

“I have instincts. You have however long you’ve lived as a player. And you’re used to getting your own way.”

“I’m used to getting what I want, yeah,” I admitted. “Because I give others what they want.” I touched her arm, and slid my hand down to her wrist. “What do you want, Buffy? I would bet you... I’ve got it.”

“You’ve got something all right,” Buffy said, taking her hand back. “Look, I’m really not in the mood to start a relationship.”

“We already have a relationship,” I pointed out. “I mean, you’ve touched my heart, how much more intimate can you get?”

Buffy laughed, but she wasn’t buying. Yet. “You don’t get it,” she said. “I don’t have casual sex with strange men.”

I put my arm around her waist – just lightly. Not so grabby that it would feel out of place. “How about intense, amazing, and earth-shattering sex with strange men?”

“You’re really pushing it, Harkness,” she said through a grin.

“Ooh, Harkness, is it? Call me Captain, it makes me feel manly.”

Her smile snapped off like a light, and when she pushed me away this time, she meant it. I released her instantly. “Sorry,” I said quickly. That had thrown a bucket of water on the heat between us, real fast. I hadn’t said anything offensive, had I? Which meant one thing. “What did I just step in?”

“I...” Buffy stopped and sat back down, looking into her coffee. She looked immensely sad.

“Hey,” I said, and this time I wasn’t able to keep the paternal out of my tone. I sat down and touched her hand. “I didn’t mean to remind you of...” I sat back. “Starting over,” I said. “You really did lose everything, didn’t you. Who was it?”

She looked into her coffee.

“Lover?” I asked.

She covered her left hand with her right, but not fast enough for me to miss the burn scars on the
back of her hand. “It was six months ago,” she said softly. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her pain echoed my own so perfectly that I found myself saying, “Seven.”

Buffy looked up.

“Seven, for me,” I said.

She regarded me, the weight of the world in those painfully young green eyes. “It must have been some apocalypse.”

Oh, shit, I was fucking crying. “Fuck,” I muttered, covering my eyes with my hand. “Excuse me,” I added. I tried to wipe my tears away, and heard Buffy chuckling. I didn’t see anything funny about this until I looked at her, and saw tears in her own eyes, too.

“Stupid, isn’t it,” she said. She grabbed a napkin from the table and dabbed at her face. “You keep thinking you’re done with this shit and then... there it all comes again!” She was laughing at herself more than me.

“It doesn’t go away,” I told her. “I’m sorry, I wish I could say it does, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t matter if you make yourself dead, make yourself steel. Things seep through the cracks. The weirdest stuff will hit you, and even a hundred years later you can find yourself crying, when you thought you were over it for decades.”

“It haunts you,” Buffy said quietly.

“Yeah.” I regarded her. Five minutes ago I had been trying to seduce her. Tears drying on both of our cheeks, suddenly we were past that. “You wanna go home with me?”

“Yeah,” she said quietly.
Buffy

I lay down, sweating, tingling, my body still humming from the sex. “I, god, I needed that,” I said into the darkness.

“I could tell,” Jack said beside me. “You have... skills.”

“I had a good teacher,” I said. I kept saying I never wanted to talk about Spike, but he kept rising in conversations. I kept addressing him obliquely, never looking head on. There were a lot of things that reminded me of Spike that I couldn’t look at head on. Like Jack. Glib talking flirt-savvy dangerous older men with great coats and piercing blue eyes. Those eyes had made me ask him to turn the light off. Here I was again, getting in over my head. Strange immortal creatures with dark pasts who might or might not be evil... hm. Looked like I had a type. The speed with which I’d landed in Jack’s bed was startling to me. I must have been hungrier than I’d thought.

Of course, life seemed pretty short to me, anymore. Didn’t want to put things off.... oh, god. Some other player had said that to me once, hadn’t he. I’d turned into Parker? Well, I sure never planned on sleeping with Jack again, so... yeah. I probably had.

“You were taught all that, were you?”

“Well... no. Some is instinctive slayer stuff, I think.”

He chuckled. “Slayer stuff,” he said. He seemed to find a lot of what I said some kind of amusing. He’d turn all condescending at strange moments and look at me like I was some kind of kid. Angel used to do that. Hell, Angel still did that – it was one of the reasons I couldn’t bear to be in the same room with him anymore. “Well, I’m glad to know I can serve a purpose, and finally give a young lady her just desserts.”

“Is that what you think this was?”

“Well, next time we can incorporate some tiramisu, if you’d like. But otherwise, yeah.”

Next time. I did not like the sound of that. “Who says there’ll be a next time?”
“You, every time you moaned,” Jack said.

Another sexy guy who was good in bed, and thus convinced he was god’s gift. God, I was gonna be in trouble at this rate. I couldn’t do that again. Fortunately, I was pretty sure if I nipped this quick, it wouldn’t be a problem. “You know, Jack... that’s not what this is,” I said. “Things are... kinda up in the air for me. This was really nice. Really. But I don’t want you getting the wrong idea—”

Jack stopped me. “Wait a minute. Are you seeing me off?”

I sighed. I’d been hoping to rest a few more minutes, but I knew this pattern, too. I sat up. “Really, Jack. It was great. Thanks. I’ll see you around.” I had slayer night vision, so finding my clothes wasn’t a problem.

It still was for Jack. He shifted and turned on the light. “Wait a minute,” he said. “You’re not allowed to run out on this.”

I rolled my eyes. Why was it that guys always thought they owned you after they’d fucked you? “Jack—” No. Stop. You can do this without being a bitch, Buffy. I sat down on the edge of the bed. “Jack, I can’t do... what you’re asking. This was nice. It was. But I can’t... I’m not gonna fall in love again. I just can’t.”

“I’m not telling you to fall in love,” Jack. “God, please don’t.”

I was surprised.

“Look. You’re reeling from something,” Jack said. “So am I. You weren’t wrong about last night. I was hunting.”

I hadn’t been nervous, but I quickly glanced around looking for something I could turn into a stake. Among other things, Jack had hung a loaded gun on the side of his chair, but I was never good with guns. Jack’s room was full of antiques, though, and the legs on the bedside table beside me could be easily snapped to make a stake. I always knew what could be quickly broken to make a stake. “Were you,” I said evenly.

“Not for blood. But for bodies. I go hunting every night,” he said. “Something, someone to hide in. To disappear in. I don’t like facing the dark anymore, I can’t face the morning coffee....” He stopped. “This sex was amazing, Buffy. You know it was.”

I nodded. “It was pretty good.”

Jack looked offended. “Pretty good,” he asked. “Did you just claim that my lovemaking was pretty good?”

It was. It was very physical, though, and I’d had better. Lots better. Beyond compare, other dimension, tear the house down better. Better for me, anyway – I could tell he knew his stuff. But he wasn’t... my opposite.

“My bedroom skills have been called innovative, bordering on the avant garde. And you just claimed I was pretty good?”

I laughed. “Did baby bruise his widdle ego?” I asked. “No, really, Jack, it’s been great, but I told you. I’m not starting a relationship right now.”

“And I can’t believe I’m asking for one, but I want to learn you,” he said. “Look, one night
stands are just that. One night. And they are simple. But they’re ordinary. If you want really good sex, you need to learn the other person, and you’re worth learning.”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d had that drilled into my head by a man who had learned me inside out. “That gets complicated, Jack. I don’t want complicated.”

“What if I promise not to fall in love with you?” he said.

Well, that was blunt. I tilted my head back. “You can’t promise that.”

Jack laughed, kind of helplessly. “Yeah, actually, I can.” He sat up. “No forevers. No eternities. No happy ever afters. Those are three things I can promise.”

God, that sounded tempting. After last year... and the year before. “You’ll want more.”

“I won’t.”

“Everyone always wants more.” Jack reached up to touch my cheek, and I pulled away. “No. There isn’t any more of me to give. Not anymore. Please, come on. Don’t do this.”

“I won’t stop you, but you’re wasting a great opportunity, here.” He leaned back and put his hands behind his head, looking suave and seductive. He smiled, showing off little dimples I knew he knew all about. He knew exactly how charming that grin of his was. “Don’t tell me you weren’t burying your grief in this.”

I regarded him. “Was that what you were doing?”

“That’s what I’m always doing,” he said.

“I’m not gonna love you,” I said. “I’m never gonna love you.” God, this sounded so familiar.

“That’s fine with me,” Jack said. “I don’t really want you to. I just want to screw you until your voice goes out and your legs go weak and I can finally reach the end of that excellent slayer endurance.”

I chuckled. “Can you keep it going for five hours straight?”


“Then don’t bother,” I said. “My endurance is set to hunt vampires. You’re just a man.”

“And you’re just a woman,” he said. “Here.” He reached across to the chair and pulled his blue military coat onto the bed. “I think I got... there.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. It was a keycard. “That’ll get you into the lower compound. I’m here by two most nights. I may have a guest. You don’t have to join us, but don’t freak out if I have company.”

“Are you giving me permission to come and go as I please through your house?”

“The house is rented. Nothing here is mine, save the clothes on my back. And what I just did was give myself the opportunity for some really great sex, any time you want it.”

“And how often do you think that’s going to be?”

Jack smirked. I knew that smirk – or the sentiment behind that smirk, anyway. The first time I saw that cocksure kind of smile, I wanted to hit it. I wanted to hit it now, too, but I’d break Jack’s jaw. He was no vampire. I took up the keycard and slipped it into my wallet. “I’m taking this,
because I don’t trust you,” I said. Which struck even me as lame.

“It was lovely to meet you, Buffy,” he said, his white teeth glistening. “I’ll see you around.”

I stalked off into the morning.

Ten minutes later I was standing at his bedside again. “I am never going to love you,” I said.

“Fair enough.”

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“Okay,” I said. “I’m finally gonna ask.”

“It’s just creativity, baby,” Jack said. “You gotta learn to have fun with it.”

“Not that,” I said. I leaned back, my head against his warm chest. The warmth always felt a little wrong to me... I lifted up his hand and fondled his fingers. “What’s with the big ass watch? You never take it off. Not even in bed.”

“Sure I do.”

“I’ve never seen you take it off.”

“No, you haven’t.”

I looked up at him. “Are you telling me you don’t trust me, Jack Harkness?”

“Why wouldn’t I trust you, Buffy Summers?” he retorted. It was getting to be a running gag. The trust thing. Neither of us trusted the other. He knew. I knew. Neither of us knew a thing. He was grieving for someone big time. I was grieving for the man I was beginning to suspect was the love of my life. And neither of us said a single word about them.

It often meant we stepped in things we shouldn’t. Jack had a peculiar melancholy about coffee, which frankly weirded me out. How was I supposed to live without it? Conversely, I could not stand the scent of bourbon on Jack’s lips – to the extent that he’d promised to stop drinking it entirely – and I had to clench my fists whenever I passed anyone smoking the right kind of cigarettes. Also, the way Jack swirled his coat sometimes bugged me. The eyes had gotten easier. The piercing blue was distracting at first, but I soon learned they really were nothing alike. Jack’s eyes held depth, weight, a lot more time than I wanted to think about, but to my relief, they never once showed any love or adoration. I was free of that. Spike was dead, but his eyes had always been alive. Jack was always alive, but no matter how they sparkled with mischief, his eyes were often very dead.

But not sharing also meant there was a lot neither of us talked about. I don’t think either of us were lying. I know I wasn’t. Jack would have given me a better tale if he was; I had no doubts about his ability to lie convincingly. But it was hard to trust each other with anything other than sex. I didn’t even allow any bondage play, which I used to love. We’d fake it sometimes, holding on to a pole or something, as if we were bound, but I didn’t want to trust him with anything. He seemed to accept that as perfectly normal. The rule was, he could pull out the whips, but not the chains. We both needed pain some times, seemed to feel the need to be punished, but our styles were different. Organized whips and straps didn’t really do it for me, and forced combat sparring did little for him. We were good together, but we didn’t mesh. I couldn’t trust him when I couldn’t turn the tables.
I never slept beside him, either.

“So what’s with the watch?”

“Wrist strap,” he said. “It’s lots more than a watch.”

“Nifty compass?”

He smiled. He did have a charming smile, and the bastard knew it, too. “Among other things.” He reached down and opened it.

It was simple. Three buttons, a dial, a small digital screen. The screen was blank. There was a small blue light glowing on the bottom, but otherwise the thing was wholly unremarkable. “What is it?”

“That, my dear, is the source of all my nifty powers.”

I reached out and touched it. “This is why you’re immortal?”

“No. That is why immortality doesn’t suck as much as it could,” he said. He pressed a button, and suddenly a soft, clear music emanated from it. It didn’t sound tinny or electronic. It sounded as if I was in a room with a light jazz band. “Want to know the weather?” He asked. He touched another button, and up came a hologram – a hologram – of a map of Rome, with little dots and lines, indicating weather patterns and where there were likely to be showers that day. “Looking for a demon?” He touched another button, and the weather was replaced by a series of little moving dots, which wandered over the green projected streets. “There’s all non-terrestrial activity. And...” he pressed another button, and suddenly there was a tiny hologram of a curious looking blonde – oh. Me. Underneath the image a bunch of pertinent information scrolled. Heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure – how the hell was it reading my blood pressure? At the bottom a little red note lit up. “Anomaly detected: alien energy signature. Enhanced strength. Unknown psychic abilities. Use extreme caution.”

“What?”

“It just told me you, my dear, are a Vampire Slayer.”

“Alien energy signature?”

“You’d call it ancient demonic power,” Jack said. He shrugged. “Same shit, different era.”

“What the hell is this?” I asked. “It’s like totally steampunk.”

“I think I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said. “Or a sign I’m getting old.”

“Is it magic?”

He shook his head. “No, tech. But yes, magic. Arthur C. Clark was the one who said any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Even all the stuff you and your watcher council think of as magic gets understood and settled down into technology eventually. They do stuff with robots you couldn’t imagine.”

“You’d be surprised,” I said wryly. “And they put it all in this strap?”

“A lot of it,” Jack said. “This was survival gear from the 51st century.”

“It’s from the future?”
“Yeah.” He frowned. “You don’t look as impressed as I’d expected.”

“I jumped a portal into the past, once. It must be possible.” He didn’t look as impressed as I had expected, either. Apparently time jumping didn’t seem odd to him. I regarded him. “Are you from the future?”

“Past, future, and a lot of other places in between,” he said. “Immortality gives you lots of time.”

“And you brought this from the future? Kind of a magical Swiss-Army knife?”

He looked indignant. “This is one of the most sought after technologies of all space and time, I’ll have you know.”

“Poor baby, do I not sound impressed enough?” I asked. “So you basically have a bunch of spells at the touch of a button?”

“Pretty much,” Jack said. “It’s psychically controlled, to an extent, so so long as I know what it can do, almost any of those buttons will do it. And you,” he pretended to examine the strap, “are impressed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Am I.”

“Heart rate elevated, skin temperature rising, yes, I think you, my dear, are turned on by nifty gadgets.”

“Or I might just be getting pissed off.” The truth was, I was turned on, but not sexually. This was useful.

“Well, better pissed off than p–”

“What are its limitations?”

“What?”

“What can it do? Can you write me out a list?”

Jack laughed. “No. This is my toy, Buffy. Hence why you’ve never seen me take it off.”

I sat up. “Okay, so, it can read or at least download a localized map. It has the ability to track demon activity. It can read a body print and pinpoint demonic energy.” I listed stuff off on my fingers.

“Stop it, Buffy. I didn’t show it to you to become part of your little slayer army.”

“But what if something happens?” I asked. “The world goes through these little apocalypses all the damn time. I need to know what my assets are.”

“Not. Me,” he said.

“What?”

Jack sat up. “The next time the world ends up in peril, it can save itself without me,” he said. “I’ve paid my dues, I’ve played my part, I’ve done my share. I’m out.”

“But what–”
“I’m done, Buffy,” he said sternly. “I don’t care what you may see on the horizon. I don’t care who’s about to die. I don’t care what monster is rising out of the dark.”

“So, what, if hell’s about to spring up on earth you’re just going to sit there?” I asked. “Living forever at the right hand of Satan?”

“If that’s what it takes to get people to leave me be, yeah,” he said. “If you want to throw your life away, saving the world, you go ahead. Leave me out of it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had immense amounts of power. He had magic at his fingertips, all the time in the world to learn new skills, and he didn’t have to worry about not being there tomorrow. And he thought the world wasn’t worth saving? What the fuck was I sleeping with? Spike had been pure evil, and even without a soul he’d wanted to save the world. Jack wasn’t evil, in the sense of serial killer criminal vampire eating people evil, but I was becoming more and more convinced that he really wasn’t any good. “You know what? I will.” I stood up and got dressed.

“And now you’re pissed off,” he said.

“Yep.”

“I really have done my share, Buffy. You have no idea the prices I’ve paid.”

I slapped him. I was as surprised by it as he was. A white edged hand mark showed up on his face, and I almost apologized, but I was too angry. “Grow up,” I told him. I shrugged on my coat and headed out the door. “It’s not all about you.”
“It’s not about you,” I said to Angel. “It’s not even about me. It’s about her.”

“You’re right, it is about Buffy,” Angel said. He slammed his coffee cup down on the table, and a splash of blood stained his desk. It looked bloody appetizing. I hadn’t eaten a thing since I’d been mojoed up. Hard to drink blood when you’re not solid. “It’s about Buffy Summers and what she deserves in life. And what she deserves isn’t you, and it isn’t me. She deserves sunshine and freedom and happiness.”

“She deserves someone who’ll stand at her back no matter what the hell hell is throwin’ at her!” I snapped. “Not some ponce who’ll march off all martyred while leaving her alone to die.”

Angel winced. Good to see. “Like you ever saved her.”

I’d saved her a lot, but his arrogance about that annoyed me more than the assumption. “Like you even knew her,” I retorted. “She didn’t need saving.”

“Oh? Then why did she die in the first place?”

“She’s not...?”

“I meant two years ago.”

I scoffed. “Buffy was fine. It was her little sis needed saving. And what the hell do you know about it, anyway? I was the one getting into it, fighting, scrapping, getting tortured half to death by gods, and no shred of a soul to make me feel all martyred for it, either.”

“You just wanted to get into Buffy’s pants.”

“I already knew she’d never love me!” I snapped, remembering that intense moment in her house just before we went to fight Glory. Unfortunately, both Angel and I heard what I said. Angel raised one of those heavy brooding eyebrows at me. “That wasn’t what I meant,” I back-pedaled. “What I meant was, that wasn’t why I was doing it. She needed me, and I was there for her. Whenever she
needed you, you were off playing super-saver coupons with your precious soul.”

“Buffy needed me out of the way,” Angel said. “It was... too difficult being around her.” He said it all dark and sad and brooding, too, as if he expected me to feel sorry for their star-crossed love.

“Yeah, well, maybe it is, for you, but that doesn’t mean she shouldn’t know where I am!”

“You’re not anywhere. You’re dead.”

“Knew that for a while, mate. She knew it too.”

“You’re right,” Angel said. “She knew it. And you know what?” He stared at me. “She was fine.”

“What do you mean?”

“She came to LA just after it happened. Best place to reconvene before they sorted themselves out. Buffy lost her home, because someone had destroyed it, and she came to me. Just like she always will.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way before. I’d closed the bleeding hellmouth, saved sodding humanity; I hadn’t thought in terms of destroying Buffy’s home. That house on Revello Drive, which smelled of Buffy, held Buffy’s photos and her shoes and her old stuffed animals. That basement where she’d tended the very bruises she gave me, where she took me into her arms, let me hold her close, feel her against me. The old crypt where we’d shagged more times than I could even count, Willy’s bar where we got drunk together, the cemeteries we patrolled, the streets we’d fought demons in, the sewers we chased nasties into. The Bronze. Joyce’s grave. All of that was gone. It was my home as much as it was Buffy’s, and here was Angel, with his dark brooding forehead all foreboding, telling me that I’d destroyed it.

It didn’t feel very noble put that way.

“And she hung out with her friends,” Angel went on, “and she checked out flights to Europe, and she laughed and joked with those innocent little girls, and I never once saw her shed a tear.”

“Yeah. Innocent little girls,” I muttered, but at the same time I realized – Angel didn’t know. Buffy hadn’t told him about the slayer spell – every potential slayer in the world activated, the power shared between all of them. Angel didn’t know... which meant Wolfram and Hart didn’t know. Well, I wasn’t gonna betray them. If Buffy hadn’t seen fit to share all with Broody McHairgel here, her secret was safe with me.

But she wasn’t. “She deserves to know I’m back, Angel.”

“Who says she doesn’t?” Angel asked.

“What, did you call her?”

“Not about you, no.” I could usually tell when he was lying. He was being misleading here – he hadn’t called Buffy at all. “But come on, Spike. She’s got Willow, avatar of... I don’t even know. Her own goddess, maybe. She’s got what’s left of the watcher’s council. She’s got that coven in Scotland or wherever. Do you really think that they wouldn’t have some idea of what’s going on here in LA? I know I keep abreast of her whereabouts.”

“Spike—”

“Well, what else do you call the guy whose *modus operandi* is to betray any woman who gives him a happy?”

“If Wesley felt that Mr. Giles needed to know about you, he would,” Angel said. “And he’s with Buffy, last I heard.”

“Have you asked him?”

“I mostly let Wes handle his own affairs.”

“Oh *come on!*” I snapped. “Just give me a bleeding phone number! Hell, call her yourself! Buffy, by the way, Spike’s here!” I wished I could kick his desk. Hell, I wished I could kick him. “Stuck here.”

“I’m telling you, Spike,” Angel said. “Buffy’s happier without you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know I would be!” he snapped.

“Well, let Buffy know I’m here, and maybe she and her witch can find a way to un-ghostify me, ever think of *that*?”

“Fred says there’s no known magic that can–”

“Red doesn’t even stay with known–”

“And I’m not going to call Buffy up just to confuse her!” Angel shouted over me.

“Shouldn’t that be her decision?”

“But it’s not her decision,” Angel said. “There is no decision. You’re a ghost, Spike. She can’t love you, she can’t be with you. You’re already dead and gone. All she could do is mourn you. Well, easier to do that without you still there confusing matters.”

“First you tell me she probably knows I’m here, then you tell me she doesn’t, and that that’s better for her. Make up your bleeding mind, wanker.”

“I don’t know about better for her,” Angel said. “I’m thinking about better for you.”

“What the hell are you yammering now?”

“Think about it, Spike,” Angel said. “Do you really want to see Buffy? Do you want to hover over a phone receiver, shouting at her across two continents that you’ve burned out? That you’re hanging around this law firm, haunting me in your spare time. I mean, when was the last time you saw her? Just at the end? Your final glorious moment. That’s what she remembers when she thinks about you. The great champion. And now what are you? A ghost of a creature, a shadow of your former self, flickering in and out of–”

As if he’d summoned it, there I went again. Flickering. “Hey!” I shouted. But everything went blurry, and the office flickered out, and there I was again. Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it... damn me.

Hell isn’t exactly the highest ranking on the Zagat’s guide even for a demon. The ambiance is
lacking something in appeal. I wouldn’t have liked the place even without a soul. Of course, there
was a real question as to whether or not I would have been condemned to eternal torment if I hadn’t
bothered to go get one. No one I knew had ever really asked what happened to demons after they
died – I’d always thought they were just dead, and good riddance. But the torment... well,
fortunately, the torment was easy to understand. I was just burning again. Back into the fire, eyes
melting out of their sockets, bones splintering into ash, burning up in a pillar of flame. I’d stopped
laughing about it. It wasn’t funny anymore.

Screaming came from all around me, as other tortured souls suffered their eternal torment. God,
this place was gonna get dull.... You’d think that throwing your life away to save the world and the
woman you loved would be enough to earn a bloke at least a tasty oblivion, if not a picnic blanket
on the Elysian Fields, but hell. Hell. That was where I was headed, wasn’t it.

“– and at least Buffy and I knew where we stood with one another. You, you were just there, and
she needed another strong arm.” Angel had been so wrapped up in hearing himself talk that he
hadn’t even noticed I’d flickered out. Bastard. “I’m not gonna pretend that I know all of what
happened between you and Buffy, but it was war. You can’t go trying to pick up the pieces after a
war, Spike. You already know the pieces are blasted all over.”

I walked off. I wondered how long he’d keep talking before he realized he’d only ever been
talking to himself.

***

“Hey there, pet.”

“Oh, Spike!” Fred said. “You startled me.”

“No, I didn’t.” I regarded Fred. She was an odd bird. Sharp enough to cut her own throat, she
could play pretty flighty at times, but she was tough as nails under that skinny little shell. I didn’t
faze her at all. Evil deadly vampire, me, and she thought nothing of me ghosting my way through
walls into her little lab. I hugged my arms, and tried to look innocent. “So, uh... what you workin’
on?”

She looked frazzled. She always looked frazzled. “Uh... something for Angel. A demon egg
incubator, so one of our clients can stop using human hosts. But I have been working on your little
problem, I swear,” she said.

“I believe you, pet, it’s just...”

“No,” Fred said. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this. I know I’ve got this. I’m still trying
a spectrographical analysis of your amulet.”

“And where’s that gotten you?”

She looked sheepish. “Um... nowhere. It seems to resist any kind of external influence. Which
makes sense, because, I mean, how could it have gotten out of Sunnydale itself, when everything
else was totally obliterated.” She laughed lightly, and I looked away. Like I needed another
reminder of that just now. “But, I’ve been trying to get a better translation of the text that Angel got
with it.”

“And what’s that say?”
“Um... that’s still coming up with a translation of scrubbing bubbles...” she admitted. “I... don’t think the translation program is really working there. We don’t even know where this amulet came from, or what it is, or why it works.”

“It’s a bloody nuclear bomb, innit?” I asked. “Least that’s what they say it looks like hit SunnyD.”

“Well... no,” Fred said. I had to smile at her. She had this hesitation before she said anything, and then it always spilled out in a massive heap on the floor, a brilliant tangle of scientificy mojo that she was both completely baffled by and utterly confident of at the same time. “There’s no residual radiation or anything, so whatever the power source was, it wasn’t nuclear. In fact, our field team out at Sunnydale is having a hard time figuring out what the power was that caused the crater.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea, pet.”

“Well... yeah, we know it was the amulet, but... usually we can track or detect energy signatures, and there’s no residual anything that we can trace. I mean, there’s all kinds of demonic energy from the hellmouth itself, but that’s just left over from the hellmouth. Demonic energy wasn’t what took it out. In fact, it wasn’t any kind of energy that we can make sense of. It wasn’t chemical or nuclear or gravitational or anything. I mean, energy can never be created or destroyed, it can only change form. You said the amulet emitted a kind of light?”

It was hard to talk about what that amulet had done. It had done a lot of things. Sometimes I felt like I wasn’t part of it at all. Other times... it was... No. No, I didn’t know what it was. I hadn’t felt like me, that was for damn sure. “Yeah.”

“Well, see, that’s the thing,” Fred said. “What destroyed Sunnydale wasn’t mere photons. That’s impossible.” She opened up a file and tried to show me a chart with some kind of numbers and a graph, and it was all bollocks to me. I was riveted by the file, anyway.

On the opposite side of the folder from the charts she was trying to show me, paperclipped on in an afterthought, was a photograph of Sunnydale. Or, in truth, the Sunnydale Crater. I’d never seen it before. I’d heard it was just a crater in the earth. I expected that. But the scary thing was, I knew it. I recognized the hills around it, I knew the landscape, hell, I knew the road the photographer had been standing on. The fried fish place was supposed to be across from the truck stop half a mile ahead, its big old octopus holding a basket of fish ‘n chips glowing in its tacky halogen flood lamps. Now there was nothing but ruin. I didn’t feel at all like I’d saved the world. I felt like William the Bloody had become William the Destroyer, and taken his big bad to new heights. It didn’t make me feel like a hero. I still felt like a complete monster. A monster who had utterly demolished something I loved. I’d only felt like that one other time, and I had a damn soul to show for it, too.

“We’re trying to make sense of the energy signatures we are finding, but, see, we’ve never seen anything like it before,” Fred went on. “Well, no, one other place.”

I only half heard her. “Huh?”

“You,” she said. “Whatever you’re made of, it destroyed Sunnydale.”

She was seeing it that way, too. Not closed the hellmouth. Destroyed Sunnydale. The only thing that stopped me from curling up in a horror of shame was that I thought the town had been deserted. But I only thought that. There had still been stragglers as of two days before Buffy’s final battle. What if there had been diehards, hangers on trying to wait it out in their houses? Innocents?
Families? Children? A town the size of Sunnydale, there could have been hundreds, and it still would have looked deserted. More innocent victims on my head. I was so going to hell.

“I couldn’t stop it, you know,” I said.

Fred looked at me. “What?”

“The power. It just charged through me. It burned, I... Buffy told me to stop. I couldn’t want to, it just... it had to burn.”

“It didn’t seem to be a very focused blast,” Fred said. She regarded me. “Buffy told you to stop?”

“She said I’d done enough.” I was still staring at that damn picture. Everything I knew. Every place I’d walked. Every drop of blood I’d spilled, all were down at the bottom of that goddamned crater. Drusilla’s old dolls and that burned out hulk of a factory. Angel’s Art Deco mansion. The UC Sunnydale Campus, and the old Initiative caves. Hell, those poor fallen slayer girls, their bodies never again to be seen. All of it, blasted out of existence. “I didn’t mean to.”

Fred closed the file, catching my mood. “There was this big evil coming, wasn’t there?” she said. “I mean, the hellmouth had to be closed for good.”

“Is it?” I asked. I gestured to the file with my chin. “Does that look closed to you? Or does it look like it might be about to split apart the earth, and crack the maw of hell open to the sky?”

Fred smiled. “Angel said you were a poet.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fred, is the hellmouth closed, or what?”

“We think so,” she said. “We haven’t been able to get to the center of the des... the cr... the bla...”

“You don’t know.”

“We’re pretty sure,” Fred said. “I mean, we did our research, and there are no more prophesies about Sunnydale. Well, we don’t think there are. And...”

“And you don’t think it matters. Whatever it was, it’s not your problem down here in your bright, shiny office in Lost Angels.”

“Spike, what’s wrong?”

“Did you see Buffy?” I asked. I hadn’t realized I was going to, but there it was. It was out now.

“Um... what do you mean?”

“When they came here, did you see her?”

“Well... mostly I know Willow better,” Fred said. “And she was kind of... humming still. Some spell she did, I don’t know the details. She’d been the conduit for a lot of power.”

Like I didn’t know what that was like.

“How’d she look?”

“Willow?”
“No, Buffy, for god’s sake,” I snapped, trying to soften my anger at the end there. Fred was the last person to deserve my ire.

“Tired,” Fred said. “She spent most of the time asleep in the hotel.”

Tired. That could mean a lot of things. “And the niblet?”

“Who?”

“Dawn. Buffy’s sis.”

“She was okay. Laughing a lot with the other girls. What was with all those girls, by the way? They kept laughing a lot.”

Sharing a big secret. “They were alive, weren’t they,” I said. “They’d all expected to be dead.” Just like I had. I was supposed to be dead and gone, damn it, not floating about like bleeding Casper, waiting to be sucked into hell. “Did any of them mention me?” I felt like a whiny little boy for even saying it.

“Um... Mr. Giles said something to Wesley about the amulet,” Fred said. “I don’t think he mentioned you, exactly. I wasn’t really involved.”

I wished I felt sick, but no part of me felt right in this empty lightshow that was my supposed body. “Did I do any good at all...?” I whispered.

Fred rounded on me, and stomped her foot. “Yes!” she said decisively.

I looked at her with a world weary sigh. “Looks to me like I wrecked a pretty little town, scared a bunch of little girls, and didn’t even merit a mention.” I wished I could flop down onto a chair, but I had to concentrate to do that. Lying or sitting took more strength than just standing – oddly – so I just stood. An empty shadow. Sunnydale was gone. The place where I had fallen in love with Buffy. The place where I had thought, now and again, that Buffy had fallen in love with me. The place that was the two of us, everything we’d done, everything we’d said, everything we’d felt. She and I... the backdrop was Sunnydale. Not L.A. or Europe or Cleveland or wherever. I’d been around the world, to Brazil and Hungary and China. I’d seen the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. I’d traveled through Africa. I’d slaughtered my way across Australia. I’d seen the moon over deserts and mountains and seas and forests. Towns and cities and plains and tundras, I had seen it all, with Angelus, with Drusilla, with countless victims and vamps and demons and monsters. But Buffy was in Sunnydale. Buffy and I had only ever been in Sunnydale. And there was no Sunnydale. I had destroyed it. It was like I’d gouged all my memories out of the earth itself.

“You closed the hellmouth, Spike,” Fred said. “Whatever happens tomorrow, or a hundred years from now, on that spot, the armies of hell are not about to come charging over the desert to slaughter humanity. Evil itself has not corrupted the soul of every human being on earth. Isn’t that what you were trying to stop?”

I wished it was. I wished that had been it. But the truth was, I didn’t know what I’d been trying to do. Be there for Buffy. Be whatever Buffy needed me to be. That was as far as I’d ever been able to think. For her sake, for her, to be hers. Her... anything. Her lover... I already knew I didn’t deserve that. Her friend, her support... maybe she didn’t need that. Her champion.... Well. I’d been that, hadn’t I. Maybe Angel was right. Maybe there was no place to go from there but down.

“Look at me, Spike,” Fred said.

I didn’t want to look at anyone human just now.
“Spike. Look at me.”

She really did have a strong personality for a little bit of a thing. I looked at her.

“You closed the hellmouth. Say it. I closed the hellmouth, I defeated evil.”

“It’s absurd, pet—”

“Say it!”

“I closed the hellmouth,” I said.

“You defeated evil.”

I closed my eyes. “I defeated evil.”

She leaned close to me – close enough that if I’d still had blood and bone, I’d have felt her breath on my skin. “And don’t you ever say anything different.” Then she leaned back.

I took a deep... well, projection of a breath in my non-real state.

“You’re a champion, Spike. You are. The amulet said as much by the fact that it even worked. The translation is very clear on that. You say anything different, and throw away all this work I’m doing, and I’ll... I’ll scold you!” she said.

I laughed out loud. “All right, love. I won’t let the cynic have the run on my mouth, ‘kay?”

“Okay,” she said with a soft smile. “I’m gonna hold you to that. Champion.”

Chapter End Notes

Broody McHairgel comes from Gaia Void Mother.
The slayer’s hand mark lasted upon my face for two days. She’d hit me hard. If the attack had been lethal it would have healed in minutes, but ordinary injury usually lasted as long as it would on anyone. Often I didn’t think Buffy knew her own strength. Sometimes I was tempted to tell her to kill me before we really got into it, just to get her to rev down a bit so we could concentrate on what we were doing. (I would have, except I figured indulging that side of her alien energy source would probably put her in a bad head space.)

God, the passion of that girl. She was eating into her grief the same as I was, but it was a more immediate pain for her. I’d gone through grief before. This grief for Ianto was tough – his death was senseless, painful, snatched from me at the very height of our love for each other. He was young, healthy, and he didn’t have to die. And what his death had turned me into, I loathed. I often wondered if I was grieving for my lost self as much as I was grieving for him.

But for Buffy the grief was new, fresh, very raw. She’d lost her mother young, and there were some other dark slices of history which she wasn’t telling me besides whoever it was that made her cringe whenever I called her “slayer.” But this last loss, whoever it was, had gutted her. I’d realized I sort of reminded her of that lover, who ever he or she was. (I suspected a he. 21st century girls tended to be pretty categorized, and she seemed hetero.) She was young. I kept being reminded how young she was. I kept being reminded how someone that young shouldn’t be filled with so much pain.

I’d always found the slayer anomaly a cruel trick to play on any young girl. Not that I could say a damn thing about sacrificing the innocent to destroy the evil, but it was difficult seeing the toll it could take on the girl. She introduced me to a couple other young slayers, girls years younger than her, who had been activated here in Italy when her power’s temporal lock broke. They didn’t understand. There were so many slayers anymore, they didn’t know what it was to be the only one of their kind. They were tall, strong, confident young women, but they were only part of an exclusive and really nifty club. They didn’t have that lost look Buffy had. That Chosen One weight to their eyes. That air of being alone.

I knew that feeling. I was the only one of my kind there would ever be. Well, more or less. There
were others who didn’t die, but no others, as far as I knew, who never would. I knew there was no way to kill me. I’d spent nearly two thousand years under the earth, coming back to life every few minutes only to suffocate again. I’d spent a year being systematically slaughtered by an alien sadist, who had done everything from vaporize me with plasma to shrink my molecules down till I was the size of a Ken doll, and I always came back. No matter how charred or dismembered I was, my whole body would grow back from whatever the largest mote of carbon there was left. (Always hurt like hell, too, until my skin grew back.) I’d spent a month at the bottom of the ocean once. The pressure and drowning sucked, but the fish were worse. I’d never dared throw myself into a volcano, and I hadn’t yet decided if it was worth it to try and figure out if I could get sucked into a fiery sun, but the results worried me. It might have been simply subjecting myself to pain for eternity, and I might be a little kinky, but I wasn’t that masochistic. I lived in terror of the end of the universe, when there would be nothing but me floating in an empty black.

It was that haunting thought of the empty black which made me want Buffy back. She was excellent for removing melancholy. Which was why I found myself on a Saturday evening standing outside her apartment door with a bottle of wine and a box of Gianduiotto chocolates. When her sister opened the door, she frowned at me. “What do you want?” Dawn asked.

Dawn didn’t like me. I’d figured this. Buffy had told her everything about me that she knew – which, to be fair, wasn’t a lot – and the girl had opinions about everything. Dawn didn’t trust me. Buffy didn’t either, so I didn’t know why it should bug her, if it didn’t bug Buffy.

“I want to talk to Buffy.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to talk to Buffy,” I said. “Is she in?”

“Maybe,” Dawn said. She made no attempt to move from the door.

“Are you going to let me in?”

“No. I’m not inviting you. I know better.”

I sagged. Poor little girl. “I’m not, by the way, a vampire.” And I pushed past her into the apartment. “Buffy!”

Buffy came out of her bedroom, wearing sweats and a sports bra. She’d been working out. “What do you want?” she asked, in the exact same tone of voice her sister had used.

I held out my peace offerings in mute apology, and tried to look charming. She groaned, then sighed, then grabbed a shirt from the back of a chair. “Dawn. I’m going out.” She took the chocolates, dropped them on a table, and made me bring the wine.

So. Not ready to take me back to her bed, but ready to listen. I wondered how many of those chocolates would be left after Dawn got hold of them, but that was Buffy’s problem, not mine. Buffy did not even bother to brush her hair on the way out the door. Not dressed for a date. That was okay by me. She was still twenty-two and gorgeous, so... who was I to judge how she dressed?

Buffy was the first to start talking. “You’re an ass,” she said.

“I know.”

“No, really. An ass.”
“I know.”

She glared at me, and kept walking. There was a sweet little viewpoint at the end of the strata, attached to another one of Buffy’s favorite coffee bars, but this one was only open in the mornings. The tables and chairs were always there, though, and Buffy grabbed one, then kicked her feet up on the low stone wall overlooking the hill. The sun was almost set. “What have you got against the world?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I grabbed another chair and joined her.

“But you don’t want to save it.”

“I don’t want it to be my job to save it,” I said. “Can’t I just live in it, like everyone else?”

“Everyone else isn’t immortal,” Buffy said. She reached for the wine.

“Um... don’t have a corkscrew,” I realized.

Buffy frowned at me, then unwrapped the top of the bottle, and pulled a pen from her pocket. She jabbed it down through the cork, and then eased the cork out, slowly at first, until she could grab it with her fingers and pull. It was impressive. I couldn’t have done it. Even her fingers were super strong. She took a swig. “Careful,” she said, passing it to me. “There’s some cork in the bottle.”

“Wouldn’t have thought you were the kind of girl to chug her liquor from the bottle.”

“You don’t know what kind of girl I am.”

“True.” I took some wine myself.

“Not everyone has the resources you do,” she said. “How can you just waste them?”

“How can human beings waste their best and brightest in war?” I countered. “That’s all it is. Constant war.”

“You’re right,” Buffy said. “It is a constant battle to try and keep everyone safe.”

“It’s a constant battle all the time, and no one is safe,” I said. “Believe me, everyone dies.”

“Yes, but you have the power to stop it.”

“Sometimes I have the power to delay it,” I said. “I can’t stop it.”

“You have enough power to do just about anything, Jack.”

“I don’t, actually,” I said. “I wish I did.”

She gazed out at the city. “I can do anything,” she said. “If I work at it hard enough.”

“No one can do anything.”

“I can,” she said. “If I think I can, and I try to, and never give up. I always have.” She shook her head. “I’ve almost lost count of the number of times I’ve saved the world. I have lost count of the number of people I’ve saved. Just, personally, go on home now, not the world saving. I’ve lost count of all the times I thought I might fail, and succeeded. And you know what, Jack? I’m going to keep trying until I can’t try anymore.”
“That’s what I’ve done,” I said. I took a swallow of wine and handed it back to her.

“I meant, until I’m dead.”

“I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve died,” I said. “There have been times I’ve done it for fun. Times I’ve done it as a job. Times I’ve forgotten how to do anything else but die, over and over again.” I looked over at her. “Don’t you think I’ve earned a rest, yet?”

She took some wine and handed it back to me. “I don’t know, Jack,” she said. “It’s all well and good what you say, but when someone comes to me tomorrow and says there’s a big bad brewing... I need to know everyone around me has my back.”

“I do have your back, Buffy,” I said. “It’s just not my job.”

She nodded. “So. The great big Immortal with the magic wristwatch is going to sit back and watch the little girls fight evil.” She stole the wine from me. “Shadow man.” She took a big swallow.

“Who’s the shadow man?”

“The shadow men were the ancient shamans or whatever who chained down some innocent girl and raped her with the power of a demon,” she said, “and sent her out to hunt vampires, so that they wouldn’t have to.” She stuck with the wine. It didn’t look like she meant to hand it back to me any time soon. “They created the first slayer.”

I regarded her. The comparison wasn’t wholly inaccurate. There was a time I might have been insulted. That was seven and a half months ago. “Yeah, well,” I said. “What if the shadow men had just said, to hell with it. Let the vampires do what they want. Let the girl go. Solving this problem is not my job.” I shrugged. “That’s where I am right now.”

“Right now,” Buffy said. “Are you likely to stay there forever?”


She finally turned and looked at me. “Are you telling me you could change your mind?”

“Of course I could. I do it all the time. Don’t you?” I leaned toward her. “Tell me this, Buffy. Have you never once just thrown your stake in the air and said, fuck it, I quit?”

She looked away, and I thought she was insulted, and then she laughed. “All the bloody time,” she admitted. “And then the apocalypse comes... and I take on the damn mantle again.” She looked at me. “Are you telling me that’s what you’re likely to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said frankly. “I’d like to say no.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m getting sick of the shit I have to do to save this damn world!” I snapped. “Let the girl go. It’s not worth it.”

She considered this. “If the big bad comes,” she said, “and I can’t count on you...” she looked at me very seriously. “I’ll bloody kill you.”

I chuckled. “Fair enough.”
She took another swallow of the wine and handed it back to me. It was half gone. “I suppose you have seen enough to get jaded,” she said. “God knows, I have.”

“But you’re not.”

Buffy shrugged. “I am in my way. I have to live, ‘cause... I kinda made a promise to. Sort of. But part of me doesn’t really care if I do die trying to save the world again.” She shook her head. “I don’t have much to lose, anymore.”

“There’s your sister,” I said.

She smiled. “There was a time I would die for her.” Then she confused me by adding, “There was a time I did. Now... I don’t know.” She reached for the wine. “Gimme that.”

I handed it to her.

“She’s kind of touchy, lately, Dawn,” Buffy said. “Something happened six months ago, I can’t really forgive her for. But more, I don’t think she can forgive herself for, and she resents me for it. I still love her, in my way. But it’s hard to remember she’s supposed to be my flesh and blood. Mostly she just feels like a liability, anymore.”

“But she is your flesh and blood,” I said.

“She’s supposed to be,” Buffy said again. Her voice went kind of distant. “She was given to me, whole and entire, at the age of fourteen. Through a spell. Sometimes, you know... my memories of her slip away. Don’t tell her this,” she said carefully. “But sometimes I look back on my life before she was there... and she wasn’t there. I mean, sometimes I can remember her as a baby, or playing with her when we were both kids. And then, I remember something, like when I first became a slayer, or when I...” She stopped. “I just look back, and I know I was all alone. She wasn’t there for me then, because she wasn’t there. She isn’t there for me now, because... in some ways, she knows she wasn’t there.”

I regarded her. It sounded like some kind of creepy reverse retcon. “Boy, the fates just fucked your life six ways from Sunday, didn’t they.”

She burst into laughter. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, they really fucking did.” She held up the bottle. “Fuck the Powers That Be!”

“Fuck them up the ass,” I said, clinking it with my wrist strap in a toast. “But you do love her?” I asked.

She shrugged. “As much as I can love anyone, anymore,” she said. “My friends, my family, everyone. They all turned on me. Everyone did. Everyone but one person.” She took a swallow. “And he – he’s gone, now,” she added. “So. I’m here with her until she doesn’t need me anymore. Then, I guess we’ll both be on our own.”

“She should be all right,” I said. “She’s, what, eighteen?”

Buffy nodded. “For the most part.”

“She’ll be done with school soon. She seems clever enough.”

“Well, she doesn’t approve of you,” Buffy said.

“Like I said.”
Buffy laughed.

“I’m used to families not liking me much,” I said. “Particularly if they know the truth. Though I don’t get why she seems to think I’m a vampire. I mean, does she honestly think you’d be having an affair with one?”

Buffy looked out over the city, and said nothing. She said nothing so loudly and so pointedly that the tumbler very clearly clicked in my head, and I stared at her. And I thought I was the only pansexual in the city. Heterosexual? She wasn’t even homosexual, as in homo sapiens. “Risky,” I said frankly.

She caught that I’d caught on. “You’re not disgusted?”

She’d actually asked the question. I think she was startled by the loudness of my bray of laughter. I couldn’t help it. I fell off my chair and caught her up in a hug, lifting her into my arms. I kissed her face, bit at her throat – no wonder she liked that so much! – and laughed again. “No,” I said. “God, no, not in the least, you darling little creature!” I could not stop grinning. “Buffy Summers, you are just full of surprises! Thank you so much for coming into my life, I was bored as hell.”

She did another one of those little cringing things she did when I reminded her of something. There must have been something about my personality that echoed in that grief of hers. Just like there was something in her dutiful honesty that sometimes made me wince. “I had a human lover once who couldn’t deal,” she said. “He like... totally imploded. It was ugly.”

“Yeah, bigots are like that,” I said.

“He wasn’t a bigot,” she began. Then she stopped. “Well, maybe. Kinda. He was a hypocrite, is what he was. And what bugged me was that he blamed me for him going off the rails, and... for the longest time, I did, too. I blamed myself, thought it was ‘cause I wasn’t really there for him, when... I had been. But, he was the one who lied, he was the one who cheated, he was the one who showed up out of the blue and made me lose my job and didn’t tell me he was married and fucked with my love life....” She stopped. “Wow. Okay. That’s been bugging me more than I thought.”

“I chuckle. “Hadn’t really said it out loud before?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk about my relationships much.”

“I’d noticed.”

“Yeah, well, you can see why.”

“Here and now, to everyone else? Hell yeah. To me?” I kissed her. “Buffy, I’ve had affairs with vampires myself.”

That did surprise her. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. They really like me.”

“Why?”

“Because they always want to kill the things they love,” I said. I waved at her. “Hello.”

“And you complain about immortality,” Buffy said. The tone in her voice led me to believe she knew exactly how sexy being drained could be, if the vamp in question did it right.
I chuckled. “It does have its good points.” I considered this. “Yeah. Yeah, it really actually does...”

“Not going to say that it’s a shame neither of us is a vampire.”

“Maybe we could borrow one to share?”

Buffy’s smile snapped off. “Not my scene, Jack.”

“I was just—”


I blinked. “How the hell are you able to screw vampires without adding a little evil into the mix?”

“Jack? You’re asking for stories I don’t feel like telling. So, if you want answers, you go first.”

“Beautiful sunset, isn’t it?” I asked a moment later, turning to face it.

“Yeah,” Buffy said. She leaned against the wall and watched the fiery orb descend over the hill. I put my arm around her waist and held her close, brushing her skin under her waistline. She didn’t push me away, so I knew she’d forgiven me – enough to be carrying on with, anyway. She sighed and leaned against my arm. “At least we can share that.”
Buffy didn’t come home, so I knew what she was off doing. I couldn’t believe the hypocrisy. I mean, she’s running off at all hours, screwing around with dangerous immortal creepazoids, and I’m not allowed to spend the night with Giordano unless I go to that damn doctor and let them stick things up my twat. It wasn’t fair. She was so unreasonable.

So while she was off playing hide the salami, I stayed home on a Saturday night and watched movies and ate her chocolates. Buffy didn’t come back until nearly noon on Sunday. She looked exhausted, and announced she was going to bed.

“Too much fucking?” I asked, knowing she didn’t like me swearing, when she’d started doing it all the damn time. “You were at it for over twelve hours this time.”

Buffy looked at me pointedly. “The breakfast meeting? With Francesca? Remember?”

I had forgotten the Roman Slayer’s meeting. I was supposed to bring coffee... oh, well. It wasn’t as if they really needed me. “You could have called me,” I said.

“I tried. Your cell’s dead.”

“There’s a land line.”

“I forgot the number,” Buffy said. “And why is it my job to remind you of your responsibilities, Dawn?”

“Well, when I’d agreed to go, I’d thought we’d be going together,” I said. “I didn’t think you’d be running off with your immortal boyfriend for some synchronized grunting.”

Buffy rolled her eyes.

“How long do you two fuck, anyway?”
“Is that your business?”

“Well, what I put between my legs seems to be yours.”

Buffy glared. “Dawn. If you can’t handle a pap smear and birth control, you’re not ready to have sex. I mean, for god’s sake, you were created by freaking monks! Maybe you don’t even have a womb! Ever think about that?”

“I don’t want some doc sticking things up my privates!”

“Then live celibate. God knows, there are all kinds of mystical creatures who do.”

I wasn’t a mystical creature. I may have started out as some green glowing energy key, but I was pitifully normal in comparison to everyone I knew. “It’s not like you can stop me, you know. If I wanna have sex, I’ll have sex.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Buffy said. “I mean, it’s not as if you listen to me about anything. But I don’t have to help you make some huge mistake, Dawn. I’ve told you how to do it safely. Condoms are in the bathroom. If you want to throw your life away on that pimply lounge lizard, you can either handle the realities of it in a grown up and sensible way, or skulk off where I don’t have to listen to it.”

Giordano’s mom was Catholic, and didn’t think we should even be kissing, so there was no doing it at his place. And it felt weird and sordid to try and rent a hotel room or something, and Rome was freaking crowded. There just weren’t any private corners where I wanted to experience something like that for the first time. I just wanted to be able to invite G home for the night. Why couldn’t she see that? It wasn’t fair. We hardly saw each other as it was, since he went to a different school. I hadn’t seen him in nearly two weeks. I figured if I could just get him to spend the night, he’d make more time to spend with me, but that wasn’t gonna work with Buffy cock-blocking me all the time. “It’s not fair,” I went on, and Buffy rolled her eyes as she always did when I said that. I didn’t know why it bugged her so much. It wasn’t fair. “You go have sex with your boyfriend!”

She started listing off differences on her fingers. “I don’t do it in front of you, I’m twenty-two, I’m on birth control, he uses condoms, we’re capable of talking about it beforehand in an adult and sensible manner, and I’ve gone to the gynecologist twice a year since I was seventeen, and without making a damn fuss about it, either.”

“Oh, because Mom wanted to make sure you weren’t pregnant with some alien vamp baby,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I snapped, even though I’d hoped she hadn’t. “It’s not as if you were all logical and mature when you started to have sex.”

“Yeah!” Buffy snapped. “And, hey, congratulations Buffy, I know exactly how badly that can go!”

“Well, none of my boyfriends have detachable souls. I make sure of these things.”

“Very funny.”

“Come on, are you sure Jack even has one?”
“He’s got a soul, Dawn. He’s just jaded.”

“Like you’d know,” I muttered. “After all, you prefer ‘em without.”

Buffy glared at me. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

I wasn’t sure, actually. I’d just wanted to say something that would hurt her, and that had sounded mean in my head. “You can’t handle a normal relationship, so you run off with that immortal creep,” I said. “Do you know what Giordano’s mother calls him? L’immortale diavolo, amico di morte.”

“I know he’s immortal, Dawn,” she said. “I know why.”

“Do you really?”

“He’s not a vampire.”

“So? You remember the mayor, he sold his soul for immortality.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Like you really remember the mayor.”

She’d been saying things like that a lot lately. It bugged me. “Yeah, I do,” I said. “And I remember he was pure freaking evil.”

“Jack just got cursed. It was an accident.”

“So he says.”

“Well, who else is supposed to know?”

“Just ask around! I mean, when a guy’s street name is The Unholy Death.”

“Giordano’s mother is wrong. He isn’t a devil. He isn’t a friend of death. He’s just a guy who got caught in the wrong curse and has to live the wrong life.”

“And so he spends twelve hours fucking the vampire slayer to feel better about it.”

Buffy rounded on me. “You want the lowdown?” she snapped. “We drank wine. We had dinner. We drank more wine. We went to a club. I got drunk. Jack flirted with some guy. He might even have screwed him for all I know, I was dancing. I got even more drunk. Then yes, I went back to his casa and we fucked, with condoms, about three times, sat in his hot tub, had more wine, and then it was time to go to work. Happy now, Dawn?”

“No!” I came up to her. “I don’t like him. I don’t trust him. I don’t want you dating him.”

“You don’t get a say!”

“You get a say about whether G spends the night here!”

“You are only just eighteen.”

“So? I’m a real person, Buffy. Why can’t you let me make real decisions?”

“Because you’re not making them. You think you’re ready for sex when you’re not even ready to let a doctor make sure you’re healthy? When you’re still talking about soul-mates and true love and unicorn rainbows? Sex isn’t like that, Dawn! It’s a hard gritty reality of bodies and hormones
and blood. You can’t even handle talking frankly about your period, and you’re too embarrassed to buy condoms yourself. If you’re not ready to talk about it, you’re not ready to do it. What would you do if you got pregnant? Think about it. Do you know how many people would be looking at your cunt if you did?”

“Hey!”

“And what if something else happens? It’s not just souls that can be displaced in sex, Dawn. Lives can. People change. It’s very adult stuff, and you can’t handle acting like an adult about anything.”

“I just want my boyfriend to stay the night! Is that so much to ask?”

“I’ve told you what hoop to jump through.”

“Why is that your decision?”

“Because I’m the grown up. And it’s my house.”

“It’s our house,” I said. “And if you get a say about my love life, I get a say about yours.”

“No, actually. You don’t.”

“Yes, I do! I’m your sister!”

Buffy glared at me. “What are you trying to tell me? We have to be together on this?”

I didn’t want this brought up. I’d apologized. Months ago. I knew Buffy still resented it, but I thought she should have gotten over it by now. “That was uncalled for.”

“Oh, no, I think it was called for long ago!” Buffy yelled. “You have ideas in your head about who you are and what rights you have. It’s the same damn thing as this vendetta against Jack, when it’s not your call. You kick me out of my own damn house with the whole bloody army at your back to reinforce you, when god knows, the deed sure as hell wasn’t in your name. You weren’t the one paying the taxes and the electric bill and figuring out how not to go into foreclosure! No, you were just skipping school and freaking out and whining about how no one was ever there for you, when for god’s sake, how much more of a symbol of my love did you ever need than me dying for you, you selfish bitch!”

“Oh, is that what this is about?” I shouted back. “Well, I never asked you to die for me! I was about to jump off that tower as fast as you were.”

“That isn’t what it’s about,” Buffy snapped. “It’s about everything always being about you, about how you want attention, and about how you’re all alone, and about how you never get what you want. So you grab for the attention, just like you grab for everything else, and somehow it’s my fault that you don’t feel real. Well, you’re not real, Dawn. You never were. Get over it!”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Get over it and grow up!”

“How do you know what it’s like!” I shouted. “Have you ever found out your whole life was a lie?”

“At least six times, Dawn, starting from the first dream I had as a potential, and ending with
finding Angel working for Wolfram and Hart. And by the way, I was at least as traumatized as you were to find out you were grafted into my life like some kind of implant. But I had to keep going, and behave myself. You just keep freaking out.”

“I do not freak out.”

“You’re freaking out right now, and the only thing wrong is your sister’s got a boyfriend. You never handled who or what you were with any kind of dignity or grace.”

“Oh, like you were the paragon of all acceptanceness?” I snapped. “Oh, poor me, I gotta be the slayer. I get adventure and super powers and hot guys falling all over me, oh, poor Buffy!”

“Like you can begin to compare our behavior,” Buffy said. “I got up every day and got out every night, and dragged the world back from the edge of hell over and over and over again. And I did it every day from the age of fifteen, all by myself. You find out you’re a key, and what do you do? Ask questions, do research, try to figure out what that means and how to protect yourself? No! You carve yourself up, scream at our mom, set fires, run away, ditch school, steal things, whine to vengeance demons, put everyone including yourself in danger, and go running off to play with Spike just to get a rise out of me!”

“Like you can say a damn thing about running off to play with Spike!” I shouted at her. “And don’t tell me you weren’t doing it to punish me back.”

“It wasn’t like that,” she snarled.

“Oh, it wasn’t? Then what was it like, Buffy? Was it like you and Jack?”

“It’s none of your damn business.”

“Tell me, do you love him? Do you feel for him?”

“It doesn’t matter what I feel for Jack, or what I felt for Spike, or what I feel about anyone,” Buffy snapped. “I handle it all like an adult. You’re still acting like a big fucking kid.”

“Well, hell, I’m only four years old,” I retorted. “I think I’m acting real mature for my age.”

“Take care of yourself, then,” Buffy said. “Let the girl go, I’m done.”

I didn’t get it. “Huh?”

“ Forget it.” Buffy pushed passed me. Then she stopped. She’d seen the empty chocolate box. I’d left it out for her to see. “You ate all Jack’s chocolates.”

They’d been really good, too. Sweet and smooth and tasting of hazelnuts. “Checking to see they weren’t poisoned.”

“Dawn...!”

“I should have known they weren’t,” I continued. “You don’t need to be poisoned to be a bitch.”

She rounded on me. “What is wrong with you! Seriously. What did I ever do to you? What did I do wrong, apart from love you and take care of you and give you everything I am and deal with your shit?”

“I’m not the one who’s shitty.”
“You’re the one who’s a selfish, whiny little brat who wants to fuck some stupid kid without facing the consequences!”

“Well, I’m not the one who likes to fuck murderers and rapists!”

Buffy raised her hand to slap me – she was pissed off enough, she might have killed me. I think she realized that. At the last second she deflected her anger and punched the living room cabinet. It collapsed, wood splintering, spilling CDs and magazines onto the carpet. “Get out of my sight,” Buffy said in a low tone.

“Yeah,” I said, afraid, though I didn’t want to admit it. “I’ll get out.”

“Now!” Buffy roared.

I grabbed my school bag and went out to see Giordano. To my immense irritation, he used the opportunity to break up with me. I came home to find that Buffy had cleaned up the living room and was watching Thelma and Louise. It had been one of mom’s favorites. “I thought you’d be out with Jack, bitching about your little sister,” I said.

“I thought about it,” Buffy said. “We don’t really have that kind of relationship.”

“Do you ever?” I asked. I was feeling bitter about G.

She sighed and handed me the popcorn. “Not anymore.”

I sat down beside her on the sofa. “Are all men just stupid?” I asked.

She chuckled. “I think all people are, sometimes.”

I sat down beside her and leaned my head on her arm. “I don’t have to see the OB,” I said. “G broke up with me.”

“Did he.”

“Yeah.”

She paused a moment. “So. Appointment next week some time?”

It would free me up for the next time I wanted to do something. And it would remind me that I wasn’t doing it for some guy. I was doing it for me. “Yeah,” I said.

Buffy petted my hair, and turned back to the movie. We were okay. Except... we never really were, anymore, either.

We had that argument, or one very like it, almost every other day.
One Step Away

Chapter Summary

Spike

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, season Five, during Harm's Way.

Spike

I grinned as I surveyed Angel’s private little fleet of cars. “Viper it is,” I cooed. I lay my hand on the bright cherry finish and caressed the sweet little ride. Not since my pretty little Desoto have I enjoyed driving a car as much. I had a long trip to undergo, and a nice necro-tempered glass windscreen was gonna make the whole damn thing a lot sweeter. I couldn’t wait to feel the sun on my skin, shielded though I would be behind the glass. The feel of the car moving under me, the rush of the road. I was starving for the sensation of it, the sensation of everything. Which was why I snatched this sweetie up when I went out to find the Cup of Destiny. I had even been starving for the torment. Strange that.

Buffy was in Europe, and I was on the west coast, which was going to made my trip a lot more difficult. The moment I’d gotten back from totally walloping Angel at that rubbish Cup of Destiny debacle, (what a rush that was!) I’d looked up the best way across the pond, and found a cruise ship that would pick me up in New York. I’d ordered the tickets – which were gonna take three days to get to LA – and went off to get properly soused for the first time in too bloody long. I’d gotten drunk, rented a hotel room charging the expenses to Wolfram and Hart, and then passed out for two days. I hadn’t been able to *sleep* as a ghost. No one ever told you how slow it gets when you can’t turn yourself off. Then I’d gotten up, gotten drunk again, and gone back down. The taste, the buzz, the blood, the sensation of the sheets on my skin, the movement of my body, the feel of... of *everything*. I needed it. I needed Buffy. I needed her hot flesh and her heady scent and the blaze of her hair and the depth in her eyes. I needed so much...

But a New York launch meant a road trip ‘cross country, and that meant some wheels, or a bugger all long series of trips on a bus, ‘less I wanted to risk more sins on my head and steal something. Of course, just up and walking off with Angel’s ride with a vague half-a-permission couldn’t possibly count as actually stealing, so, I was in the clear.

I slid into the front seat, readjusted it to my own height, and reached for the keys.

Bugger. They weren’t where Angel usually left them, out on the dash. He might have pocketed them, but this was part of his little stable of vehicular manslaughter, so I didn’t think it would occur to him that someone might just stroll off with his beauty. So, second set of keys was probably...
opened up the glove box. Thar she blows. Reached in to pick them up, and caught up something else, with them. A stiff piece of paper had been half covering the keys. Apart from the owner’s manual, registration, and a wooden stake, that piece of paper was the only other thing in the box.

I didn’t know why it was there, at first. Then I realized I knew exactly why it was there. Angel had put it there, to bug me. He was still all into the mental torture, no matter how devotedly soulful and destinal he’d become. I’d taken the viper last time. He’d carefully manipulated me into taking it again by telling me not to take it, and Angel had put this pretty little pressie into the glove box, and left the keys there so I’d be sure to find it. Manipulative bastard couldn’t just out and be the prat he was, so he had to finagle it. Trouble is, it worked. ‘Cause it was the first time I’d seen her face since I’d gone up in flames.

It was a photo of Buffy. Specifically, it was a photo of Buffy and Angel – always had wondered why we vamps showed up in photos but not mirrors – and Buffy was all geared up and gorgeous. Pink tinged buff dress, off the shoulder, a pretty little gold pin. Angel all decked out sexy in his tux. This had to be that fabled Senior Prom I’d heard so much about. The last dance and whatall that worked wonders keeping Buffy on tenterhooks, wondering if the breakup was really the end-all it was supposed to be. The Senior Prom leash. If he’d broken up with her after it, she might have believed in the end. But to break up with her before it happened, and then show up to be all romantic and star-crossed after the bloody tears... that was putting a stake in her securities, wasn’t it.

So, even knowing what night it was made me seethe with fury. This was the false fairy-tale I’d been fighting against ever since I knew Buffy, whether I wanted her dead, in my bed, or wherever she needed to be.

And then seeing Buffy’s face. God, the sadness in her expression. The tragedy and longing, as she looked up at Angel – not at the camera. Which meant I couldn’t see her eyes. Jade green and deep as the sea in my memory, they were only shadows as they gazed up into Angel’s doleful face, as he stared back at her with possession and assurance, tall and strong, the hero, who pretended he was not the same man who had spent the previous year torturing her, her family, and her friends, and bragging about it to me behind the scenes while he seduced my Drusilla. Trying to scrub Buffy’s love off in the fountain, the bastard.

But god, Buffy was beautiful. So damn beautiful. And in that photo she belonged – every damn inch, you couldn’t miss it – to Angel. “Aaagh,” I sneered, and ripped him out of the photo. But even setting the effigy on fire didn’t help much. Buffy was still staring up at him, even with him out of the picture. But I couldn’t bring myself to destroy her beautiful face. I slipped it into my pocket alongside my boat tickets, and...

Bugger. Where were...? They were coming in today, I’d come in to say my fare-thee-wells... Right. I’d meant to pick them up on the way up to beg for the car, and got distracted by the blood trolley. Liquor is quicker, but I’d been a little peckish, and they had goat for a change. Gotta admit – working in a law firm where vampires and demons were considered common place made for some nifty snack bars. Angel had really had the world silver-plattered for him, didn’ he.

Back up to the lobby, then. I pocketed the viper’s keys and slid into the general lift, rather than Angel’s little motor-pool private vertical-people-transporter. The lobby of Wolfram and Hart was bustling as always, with well dressed demons, and even better dressed men and women who might as well have been demons, for all the good in ‘em. I slid up to the front desk. “Could you check the mail-bag for me, pet?” I asked the receptionist. “There should be a pretty little envelope from something Poshtop cruise lines with my name at the top. Spike? Care of W&H?”
“I’ll be right with you,” the receptionist said, and turned back to her phone.

God, I hate waiting, I thought. “I hate waiting,” I said loudly, just to make sure she knew that.

She completely ignored me. Probably annoyed vampires on their way out the door were the least of her problems, particularly as she was explaining that Wolfram and Hart had no jurisdiction over wrongs committed within Arrashmahar, and that the client was thus on their own trying to wreak vengeance. “Yes, I know you just want me to put you in touch with the right department,” she kept saying. “I keep telling you, there is no right department for such a suit.” I drummed my fingers heavily on the edge of the desk. Loudly. And then even more loudly. Finally I sighed expressively, and took off my coat to show how long I had been waiting, and wasn’t it a bit close in here, in this posh climate-controlled, necro-tempered, open and spacious lobby.

She wasn’t impressed by my theatrics, so bored as usual, I turned to my coat to look up old battles.

A leather coat you keep for near thirty years picks up scars. Little rips and resewn seams, scuff marks and bruises on the leather, a patch here and there. There was the patch from the mob attack in Prague. And there was my favorite scrape on the sleeve from my first battle with Buffy. And – I was never sure about these, so I went to look at the multiple scratches on the back from the fight in the abandoned house...

And less than half of them were there. What the...? I spread the coat out on the desk, ignoring the annoyed squawk from the receptionist who had finally had enough, and I started looking for scars. The scratches, the scuffs, the scars in the leather... lots of them weren’t there. And the bit on the hem, where I’d replaced the seam with blue thread ‘cause I couldn’t find black, that was missing. And the faded bit in the lining from the salted roads in New York... that didn’t look right. And where was that one bit that Nikki must have repaired, the one... that one wasn’t there at all. Whose coat was this? Who had stolen my coat? Where the hell was my slayer’s skin? “Who the hell took m...!”

My ire and accusation died as the truth hit me. No one took my coat. Or rather... I had taken my coat. This coat had come about because my pretty box of flash recorporealized me in the image that I always kept of myself in my head, which usually had this coat in it. But I didn’t have every single scuff and scar memorized – on the contrary, finding them and forcing myself to remember where this or that mark had come from was part of the game. So, because I didn’t think about the marks much, they hadn’t all been recreated.

This wasn’t my coat. This wasn’t the coat that I had pulled off the body of Nikki Wood in 1977, thus proving to myself and the world at large that I was more than just a single lucky day – I was the Slayer of Slayers. My second skin. My armor. My image. It had burned to death in Sunnydale.

Just as I had.

Don’t do it, Spike me lad, I shouted at myself as the tears rose. Don’t do it. Don’t. Don’t do it.

“Your mail, sir,” the receptionist said pointedly, and set the envelope down atop the coat.

It seemed profane, suddenly, that quite literally my ticket to Buffy had been dropped down atop this lie. I snatched the envelope away before it could be tainted, and fled across the lobby, envelope clenched in one hand, coat dragging in the other. I nearly ran out the door, but – hello, vampire, daylight, you ninny. Sunny lobby was one thing, but necro-tempered sky they did not have. I diverted myself at the last second and skirted to a bench by a bunch of potted plants. I sat down, trying to compose myself.
It wasn’t just the coat – though if I had been alone in a private room, I might have indulged in a
manly mourning session and wept for the poor murdered thing. What dragged me down was
everything. Death and hell and the god damned soul, Angel’s dismissal of everything I’d ever done
– hell everyone’s dismissal of everything I’d ever done. And Buffy... Buffy staring in devotion up
at Angel, even when he wasn’t in the picture. That kiss she’d planted on him, that night he’d
shown up in Sunnydale. No matter what she felt about me, she was always going to be staring up at
Angel, wasn’t she? Whether he was in the picture or no. God, showing up at her doorstep, tracking
her across the god damned planet like a bloody stalker. Like I’d come to hunt her down again.
Dammit, I hadn’t changed any more than Angel had.

It would have been so much easier if Angel had just given me her bleeding phone number when
I asked! That was months ago. But when I’d finally had fingers to do my own damn research,
looked her number up and called it the night we got back from our epic quest and battle for
Mountain Dew, the line she’d given him had been disconnected. If it had ever worked in the first
place. I hadn’t found any other contact information, except for Giles, and god, no. I didn’t trust him
a lick after that incident with Wood. I could have found her in person, of course. Ask the right
questions, track down the right spells, hunt her down...

Hunt her.

What the hell stupid thing was I doing?

The first time I saw Buffy a local band had been playing a song I’d never allowed myself to
forget since. It had been at the Bronze. She had abandoned her all-important homework, and gone
to dance, like the hellion I always knew she was. “I... did a stupid thing last night,” I whispered to
away from crashing to my knees.” I wasn’t singing or anything, though the words had the cadence
of the lyrics. It was more than enough, apparently.

“Ow-o!”

The ejaculation came from halfway across the lobby, and echoed in the high ceiling. I glanced
up to find Lorne staring at me, wincing. He came over quickly and sat down... near me. Not beside
me, I noticed. “Tell you what, Mr. Sunshine, do me a favor and never do that again.”

“What?” I asked.

“Sing. Or whatever the hell you were doing.”

“I wasn’t singing,” I said.

“Lyrics is bad enough to the right kind of soul, Spikester,” Lorne said. “I barely caught a word
of that, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. What’s got you so gloomy?”

I looked down at the scuffed leather in my hand. “S not my coat.”

“What?”

I tossed the false thing away from me and glowered at it. “That’s not my coat. My coat burned in
Sunnydale just as I did. That’s not me. It’s not real.”

Lorne bent down and picked it up. He hung it on his hand and brushed it off, as if it needed
tending. “ Seems like a real enough coat to me.”

“S just a projection. Like me,” I said. I checked my eyebrow. It felt right, but, “Do I still have a
scar here?” I asked.

Lorne raised his own green eyebrow. “Yep.”

I sighed. At least that was still there. But really, that scar was as much of a lie as the coat was, wasn’t it? It wasn’t the cut that my first slayer had sliced into my skin. Hell, it wasn’t even my skin. I didn’t want to look at the rest of my body. I had other scars. I had a few that had been given me by Buffy herself. I was terrified lest any of them were gone. I tried like hell not to cry, but pitiful William bloody Pratt had always been a weeper, and dragging his poor soul back down into this demonic form had not diminished the impulse any.

But maybe it had. Maybe it wasn’t real. I was only what I remembered myself being. The coat was different. The marks and scars of its lifetime had been cleaned away by my own distraction and weak memory. What of me was missing? What marks and scars no longer existed on my body, my person, my self, my soul? Was I the demon or the man I was before I was burned to death in Sunnydale? Was I even me at all? I’d felt only a fraction of myself as a disembodied ghost – what fraction was I now? I had a soul (I felt too much to not) but what soul was it? Who the hell was I, anyway? Did I ever know? And if I didn’t, then what the hell had come back? I groaned and lowered my head, squeezing my temples.

“You are not feeling your most righteous, brother,” Lorne said. “Look, you know you love the girl. Don’t doubt that one, first off. That one’s strong enough to blast me from across the room.” He looked at me with a sad smile. “You’re just not quite yourself yet. And that’s to be expected, right? I mean, yourself was kind of burned up, wasn’t it?”

It had been. My self had been burned up, and I was just my demon-tainted-soul stuffed into some fabricated vessel. I sighed, almost a scoff, and clenched my fists. I was only some xerox of me. It wasn’t right. I wasn’t right. I hadn’t felt right to start with. I always thought Buffy’s distance and depression when she was brought back from death was mostly because she’d been denied her chance in heaven. Now I knew it was something more fundamental than that. She didn’t feel real.

And she’d nearly eaten me alive because of it.

I hadn’t felt real since I got back. I wasn’t real, of course. I had been a disembodied ghost. But all I’d been doing since I got some kind of solid form – I no longer wanted to say I’d gotten my body back, because if I hadn’t gotten my coat back, this wasn’t yet my body – was get lost in the sensation of it, trying to make it real. Blood, sex, battle, getting one over on Angel, and three days worth of serious drinking. Now I was trying to find Buffy, and... god, I hated to admit it, but it wasn’t to help her. I wanted to feel her again. I wanted to be real. I wanted her back in my arms in the hopes that she’d make me... me.

God. I knew what that had done to me. It wouldn’t be fair to do it to her. It not only wouldn’t be fair, it would be bloody cruel. Pouring myself into her, like I’d poured into Harmony, like I’d poured myself into the drink these last days, desperate to feel... something. I rubbed at my face and grabbed my hair – my bleach blond hair. And would it grow right? Was it really my hair, or was it always going to look like this, because this was how I envisioned myself, from the few photographs that I looked at, trying to memorize my face. “I just gotta figure out what I’m gonna do.”

“Well, the trouble is, sweet cheeks, you already know what you’re going to do,” Lorne said to me. “Now you’re just trying to understand it.”

I groaned. He was right. I wasn’t going to Europe. Lorne had heard it. It didn’t feel right. But neither did anything else, and I wanted to hit something. “It’s not right,” I said. “But it is right!
Buffy.... Buffy and me, we were... arrgh!” I tossed my head, clenching my jaw in irritation. She’d said she’d loved me. And I threw it in her face. I’d thought that was going to be it! I’d thought, no, don’t do it to her, William. Everyone she loves leaves her. Don’t let her believe it. If you’re gonna leave, don’t let her love you. Give it back, don’t make her feel that loss, tell her she doesn’t feel it. She knows how you feel already. That’s so much more than enough. Why the hell hadn’t I just been allowed to have that be it? Then I wouldn’t have to try and figure out what the hell I was now! “I dunno who I am,” I whispered.

“Well, you’re Spike,” Lorne said. “I’m pretty damn sure.”

“Are you, now.”

“Well, you’ve sure got a loud enough soul, buddy,” he said. “Couldn’t miss it even from halfway across the room. That’s you.”

“Yeah, but the rest of me,” I said. “If that’s not my coat, then what the hell is it?” I shook my head. “What the hell am I?”

“You, I thought. Angel thinks. Harm thinks. They both knew you before, they seem to think you’re you.”

I wasn’t so sure. “I just don’t know. I don’t know if I’m enough... me to try and pick things up... with her.” We both knew I meant Buffy.

“What is it making you doubt, Spikester?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Yes I did. “Well. Last time I tried to pick something up after I died it went kinda bad.”

“How bad?”

“Killed my own mum bad,” I said.

Lorne nodded. “Family’s always hell, aren’t they? Last time I saw my folks, they told me they thought they’d eaten the wrong son,” he said.

It was sometimes so refreshing talking to other demons. Straight up humans were such prudes sometimes.

“So you’re all a-feared of this little lady having to deal with your baggage, are you?” He leaned back. “I can see that. You’ve got plenty of baggage, let me tell you.”

That was not making me feel better. “So, what are these readings you do?” I demanded. “You read the future when someone sings at you?”

“Sort of,” Lorne said. “Songs and poetry bare the soul. Yours is right at the surface.”

“Probably ‘cause it’s new,” I muttered.

“Or powerful. Or raw. Or stripped. Or just lonely,” Lorne said. “So I see your emotions along with your potential, as it were. And the potential, that’s sort of the future. I’m not infallible, but...” he shrugged. “I get by.”

“So what’s my future say?”

“Well. You’re not using that ticket,” he said.
I knew that.

“And you’re not really going to walk out into that bright sunny day, either,” he added.

The thought had occurred to me. But hell, that thought had been occurring to me since Drusilla left. Half a decade of that thought occurring to me, over and over again, whenever things got too heavy. Until I fell into a bottle and hoped it would all go away again. I looked at the coat which he had hung on his knee. “Why shouldn’t I?” I asked. If I couldn’t go to Buffy – and I couldn’t, not if it meant doin’ to her what she’d done to me – then what was the point of it all? “Not my coat. Not my body. Not my life. What’s the point?”

“I think the point is to find the point,” Lorne said. “And why do you say this isn’t your coat? It fits your body. It swirls and glowers and looks all Neo.”

“But it’s not the same coat! It burned, it’s dead!”

“Rest in peace, coat.”

“I’m serious! That coat was important to me,” I said. “My spoils from battle. It... it was me. It stood for that fight, that warrior I was, that moment when I knew I could do anything.”

“Well.” He lifted it up and looked at it. “It can still do that, can’t it? I mean, the coat wasn’t the fight itself, was it? It was just a symbol of it.”

“Well, yeah.” I thought he was missing the point, though.

“It can still be a symbol of it, can’t it?” he asked. “I mean... so it’s not the same stitchery of leather and satin. It looks the same.” He laid the coat back over my lap. “It can mean the same thing.”

I looked down at it. He wasn’t wrong. But it still didn’t feel right. “It’s not my second skin,” I said. “It doesn’t have enough scars.”

Lorne smiled. “Well, wear it around a bit. Let it acquire some. When you’ve done that for a while... I bet you it’ll feel like your skin again.”

He walked off. He hadn’t told me what he’d seen in my future. Except... maybe he had. Wear it around for a while. After a bit... maybe I would feel like me again.

I pulled the photo of Buffy out of my pocket. Still looking up at Angel... but he wasn’t in the picture, was he. And he wasn’t ever going to be – I was almost sure of that. If he was, she’d have made sure he had a phone number that worked, right? But right now, I was in the picture with Angel. The only thing I had left seemed to be annoying him.

Wear it around for a bit.

Maybe I could do that.

Now, how the hell to explain it to Angel and everyone around me? Including... whoever the hell I would turn out to be.
Can't Touch Me

Chapter Summary

Dana

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, season Five, immediately after Damage

Dana

Can’t touch me again.

The car is moving. They’re taking me, taking me. Taking me away from. Away from. Away. He can’t touch me again.

There was a little girl once. She was very young and very happy. Her family loved her, and treated her so nicely. Gentle hugs and swinging in the air, push, back and forth on the swing sets.

Then there was death. The family, one, two, three, still bodies on the floor. One, two, three, blood on the wall. One, two, three, step, step, step, as he took her away.

And then he hurt her. He touched her, stuck her, hurt her, kept her quiet. So many ways to keep her quiet. Can’t hurt me again.

Why am I here? Who are these? These are women, women like me. I can feel them, pulsing, resonating, humming like the coils on the air conditioner, making me tremble with the power of the me, me, me. I feel as I look at all of them. These are me. All of them have been me. Back and back and back, there was a little girl, and she was taken from her home. And there was a little girl, and she was taken from her family. And there was a little girl, and she was given to a man known as her watcher, and raised up to fight, and opened her eyes, and had the strength of twenty, and the need for battle, and the hunger for darkness, and the lust for dust. The monsters came, and the vampires, and the demons, and she ran into the darkness, and the monsters died, one by one. Keep cutting ‘til you see dust. Can’t let them hurt the family. Can’t let them destroy. Can’t let them kill. Can’t let them have the blood.

He took the blood. The blood was his. He plunged his head down and bit hard and pierced my throat. We had been fighting (I am always fighting) and I cut him. I cut him with my blade, and he bled, and I fought, and I stood, and I feared him. I feared for my life. I feared for my mother, left all alone. I feared for the world, with this monster in it, this white, uncivilized English devil, slaughtering, like the men outside are slaughtering, like the English are killing my people. This vampire, he is the image of them all – brutal, ignorant, hungry, full of lust. I fight him, and he grabs
me, and I lose. He takes what he wants from my throat, and all I can do is beg of the universe. *Tell my mother I’m sorry.*

He only blathers at me.

“I couldn’t kill him!” I shout to the women around me.

“It’s all right,” one of them says. I am bound. I cannot escape.

“Let me go! He killed me! He will kill me! He will kill me again!”

“Shh.” The girl comes and sits beside me in the moving car, touches the back of my bound hand. “I know,” she says. “I know. But it’s not now. It’s all part of the past. We are strong, now. We are many. We’ll show you how to be part of us. Buffy won’t let any of us be captured by the monsters. We’re her responsibility, she says. *You’re* her responsibility. The slayers guard their own.”


“Robin?” the girl asks.

“Oh, Robin? Robin’s actually fine, Dana,” says one of the girls from across the van. “I had that vision, too. It’s spooky to see him, really. He’s all grown up, and he’s fine now.”

I don’t understand what she’s saying. Robin was a child. *Him* – the one I left behind me. *He’s* the one I need to think on. The one who won’t hurt me again. The one I made sleep, the one I cut. I should make him into dust. But I don’t. I don’t want to make him dust. He is too much a part of me. Him. So. I take his hands. He can’t touch me again. Back and forth. Back and forth. The saw turns red, and the bones smell bad. Slip, slip, one hand falls down, flopping like a long-fingered fish. Smack, onto the ground, he can’t hurt you again. Start the other one. Harder, harder, saw it faster. Don’t let him touch you. Don’t let him touch you. You can’t risk him touching you. Those hands hit you, hurt you, twisted your head, broke your neck. He’s wearing your coat. I’m sorry, Robin. Robin, I’m so sorry.

“He killed me!”

“It’s okay,” the girl by my side says. “They’re only visions. Do you understand what’s happened to you?” No. I’d never been able to understand it. Not from the moment when he entered my home, or when my parents told me to hide, or when I heard my mother screaming, or when the silence invaded the house, companioned by his dark, heavy footsteps, step, step, step, coming to find me.

“He said, it wasn’t me.”

“It’s okay,” the girl says. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

“It was, it was. The white haired one. It was!”

“Shh. We have visions. They’re from the past, from other slayers. Most of us try to push them away. We don’t need them to learn how to fight anymore. When you were little, someone bad got hold of you. But now you’re a slayer. Now you’re strong. Now you’re one of us. But it means you’ll have memories of other slayers, other battles. Other slayers who died. You don’t have to let that control you. We’ll teach you how to control it, to make yourself as strong as the power. You’re gonna be okay, Dana. That’s what we do.” The girl looks around the van proudly. “That’s what we are. We’re slayers.”
“That’s why,” I say. “Why it can’t be him. It can’t be him.”

He’s been there. Over and over again, he’s been there. No, maybe not when I was little. Maybe not the one who walked through the house, step, step, step, with the silence. But the others. The first time, with the blood. The second time, with the crunch. The third time, with the tower.

The third time. Third time. Third time I am killed. Killed with him, beside me again. But he is not my foe. I’m fighting, again. I’m always fighting. But it isn’t him. It’s a woman, this time. A strong woman. Too strong. I hit her, she hits me. We’re chasing up a tower, and the most precious thing in the world waits in danger atop it. My family. My sister, my blood, my heart, my life, she awaits atop the tower. She is in danger, but I need to keep fighting. The god at my feet is too powerful to abandon. If I should turn to flee, to rescue the Dawn, (the sun, the light, the day, the beginning) the god will cut me down, and so I fight. I fall. We keep fighting. I am always fighting.

He rushes past me. He rushes, and I am so grateful to see his black and white form, gleaming hair and flapping coat – that’s my coat! – he rushes past me and up the tower, but I can barely spare him a glance. I am fighting. I am always fighting. But he can rescue the Dawn. I know he will try. He will try, or he will die, because... because he loves me.

“I know you’ll never love me,” he says in my memory. He says it in my home, because I invited him in. “You know that I’m a monster, but you treat me like a man.” Like a man. He is a man. He is already a man. A man I hate and fear and respect and... I will never. “Till the end of the world,” he says. “Till the end of the world.”

Don’t touch me. You can’t touch me. I can’t let you touch me. You’ve already touched me... “I love you.” That’s in my memory, too. I love you.

I can’t let him touch me.

I want him to touch me.

No. No. Can’t touch me again.

So I fight her. I fight the god until she shrinks to a young man beneath my punishing attack, and I let him go. (He is an innocent.) I run away, to save the light, the life, the Dawn. And I pass him, my white haired black hero. He has fallen. He has failed. Barely alive, crawling at my feet, gazing up at me with blue eyes like the daylight sky he’ll never see again, he has fallen to try and save the Dawn, for me. I abandon him, because he knows I must, and would never ask for more. I abandon him to rescue the Dawn. But it is too late. I see her bleeding, and I catch her up, and tell her to live. Live. Give my love to my friends. The hardest thing in this world is to live in it. And I fly... I fly away. Power tears through me, and I see them all below me – the witches and the watcher and the friends and the vampire below. And I love all of them. I love them. I love him among them. I’m sorry, all of you. I’m sorry, Spike.

“Can’t touch me again,” I whisper. “Can’t. Can’t touch me again.”

“No, Dana. It’s all right,” whispers the girl. “He can’t touch you ever again.”

It isn’t all right. I want him to touch me again. I remember touching him, holding him, kissing him, forming wedding plans. I’ve wanted to touch him ever since I saw him bruised and broken. I kissed him when he said he couldn’t live with me being in pain. I wanted more, but I wouldn’t take it. Wouldn’t let myself take it. Wanted him to touch me.

Once there was a little girl. That little girl is dead. That little girl was helped and guarded by a
white haired monster who loved her, and fought with her, and lied, and nearly died. For her. And then she was gone. “You can’t touch me. Spike. Spike. You can’t.” I curl to my side and start to cry at the idea. “Can’t touch me again.”
Chapter Summary

Jack

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, season Five, immediately after Damage

Jack

Buffy wasn’t exactly screaming, since the whimpers she made were pretty quiet, but she might as well have been. It would have been nice if it had been my doing, but unfortunately, she was asleep, and it had nothing to do with my sexual prowess. This was pretty clearly a nightmare.

“Hey, hey! It’s okay, Buffy. Hey, wake up.”

She clocked me one. “Get off!”

I flew back and hit the wall. A second later she shook her head, blinking at me, the confusion leaving her eyes. “Oh, god, Jack, I’m sorry.” She looked around her room. “Did I fall asleep?”

She had. I’d been enjoying watching her, actually. It was the first time I’d seen this strong and determined woman completely vulnerable like this, and it had been nice to see, even though I had also been about to get up and go. We didn’t really have a sleep-and-snuggle relationship. I rarely had those, anyway, and I knew for a fact she didn’t want one. But she must have been tired. She’d passed right out after making love. I thought it might have been because we were at her place. It was the first time we’d gone there to screw, and I figured the familiar environment must have lulled her. “It’s okay,” I said. I picked myself up off the floor. Her room was pretty spartan – like me, she didn’t have much in the way of personal items – so I hadn’t broken anything except maybe my pride. Buffy was definitely one to keep you humble on the Protective Manly front. “You had a nightmare or something.”

“Of course I did,” Buffy said. She rolled over and stared up at the ceiling.

The resigned tone to her voice sounded familiar. “It’s okay,” I said. “Enough dark experiences, and the nightmares just–”


I regarded her. “I thought you just didn’t trust me.”
“I don’t, but... that’s not why the sleep thing.” She moved over and let me crawl back into bed beside her. “How much do you know about slayers?”

I shrugged. “What I’ve seen, and what my wrist strap tells me.”

“Alien energy source, enhanced strength—”

“Unknown psychic abilities, yeah,” I said.

“How much do you know about those?”

“Not a lot. I always just figured that meant your lust for the hunt.” She couldn’t stop herself from hunting down vampires, I’d realized. Slaying wasn’t a job she could just quit, it was a calling. Some part of it was that she really was worried about people, but there was a strong need in her to get into it – a fight, a hunt, something dangerous. I was pretty sure that was why she was sleeping with me, truth to tell. She wasn’t wrong; I was dangerous in my way. When it didn’t come from me, it would come from things around me. Danger tended to cling to me like a magnet. Anomalies cluster around other anomalous things. That was another reason Buffy and I were drawn to each other.

“The hunt’s part of it,” Buffy said. “But we get visions. Deaths of past slayers, prophetic dreams. With so many of us around now, sometimes we’ll get each other’s experiences, too, which... sucks. It was easier when there was only the two of us. Then when we went all dream-sharey it wasn’t so confusing about who was what, which and when.” She sighed through her teeth, and I could tell she was still tense. “And it’s a lot harder to tell what’s important. Or real....” There was a distinct tremble in her chest.

“So you get more nightmares now?”

“More dreams that probably aren’t just me. Yeah,” she said.

“Was that what that was?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I think so, but... my own psyche gets overlaid over a lot of it, so certain things will take on symbolism that only makes sense to me. Some slayer somewhere is having a very... difficult night.”

“Care to tell me about it?”

“Dismemberment isn’t exactly pillow talk, even for me, Jack.”

Sounded like an awful dream. I squeezed her shoulders. “Must be hard to cope with.”

Buffy shrugged. “I’m used to it,” she said. “I’ve been having slayer nightmares regularly ever since I was eleven.”

God, that sounded awful. And the only thing I could do was sympathize. “I don’t sleep at all,” I told her.

She looked over at me. “What?”

I shook my head. “I don’t sleep.”

“Ever?”

I stared into the darkness. “Not since....”
“Your whoever died?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, and for some decades before I met him. He used to help me sleep. He was good that way. But I don’t suffer sleep dep anymore. I think... I think I may have, a long time ago. I don’t remember, really, if it was serious sleep dep or just going crazy. I’ve done that a few times, too,” I added, glancing at her. “I forget when it was, exactly, but I can be pretty sure, the world needed saving, and I was too busy, and... it’s not like it was going to kill me.” I chuckled. “I hit a point where my sleep broke, and I just... healed around it or something. I don’t get a craving for it anymore. It’s like my body clock broke, or unwound. Just plain stopped ticking.”

“Aren’t you exhausted?” she asked.

I leaned my head back. “I rest, I think,” I said. “I fill up the hours, try to sort out my day consciously. I mean, in theory my dendrites should strip or something without sleep, but... all the effects of sleep deprivation just no longer apply. Drowsiness, mood changes, aggression, reflexes, none of that gets hit anymore.” I glanced at her. “Why do you think I go hunting, in my way?” I asked. “Something’s got to fill those hours. Just – sometimes having someone will help a lot. Even if you don’t know each other real well.”

“But you don’t sleep around me.”

“I get nightmares, too,” I confessed. “Just... mine are all mine.”

“But he helped you?”

“Yeah. Helped me sleep, and kept the nightmares off.”

“How’d he do that?”

I shrugged. “He’d whisper away the time for me. Between the past and the future... there’s a lot of time.” I swallowed. “He was always taking care of me. He was good at it.”

She touched my chest. “Mine was good at that, too,” she whispered.

“Your lover?”

She nodded. “When I let him.”

We were both getting dangerously close to discussing our mutual shadows, and I myself was terrified lest such a thing ruin the easy partnership we had. I needn’t have worried. A second later, Buffy said something I hadn’t expected to hear. “Thank you so much for not loving me.”

“Hm?”

Her eyes were distant, and she ran her fingers over my chest. “I did this. Before. With him. Just... fell into bed and didn’t climb out. When we bothered to find the bed,” she added.

“Sounds hot as hell.”

She chuckled. “It was. And it was also very cold.” She took a deep breath. “I’m not proud of it.”

“Hey, there’s nothing to be ashamed of in enjoying your own body.”

“There is the way I did it.” She shook her head. “I was not... kind.” She stopped. “What was it like? The first time you died?”
Bit of a non-sequitur, but I answered anyway. “I barely remember it anymore. I didn’t realize I had been dead. I just woke up, like I was startled out of a deep sleep. I knew I’d been shot, but... everything was fine. Then I just lived my life for... years. Decades... but I didn’t really grow any older. A grey hair or two doesn’t really count. Then I got very killed once, and I couldn’t miss that I shouldn’t still be walking around. And then the dying became... rather overt. I knew that there was something... different. I didn’t know about the... well, the curse. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, or why. It scared me. Confused me.” I shrugged. “Eventually I found a doctor friend of mine who was able to tell me what had happened. Couldn’t fix it, though. I’m just an impossible thing, apparently. Always will be, as far as I know.”

“After you knew you were supposed to be dead... was it hard to settle into a normal life again?”

“Well, I didn’t,” I said. “Once I was sure I was actually immortal... I went a little nuts. Sort of self-destructive, played the high-life as it were. That was why I came to Rome, initially, there was this... time... thing. Can’t always make it work, but... well, anyway.” I looked down at her. “Why do you ask?”

“I died once,” she said. “Well... twice, but the first time kinda doesn’t count. It was only for a minute. The second time... that one was real. I was dead.” She swallowed. “I was very, very dead. I’d been buried under the earth, and my body had decayed, and my soul... had passed on.”

I was fascinated. For all the times I’d died, I’d never gone anywhere. Death was just life for me. There was no passing on. Only coming back and back and back again. “What was it like?”

She rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. “Peaceful,” she said. “No fear or doubt or pain. Nothing was my job anymore. I was just... finished. It was nice. Then a friend of mine ripped me back to life, thinking she was doing me a favor.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“I was miserable,” she said. “I was so empty and... I felt wrong. Like it wasn’t really my life that I’d stepped into. And I felt all alone... except when I was with him.”

“Sounds like he was a good friend.”

“I hated him for it,” she admitted. “He was a good friend, and I didn’t want him to be that way. I wanted him to be only evil. He would have made more sense if he was.”

“Evil?”

“Yeah. He was this contradiction I could never wrap my head around, and couldn’t ignore anymore. I tried... tried to bury it all in sensation. All the grief and the fear and the loneliness. I was convinced I didn’t love him, since there was so much hate in it.” She closed her eyes on the dark room. “The hate was very real. But the love was, too. And I couldn’t see it.” She took in a deep breath through her nose, and I realized she was trying not to cry. “I couldn’t see how there could be so much love and so much hate, all at the same time.” She shook her head. “It wounded him. Damaged him more than I ever thought possible. I’d told myself I couldn’t hurt him, but... I did. I hurt him so much, he almost hurt me. And then he hurt himself so much more...” She swallowed. “I didn’t see how the two emotions could exist at the same time.”

“Oh, I can,” I said. “He hated me.”

She looked up at me. “Your lover?”

I nodded. “He loved me, and hated me for it. Bitterly. For a long time. I can see why. I raped
him for nearly a year.”

Buffy went very still beside me, and I knew I’d described it badly. “What?” Her voice was very even.

“I didn’t know I was,” I clarified, and even though she didn’t relax or sigh, I could almost smell her distaste fading. “He told me he wanted me, he was always ready for me. It turned out he was trying to protect his girlfriend, and needed to keep me distracted. He’d never been with a man before. The whole idea was... disturbing... to him.” I shook my head. “So even though I turned him on something fierce, and I did things to him... things his body desperately wanted... it still wasn’t what he really wanted. And I didn’t see it. I thought all the groans and the trembling and the tormented looks were just... desire. Not confusion and disgust and outright manipulation. I was so damned arrogant, it didn’t even occur to me that he might not have been enjoying it. He whored himself out for the sake of my distraction. I thought we were lovers, but it felt like rape to him.”

“But... it turned out all right in the end?”

“You mean did he forgive me for making him feel raped while I forgave him for the lies? Yeah. Eventually. We never out and said it, but... we kind of started over.”

“We had to start over once,” she said quietly. “I had done the whole thing so badly. He loved me so much... and I used him so... cruelly. I didn’t want to love him, you know. I didn’t want to love anybody, but I really didn’t want to love him. But I needed him so badly, it was like a drug. I’d strip him down and use him as my sex toy or something, and then I’d throw him away. Over and over again. Just flesh, he said. Get it hard... service the girl. And I had no idea how much....” She stopped. “It broke him, actually. He couldn’t see why I couldn’t see.... He kept telling me that I loved him, and I never believed him. I’d get so angry whenever he told me that, sometimes I’d hit him so hard....” She shook her head. “I was always hitting him.”

“Was he...?”

“A vampire? Yeah,” Buffy said. “So... yeah. We were always hitting each other. When we met, he was trying to kill me.”

“And you never got around to slaying him?”

“Neither of us ever got around to finishing it, like we were supposed to,” she said. “It was like we couldn’t. Even from the beginning.”

I smiled. “I’ve known some vampires I couldn’t bring myself to kill,” I said. “Sometimes they’re just such... masterpieces of passion.”

“A masterpiece of passion,” she whispered. “Yeah. I think he was.”

“Is that why you hated him? Because he was a vampire?”

“I’d been burned by one before,” she said. “He kind of ended up paying for the other guy’s sins. Not really fair, even though... they’re not known to be the most trustworthy of lovers. But I couldn’t keep myself away from him, either... no matter how much I wanted to.” She buried her head in my side. “I don’t love you,” she said quietly.

“I know.”

Buffy clenched her fist on my chest. “How is it that I can only ever know what love is when I don’t feel it?” She looked up. “Keep me awake, Jack. I don’t want to sleep anymore.”
“Still don’t trust me?”

“I just can’t deal with any more slayer dreams tonight.”

I reached down and touched her lips with my thumb. “What dreams do you want?”

“None. No past, no future, no symbolic slicing up my dead lover.”

“No more time?” I asked.

“Just make everything go away.”

I brushed the hair out of her face. She was so damn young. “Let me see what I can do.”
The Rock

Chapter Summary

Andrew

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, season Five, after Damage

Andrew –

Once, upon the time of the new moon, a great hero made his way through the ancient cobbled streets of a hallowed city, bearing news of the greatest import for the champion of the world.

The hero. That’s me. Andrew “the Rock” Welles, the steady and eminent colleague of slayers, and notable warlock in his own right, demon-summoner extraordinaire, and one of the rising stars of the over-top part of the underworld. By which, of course, I mean the benevolent forces of right, who nevertheless must face the night. Those who fight against the forces of darkness, and strive to bring peace and prosperity to a world rife with evil conflict, and the torment of the innocent.

Which was why the message I bore was of the utmost importance. In fact, not only was it of great import, it also required the utmost secrecy. The most utmost of discretion had been imparted to no one less than I, and Andrew “the Rock” could not risk such momentous news to the vagaries of such modern inconveniences as telephones or messages. Such significant news could only be imparted in person, which was why I, The Rock Himself, had to make his way through the ancient streets of Rome, with my heart in my throat, and my palms damp with sweat.

I, myself, had been sent to Los Angeles, the City of Angels, (and the city, incidently, of Angel, the ensouled vampyre, who was once a force for good, but had allowed evil most foul to corrupt his benevolent nature,) on a vital mission to save the life of a young slayer; a childhood victim of a brutal crime. My mission, which I had chosen to accept, was to travel, with a collection of brilliant and super-strong young women at my back, to collect and detain the dark slayer Dana, to protect the world from her madness, and to protect her in turn from the madness of the world. Fearlessly, I faced the darkness, risking life and limb at the hands of a brutal...

I stopped. Hands. Yoda preserve us, I had to get to Buffy.

I pushed through the morning throng of Rome, the smell of the coffee bars and the little put-put cars. “Buongiorno. Mi scusi. Mi... scus.... um. Can you get out of my way?” It was really annoying how no one ever looked at me. I mean, I’d listened to Dawn and fixed my wardrobe. Wasn’t that supposed to garner some respect?
The senior Slayer of the Vampyres made her home in a quaint stone apartment building on the corner about twelve blocks from the New Watchers Council’s modest dwelling, in which I stayed whenever I was in Rome. Little did any outsiders know the dark secrets that lay within the quiet facade. Little could anyone suspect that the fate of the world rested on the slim shoulders of the young blonde within. Such lurid details hide beneath the surface of mundane existence, and for those in the know, the world is full of secrets. I had my own. A secret I felt it my duty to impart. I made my way through the dim hallway to number 34, where I heard raised voices from within.

Apartment 34, the home of the beautiful Summers women, Buffy and Dawn, the heroines (alongside yours truly) of Sunnydale. I knocked, with my hands clenched in anticipation at my side, as I would soon once again look upon the faces of my most beloved friends.

The door opened, and Dawn didn’t even glance at me before she turned away and shouted across the room. “I don’t know what you expect me to do,” she said. “Like, stop my ears or something? I’m an impressionable girl!”

“Who one month ago was begging me to let her boyfriend stay the night!” Buffy shouted from the other room.

Dawn was dressed for school, her long walnut tresses soft and gleaming, wearing Coral Dawn lipstick (no doubt bought for its name.) She wore a neat black blazer and trim beige slacks that flared just enough to show off her shapely thighs. Her cheeks were flushed as she called out to her dear sorella (that is, sister, for the laymen who do not have the benefit of knowing the Italian language.) “That was before I knew you wanted the same thing! If I’d known having a free pass to be a grown up meant I’d have to deal with that stuff...”

“You wanted to be treated like a grown up, so I am,” Buffy said, coming in. The Slayer of the Vampyres was dressed in a silken robe of dusty rose, that barely concealed her nubile flesh, her pulsing thews sliding through the sultry fabric with every movement of her supernaturally limber body. “So, you get to deal with it. I’m sick of going across town when my apartment is right here.”

“Fine! Jeeze! It’s not as if I care!” Dawn announced. “Just, I wish you’d keep it down! It was disgusting.”

“We were all but silent, Dawn,” Buffy said. “I know, I was there.”

“You think I couldn’t hear you scuffling?” Dawn snapped. “Ugh. Hi Andrew. See you later.” She pushed passed me, almost knocking me into the doorjamb as she left.

“Uh... hi Dawn,” I called after her retreating back. Her narrow waist and determined shoulders slipped around the corner to the stairwell, her soft walnut hair flipping luxuriantly as she walked.

As the brunette disappeared, I turned my attention to the blonde – the real heart of the Council of the Slayers, Buffy, the Chosen One. “Hey, Andrew. Aren’t you supposed to be in Scotland?”

“I asked Giles to reroute me here,” I said.

Buffy raised her eyebrows. “Problem?”

“No,” I informed her. “I’ve come to report on my mission.”

“Your mission?”

“Um... the slayer? In LA?”
“Oh. Right. Did you get hold of Monica all right? I heard the girls had handled it.”

“Um... yes,” I said. “I contacted the slayer cell in California, and they did indeed descend upon the City of Angels, to retrieve one of their own.”

“Great. Hang on a sec. I haven’t had my coffee yet, and I’ve only got a minute. You want some?”

“Um... sure. I love me some strong Italian espresso of a morning...”

“It’s just Americano,” Buffy said. “I’m still an American.” She quickly poured a cup and doctored it to her own taste, pushing a cup of straight black coffee at me.

I took a sip, and coughed. “Um... I usually order hot chocolate?” I admitted.

Buffy shrugged. “Cream’s here. You got five minutes, then the coffee goes away. So, she was in LA?”

“Yeah. And I went to Wolfram and Hart, like I was supposed to,” I said. They hadn’t trusted W&H not to want to capture or at least “study” a slayer, so they’d sent me into the maw of the beast instead of Monica or any of the others. Not because they didn’t value me, but because I was their most cunning agent, like 007 going undercover. I took in a deep breath, preparing myself to tell the momentous news: Spike, the champion of Sunnydale, the indomitable warrior of the hellmouth, the glorious vampyre whose soul outshone even those chosen by fate itself, had been returned from the maw of death, and was awaiting the woman he loved – that sultry history that even I could see from my distant vantage point – Buffy, the Slayer of Vampyres, his companion in word and deed. “I was shown into their offices with great aplomb, and prepared to inform them of the happenings in our corner of the–”

“Yeah, I told Giles the cat was out of the bag about the slayers. He gave you authorization to explain why?”

“Indeed. And it was most fortunate, or perhaps most unfortunate, that the dark creature that Wolfram and Hart had taken it upon themselves to pursue was, in fact, a slayer. Slayers are the most difficult and passionate of creatures, meant to be warriors of light. When they are pushed to the dark side of the force, only the most courageous of warriors–”

“So you saw Angel, then?”

“Yes. The dark childe of fate with–”

“And you gave him my message?” Buffy asked. “Verbatim. Word for word, right?”

“Oh, yeah. I couldn’t forget it,” I said. Over the phone, Buffy had drilled her words into my head at least twenty times before she sent me off to execute her orders. It was a double message. First off, the slayers had control over Dana, and all other slayer activity. Buffy did not trust Wolfram and Hart, even with Angel at the wheel (possibly because Angel was at the wheel, even.) And, though she wasn’t quite putting it that way, she was done. She was completely, entirely, done with Angel. “I got twelve Vampyre Slayers with me, and not one of them has ever dated you.”

“I didn’t say vampyre,” Buffy said. “Why the hell do you pronounce it like that, anyway?”

“It’s more historically accurate,” I said. Wasn’t it?

Buffy rolled her eyes. “And the rest of the message?”
“You’re working for Wolfram and Hart,” I said. “Don’t fool yourself – we’re not on the same side. Yeah. He got the message loud and clear.”

Buffy sighed. She looked relieved.

“So,” I asked. “Um... this means you’re finished with Angel, yeah?”

“Far as I’m concerned, I am,” Buffy said.

“But... um... tell me if I’m wrong. I don’t know if I’m wrong. But Willow the great and powerful... she says that you two have some kind of... destiny?”

“I said the fuck with destiny quite a little while ago,” Buffy said. I blushed at her coarse language, sullying her pristine hero’s lips. “And frankly, I said the fuck with Angel, too. Angel knows what he’s doing, and he knows how I feel about it. The way he is, the way he acts.... If there’s some destiny that involves me living with that shit, I want no part of it.”

“So, you’re not still hoping that some day the two of you can sail off into the sunset, with a happy-ever-after to the tale of star crossed love?”

“I’m living in Italy,” Buffy said. “When star crossed lovers get together in Italy, we’re talking tragedy. We’d end up killing each other.”

“So, not wanting Angel, then.”

“Why do you think I would?”

“Well, the thing is, about Spike–”

“Ugh! I don’t want to talk about Spike. Look. Whatever Angel tells you,” Buffy said. “Whatever anyone tells you. Angel means well, I’m sure, but that’s all dead and gone.”

“But... if something surprising happened,” I pressed. “If, for example, my therapist was completely wrong, and there was some chance that a miracle had occurred. If the finest warrior the world has ever known should somehow–”

Buffy snatched the undrunk coffee out of my hand and surreptitiously poured it into the sink. She gulped hers quickly before rinsing her mouth and both cups, and she threw a dishtowel over the coffee maker. “Um... Buffy?” I asked, curious.

“Dawn still here?” called a masculine voice from behind me.

“Nope.” I only just noticed that the sound of a shower had been cut off, which was what had prompted Buffy’s bizarre actions with the coffee.

“Dawn still here?” called a masculine voice from behind me.

“Nope.” I only just noticed that the sound of a shower had been cut off, which was what had prompted Buffy’s bizarre actions with the coffee.

“Good.” A powerfully muscled man with the face of an angel stepped from the still steaming bathroom, gloriously nude. His hair was thick and black as midnight, his eyes as blue and deep as the summer sky. But when the morning sun shone through the roundels on the windows, his shining, nay, magnificent mane glinted with tints of red. His broad chest rippled, glittering under the sheen of moisture from his shower, and his arms were swollen with his strength. He held himself like a ruler, like Aragorn the champion, the one true king. His finely planed face was open and honest, and his broad jaw narrowed to a manly cleft chin, set exquisitely below a red and supple mouth. A mouth that smiled at me with appreciation. “Who’s the boy?”

“This is Andrew.”
“Who?”

My mouth was dry. “T-Tucker’s brother,” I supplied, certain, as always, that my brother’s fame as a summoner of demons had spread even to distant hamlets overseas.

“Not ringing a bell,” the man said. “But, uh... I’m sure other things would.”

I think I made some kind of noise. I don’t know what. I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t torture the boy, Jack,” Buffy said with a grin. “Go put on a towel.”

The man – Jack – turned, revealing buttocks of steel, connected to thighs like tree-trunks, rippling with muscle, crouched to spring like a lion. He pulled a damp towel from the bathroom he had just vacated, and wrapped it around his hips, still revealing the flesh down his leg, but hiding the secrets that nature has endowed to all men. Really... fascinating... secrets.... “Um... so you’re... um...” I blushed. It wasn’t that Jack’s masculinity was threatening to me, or that the blatant exposition of the Slayer’s sexuality was unsettling, or that I can’t handle nudity in any form without finding myself without a human reference. My therapist is totally wrong on that. It was just that I was startled.

“Yes. I’m.” Jack smirked at me, revealing mischievous dimples at the corners of his mouth, his smile shining down as if it were a gift from heaven above. A moment later I looked away from the dazzle and down at my shoes, trying to figure out what to say to Buffy. “You got any coke?”

I was startled at the idea that Buffy, the paragon of all virtues might accept nothing less evil than drug culture in her very own apartment, when I realized he was referring only to a soft drink, which Buffy pulled out of the fridge and handed to him. “And you avoid coffee,” Buffy said.

“I still like caffeine in the mornings,” Jack said. He grabbed Buffy around the waist and pulled her close. “Though I suppose I could have some other kind of pick me up.”

Buffy laughed, looking happier than I had seen her in... well, ever. My dreams of reuniting her with her heroically deceased swain suddenly seemed quite juvenile and foolish. What was it that she had said about Angel? That’s dead and gone. And Spike himself, what had he said? Creature of the night, the troubled hero... well, no actually, I was the one who said that, but still. The idea wasn’t wrong.

I’d really been looking forward to telling Buffy. I’d diverted myself from Scotland to Rome just so that I could tell her in person. I wanted someone to crow to about it. Spike’s alive, Spike’s alive! He’s healthy and strong and alive and well and living in LA! Or he was, but now he’s wounded, and he needs you, Buffy! But all the words, all the epic descriptions I had formed of Spike’s resurrection, the poignant tale I was to tell of the Slayer of Slayers who had redeemed himself, and was set upon by the Dark Slayer, and had his power removed by her in the form of his masterful fists; the image I had of Buffy sitting by his bedside as he recovered, painfully longing to hold his hand... it all went up in smoke.

I realized that maybe Buffy didn’t want some old lover coming up out of the blue to take this paragon of statuesque Grecian beauty away, and confuse her. “I wasn’t expecting you to have company.”

“Andrew, this is Jack. Andrew kind of works for Giles,” Buffy said. “Jack’s kind of... well....”

“Is he your boyfriend?” I demanded.

Buffy shrugged. “Close enough.”
I couldn’t endure. I had to leave – leave Buffy and her pale nubile beauty in her soft pink silk; leave Jack and his throbbing manhood concealed behind his damp towel; leave this apartment where the scent of their tryst – I was sure – most likely still graced their bedroom. Buffy was in love. She had fallen in love again, with this paragon of all manliness, because, who wouldn’t? It was the most tragic thing I’d ever seen. She was in love with this Jack. Whatever history Buffy may had had with Spike was just that – history. He’d known that. Buffy knew that. Hell, they’d never even said anything outright about anything. Maybe they were only ever just friends? Just past enemies? Just acquaintances? I was the only one who had dreams of their eternal love. My therapist kept telling me these things. I had to stop making everything into a story. People were just people. Life and death were just that. Spike was happy in LA. Buffy had moved on. There was nothing I could do for either of them. Tears stabbed at my eyes and I tried not to sob aloud.

“Yeah. Um. Well. I gave Angel your message, g’bye.”

I ran out into the Roman streets, my chest spasming with tension. I wept into my sleeve for the better part of fifteen minutes. They might not believe in eternal love. I still did! The idea that she and Spike were estranged... it was horrible to me. But Buffy and this Jack guy... I couldn’t break that up, either. He was too perfect, too beautiful, too seductive. It wasn’t right that there could be more than one destiny! She’d moved on from Angel, she’d moved on from Spike... if I ever found love, would my beloved move on from me, too? What was the point of living when even resurrection did not return you to the person you loved? The horror of it crushed at me, and I pulled out my cell phone. “Yeah. I need to book another appointment? Yeah, I know my sessions’ usually on Tuesdays, but this is an emergency!”
Chapter Summary

Angel

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, Season Five, immediately after You're Welcome.

Angel

I walked into the bar still feeling numb. I was numb on the inside, and my lips were numb where Cordelia had kissed me. Where the corporeal projection of Cordelia had kissed me. Because Cordelia was dead. She had been dying the whole time she was with us. She’d been dead for some minutes even while she was standing with me, holding me, making me feel alive again.

Love. Love didn’t make any sense. It was always snatched from me. Always. Darla, and Buffy, and Cordelia... and my son. One way or another, I destroyed it. All of it. It all melted around me, as if I drained its life force, like it was my prey. Cordelia was dead.

And everyone looked so happy! They were all circled around a large table at the side, laughing and talking and drinking. Lorne had a sea breeze in his hand and was telling some story about Orlando Bloom in Vegas. Gunn was staring into his drink, but smiling now and again. Wesley was sitting beside Fred, completely at ease, his hand on her arm, the dear friends they were, and Fred was just glowing with delight. Only Spike’s mood seemed to match mine, and he was drinking steadily. He leaned back in his chair, his feet on the table, consequently a little away from everyone else. Four empty shot glasses in front of him indicated that he was handling his drunkenness quite systematically, but he was concentrating on a bottle of beer at the moment.

I came over, unsure what I was going to say, but Gunn pushed a beer at me, and I just took it. I sat down. I figured the news would be easier if I joined them, was part of the party. Lorne was still chuckling over his story. “So I says to him, I says, ‘Don’t be so down. It’s a really great hat!’” Fred and Wesley had joined in on the last line of the story, so whatever the punch line was, it was some kind of running reference. Fred was giggling, sounding pretty drunk. It looked as if Lorne had been plying her with something.

“Hey there, Angel face,” Lorne went on. “Cordy decide to take a rain check?”

“She is coming, right?” Fred said smiling. “It hasn’t felt right without her. You know, so we could still have some idea what the Powers were after. I’ve missed Cordelia. I mean... she just made it all so perfect. Oh, even without that Powers That Be vision message thing.”
“Yeah, she did,” I whispered.

“To hell with ‘em,” Spike muttered.

“Huh?”

“To hell with the bloody Powers,” he said. He looked around the table, full of people who were always, to a greater or lesser extent, trying to work on behalf of the Powers That Be. They all stared at him, in some cases offended.

“What the hell do they know?” He put his feet down and leaned in. “Okay, so, I get that this Lindsey bloke gave me my little box of flash, and I get that all his visions were bloody set ups, right? So, what I don’t get is, what the hell were they planning, eh? Them, or these so-called Senior Partners. If they’re the ones in charge of everything, one side or another, if they’re so mighty all powerful, shouldn’t they have seen what was happening? Seen him getting himself dressed up in his little secrecy runes? Hell, I wasn’t runed up, why didn’t they see me? Yeah? I mean, it don’t make any sense. They didn’t see Lindsey, and they didn’t see that little bird Eve. But I was right there, getting into it, scrapping away, and what was that? If that was a problem for them, why didn’t they just take me out? Why’d they let it keep going? The telescope may not be able to show the black hole, but it can show the rubbish falling into it, yeah?”

“Well, the Powers That Be work in ways that we can’t always understand,” Wesley said.

“Yeah, but to what? What the hell’s the long game? Whose pawn am I meant to be? Good guys or bad guys, where’s the logic? I mean, okay, the bad guys get this sodding amulet into Angel’s mitts, and it takes out the hellmouth, yeah? So, what, Senior Partners wanted the First Evil’s army taken out? Why? Thought they were supposed to be bad guys.”

“Same reason you fought me for Acathla, even though you were still trying to be the big bad,” I said. “Probably just to piss someone off.”

Spike looked at me coldly. “Right. Because I risked my life and destroyed my relationship and buggered up my future all for the sake of pissing you off.” I realized that was probably a little unfair of me. I had been plotting with Drusilla to leave him behind, after all, and doing everything I could to separate them. My soulless thought process, at the time, had been that Dru had forgotten me in the last hundred years, and I needed to claim her as my own again. If that left Spike out... yeah. It was Dru he’d turned on me for, since he loved her so much – or thought he did. For all the good that did him. But he was an ass! Of course he couldn’t keep her! I never thought he was worthy of her, anyway.

“I always thought the Powers That Be were using Wolfram and Hart,” Lorne said. “Even with the Senior Partners, even in opposition, they aren’t immune to their influence.”

Spike shook his head and went on with his question. “Fine, so. Maybe the amulet wasn’t pure Senior Partners. Maybe your precious Powers threw a shoe into that one. Maybe that army just needed taking out. But it was this Lindsey bloke who dragged my arse out of my little eternal oblivion apparently stuck in that amulet, which, you know, weren’t that bad, really. Could’a just got buried under the earth and hell, next geological era, I’m sure the damn amulet would have just melted or crushed in a sodding tectonic shift, so I’d have been gone for good. So, I’d have been free, then. But no, instead Lindsey digs me out and mails me on – to you no less. And then they mock up some psychic carbon copy of yours truly, and stick my soul in it. And why? ‘Cause, Angel, mate?’ he said, looking straight at me. “Your precious Powers sure as hell meant someone to die down in that hellmouth. You, me, Buffy, whatever these damn fates were playing at, they meant one evil power down, and one hero dead. First Evil defeated, one champion out of the
picture. And then what? If it was Lindsey dragged me up, I wasn’t meant to come back. Which means what? Cock up, right?”

“The Powers don’t always work real linear, Spikester,” Lorne said. “They make mistakes, they can cause damage, they leave loose ends.”

“Is that what I am, then? A loose end? ‘Cause I didn’t feel like I was any kind of neat tied bow to start with! Maybe you want to play Simon Says with a bunch of mystic beings, but I just want to get on with it. I mean, I didn’t want this stupid sand shoes prophecy, or the bloody Powers buggering up my life, and I’m not any high uppity-up’s sodding lapdog, right?”

“Then why’d you do it?” I asked. I couldn’t help it.

“What?”

“Yes,” Wesley asked, curious now. “If you didn’t truly believe that the prophecy might have been meant for you, why did you obey when Lindsey told you of a vision? What was your long game?”

“I din’t sodding obey, all right?”

“But you saved Angel,” Gunn said. “You went after Dana. You were doing the whole vigilante thing. I mean, what were you trying to get out of it?”

“Oh, sod off,” Spike said.

“Why’d you do it, Spike?” I asked. “Why’d you try to save all those people?”

“What was your reward gonna be, Spike?” Gunn asked. “It could be important.”

“Doesn’t sodding matter,” he muttered.

“Buffy,” I realized. Acathla was for Dru, that meant all this was for— “You’re still playing for Buffy. That’s why he stayed,” I told the others. “That’s why he tried to take my place in destiny. Because he thinks if he does that, he’ll get Buffy.”

“Get Buffy,” Spike snarled, low. “You make her sound like a bloody carnival prize. Two more balloons popped, and you get the tacky plush.”

“You knew that you weren’t good enough for her, so you stayed here to get one over on me,” I said. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t realized it before. I’d truly been doubting my own destiny, I’d almost handed it to Spike, and now it was perfectly clear to me that he was still only doing it so he could get laid. “So that when her cookies are fully baked, you’ll be right there to devour her.”

Everyone looked at me, confused by Buffy’s admittedly bizarre analogy, but Spike only sat back in his chair. “Angel?” he said, with a strange little smile that I knew from experience was incredibly dangerous. “Oh chosen one, with your precious bloody destiny? GET BENT!”

The roar rattled the drinks glasses and made the whole bar stare at us. Everyone but Spike looked embarrassed. One of the servers came up to us and asked, “Is there some kind of problem?”

“No problem at all, mate,” Spike said, all ease and affability again. “I’d like four more shots of bourbon, and another beer, thanks.”

The server did a quick assessment of how drunk he seemed. “I’ll get you your beer,” he said,
and left. Spike rolled his eyes, but didn’t protest.

“So if it wasn’t for Buffy... like a carnival prize, as you so rightly comment, then why were you going along with Lindsey’s game, Spike?” Wesley pressed. “What was in it for you?”

Spike glowered at everyone at the table. “I love how you all assume there had to be some glittery prize at the end for me.” He gestured at me with his beer bottle. “Why were you doing it, Angel?”

“Huh?”

“Well. You’re all asking me. What was your angle? You got your little prophecy, your pretty little sand shoes. That’s the only reason you help, right?”

I pursed my lips to say something, and realized I didn’t know what to say. “So, you’re up there every day in your shiny new office building,” Spike said, “and before that you were down in your little Angel Investigations gig, and you were doing it for the prize, right?” He looked at everyone at the table. “And you, you were doing it for vengeance?” he asked Gunn. “And you were only doing it ‘cause you had a crush on Angel, right?” he asked Fred. “And you, Wes, you were just trying to prove your worth to the watchers council, prove they should never have let you go. And you...” He turned to Lorne.

“I’m just here for the sea breezes,” Lorne said. “I like to make sure everyone’s having a good time.”

“Yeah,” Spike said. “But greeny’s gotta be lying, right? Because that’s not motivation enough for anybody.” There was defiant scorn in his voice. “No, Angel’s right. I was just trying to get one over on him, or trying to get Buffy, or trying to win some shiny happy trophy. It didn’t have bugger all to do with the fact that every time that sodding git told me about some vision, some bird or other was gonna die. And if I didn’t do sommat to stop it, I might as well have done it myself.”

Fred looked ashamed of herself. So did Wes and Gunn to an extent, but Fred in particular. “I’m sorry, Spike,” she said.

He waved her apology off, not as if he wasn’t accepting it, just as if it didn’t matter. He tipped his feet back on the table. “Not like I really saved anyone, anyway, is it? I mean, they were only in trouble because that git put ‘em in trouble. Using me to show you up.” He gestured at me with his bottle, and then drained the last dregs. He shook his head. “Don’t matter why I did it,” he said. “What matters to me is, what the hell’s it supposed to mean? Am I an afterthought? A loose end? And if I wasn’t s’posed to be here, is there any way I can get the hell out of it? I mean, whose idea was it for me to burn up in a fiery blaze, and then come back into this miserable life? The only thing I want from the Powers That Bugger Us is to get them out of my hair. At this rate, I’ll be different stages of undead for sodding ever. What the hell’s it all about? So much for school’s out for bloody summer.”

“A choice,” said Lorne.

“What?”

“A choice,” Lorne said. “A choice. Life and immortality, and something selfish. Sorry, that’s all I caught. And please, Spike, I told you not to do that. Give me an awful headache.”

I looked over at Lorne. “You just gave him a reading?”

“Not voluntarily,” Lorne said. “Believe me, you don’t want to see into this guy’s soul.”
“Yeah, I’ll buy that,” I said. Spike rolled his eyes and took up his last shot. “But I thought you couldn’t read someone unless they sang.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Lorne said. “Hits like a ton of bricks.”

“His destiny?”

“Just his personality, Angelcakes. I thought we’d just established all that destiny stuff as being kind of moot where Spike’s concerned. But even a brief lyric’ll do it for that guy.”

“You should hear some of his poetry,” I said.

“Shut up,” Spike snapped.

“No, really. Something about effulgence?”

“I said shut up, you berk!”

“No, he read some of his old stuff to me, years ago. Midnight descends in raven clothes.”

“He knows your poems?" Fred asked Spike, looking up with a giggle. “I thought you said you didn’t remember any of them.”

“He recited them to me for ages,” I said. “Kept trying to write new stuff about blood and... well, I think they were supposed to be about getting laid.”

“Would you shut the hell up?” Spike glowered at me.

“All his stuff was about love,” I said. “Mooning over this girl Cecily, who I don’t think looked at him twice. He’d read it out to Drusilla, plugging in her name where he could.”

“Stop it.”

“At least it sort of scanned. Of course, it didn’t really matter whose name was in it,” I said. “Not like it was ever really love anyway. My heart expands, has grown a–”

Spike stood up from his chair so fast it toppled over. “Like you ever knew what the hell love was!” he shouted. “Walk away, break it up, lie, cheat, stalk, torment!”

The bar froze again, and everyone stared. The server looked up, to make sure Spike wasn’t going to do that again – I knew this bar. Three strikes, and you’re out. If he made one more outburst, he wouldn’t be allowed back in, not that night, possibly not ever. Spike looked around. I was pretty sure if Fred and everyone else wasn’t around, he’d have been about to clock me one. I almost wished he would. I’d pushed him too far. I’d been trying to push him too far. Why was I always doing that to Spike? To everyone? Why did I push them down, push them away? He was right. From the beginning, I’d never known how to love anyone properly. Not Darla, not Buffy. Let alone Cordelia.

Who the hell was I to mock him for feeling?

“Hey, Spikester,” Lorne said, playing the host as always. “Settle down, you know? We’re all a little tense after the last few days....”

“Cordelia’s dead,” I said suddenly.

Everyone turned to stare at me. I didn’t know why I’d felt the need to say it right then. It had just
fallen out of me, as if Spike’s ire had opened the lock. It certainly took the attention off Spike sure enough. “What?” Lorne asked.


“Cordelia is dead,” I said, tasting the words. “She’s been dead....” I looked down. “Her presence was a gift from the Powers,” I said. “She never did wake up.”

“You mean she...? But she was right there! We all saw her! Lorne, you saw her, right?”

“She was... a moment. A farewell.” I looked back up at the stricken faces of everyone but Spike. “Coming to say goodbye... that was her final gift... from them... and to us.”

Fred started to cry. Lorne quickly joined her. Spike sat back down and nursed the beer the server brought him, and he didn’t say much more for the rest of the night. I tried to explain as much as I understood to everyone. The after-work drink quickly turned into an impromptu wake. We all took turns reminiscing about Cordelia, what we remembered, what we’d loved about her. Wes remembered the prom, when the two of them had still shared a mutual crush. Fred remembered how kind she was when she first got back to this dimension. When the conversation turned to Spike, he looked a bit at a loss. “Well, when I knew her I was mostly trying to kill her,” he said. “But she had great taste in Halloween costumes.”

His eyes went distant then. I could almost hear him say, not as good as Buffy’s.

Everyone trickled home, in various states of inebriation. In the end, it was just me and Spike, very, very drunk, sitting at the table and staring into our liquor. For a long time we sat there silent. “So who the hell was Connor?” Spike asked suddenly.

“What?” I looked up. To say I was startled would have been an understatement. “Where did you hear about Connor?”

Spike shrugged. “Cordelia told me to ask about him. On the way back up from fixing the Lindsey cocked destiny bit.”

“Why?”

“Dunno.” He took a sip of his beer. “Told me I was the only one safe to tell.”

I regarded him. Cordy was probably right. If I told anyone else, that would mean explaining that I’d messed with their memories, and no one likes hearing that. It was Cordelia who had said it to him... Cordelia, gift from the Powers That Be, sent to put me back on my path.... “Connor was my son,” I said quietly.

Spike laughed. “That must have been a hoot to find out about. Sort of a grown-up wild oat, Liam?” He shrugged. “Fascinating, history books. So you got two hundred years of human descendants, or what?”

“Not Liam. Mine.”

“Dru’s got a brother somewhere?”

“Not a vampire. Connor was my son.”

Spike frowned. “You’re not saying what I think you’re saying, are you? ‘Cause that’s bollocks.”
“My son,” I said. “My baby.”

Spike’s head cocked, and he stared at me.

“Mine and Darla. Just a few years ago.”

Spike looked... well, exactly as I would have expected from someone being told the impossible, and for some reason believing it. The only disbelief came out in his next word. “Darla?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Miss Eat-The-Babies-First Darla?”

I chuckled. I’d forgotten about her penchant for that. Briefly, very quietly, I sketched out the whole sordid story. Trying to bring Darla back, the attempt manifesting itself as Connor, Darla’s sacrifice for our child, and all Connor’s tragic history after. And how I was alone in it now. Alone, the only one with knowledge of my son.

“Hm,” Spike said when all was said and done. It had only taken a few moments to impart, since I didn’t go into much detail. “Well. Congratulations, Angel. Would you like a cigar?”

I looked up. I’d expected scorn, or contempt, or disgust at my failure. Spike was only looking exhausted. Well, he was drunk. “That’s all you have to say?”

“Well, whatever happened, he is where he is, and you’re off alone again, which is usually how you like it.” Spike shrugged. “All kids grow up and leave home, anyway. So if he’s happy, and you’re content with it...” He lifted his hand in vague acceptance. “All that’s left is congrats, proud papa.”

I had never thought of it that way. I’d been seeing Connor as a mistake, the child I let be tormented, the job I didn’t do right, the son I’d lost. And here was Spike, putting it down to all children grow up, and we were both content enough where we were. The tragedy of it was completely lost on him. All he saw was that I’d had a son... which was more than Spike was ever going to have.

I had lost my child. In his place had been only a tragedy. With an easy shrug and casual acceptance, Spike had just given him back to me. Conner was happy. I was content. All that was left was congratulations. My son was a blessing again.

I nearly wept.

***

She didn’t pick up on the first ring. Or the seventh. I was about to give up when she finally answered. “Hi,” she said.

“Buffy, it’s Angel,” I said.

“I figured from the caller ID,” she said. “I didn’t know who else would be calling from Wolfram and Hart.”

“This is my private line,” I told her, but I supposed it still somehow showed up as W&H.

She didn’t seem to care. “How did you get this number?”
“Um...” I didn’t want to admit the number of hoops I’d jumped through. First I’d tried the number she’d left for me, but that was disconnected. Then I tried Rupert Giles, but he just said to leave her a message, and he’d get it to her. Then I’d tried Willow, but her number wasn’t accurate, either, until I asked Fred, and she had Willow’s right number. Willow had seemed pretty awkward on the phone, too, until I told her why I was calling. Only then did she agree to give me Buffy’s number in Rome. “Willow,” I said.

“Oh.” Buffy’s tone was neutral. Neither of us said anything for a long moment. “Is there an emergency?”

“No,” I said. “I just...”

“Well, in that case, Angel, I don’t really have time...”

“Cordelia’s dead.”

A pause. “That’s why you called?”

“Willow said you’d want to know.” In truth, Willow had said she’d call Buffy with the news, but I’d pretty much begged her to give me Buffy’s number so I could tell her myself.

“Okay.” Another pause. “You know I haven’t actually spoken with her in like five years, right?”

She hadn’t? I knew Cordy had called Willow on and off before the coma, kept her abreast of things... didn’t she speak to Buffy? But then, she and Cordelia hadn’t really been like Cordy and Willow. I mean, those two had known each other since they were kids. Buffy... well. I supposed they really hadn’t been close. “I just thought you might like to hear it from me.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ve heard it.”

She didn’t even ask how it happened. Didn’t seem to care. “Buffy?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“How’s... do you still feel half-baked?”

“That’s why you called?”

“No. No, I was just... wondering.”

“Angel, look, I’ve got a lot on my plate...”

“I just... I wanted to tell you... um... about Spike....”

“It’s done, Angel,” Buffy said, her voice hard.

“No, but... about the amulet--”

“I don’t want to hear it!” she snapped. “Look. Bye. Sorry about Cordelia.”

“No, but Buffy--”

“Apologizing won’t fix it, Angel,” she snapped. “I’m not half-baked. The oven is off.”

“That wasn’t--” But she’d already hung up.
She’d hung up. I knew I should probably call back, leave a message if she didn’t answer, but I
couldn’t quite bring myself to do it. I hadn’t wanted to tell her in the first place. I didn’t want to do
it now. It was just such a huge, ugly, tangled problem after so long. First I’d hoped the Spike
problem would just go away, and then I thought the problem would be solved by someone else,
and then I decided it wasn’t my problem. Now explaining why I hadn’t called in the first place was
going to make me out as the bad guy. But... she’d hung up on me. She didn’t want me to tell her
about Spike. Well, that was fate, wasn’t it? That was the Powers That Be telling me clearly that
Buffy was better off not knowing, wasn’t it?

I was so relieved.

Of course, she probably didn’t want to hear me try to apologize for Spike’s death. She’d come to
LA all those months ago, her hand bandaged, a still seeping wound in her abdomen, and all I knew
about the battle at the hellmouth was that Spike had died in it, and the amulet had killed him. “I’m
sorry,” I tried to tell her. We’d put the injured potentials – no, not potentials anymore, were they.
The injured slayer army (why hadn’t anyone told me at the time?) up at the Hyperion, and she’d
been in the lobby, just kind of... staring. “It should have been me,” I told her.

“It couldn’t have been you, Angel,” she said.

“I know. You needed me here.”

She’d looked at me with eyes both world-weary and cold. “Yeah. That’s right.”

“Still,” I said. “I’m sorry about–”

“Wolfram and Hart?” she asked. “That’s where you got that amulet?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s where you’re now CEO, running the show. The law firm of Wolfram and Hart.”

“Well... yes. But it’s not the same, Buffy. We’re changing it, from the inside. We’re making the
world better.”

Buffy looked at me. “By bringing me that amulet,” she said.

“Well... that was part of the original deal. Yeah.”

Buffy nodded, and stood up.

“Buffy...” I started.

“I need to change my bandage, Angel,” she said, indicating her wound. She wasn’t wrong – I
could smell the blood. “Sorry, we’re all really busy.”

She’d started up the stairs, and I’d called after her. “Buffy... I really did mean to fight beside
you.”

She looked at me. No, she *glared* at me. “You couldn’t have done any good, Angel,” she said.
“No good whatsoever.” And then she’d left. That was actually the last time I saw her. The next
time I’d stopped by, just about everyone had already left for Europe or wherever.

I’d wondered at the time if she resented me for giving her that amulet, for luring Spike to his
doom. But I’d meant to wear it! I’d meant to go down fighting at the right hand of my beloved!
How could she blame me for that, when she was the one who had sent me away? I’d told her the source of the amulet wasn’t trustworthy. I’d told her the thing was volatile. She gave it to Spike anyway. That was her, not me.

But the one who had lived was me, not Spike. And that had...

Ach, but she’d told me she didn’t love him! He was in her heart, but she didn’t love him, didn’t see fat grandchildren in the offing. (Though... vampire. Wouldn’t have had them anyway...)

Sleep on it. That’s what Cordelia would have told me. Sleep on it, think on it (brood over it, she’d have said) and decide in the morning.

By the time the morning came around, I had my answer. The number I had for Buffy was disconnected.
“The oven is off!” Buffy snapped. She slammed the phone down so hard I feared she’d break it. She feared it too, and picked it up a second later to check for damage.

“Who was that?”

“My ex,” she said, answering exactly how I thought she would. That had sounded like a conversation with an ex. A heavy ex, from a relationship that still had a lot of ugly baggage attached. I wondered if it was one of the vampires she’d admitted to dating.

It had been a complicated morning even without this. Dawn and I had gotten into a spat, ’cause I was in the shower, when she wanted to use the bathroom. She hated it whenever I spent the night. Buffy and I had actually been getting closer – she’d actually dared falling asleep around me more than the once now – though neither of us were thinking in terms of true love. Mostly we were just two reluctant heroes trying to burn our excesses out in each other. We both had the energy for it. Dawn hated me for reasons which I felt had more to do with Buffy’s previous relationships – and what I’d heard of the conversation Buffy had just had on the phone did not lead me to change that opinion.

The phone’s ring had only barely distracted the two of them from their sisterly bickering, until Buffy had read the name on the caller ID, and then the fight just stopped dead. The two of them had stared at the phone for several heavy seconds before Buffy had finally picked it up. The fact that Buffy had answered seemed to annoy Dawn, and she’d gone to start coffee to annoy both of us in turn.

Even though Buffy was meticulous in avoiding it around me – kind of her, really – the smell of
coffee only really bothered me when it surprised me, so Dawn’s revenge was more childish than effective.

“Hang on a sec,” Buffy said to me after she’d slammed down her phone. “I have to call Willow.”

I didn’t bother remembering the names of all her friends. “Which one’s Willow again?”

“The witch,” she said. She picked up the phone and waited a minute. “Willow, hi. You gave Angel this number?”

There was a long moment when Buffy just looked irritated. “Well, him sounding sad was his problem, wasn’t it. Now I have to change numbers again. Do you know how much of a hassle that’s going to be? — Well, no, I’m not over it. — Look, I know Cordy was your friend, but, real sorry, I don’t actually care that much. I didn’t need a personalized infomercial about it. — That’s me. Really cold. Really cold with a boat load of shit to deal with, and I didn’t need a line from evil itself sneaking into my private home! — No, I meant Wolfram and Hart. I don’t think he means to be evil, but you know Angel. Really easily corrupted. — News flash, Willow. I haven’t felt that way for a long time. — No. I don’t think he’s gone all Angelus.” I looked up. “Just don’t give him my number again, okay? I don’t hate him, I just... I don’t want anything to do with him anymore. Ever. — Well, if you think you can handle being cut off from Fred, then, yeah. I’d prefer it. Anything they need us to know can come through Giles. — Okay. I know. And I am sorry about Cordy, but I’d rather you’d been the one to tell me. Then I could have been properly sorry more than pissed off. — Apology accepted. Talk at you later. I’ll let you know the new number,” she added pointedly. She hung up the phone. “How do I find the number for the phone company, anyway?”

I didn’t give a shit about her changing her number. “Did you say Angelus?” I asked.

Buffy glanced up at me. “Yeah, why?”

“Angel... Angelus....”

“Yep.” Buffy sounded resigned.

“And... this man was your ex.”

“Yeah.”

I asked what was to me a very important question then. “He’s not a vampire, is he?”

Buffy looked embarrassed, and then defiant. “I already told you.”

“Just bear with me,” I said. “This Angelus. Not kind of tall, with light brown hair, really nice face, low eyebrows, penchant for the dramatic. Dumb sounding Irish accent.” She was staring at me with recognition that I was really hoping she wouldn’t have. “Um... Celtic tattoo on his shoulder, some kind of... bird.”


I really hoped there’d been some mistake. “Angelus. Scourge of Europe, demon with the face of an angel, thinks convents are his own personal cookie jar?”

“Why the hell are you asking?”

I looked at Buffy seriously. “And you dated this guy. This Angelus, this guy was your ex, this
was the vampire you dated.”

“One of them,” she said neutrally.

God damn it! “Fuck!”

I stormed out.

I was actually shaking as I made it down the stairs and out into the street. I’d been avoiding all this shit – all my history, all my mistakes. I’d been living in the now, pouring myself into dancing and liquor and random men and Buffy, avoiding anything that would remind me of my own past, my own mistakes, my own feelings. Buffy had been the only one to bring any of it up in me, and it was only because her pain paralleled mine so perfectly it was like looking in a mirror. Now I was terribly afraid it was a true mirror, and that Buffy was even more like me than I thought. It seemed we had the same taste in men.

It was childish of me, but I couldn’t bear the truth of it coming to slap me in the face. I did not need all this dredged up just now, not with Ianto so heavy in my head. Didn’t I have enough grief to sort through?

I hadn’t expected Buffy to follow – we didn’t really have the kind of relationship that lead to soul-searching discussions – but I’d underestimated her altruism. I was back by the low wall by Buffy’s coffee bar, staring out over the city when she came up behind me. “You gonna tell me what that was all about?”

I felt sick and elated and confused all at the same time. I meant to say it was nothing. Unfortunately, I was never that good at forgetting people I had loved. “How is he?” I asked instead.

“What?”

“Angelus. How is he?”

Buffy sat on the wall and looked up at me. “You know him, don’t you.” Wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, I know him,” I said with a sigh. I rubbed my face. “Him and his whole damn gang.”

“The... what did they call it... The Whirlwind?”


The look on her face was intense. “When?”

“I dunno... long time ago. I think the last time I saw them all together was 1894. After that they seemed to break up.”

“Yeah.” There was a wistful tone to her voice. “They kinda did.”

“Did you know them?” I asked.

“Some better than others,” she said quietly.

I grinned. “Some were harder to know than others.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Some were.” She swallowed, and then licked her lips, as if eager for some reason. “What were they like then?”
I chuckled. “Deadly,” I said. “But you had to know that.”

She shrugged.

“Never could bring myself to kill them, though. That was how we met – someone found out I was immortal, and thought I’d be the best person to take them out, trapped me with them. But... I didn’t kill them. Never did. Just... distracted them as much as I could, whenever we ran into each other. Got William arrested for tax evasion, once. That kept him off the killing fields for a few weeks. Not to mention that seven-year time loop, but... eh, I don’t know if he ever remembered that.”

“You knew all of them.”

“I... pretty much dated all of them,” I admitted. “Depending on your definition.”

Buffy looked startled. “All of them...?” Then she shrugged. “Never mind, it’s you, why did I bother being surprised?”

Buffy was getting to know me pretty well. “Well, things were different back then. It wasn’t exactly... um...”

“Romantic?” she supplied.

“More adversarial, except when it wasn’t,” I said. “A whole bunch of long, complicated, and sometimes really kind of... sordid stories.” I closed my eyes. “I loved that crew. I had the biggest crush on... god, every single one.” I grabbed one of the coffee bar’s chairs and sank heavily down on it, feeling exhausted. “I hate it when my past catches up to me.”

“Must happen a lot as an immortal.”

I shrugged. She was right; it did. If it hadn’t, I’d still be in Cardiff with Ianto in 2009, instead of mooning about in 2004 Rome, grieving my lover’s death. “Seems to happen to you, too,” I said. “How do you know Angelus?”

“He was my boyfriend, then he tried to kill me, so I killed him instead,” she said. “Then he was my boyfriend again, then he broke up with me.” I raised my eyebrows. “A whole bunch of long, complicated and really kind of sordid stories,” she said. “Anyway, now he’s running LA’s branch of Wolfram and Hart, and I don’t really trust him anymore.”

I nodded. “I can see Angelus doing that.”

“Yeah, well Angel blind sided me with it,” she said. “You know he’s got a soul now, right?” I wasn’t even sure what she thought she meant, but she kept on. “He... tries to be good. But Wolfram and Hart... I think they’re probably corrupting him again. I don’t know how he got tangled up in them, but... it bothers me. And he did something, gave me this thing that...” It sounded like an STD or something, the poison in her voice. “Anyway. I’d rather he talked to Giles if he needed something, and didn’t know exactly where I was. If he does lose his soul again, or wants to lose it again...” She shook her head. “It’s complicated. I just want him to stay away from me.”

I shrugged. Souls were complicated things, mixed in with life-force and mental-capacity and after-life concepts which were really, for the most part, out of my purview. I focused on this world, this universe where I was stuck, not other non-corporeal or demonic dimensions. I knew a bit about psi-energy. I knew that by definition I had a soul, that was fixed in time and space and my body was rebuilt around it if destroyed. I knew my friend the Doctor had a single soul which remained constant while his body and personality could change. I knew souls existed, but I didn’t know
much about how the damned things worked. But for Buffy, they were probably immensely important – she was primarily connected with vampires, and they reportedly lost their souls when they were turned. I always interpreted that as the life-force or psi-energy, replaced with the demonic dimensional-energies which was what then animated the body.

Buffy seemed to think it had more to do with conscience. There was probably some truth to that, something about a soul that made someone human or, more accurately, humane. Something about whatever it was they lost which made it okay to make a living cannibalistic buffet out of the very creatures they used to be. I’d never tried to make sense of it before. “And Angelus just got your phone-number,” I said, understanding.

“Yeah. He likes stalking me,” Buffy said with a long-suffering look on her face. “Thinks it’s a sign of his love.”

“Or how much he’d like to eat you,” I pointed out.

“I don’t think he can always tell the difference,” Buffy said, almost amused. “I don’t think he’d eat me, but I don’t think we always agree on what’s good. He... did a lot of things I have a hard time forgiving him for.”

“He did a lot of things which were pretty much unforgivable,” I said. “At least when I knew him. But... I guess that must have been before the soul, ‘cause he wasn’t trying to be good at all, then. None of his gang were, but, oh... they were amazing. I loved them all so much.”

She had a strange smile on her face. “All of them, huh?” she asked softly.

“Oh, yeah. Darla... coquettish little queen. Drusilla, this... mad sibyl with this unearthly grace. Angelus... arrogant prick, who was not altogether wrong about how gorgeous he was. And William... hm. William did terrible things to me.”

“Did he,” Buffy said evenly.

“He looked like an old boyfriend of mine,” I said. “Like... my first long term boyfriend ever. Oh, god... William made me fumble around like an adolescent school girl. It was like running into my ex-wife, only... younger and... sexier, and into blood drinking.”

“Sure it wasn’t the same guy?”

“Oh, yeah. He... well ‘John’ came from the future same as I did.” That wasn’t his real name, either, but it didn’t matter to Buffy. “John and I worked together, and he was very human. Maybe there was some genetic duplication going on, that happens when you jump through time a lot, and I never asked John’s genetic profile. Maybe they were great grand cousins or something. But William was very much a product of his time. He got so offended when I slept with Drusilla. I didn’t know he had a monogamy hang-up. He’s a vampire! Since when do vampires give a damn about stuff like that?”

“You made Dru cheat on him?” Buffy asked, sounding offended herself.

“I didn’t make her do anything. She and Darla both had a whale of a time draining and screwing me over and over. It was... nice,” I said wistfully. I didn’t roll that deadly way anymore, but that had been a crazy time in my life.

“You just let them feed off you?”

“Didn’t have much choice the first time, but..., well, I...” I looked at Buffy. Was she ready to
hear this? She was awfully old, for her years. “I was trying to figure out how to die,” I admitted. “I figured, getting involved with a bunch of vampires... there are worse ways to go.”

Suddenly Buffy laughed. “Of course,” she said. “Jack, Spike, and Angel, I can just see it.” I couldn’t tell if she disapproved or not. Her laughter had been a bit manic. She still looked kind of freaked.

“Well, you gotta understand where I was, then. I’d just discovered I was immortal. Really immortal, not just, ‘Hey, I don’t seem to be aging much, what the hell’s going on,’ but, ‘It doesn’t matter if I’ve been shot, stabbed, drowned, poisoned, squished by a train, I keep coming the hell back!’ And I had lost a lot of friends already. And a wife. A couple of kids. And... well, things were just really complicated, so I was in a kind of... self destructive mode. And I was starting to wonder if I’d be around forever, even sort of... longing for death. So I started spending a lot of time around vampires and other aliens, demons, just... anyone that would make me feel more... alive.”

“But you let them kill people.”

“Mostly they did that out of my territory,” I said. “Or at least out of my sight. I’d play these games where I’d let them think they were getting some choice kill, and then they’d lose it, and back and forth, cat and mouse things. And then, in the end... there I was. So they’d try to kill me, and I’d come back, and do it all again. Sometimes things got really intense.” I sighed. “Yeah, I’d let them drain me. And then we’d go and get drunk on whiskey. Angelus was kinda scared of me, but he was too proud to admit it. William thought I was a bastard, but ballsy, and he liked the sport of me. Drusilla and Darla... they just liked to play. Like two cats with a rat.”

Her eyes were very clear as she gazed at me. “Tell me more,” she whispered.

I shook my head. “I don’t know if it’s stuff you want to hear,” I said. “They were pretty evil.”

“I know he was evil. Tell me anyway.”

“Angelus wasn’t... at all good, then, no matter what he did later. I mean, he was fun sometimes, but I always had to stay on my toes—”

“Not Angel,” Buffy said. “Tell me about William.”

I frowned at her.

“He loved Drusilla?” she asked. “That was real? The love? What were they like together, when they weren’t out killing? Was he a good fighter then? Was it instinctual for him, or was he still learning?” She sounded incredibly eager.

“Why...?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, and as before, the silence and the weight in her eyes answered for her.

It felt like a punch in the gut. “No,” I whispered.

Buffy turned away and looked out over the city.


Buffy’s face tensed, but she only drew in a calm breath. “Spike,” she said quietly. “He went by Spike, mostly.”
He’d been trying to get people to call him Spike, now that I thought of it. I supposed after the nineteen-eighties it had finally taken. I tried to think of the best reaction to have to the news of his death, and tears was the only thing that came to mind. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair, these vampires were supposed to be immortal too, dammit! But I knew they weren’t. They just didn’t die, it wasn’t that they couldn’t. Not like me. I dabbed the tears away and took in a deep breath. I hadn’t seen William in over forty years – even from a non-time-traveling standpoint. From my personal perspective it had been... ugh, I didn’t even want to think about how long. It shouldn’t have mattered.

It always mattered.

After I swallowed down the worst of the emotion I asked, “So did Dru die, then? I thought they’d always be together.”

“Still alive, last I saw. She left him,” Buffy said. “I don’t know where she is.”

I frowned. “Drusilla always seemed to need someone to... keep her centered.”

“She got a bit better,” Buffy said. “Spike... fell in love with someone else. She left him for a chaos demon.” She glanced at me. “I don’t think it lasted.”

“Someone else?” I asked.

“Spike fell in love with me,” she said quietly. “Hard.”

I knew William of old. To have all that passion and all that devotion directed at you must have been intoxicating. Possibly overwhelming – which was probably why she’d said the relationship had been so toxic at first. I was sometimes overwhelmed by his love, and it was only directed at Drusilla, with a hefty dollop of hero-worship toward Angelus. I had only ever been a game, a tease, a torment, or an extremely inconvenient drinking companion with whom things got a little out of hand. I may have wanted it, at times, but I had never had William the Bloody turn his love on me. His non-beating heart was possibly the most passionate I’d ever known. No wonder Buffy thought I was only pretty good.

“Damn you,” I said. “Damn you for telling me.” Like I had needed someone else to grieve. I stood up and put my arms around her. I needed the hug as much as she did. “I know it doesn’t help, but... even if you only had a single night... I’m envious as all hell.”
**Misperceptions**

**Chapter Summary**

Dawn

**Chapter Notes**

Takes place during Angel, Season Five after, You're Welcome

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**Dawn**

“So what’d you all bang out of the house for?” I asked when Buffy came back. “Going for kinky violent sex with The Immortal without me looking on?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Would you stop acting as if I’m a deviant for sleeping with the guy?” she asked. “He’s just... a guy.”

I rolled my eyes back, and then caught myself at it. I knew I’d been made from Buffy, so we had a lot of the same characteristics, but it kind of annoyed me sometimes how alike we could be. “Just a creepy immortal guy. Why can’t you ever have a normal boyfriend?”

Buffy glared at me. “Because I break them,” she snapped.

I scoffed. “Doesn’t stop any of the other slayers. Hell, some of them even come on to me.”

“Well, you’re not exactly human either, now, are you,” she said in a nasty voice.

“Hey,” I snapped. “I’m just as normal as anyone else.”

“Tell that to Andrew,” Buffy said.

Andrew had been fiddling with his demon-summoning books again, found a dimensional anomaly, and it led him to me. He’d thought I was a demon replacement or a pod-person. We’d had to explain the whole dimensional key thing to him before he’d calm down. Actually, Andrew and I had been hanging around together a lot since that little revelation. He’d been getting me more into D&D, and we’d been talking a lot about watcher training. I hadn’t really decided if that was what I wanted to do, ultimately, but the more I knew the better.

“It’s not as if your taste in boys is any better,” she added.

“For the last time, I am not dating Andrew,” I said. “I think he’d pass out if I tried to make a move on him, anyway. You know he prefers guys.”
“He doesn’t,” Buffy said.

I laughed. “He is a little... asexual isn’t the word, is it. Terrified-sexual?”

Buffy laughed, too.

“So what ran phlegmatic Jack out of the apartment?” I asked.

“Angel.”

“I thought you said he knew about your vampire kink.”

“It’s not a kink! And that wasn’t the point, anyway.”

“What was?”

“Jack knew him.”

“Jack knew Angel?”

“Yes. A long time ago, apparently. He knew his whole little gang, back before the soul, even.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Angel and I had never really gotten on. Buffy kept him so secret back when I was a kid. Or... in truth, I’d never really known him. When he saw me in LA he looked at me as if I confused him, and then said, “Hello, Dawn.” And then seemed to forget about me again. Clearly the false memories of my existence hadn’t been very carefully implanted in Angel, just like (I often thought) they hadn’t been very carefully implanted in my father. Basically, anyone outside of Sunnydale had a very cursory memory of me.

My father was the thing that bugged me the most. I could see how he’d pretty much dropped Buffy. The odd, secretive daughter who started fights and could never be pinned down. But me? I was perky-bouncy-fluffy kid. And after Mom died it didn’t make sense that he had just left me to my odd, secretive, violent sister. Dad had never been like that in my memory, so why would he so blatantly abandon me?

But, hell, everyone always abandoned me. That was kind of par for the course, yeah? Everyone always either died or left me. Tara, Mom, Anya, hell, even Buffy had died on me. Dad, Angel, Spike, Riley, Willow, Xander, Giles... every one of them had abandoned me. And Buffy had come back, but she was just as anxious to abandon me again, too. I knew she was. I could just see her aching for the moment when she wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore.

“Before Spike’s soul, or Angel’s?”

“Angel’s,” Buffy said. “Well, and Spike’s.”

I stared at Buffy. “So... Jack was friends with Spike.”

“Yeah,” Buffy said.

Buffy read a lot into my sullen silence, which wasn’t surprising, as I was broadcasting disapproval as loudly as I could. “What?” Buffy asked.

“Nothing. I’m just not surprised, is all.”

Buffy raised her eyebrows, waiting for me to say it. Whatever it was. “You are a little incestuous with these murderers and rapists.”
Buffy clenched her fists. “For the last time, would you stop this? I do not have a murderer kink!”

I stared at her. “Oh, really. Could have fooled me.”

“Dawn–”

“Well, no, Angel was like... Spike’s grandfather, right? And now Jack was Spike’s ex?”

“I never said he was–”

“You didn’t have to. I knew Spike, and I’ve been watching Jack. He’s more into guys than Andrew is.” And Spike was kinda fluid, though it was clear he loved Buffy. Only thing he’d ever really loved.

“Jack’s just... kinda bi.”

“Tri, quattro, cinque, and centinaio,” I said. “Is there anything that moves he doesn’t want to screw?”

“Dawn–”

“Does he make sure they’re sentient?” I asked. I didn’t know why I was so damn angry. If I was Buffy I’d probably have been hitting her or something. “Over eighteen? Willing?”

“Dawn–”

“Well, given your tastes, they wouldn’t have to be, would they–”

“God!” Buffy actually screamed at me. “What the hell is your problem? Why the hell can’t you forgive me for being born a freak? Of course I fell for freaks! I’m the god damn slayer, I’m part bloody demon, of course I’m going to fall in with other demons!”

“I don’t give a shit that you fell for demons,” I snapped. “If you’d decided to go dating Clem I’d have been all for it. But you go all hot for rapists and liars, that’s what gets me!”

“I do not go all hot for rapists.”

“Bullshit. Xander told me–”

“Xander didn’t know what the hell he saw, and you don’t know what happened.”

“I know Spike cheated on you, and then came to rape you when you broke up with him for it, that’s what I know.”

Buffy stared at me. “What?”

“You heard me,” I said low. “I’m not a goddamn kid. I can see what’s in front of my eyes.”

She was staring at me white faced. “That’s what you think happened?”

“That’s what I know happened.”

“That’s not–”

“And then you just forgave him, like you forgave Angel when he got his dumb soul, even though he tried to kill us all. And now Angel’s working for Wolfram and Hart – fat lot of good a
soul does."

“It wasn’t ‘cause of the soul that I forgave Spike, Dawn,” Buffy said.

“No, you forgave him because you like abusive men.”

“That’s not true.”

“Angel, Riley, Spike – and from what you’ve even said about Jack he’s cheating on you.”

“It’s not cheating if you agree you’re not exclusive to start–”

I cut her off. “Not one of them ever treated you right.” Angel’s treatment toward her was obvious, and she’d finally told me the complete truth about Riley – his jealousy, his weird accusations, his blaming her for his problems and addictions – some time while Spike was gone. When I pointed out the things I’d been learning in school about signs of abuse, she’d only nodded and said yeah, she knew. “You only ever fall for abusive mother-fuckers.”

Buffy’s face grew hard as steel. “You take that back.”

“Spike was just like the others.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” I ignored the warning sign, the dark tone to her voice.

“Yeah, I do. I asked Spike,” I said, and she blinked. “After he came back, in the basement one time, I asked him. He didn’t have a word in his defense.”

Buffy was breathing hard. “You really think that?” she asked. “That’s why you’ve been so damn pissed off whenever anyone brings up Spike? That’s why you don’t like that I grieve for him? That’s why you think I like monsters, because of Spike?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? He tried to rape you, you said as much yourself.”

“Dawn, that’s not how it was.”

“It was pretty clear,” I said. “You were all hurt he cheated on you with Anya, so you broke up with him and–”

“We were already broken up when he went to Anya!” Buffy said, surprising me. “He was trying to move on, like I’d fucking told him to.”

“You...” That didn’t make sense. She’d been so hurt – so obviously hurt when she saw them together. “You weren’t...?”

“Not... really,” Buffy said. “I...” She trailed off awkwardly, and opened and closed one fist as if the words were physical things that had escaped her.

“But... he did try to rape you.”

Buffy closed her eyes. “It was more complicated than that.”

I scoffed. “It’s always complicated.”

“He felt terrible about it, Dawn.”
“Well, he fucking should have.”

“For god’s sake, he went to get his soul!”

“And that’s supposed to just make me forgive him?”

“No! But that’s not what—”

“That doesn’t make it better,” I said. “Angel has his soul, and he’s all Wolfram and Hart now, right? It didn’t make Spike the good guy, no matter how well he played it. He was an evil bastard, and he deserved what he got.”

If Buffy’s eyes could shoot sparks, she’d have burned me with them. “Don’t you ever say that again,” she said low.

“Why not? It’s true. He deserved to die. I should have done it myself.”

“Dawn!”

“I should have!” I yelled. “He lied to you, he lied to me, he lied to everyone, he betrayed you and attacked you and then ran away like a fucking coward to get some shiny soul like a band-aid on the evil so you’d think that would make it all better—”

“You have to stop this.”

“No! I hate him, and I don’t see why you forgave him!” This was it. This was the argument we hadn’t been having, that all the other arguments had been dancing around. “I’ll never forgive your forgiving him! I don’t care that he died a hero, he was a monster—”

“You have to stop saying that.”

“Why?”

“Because it wasn’t like that!” Buffy snapped.

“Yes it was. Xander told me—”

“Xander didn’t know what he was looking at. He walked in on me in shock and Spike’s coat on the bannister, that’s all. I couldn’t explain, and he jumped to a conclusion.”

“He jumped to the right conclusion,” I snapped.

“Technically, but it was really more complicated than that!” Buffy said.

“So? It always is. He said it was, you say it was, it’s still a vampire coming to rape you.”

“He didn’t come to rape me, all right?” Buffy said. “He came to talk to me, and I wouldn’t listen. I never listened to him. Never.”

“Well, he didn’t listen to you, while you were, what, screaming no at him?”

“No, he didn’t. ‘Cause I’d spent six months driving him so insane he couldn’t even think straight, let alone hear me!” Buffy said. “God, Dawn. Spike wasn’t blameless, but he wasn’t a monster.”

“He was your secret boyfriend.”
“He wasn’t my boyfriend,” Buffy said wearily.

“But you—”

“Good god, Dawn, it wasn’t ever that kind of relationship,” she said in a kind of despair. “I never let it be. I was messed up, okay? I was awful. Of the two of us, I was the evil one, all right? It was abusive – I abused him. He kept wanting to snuggle and take me out dancing and give me flowers, and I just wanted to beat him senseless and drown myself in sensation. I all but forced him half the time, holding him down and fucking taking what I wanted, whether he wanted me to or not.”

I couldn’t believe it. “What?”

“Yeah,” she said, with a slight hysterical tremor to her voice. “Here’s the ugly truth, Dawn – your sister’s as big a monster as all of them. I was never kind to Spike. Our relationship was like a war. When I wasn’t pinning him to the wall as he told me this wasn’t what he wanted, I was telling him don’t touch me. He was always telling me to stop him, and I didn’t. I never did, and all it would have taken was just pushing his hand away.” She pushed her hair out of her face in distracted tension. “That was what it was like, Dawn, for both of us; I want you, but I don’t want to, so make me do it. Push me, force me, that’s the only way I’ll love you. Stop; Make me. How the hell was he supposed to see I meant it that time?”

That had never occurred to me. I’d always thought they were just constantly sneaking off and falling into each other’s arms and laughing as they snuck back, cherishing their little secret. “It... it was that ugly?” I whispered.

“It was beyond ugly,” Buffy said. “It was the cruelest, most atrocious thing I ever did in my life. It was evil, Dawn. I was evil. I was attacking him, constantly. I broke him, berated him, beat on him. Those bruises he still had, at my birthday? That was me – I’d nearly beaten him to death when he tried to stop me from confessing to killing that girl I didn’t actually kill.” She shook her head. “God, I can’t get that out of my head. I knocked him down and I just kept beating him and beating him, and he just sat there and let me. I could have smashed his skull – he could have dusted right there beneath me. But he just let me. That’s my girl, put it all on me. God...” She shivered. “Why the hell couldn’t I stop?”

She rubbed at her face. “He was always doing that. He let me pour all my hatred toward the world and toward myself into him. And he didn’t deserve it. Not even a vampire deserves that. I should have just staked him, it would have been kinder. He wasn’t Willow, or Xander, who did the damn spell. He wasn’t Giles or Angel or Dad, up and abandoning me. He wasn’t you, constantly needing more and more and more from me, and stealing and throwing tantrums when you didn’t get it. He was just there for me, every second, for whatever I needed. And I needed to hate.” She shook her head and seemed to fall into herself. All of this was pouring out of her, and she didn’t seem able to stop. “He just opened his arms and took it,” she said. “He let me unburden my hate into him, and never even complained.”

Spike’s words when he was drunk and alone echoed in me. Yeah, ‘cause big sis was treating me so well up to that point. I’d been seeing the whole thing completely wrong. I’d seen Spike as her secret boyfriend, and he’d cheated on her with Anya, and then came to attack her. I’d seen him as lying to me, and evilly conniving to hurt my sister, and... I’d had the wrong view of all of it. “You did that...?” I whispered.

“Yeah. I did that,” she said wearily. “I kept doing that. And when that night happened, when he came to me in the bathroom, he was just trying to reach me. Yes, he went too far. He knew he did, but he didn’t come there for that. When I finally pushed him off and he realized what he’d done...
he looked just as shocked and violated as I felt. He lost control of his demon for..., god, it was forty-three seconds. I know, ’cause I relived them over and over, and I counted. I abused Spike for months. Do you hear me? Months. And I never felt repentance like he did. Forty-three seconds, and he nearly went and killed himself for it.” She was crying, and I didn’t blame her. “I had a soul, and didn’t feel it. He didn’t, and he felt every one of those forty-three seconds like they were bullet shots.

“So, yeah,” she said. “He went away. And yeah, it was traumatic, what he did, but it was traumatic for both of us. Just like what I did was. And when I learned why he’d left, when I learned what he’d done, I freaked. I was the one who ran away, then. I left him mad and burning on the cross in the church ’cause I couldn’t face it. I had to push him away again, rather than help him through it at first, ’cause I could still face what I’d done to him, what he’d done to himself. I couldn’t really face him until after the First took him, and I thought what it would be like to lose him – really lose him. And now I have, and I’m... bleeding inside, and I’m never gonna be whole again.”

I stared at her. She’d seemed so together, so solid. “But I thought... with Jack... but you’re dating Jack.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m over it.” Buffy sniffed. “I’m not over it, Dawn,” she said. “I’m never going to be over it, just like I’m never going to be over what Angel did to me. I’m gonna keep going on, and keep living this god damn life, because I have to. Because that’s what Spike died for. But just because I’m fucking Jack, that doesn’t mean I’m over it. I’m just not made of ice! I don’t care what Jack’s done, or who Jack’s fucking, or even who he is. I don’t want him to love me – I don’t fucking deserve it. We’re both just burning out our grief, okay?”

She covered her eyes with her hand. “I know you all want me to be this unapproachable saint, this hero without any flaws, but I can’t. Spike was the only one...” she gulped. “The only one who could accept that. And he’s gone. I’m not perfect, Dawn. God I’m not perfect. I can be just as evil... and selfish... and cruel... as any demon.” She shook her head. “As bad as any vampire. Spike knew that, and he loved me anyway. Of course I forgave him – and it wasn’t ’cause of the soul. He didn’t mean to hurt me. Please, please just let this go.”

I hadn’t been able to let it go. I’d threatened him and hated him, and he hadn’t said a word. He’d kept his mouth shut, so that Buffy wouldn’t look bad.

He was my best friend.

I think I screamed. I actually don’t know. I’d been fighting this roaring in my head as Buffy spoke, almost standing outside myself in disbelief. My world seemed to collapse around me, and Buffy was suddenly there with her arms around me, saying my name. “No!” I cried out. “No, that’s not right! He’s supposed to be evil.”

“I know,” Buffy said. “I felt the same way. But he wasn’t. He was once – when I first met him, he was. But he’d changed. Even before the soul, he’d been changing. You have to believe that.”

“No!” I wailed. “No, you don’t understand, Buffy! I thought... I thought....” Buffy sat me down on the couch and sat beside me. Why hadn’t I ever sat down and thought about it? Why hadn’t I ever spoken to him about it? Even at the time – I’d thought him my best friend, we’d eaten cookies and played rummy and he told me scary stories and held me when I cried for Buffy – while we’d both cried for Buffy. Why, when he’d stepped away, hadn’t I chased him down and asked? Why hadn’t I ever tried to get close to him again when he was living in my own fucking basement? Why had I just acted like a dumb fucking selfish kid when he was going through hell, and had no one to share it with?
I would just have to bite the bullet and admit the truth if I was going to explain. “Buffy, I hero-worshiped Spike,” I told her. “He was like the best bad-boy brother ever, with cool coats, and scary stories, and just... he was awesome. I don’t know if you knew...”


“But he nearly died for me. On that tower, just like you did. God, Buffy, the look on his face just before he was thrown off. The horror and the regret, you could hear the plea in his eyes, the no! And those bruises, from Glory. And the way he used to hug me when you were dead, how we’d hold each other through the grief. He was my hero.”

“I know.”

“No! You don’t! Because after you came back, he just... he vanished! It was like, he was my only support, the only one strong enough to catch me when I fell, and then suddenly he was just... gone. I thought he’d only been spending time with me because he was mourning for you. I thought... I thought he didn’t really care about me at all.”

Buffy shut her eyes. “God. I didn’t think you’d take it that way,” she said. “I just... what we had was so intense and so... ugly, I didn’t want you anywhere near it. I’m the one who made him stay away.”

“I know,” I whispered. I’d only just gotten that. If she’d been abusing Spike, and making him play dominance games with her, she’d have wanted me as far away as possible – for all of our sakes. “But you don’t get it. ‘Cause then Xander said he tried to rape you, and I thought... I really thought it was just... come in stalk you down, hunting sort of thing. And it was after that thing with Anya, and he’d said he still had a bit of the evil in him, and I thought... I thought he’d meant to hurt you. And then he just vanished, like, forever, and left us with Tara... with what happened to Tara....” I gulped. I still had nightmares about sitting beside Tara’s cooling corpse. “And Willow all witchy... just abandoned us just when we needed him, I thought he didn’t care about us. And I thought... I thought if my bad-boy brother could just turn on me and abandon me like that, then I couldn’t rely on anyone.” I gulped. I had to say it. I could let this lie between us anymore. “Not even you.”

“What...?”

I took a deep breath. “So when Mom’s ghost came to me, the night the First Evil attacked, and said... said you wouldn’t choose me... I believed her.”

Buffy frowned. “Mom’s ghost...?”

“There were two ghosts. Or... or I thought there were. And I drove off the bad one, and the other one was Mom, and she said that when the time came, you wouldn’t choose me, and she had come to warn me, and the other ghost was trying to stop her. I believed her! I mean, I had my doubts, but... I really believed that was her.”

Buffy shook her head. “Dawn, Mom would never have said that! I would never have thought that, you know that.”

“Well, yeah... but... if Spike could betray us both like that, then why wouldn’t I think...?”

Buffy covered her eyes with her hands for a long moment, and then reached out for me. “God, I’m so sorry, baby,” she said. “And that’s why, when the time came...”

“To make a choice, them or you... I chose them. I said it was ‘cause we had to be together, and
that you weren’t a good leader, but... it was because of Mom and Spike.”

“The First Evil,” Buffy said to me. “That wasn’t Mom. It can’t have been.”

“I get that now,” I said. I sniffed. “But Spike... Spike wasn’t what I thought, either, and now...”

Buffy pulled away. “Look. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! I threatened to kill him, and I never really forgave him, not to his face! And now it’s too late, and he died hating me, and...”

“He didn’t die hating you,” Buffy said. Tears were in her eyes again. “He didn’t die hating anyone.”

“No, but, I never forgave him...”

“He was still calling you niblet and worried you might be hurt,” Buffy said. “Even the night before. He still loved you.”

“How could he? I’d been so cold to him.”

“He knew why. He had to understand. He didn’t explain because it would have made me look bad – and I didn’t for the same reason. It was selfish on my part, but it was completely selfless on his. He did blame himself, and he did hate himself just as badly as you did for that night.”

“But if you say he didn’t mean to...”

“He didn’t, but he still felt the shame. That was the whole point of getting his soul, Dawn. That’s why he felt he needed it, so he’d never make that kind of mistake again. He got your anger, really, he understood it. It was probably a relief.”

“What–”

“It was his own,” Buffy explained. “His own anger and hatred of himself, he probably loved seeing it in you. He couldn’t have hated you for feeling what he felt for himself.”

“He must have.”

“No. No, Dawn, I know. He didn’t hate you.”

“How could you know?” I moaned and let my head sink into her shoulder.

“But if you say he didn’t mean to...”

“Because there was no hatred in him at all at the moment he died.” Buffy pulled away a little and held up her hand. She laced her fingers through mine. “You feel those scars?” she said. I had wondered over them. They were smooth, shiny white things – just a slight discoloration to her skin. It was not very noticeable, but still there, all these months later, even with her slayer healing. She never spoke of them. “I touched Spike, as he was burning. I...” she swallowed, and then she admitted. “I felt his soul. There was nothing there but love. Perfect love and perfect acceptance, and a need to help us all. He didn’t hate you, Dawn, because there was no room left for hate in him. I felt it. I know, because I felt it.”

I only stared at her, gasping still through my tears.

“He died loving you,” Buffy said. “And loving me, and loving the world. I think he’d even forgiven Angel in that moment. There was nothing in him but purity and devotion, and he sacrificed himself, to save all of us. He didn’t hate you, niblet,” she said quietly, brushing the hair
from my face, as he would have. “You were his little bit, his platelet. To the end of the world, he once told me. He’d protect you to the end of the world. He meant it.”

That almost made it worse. “But I still hated him, when…!”

“Forgive him now,” Buffy said. “Love him now. He loved you at the end. You can love him now, and that’s the whole point. You got to live…” She was crying again. “You got to live long enough to change... to grow and learn and change your mind, and... and....” She sobbed, and I grabbed her and hugged her. “And that’s why he died,” she finished in a miserable whisper. “That’s why. For all of us. So we could live.”

We clung to each other, weeping over the death of her lover and my best friend, a grief I should have been feeling for over half a year now. I’d stashed it behind anger and resentment, and it had sat back there and festered. Now the splinter was gone, and the wound behind it felt raw, bleeding afresh.

But with all the misunderstandings and bitterness out of the way, it was finally clean enough to start healing.
Spike

Vivacious.

Gracious... spacious... Why did I always have to try and rhyme these sodding ten-dollar-words? Why was I always so in love with them, anyway? It wasn’t as if they made the poetry itself any better. But the words were so damn beautiful... like the glitter of Dawn’s tears in the candlelight... like pizza beside her laughter.... Salacious... god no. Vexatious? Well, yes, but not for this poem. Not for Dawn.

Someone on the stage was muttering something about having obsessive compulsive disorder. The poem was too long, and people were losing attention. I should have been listening raptly – I usually did, learning, feeling, being with the words – but the muse was crueler than the demon some days, and Dawn had been haunting my memory for a while. God, I missed the niblet. Such latent strength hiding under such fragility, such courage despite...

Hm. Courageous? It was only a near rhyme, but... oh, sod a dog, it was my bloody poem, I could do whatever the bloody hell I wanted. It wasn’t as if anyone but me was ever gonna see the sodding thing.

stolen/ grins, a /laugh vi/vacious,  
broken/ whispers/, secrets,/ tears.  
Da-da-da-da heart courageous,  
scattered

Scattered what? What the hell did I want to say about Dawn, anyway? I’d crumpled up and eventually burned with my lighter no less than five twisted pages of tortured verse. I’d never
missed fireplaces as much as I had these last months. I’d never realized how useful it was to just have a tiny coal-burning incinerator in every room waiting to erase my lackluster rubbish for all bloody time.

I knew I was thinking about it too hard. For Dawn, I was trying to step away from the gut-punching punk gutter-speak and come up with something more genteel. I was experimenting with sapphic style, but I wasn’t sure I was going to succeed, here. Punk poetry was comparatively easy, in contrast to the high forms of the post-romantic period, and really, I was only easing back into it. I couldn’t quite bring myself to leave the strict structures, though. I wasn’t sure they made poetry any better, but they made it quite distinct. Granted, even the great Christina Rossetti wandered a bit on her rhythms.

“Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.”

Goblin Market wasn’t going to help me now. Besides, Rossetti herself had said that poem was not meant for children, and Dawn was still a child. In my mind she was, anyway – she must have been over eighteen by now.

Ugh. The rhyme wasn’t even the problem. I was having trouble with the rhythm. Part of what was wrong with the poem was that I missed her, and I wanted to see how she’d changed in the last year. I didn’t know how she’d changed, so anything I wrote was going to be wrong. How much could she have changed by now? In only a year she’d gone from a devoted little mouse to a tall and confident big little bit who could be unbelievably scary. I did not doubt for a moment that she’d have set me on fire if I’d pissed her off. I knew she was angry at me. I knew why. I knew she’d never forgive me for it – it shocked and alarmed me that Buffy ever had. I did not expect forgiveness or absolution, despite Angel’s constant demand for it. That was why I got the soul, at some level. But unlike Angel, once I had it, I knew it no longer mattered. People forgive for themselves, not for me. Just as I loved Buffy not for what she did for me, but for what she was...

Stop it. I was not thinking about Buffy. I was out, it was poetry night, I was not thinking about Buffy.

I lost patience with it and put the Dawn poem aside. I wasn’t really getting anywhere with it, and I had other works in progress. I pulled some other of my poems out of my coat pocket, ones I thought still needed work, or just things I wasn’t sure about. ‘Course, none of my poems were ever finished. They were only abandoned.

I glanced through the piles of crinkled paper. There was that pretty little terzanelle I wrote just after I woke up from a dream of Dru getting pissed off that I’d gotten my soul (again, she said I wasn’t demon enough for the likes of her – like she had any say about that bollocks anymore) so she turned into a wolf and ripped out my heart. Hadn’t been able to sleep for the rest of that day, so... filling the time with a complex syllabic poem seemed the way to go. I didn’t know if the damn thing was any good, but I’d plotted it perfectly – nineteen lines, five tercets and the concluding quatrain, with the refrain line repetition, in perfect iambic pentameter, damn it! All save for that first god damn bloody line... which I still couldn’t fix. The stress was wrong. I stared at it for a good seven minutes, but I finally gave up on it again.

I was hidden in the forest dark and deep,
When hunted by a passing wolf was I,
And now I cannot risk to fall asleep,

Or turn my gaze, or take my heels to fly.
I seemed a leaping hare or fragile deer,
When hunted by a passing wolf was I.

I cannot stalk and overcome my fear,
Or yet become the hunter in the night.
I seemed a leaping hare or fragile deer;

It was that innocence drew my wolf to light.
If she should come again, and find me here,
Or yet become the hunter in the night,

To track me yet again, to still my fear
To brush my cheek against her thick warm fur...
If she should come again, and find me here

Oh wake me! Shake me! Cause my heart to stir!
I was hidden in the forest dark and deep,
To brush my cheek against her thick warm fur,
And now I cannot risk to fall asleep....

That was a charming little nightmare. All that clean repetition and syllabic precision and strict rhyme scheme completely belied the fact that I’d spent the rest of the damn morning shuddering. Strange. Because Dru didn’t actually scare me any. But she scared my soul, apparently, ’cause I couldn’t bloody stop shaking.

I guess she had killed the poor thing, in a way. Really no need for it to be such a damn coward, though. The bleeding thing was strong enough to take out a city and ten-thousand uber-vamps – one undead seeress was fledge’s play. ’Cept... it was Dru. And it was me. And I was still sorting stuff out. I didn’t want Drusilla back; I couldn’t love her right anymore. But a hundred years of love and devotion doesn’t disappear that fast. At least... not for me it doesn’t.

Can’t contain the heart. Can’t control the soul. ‘Least I could channel the bloody thing. Through poetry.

Poetry. I’d lost my poetry when I’d lost the soul. I used to think that was because I’d lost it, and I couldn’t write it without it. There was some part of me still thought that, but I wasn’t sure if it was something that would have happened to another poet. Some other vampire might have been just fine writing blood-poems and never felt the loss. Somehow, for whatever reason, my muse had always run away whenever I’d tried to use it when I was soulless. Maybe it was just scared of big bad me. I knew the soul was. I spent most of my days and nights in an agony of terror lest I do something wrong again. Kill someone... make a mistake... become William the Destroyer in a desperate attempt to do something good. That was why I hadn’t...

Don’t think on it, William!

So. Good boy. Not thinking about Buffy. What else did I have here...? I shuffled the papers, and they crinkled like autumn leaves in my hands. I didn’t work well in notebooks. We had them back when I was alive, but I’d always worked better on loose-leaf, piled up, re-arranged, scrunched up into my pockets, lost, found, lost again, forgotten about for months, slipped down the back of the
settee, accidentialy picked up by the maid and used to light the fire....

The poetry had always been so integral to who I was. I had so much of me just... bottled up inside, and nowhere to put it. Then I’d died... and I poured my life out through my fists and sucked it up through my fangs, tasted blood and death and darkness and sex and blazed it all out in a fury of violence, pain and rage and lust and hunger and an absolute love of life that I’d never had when I was alive.

The soul had changed all that. The pain of my inadequate existence had come rushing back along with my soul, and brought all its friends and family of guilt and remorse and self-loathing, not to mention the self-awareness which kept me from just screaming it all out and biting my way back into insanity.

It was like half of me was in prison. I had too many feelings and emotions, there was too much of me. I’d been so empty, and Buffy – stop it, you’re not thinking about Buffy – I’d only felt full when I... wasn’t alone. The soul had filled me to overflowing with too much. Too much pain, too much emotion, too much... me.

And there was the poem I’d written when I realized I could pour it out. I didn’t have to stay bursting at the seams, I could bleed the soul and the pain and the... whatever... out into these little bits of paper so that I wouldn’t break apart. The poem wasn’t finished. It still had half my notes scrawled on it, and I was missing half a line.

Like a fool, I had forgotten, trapped in the empty wheel
back and forth and back again, as ocean waves must feel
Hands gone rough from labor, blue grey eyes gone wet with tears
like a fool, I had forgotten,

Words had lost all of their meaning, become only cart and horse
and the memory of poetry had turned back to remorse.
You can turn love to a joke, and words can burn or rot the core
but the memory of both can tear heartsore

The other poem... nah. Don’t look at that one. Or those other ones. Any of those. Those were love po... no. I didn’t want to look over any those awful poems I knew I shouldn’t be writing. Any of the stuff I knew I shouldn’t be thinking. Because I wasn’t thinking about her. I wasn’t wanting her. I didn’t need to be with her. I shunted the entire pile of poems across the table. Like an idiot. Because someone opened the outer door at the same time, and the movement as well as the slight gust of air caught half of them and sent them fluttering to the ground.

I reached over, snatching the papers from the floor. A couple people turned to help me. The big biker with the bandana handed a poem back with a muttered, “Here, buddy,” and turned back to his pool table, but the Goth chick with the clunk heels stopped and looked at the one she’d grabbed.

I could tell she was reading it. “That’s mine,” I growled.

She leaned back a little further and kept staring at it.

“Can I... um...” I snatched it out of her hand, trying not to say something about the inks still being wet.

“Wow,” she said, gesturing toward the poem. “That’s some stuff.”
She couldn’t possibly have finished reading it. Thank god.

“You going up later?” she asked.

“What?”

“Well, poem, great look, open mic night. You headed up?”

“Uh. Nah,” I said, shuffling the papers back into the pocket of my duster. “It’s not ready yet.”

She regarded me. “I’ve seen you around.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I been coming for a few weeks.” I loved this pub, actually. When their stage was empty, their canned music was a neat mix of punk, metal, folk-rock, and local indy, and they often had local bands earning their stripes. Saturday nights they were part of a stand-up comic circuit, and Fridays they often had a more name band. If I didn’t have a nagging suspicion that Angel needed me to keep an eye on him (and I was damn good at keeping an eye on Angel, let’s be frank) I’d have applied for a job as bouncer. Instead I kept a low profile, waiting for Thursdays. Thursdays were the nights I almost always showed up and stood about in the shadows. Thursdays were poetry slam, open mic. Place reminded me of the 70’s punk hub CBGB sometimes, the Bronze at others (particularly the Bronze on the night the troll attacked – that one stayed with me) and some of the biker bars I used to crash when I wanted something spicy to snack on.

I didn’t come here to snack. Not on the pub-crawlers, anyway. No flowering onions, but they had some decent onion rings, and a few really choice micro brews on tap. But the way Goth-chick was looking at me, she had a bit of an appetite, and it weren’t for onions. I didn’t disapprove. Sweet looked rather fetching, with her kohl eyes and her black dyed hair. Had a bit of a look of Dru, despite the excessive attempt at Goth. Dru always just was, didn’t need to try for the dark look. “So you’re a writer, too?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I used to be,” I said. “Might be again. Dunno yet.”

“Sure looks like you are,” she said. She sat down at my table, and I hurriedly joined her, snatching up the rest of my poems for fear she’d pick them up and start reading again. “Unless that wasn’t yours.”

“No, it was mine,” I admitted. “Just... not ready yet.”

“Will it ever be?” she asked.

I was pretty sure the answer was no, but I shrugged. “Don’t matter. Just a bunch of words on paper, yeah?”

The girl smiled. “Did you catch me up there?” she asked.

“I could catch you easy, pet,” I said with a smirk. Couldn’t help it – lady looked nice, all prettified. Her poetry... that left something to be desired. I’d heard similar offerings by avant-gardes in the past, but I hadn’t liked them, much, either. Whenever I heard them it always made me want to go break out the railroad spikes, ‘cause if I was gonna get my heart handed back to me for effulgent I wasn’t about to let some arrogant prick get away with some piece of ruddy tripe and call it a sodding poem. Not that I didn’t get the allure in repeating a word or phrase over and over until it loses its meaning and just becomes the sounds, and the sounds themselves become a different meaning. But I wouldn’t call them messes poetry. Not even when Gertrude Stein or Patti Smith wielded the word.
This little pet’s *poem de jure* had taken the form of her standing on the stage in all her Gothly glory and announcing, “*We are not ourselves. We are not ourselves. We are not ourselves,*” over and over with differing stresses and stronger and stronger intensity until she seemed about the shag the microphone. I had not been favorably impressed.

And bloody hell. *That* thought came up in my old accent.

Old William had been surfacing every once in a while ever since that soul. I’d fallen in with the working class of north London shortly after I’d been turned, once I’d realized they all tasted better to me than the frilly-collars I’d grown up with. Something heartier and less... less like what I had been. Now that I had that soul I looked back and wondered if that had been my compromise about eating people – these are the lower classes. They’re not like me; thus they’re just animals. Though, being “like me” sure hadn’t stopped me from slowly driving railroad spikes between the eyes of all my one-time mates, causing (I’m sure) some terrible gaps in the tables at the formal dinner parties that season. The great thing about this pub was, I was pretty sure most of my violent beer-mates here would agree that my Victorian poetry critics’ brutal deaths were earned.

The thing is, I didn’t anymore.

Between camouflaging my voice to hunt better, and Dru’s sweet, sultry cockney, my own aristocracy had completely died, and my posh accent had been the first to perish. But every now and then – particularly when I was writing – the old Victorian poet in me looked around at my unlife in stunned bewilderment and said in his own toffy-nosed little voice, “What the hell am I doing here?” Which was strange. ‘Cause he’d never have used such strong language in life.

“You could catch me, huh?” Goth-chick said with a seductive grin. Her eyes flickered up and down my chest. “So, ah... you’re a classicist, are you?”

I shrugged. “Nah. Well, sorta, I’m really more into the punk scene. Patti Smith, Richard Hell. A little John Cooper Clarke.”

I could tell she had no idea what I was talking about.

“Some Byron,” I added, to see if that helped. Nope. She was vapid as Harmony, for all her kohl black eyes. Not that Buffy would have had the vaguest clue what I was talking about eith... *stop it, Spike. You’re not thinking about Buffy.*

“But you write poems?”

I shrugged. “Now and again.”

“Tell me one.”

I laughed. “No, pet.”

She leaned forward over the table, and I knew she was doing it so I could get a good solid glimpse of her cleavage. “Come on. I don’t judge.”

“I don’t share.”

“Just one poem. Show me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

I glanced along her. I hadn’t been impressed by her poetry. The rest of her...

I was tempted. Really tempted. She was young – a little too young to be in this bar, really, but
she looked older with the eyeshadow. If I’d seen her in CB’s I’d have snapped her up. Ten minutes we could be out back. I could have her right here on my lap in four, and if I timed it right her first and only cry could be lost in applause or a drum-crash – applause in this instance, since it was poetry night – and after that she’d just melt in my arms, and her blood on my tongue, and the heat pouring down my throat, and the taste, oh, the taste of her, the feel of her hot body as I moved just under her, pulling her life down into me –

*Shut the hell up, Spike. Down boy.*

My hand went to my throat anyway, my fingers idly sliding down my neck, as I’d like to slide along hers.

“I’ll bet,” she said with a seductive little grin, “that you have some erotic poetry in that little pile. Tell me one of those.”

“Unh-unh,” I said with a bit of a smile.

“You could finish reading out that one I saw,” she whispered. “It was...”

“Not for you,” I said flatly.

“Then another one,” she said. “Come on. A guy like you doesn’t bring poems to a place like this unless at some level you want... to share....” She was not being subtle this one.

“Tell you what,” I said. “What do you say I do tell you one of my poems.” I’d just had an idea, and it was just at that edge of evil without going over, so pretty much all of me was humming with it. I loved that line of wicked before evil. “And we see... if you like what it says.”

“I’m pretty sure I will.”

I leaned further over the table. “Come closer, pet,” I whispered.

She moved her chair so it was at right angles to mine, so we were just a few inches from each other.

I’d always wanted to try this. This pet had on a nice little black lace overshirt over a solid top. It was loose around her arms, and I knew how such things worked. It was only held on by a single button at her breast.

“Aren’t you gonna pull it out?” she asked.

Oh, the innuendo was strong with this one. “Don’t need to,” I said.

“You have it memorized?”

I smiled. I didn’t say I was making it up on the fly. “Why, look at you,” I began.

That’s right, kitten. You should scream. This ain’t no dream.
I’m dark of the night, killer of light,
I got you, old Spike do it right.
Break that bone, make that moan, have that blood rise so sweet.
That whiff of fear, that falling tear,
I catch ’em up, bring that heat inside.
You’re quite the ride.
Pretty pretty pet, won’t have time to forget.
You’re my bloodline, my cloud nine, you’re all mine.
Come to me, pet, come with me, come in me,
come and go and go and flow, and that’s what you owe,
that trickle of blood red death.
I bring you down to the dark with me, gonna hear you plea,
eat your heat, until you’re cold, cold, cold. If I may be so bold, my lady.
I may take your hand. Take your arm. Take your throat.”
I glanced down her. The last words I added in a whisper.
“Nice shirt, kitten. Now it’s mine.”

She hadn’t even noticed I’d slid my hand around her back and pulled her shirt up over one arm. I sat back, and the delicate lace thing came off her other arm and into my hands. It wasn’t a thrall, such as Dru could do. Wasn’t my gift. But I sure as hell distracted her, and now...

Her cheeks were flushed even under her pale makeup, and her breath came fast. I could taste her aroused on the air. I could do it. I knew I could. Have her up against the wall so fast it would make your head spin. I wouldn’t even have to kill her. One quick nip, and I was no fledgling, sure to lose control. I could take a few sweet sips and leave her to tend her wounds, wouldn’t even lose so much blood she’d need a doctor’s office. Two little scratched mosquito bites, and she’d shrug and wonder where she got those. After she woke up.

I stood up and left the shirt on the table.

“Wh–where are you... g-going?”

“Home, pet,” I said. She looked bewildered. I didn’t have to take her blood. I could just take her body – in the alley, even. I could tell she didn’t care by this time. She’d come here hunting for a body, and she’d set her trap for me. Got a bit more than she bargained for with me, though.

“But... I thought we’d...?”

I smiled at her. “I’d like to. Really, I would. Best of luck – it’s a nice meat market, plenty of choice bargains in here. ‘Fraid I’m not for sale.”

Her heart was still beating too fast. Ah, what the hell. I reached down and took hold of the back of her neck. I lunged for her throat as if I’d devour her, but my lips didn’t even touch her. Just breathed in the scent of her blood and her heat and her arousal, enjoying her bouquet like a fine wine. She gasped, and her legs parted a little beneath my bent form, a silently eloquent invitation.

I was already bored with her. “Night, pet,” I whispered into her ear. I slid away through the crowd.

I shouldn’t have played that game. It was too easy – damn soul gave me an unfair advantage. No wonder Angel kept getting the girls’ eyes – Buffy, Fred, that wolfgirl; there was something about the demon with the soul that just melted them. I’d already played with it a bit, inviting some of the birds I’d saved to listen to music or go get a beer, but the poetry... that was just cheating. My poetry had fled along with my soul, but I’d had a hundred years to absorb rhythm, rhyme and the English language. The truth was, the free-verse stuff came really damn easy for me, and it didn’t even feel like poetry. I was just... talking. Make it a little evocative, throw in a rhyme or alliteration here and there. Easy. Too easy to count.

It wasn’t like that poem – or all those poems – that I wrote for Buffy. Like that one the pet there had gotten hold of. I was glad she hadn’t finished it – it really wasn’t for her. She got bloody punk style free verse as it fell out of my head. That was just the constant background buzz of my
universe. She was not going to get my painstakingly crafted terzanelles or my... okay, probably bloody awful sonnets. But then again... Buffy probably wasn’t, either. I had at least a dozen epistolary poems written up for her. Dear Buffy. Buffy... love.... I tell you, slayer.... and she was probably never going to hear any of them. 'Cause I wasn’t going to send them.

It wasn’t as if I deserved her. I still wanted to eat that girl in there, after all. So what if I hadn’t actually done it? I was still some demon-tainted soul in a mock-up suit. I still wasn’t... really me.

We are not ourselves. We are not ourselves. Stupid bint had a point.

As I headed out the door, I realized I’d never even asked her name. I never really looked at the victims, anyway.

I blinked. That was a cracked thought.

I pushed past the blokes on their way into the pub and slammed one of my pieces of paper against the wall, scribbling furiously.

I never really looked at the victims...

And. That would clean it up.

And I nev/er really looked/ at the vict/ims... Now... what the hell did I want to write in this anapestic meter?

Chapter End Notes

Excerpt from Goblin Market, by Christina Rossetti. I'd have done some punk poetry quotes, but they're all still under copyright, and I felt odd about it. I recommend looking up any of the punk authors Spike mentioned, particularly Patti Smith. If you do plan to do that... usually, there should be a content warning when it comes to most punk poetry.

All other poetry in the text is mine.

Spike's final poem was in fact written very quickly, on-the-fly, without editing, and thus probably isn't as good as it could be if I'd bothered to actually look at it carefully, or even think about it before hand. The point was to do it spontaneously.

Gaia-VoidMother loved it so much she made an audio wav of the poem. Link is here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0iEblZUfKdkcmJOMm1yZERBnzQ/view It may have to be downloaded to your computer to be heard -- I know I had to.

The other poems were all painstakingly plotted out, and are not, on the whole, finished. I make no presumptions to how good they are. They are classical writing exercises, and all that syllabic plotting is not easy to do!
“Yeah, I didn’t know who else to call...” Dawn said.

I rolled my eyes and snuggled down deeper into the couch. Dawn and I had been fine these last few days, but now she was acting like a god-damn mother hen. We’d spent a day in deep mourning after we’d finally spoken about Spike, and then Dawn had gotten up, squared her narrow shoulders, and gotten the fuck back to school. You know. Like she was supposed to. Like I kept claiming she was too damn young and irresponsible to do. Like I couldn’t.

Lancing the festering poison had been cathartic for Dawn, but it seemed it just got the stuff all sticky over me. I’d been exhausted ever since. I’d canceled the slayer meeting we had scheduled on Monday. On Tuesday I hadn’t shown up to help train the local girls, and didn’t even bother to call to say I wasn’t gonna be there. Wednesday I’d tried to get up and do something productive – I got some groceries – but I’d fallen back into bed the moment I got home. I’d backed out of the conference call I was supposed to have with Faith in Oregon and Giles in Scotland, discussing the younger troubled girls – like that one from LA, Dana. Somehow I didn’t give a shit that Giles was pissed at me for it.

Now it was Thursday and I’d managed to go to the bathroom, find the couch, and turn on crappy salacious talk-shows – most of them in Italian which, honestly, I couldn’t even understand really. I played that game I’d used to play with Xander and Willow, filling in the words I didn’t understand with really bad translations, and trying to make it as funny as I could. I missed Willow and Xander, really for the first time in months. I missed my mom fiercely.

And I missed Spike. I didn’t even want to think about how much I missed Spike.

I thought Dawn was pissed off at me this morning when it seemed I wasn’t going to do anything but sit in front of the TV. She’d been short and sounded a little snippy, but when she’d gotten back home and discovered, yes, that was exactly what I’d done all day, she’d actually gotten quiet. The sofa was a pile of blankets, empty soda-cans, and miserable slayer. I wasn’t even snacking. I couldn’t eat. The idea of food was horrific. Now she was on the phone, and I surreptitiously turned down the volume a little to catch more of what she was saying.
“No, I think it’s something else.” She turned away from me and started making some food. I couldn’t quite hear her over the rustle of packages, and she was speaking really quiet.

After a while she hung up and offered me some spaghetti. “Not hungry,” I said.

“You can’t just sit there all day.”

“I am watching bad Italian daytime television,” I pointed out. “This is my job. Who will watch it if I get up and do something?”

I hadn’t even showered since Sunday. I hadn’t even brushed my hair. And I didn’t care.

“You have to eat something.”

“I had a sandwich,” I said.

“When?”

“Yesterday,” I said.

“I could make some soup.” She sounded just like Mom...

“I’m not sick,” I said. “I’m just not hungry.”

Dawn frowned at me. “Right.” She went back to the kitchen area. I thought she was pissed – so much for lancing the poison – but a little while later she came back and pressed something into my hand. I was going to get angry, but then I realized it was a big glass of chocolate milk. “Can you at least drink something? There’s some protein in that, right?” She sat down beside me. “Ice-cream?”

Ice-cream seemed too solid to me, but the chocolate milk looked... I started to cry. (Again.)

I’d been mostly hiding that from Dawn.

Some part of me knew this was normal. Some part of me knew that I should have been doing this ever since it happened. But I’d been so damned proud of Spike for his goodness and his sacrifice – he had felt almost blessedly pure as the fire came for him – I hadn’t wanted to spread my grief over it. I’d gone all accepting and serene, with honor for his noble sacrifice and a dutiful performance of my role as The Slayer. You’re The One, Buffy. (Shut up, memory.)

But I didn’t want to be The One. I still didn’t. I wanted to be The One even less than I had before, even though I’d been diving in head first ever since Sunnydale. There’s a nasty cabal of vampires, following a Big Bad who could be worse than The Master living below Rome? Yeah, I’ll head there! Now there’s this creep called The Immortal returned, and the local coven is scared? Yeah, I’ll keep an eye on him! More girls to train? Sure, send them to Rome! Give me more work. Fill my days. Give me something to do. And if the grief starts to leak out (no! Lock it down, lock it down!) I can just push through it. It doesn’t matter. After all, I’m The One. So I’m fighting with Dawn, and I’m harsh with the girls, and I’m cold and dead inside when I hear about death, and I’m using some guy I don’t love for emotionless sex. All that is what I’m supposed to do. Because someone, somewhere, once knew the best and the worst of me, loved what I was, what I did, how I tried, saw the best and the worst of me, and knew I was the The One.

I was sick of standing up to that memory. Sick to the teeth of it. It was as if talking about it had pulled all that strength he once gave me out of me, and dropped it on the floor. It couldn’t hold me up any longer. And I couldn’t stand without it.
Dawn took the glass from my hand and set it on the side table. “Oh, god, Buffy... I really am sorry....”

“I know,” I said. I rolled my eyes. Damn tears. “I’m fine.”

I was anything but fine. Even I knew I was anything but fine. Dawn grabbed the tissue box and pushed it at me, and I blew my nose and made myself stop crying. That was why I was watching Italian talk shows. Anything with a plot almost invariably had a love story. Anything in English invariably had some word I recognized, and then I’d hear it in Spike’s accent, because the damned guy had a broad vocabulary, and he used to use like all of it on me in his sex-voice. The god damned poet had poisoned me to fucking words. If I saw him again in heaven, I’d break his fucking nose for that!

I didn’t know how to climb out of this funk. Well, no, I knew how – get up, and do something. Do anything. But the last time I’d felt like this, I’d had Spike, and that had been something really great to do. This time... nope. All I wanted to do was sleep. Except when I slept, I had nightmares... so I lay on the couch and hid behind caffeine and bad television.

Dawn brushed the hair out of my face and looked concerned. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can get you?”

God she sounded like Mom. “A second chance?” I said in a miserable voice. I knew she didn’t have anything she could say to that, so I reached over and retrieved the chocolate milk. “Thanks,” I said before I drank some.

Dawn squeezed my shoulder and went back to the kitchen while I stared at the television. After a little while, a knock sounded at the door. Dawn jumped to answer it. I probably would have left it. A man’s voice greeted Dawn at the door, and she quickly ran out to the hall and shut it behind her. So she had another boyfriend. Good for her. Hopefully she wouldn’t break his heart, shatter his sanity, and then tie a suicide bomb around his neck. I finished my milk and closed my eyes, wishing I could sleep. I burned for sleep, and was so scared of it at the same time. That nightmare of sawing off Spike’s hands stayed with me. It had been so slow, and so deliberate, and I’d felt and heard and smelted every damn second of it. I didn’t want to know the details of what slayer’s life had meshed in to my own memories. Sometimes I wished I was Spike, and could drink myself effectively into oblivion. Maybe I would some other day. Right now, that seemed too proactive.

About five minutes later Dawn came back into the apartment followed by the very last person I would have expected her to call – Captain Jack Harkness. “Hey Buffy,” he said.

“I’m going out,” Dawn said with false cheer. “See you later.”

I rolled my eyes. I liked Jack, sort of. He wasn’t Spike. He wasn’t going to be able to shake me out of this. “Dawn shouldn’t have called you,” I said. “I’m not going out.”

“That’s okay.” He took off his big blue military coat and laid it over the back of the chair.

“I look and smell like a troll right now, and I’m fine with that,” I snapped.

Jack nodded. “Okay.”

He wasn’t getting it. “Jack.” He lifted his eyebrows with an air of listening. “I’m not in the mood.”

That was mostly all Jack and I did. We didn’t hang out and talk. We didn’t hang out and watch
TV. Even though nightmares and bad steam-punk futuristic jewelry and a couple stupid arguments had drawn us marginally closer, we were lovers. We weren’t friends. We never had been. While the conversations about what we were comfortable with in bed had gotten pretty intimate, we mostly kept everything else kinda superficial.

At least that was what I told myself when I thought about Jack. Truth was, it hadn’t been true even since the first night. “My lover’s name was Ianto Jones,” he said quietly. “He wasn’t even thirty.”

And... I was crying again. Jack and I had bonded to start with ‘cause we were both in a hell of grief. I’d just entered a lower level (or was it a higher one, being more honest about my emotions? Either way it felt worse) getting stuck at near catatonia, while Jack was still sitting pretty at ‘functional.’ Jack leaned forward and grabbed me a tissue.

“I’m sorry all this got brought up.”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“You’re not fine,” he said. “I wouldn’t be fine either, ’cept I’ve done this before. A lot.”

“And you’re still breathing?” I said, before I remembered who I was talking to. I guess that had been pretty tactless.

He didn’t seem offended. “Not much choice,” he said with a chuckle. “I know I just have to get through it. It’ll suck, and then eventually I’ll feel human again.”

“Gah!” I shrugged Jack off, and he let me. “I’ve been through this before, all right! I lost Mom, I lost Angel, I know what grief is!”

Jack nodded sagely. “And how did you handle it before?”

“What?”

“When you lost your mother, how did you grieve?”

“I don’t know. I just did it. I was kinda busy, some ancient god was trying to kill Dawn, and then I...” I stopped.

“And?”

“Well, I died,” I said. Actually, I’d gone completely catatonic, first, and then I’d sacrificed myself... Well. Okay. I’d kinda committed suicide, but I hadn’t really had time to think of other options.

“Okay. And for Angelus?”

“Um...”

Jack raised his eyebrow.

“I... ran away and pretended I was someone else for three months.” Then fell back into the same abusive pattern the second the stupid souled vamp had landed back into my life, which meant I’d never finished grieving, just... stuck it behind stupid teenage fairytales of true love.

God, I was a humming beehive of messed up.
Jack actually laughed. “Running away,” he said. “Which is what you’ve been doing here, in Rome, ten thousand miles from your last life, far away from everyone you know except Dawn,” Jack said. Guy had a point. Bastard. Spike was right about him. “Look, I get reinventing yourself,” he said. “Problem is, you always bring yourself with you. Believe me – I’ve been running away for centuries. I’m still right here.” He held out his arms as if annoyed. “I knew a man who ran all the way across the universe of time and space. No matter how he changed, he was always the same inside, too.” He leaned back toward me. “Sounds to me like you never let yourself grieve any of it.”

I looked away.

“When you became the Slayer, did you ever grieve your humanity?”

“I was still human!”

“But not the normal girl you thought you were. Did you ever grieve for her?”

I didn’t have an answer.

“So, you lost her. Then you lost... who first? Angelus, or your mom?”

“Angel,” I whispered.

“Okay. Then your mom. Then... you said heaven was pretty hard to get over.”

It was.

“Then...?”

Then Spike. “Right. So. I’m a fucking black hole, and all the light around me keeps being absorbed,” I said. I was pissed. “And I’m supposed to get up and keep acting like I’m the goddamned Chosen One and that the world freaking matters.” I threw up my hands. “Well, I don’t care anymore, okay? I’m not The One anymore. There’s a thousand freaking slayers out there, there’s Faith and Giles and all their little watchers-in-training like Andrew, and I’m bored with it. I want bad television and lethargy and too much caffeine.”

Jack nodded. “You know Dawn’s worried about you.”

“Tough. She’s a big girl.”

“She called me to snap you out of it.”


“Have I.”

“I’m not going out, I’m not going back to work, and I’m not going to fucking snap out of it,” I said. “I’m certainly not going clubbing with you, and I’m so not in the mood to ‘shag’. I just want to sit here and not think about anything.”

Jack nodded. “Okay.”

“What?” I hadn’t expected this.

“I’m okay with that.” He sat down on the couch by my knees.
I frowned at him. “I... I really expected you to tell me to get off my ass or something.”


I was almost speechless.

“You’re missing William the Bloody. Jeeze, I get it. Who wouldn’t miss those cheekbones. You want to sit here and be miserable, sounds like a good idea to me. You’ve earned it. Be miserable. Be pissed off and lonely, sounds like a plan. So,” Jack said. “What are we watching?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I think it’s some kind of mafia Jerry Springer. My belief is that the girl with the black hair has been caught sleeping with the guy in the uniform, when she’s really married to his brother the guy in the glasses, and now she’s carrying their illicit love-child.” I knew Jack actually spoke Italian, so I half expected him to correct me.

The closest he got was to say, “That’s pretty damn impressive. He’s a generale di brigata.”

“Huh?”

“Brigadier General. They’re the lowest rank in government top management.”

“Oh, so it’s a national scandal, too,” I said.

Jack chuckled, and lifted up my feet, sticking them on his lap. He started to massage them through my socks. It felt good. It felt amazing, actually, and I loved it. It felt natural and real and I felt perfectly at home settled down on the couch, making snide comments about the television, with my feet in the lap of my lover. It was perfect.

*Why the fuck did I never let this happen with Spike?*

*Don’t think on it, Buffy,* I chided myself, and turned back to the television. “So, do you think his brother is going to have him excommunicated or something?”

Jack laughed. In truth, I thought the girl with the black hair was some kind of interviewer, and I was pretty sure the guy with the glasses was some sort of economist, and I had no idea what the brigadier general was chatting about, but I was fairly certain it was something political rather than in regards to his illicit love-child with his brother’s wife. But my story was better.

“Nah,” Jack said. “They’re just arranging to go back in time and have the baby born in the Precambrian era. That way, he can jump-start human evolution.”

“Now that’s just silly,” I said. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have to go further than the neolithic era. Any further than that, and the demons would get him.”

Jack looked at me. “We have very different views of history.”

“I think that’s the fault of the demons,” I said. “I don’t know. Was it because they melded demon and human dimensions, or was it just revisionist history?”

“Bit of both,” Jack said.

This was already too thinky for me right then. “Oh, look. I think they just told the husband that the baby is going to be born with dog feet.”

“Oh, so it’s Sirian, is it?”
“What’s Syria got to do with this?”

“Not Syrian. Sirian. As in from the dog star, Sirius?”

“Oh, right. Aliens.”

“No, bad puns,” Jack said.

“Is there much difference?”

Jack threw one of my dirty tissues at me, and I countered with an empty pop can. Eventually Jack got me off bad Italian daytime television and into bad action war flicks, where at least I could understand the language.

Dawn came back nervously, bearing Andrew in tow, and seemed surprised to see me and Jack still on the couch watching something called Hamburger Hill. Someone’s head exploded on the screen, and Andrew winced as far too much blood and viscera splattered across the set. Andrew had a kind of a traumatic reaction to any semi-realistic blood or violence, even on the television. I personally thought what had happened with Anya and the First Evil got to him more than he ever admitted to anyone but his therapist. He stared at me and Jack with a white and anguished face. (I was pretty sure he had a crush on Jack.) “Hi, guys,” he said.

“Hey,” Jack said.

“I brought some focaccia,” Dawn said.

It wasn’t pizza (Italian pizza was simply not the same) and I still wasn’t up for much in the way of food, anyway, but a piece of herbed bread seemed edible. Jack turned off the movie and we ate, and Andrew pulled out a board game, and it wasn’t until after he’d gone home that I realized I hadn’t cried in a while. It was Dawn who caught me as I was going to the bathroom. “You okay?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “But I probably will be.”

“What’s wrong?”

I looked at her. “I’m just grieving, Dawn. You never saw me after Glory took you, but did Willow tell you? I went... dead. I’m actually doing pretty good, in comparison.”

She looked over at Jack. “He talk to you?”

“No,” I said. I watched him. He’d stretched out on my couch looking perfectly at home and turned the television back on. “He rubbed my feet.” I shook my head at Dawn. “I don’t love him, Dawn. Not at all. He can’t make it go away.”

“I know, it’s just....” She looked so worried.

I put an arm around her. “I’m just gonna be sad for a while. Think you can pick up the slack? Talk to Giles, maybe, make sure the chores are done? If I’m still like this in a month or two, you can worry, but in the meantime... can you be the adult for a little while?”

She nodded, as if I’d given her a present. I trusted her. She knew I meant it, too. “Yeah,” she said. “I do love you, Buffy.”

“I love you, too,” I said. “You know that, right?”
“Yeah.” She hugged me really tight, and I hugged her back. “Yeah, I do.”

I was exhausted, but I wasn’t sleepy. I was still awake after Dawn went to bed, and Jack didn’t seem inclined to leave. I curled up beside him on the sofa and watched soldiers being murdered. “You’ve been in wars, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And this doesn’t bother you?”

Jack shrugged. “It’s a movie.”

We were watching war flicks because I didn’t want to watch romances, or horror with monsters, or any chick-flick with a mother or a love interest or anything that reminded me of anything I cared about. (Some of the war-crap reminded me of Riley, but that scar was just an annoyance anymore. That regret was only that I’d wasted my time with it.) All the other stuff was just a little too close to home right now. But war... Jack and his military coat. He had to have been a soldier. “But... doesn’t it remind you of... things?” I asked.

“Well...” Jack frowned. “Do you remember... being a little girl, and being scared to go down the stairs at night?”

“What?” That sounded too accurate. “You never knew me as a kid, I don’t care if you do claim you came from the future.”

“No, I never knew you, but I’ve had kids,” he said, which startled me. It shouldn’t have, but it did. He looked almost forty – even if he hadn’t been immortal he could have had a whole passel of brats. I was just used to vampires, who couldn’t have any. “There’s always a stage when they’re scared of the dark,” he went on. “Do you remember what it felt like?”

I’d always been a potential slayer, even before my dreams started, so I’d always had a certain... superhero quality to my playtimes. But... “Yeah,” I said.

“Fear of the unknown, the unseen... and whatever your imagination could put there, right?”

I nodded.

“And when you grew up a bit, you were pretty sure it was just your living room, in the dark, right?” He shrugged. “I’ve seen it all, Buffy. I know what’s in the dark. It doesn’t scare me. This?” He gestured with his chin at the movie screen. “They’re actors. And even if they weren’t... I don’t feel it much anymore. People die. Okay. So. They die. If I cared about them, it might be different but these...? They’re just bodies.”

I thought about this. “Doesn’t that make you kind of...”

“What?”

It sounded like a vampire. “Inhuman?”

He was warm and soft and strong around me. “Probably,” he said.

It felt wonderful, having Jack there, his arms strong around me, his body open and receptive, just relaxed there with me watching bad movies. I’d never had this with Angel – it was all couched in teenage drama, and his damn vision of destiny. I’d let Riley poison what we did have with his ideas of chivalry and his right-wing Iowa military misogyny.
I could have had this with Spike. He would have loved it. He’d have snapped back at the television with British coated sarcasm. He’d have stroked my hair and kissed my nose and made himself my snuggle toy. Instead I’d used him, and abused him, and ran from him, and when I was finally ready for him... it was too late.

Suddenly I couldn’t take it anymore. I buried my head in Jack’s chest. “I want him back, Jack,” I sobbed. “I can’t help it. I can’t help it, I want him back! I know it’s awful and I know it’s evil of me, and I know he’s happy in heaven, ’cause he’s gotta be, ’cause no one could go through what he... but... but... I want him back!” I sobbed. “I want a god-damned second chance, I want him back!”

Jack kissed the top of my head, just like Spike used to do. “I want them all back,” he said. “They all go.” He swallowed. “All my lovers, all my children, all my friends... all of them. I can’t even die to be with them. It never stops, Buffy. They always die.” He brushed my hair away. “You will, too. You get used to it.”

“You say you travel in time. Why don’t you...?”

“Go back to them? Change the past? It’s not that simple. Come on, you know it’s not.” I did know. “Besides. I’d never stop,” he said. “Forever is forever.” He shook his head. “I don’t dare start. And in the end, you know they wouldn’t thank me for it.”

I knew that. Spike had been miserable. He’d been miserable ever since Drusilla left him. I knew he’d had suicidal tendencies ever since then. He’d tried to kill himself after the chip was implanted. He pretty much did kill himself getting that soul – killed what he thought of as himself, anyway. I always thought he’d gotten the soul because it was the only option he could live with besides killing himself, after what he had done. And after he’d gotten it... I knew the only reason he’d kept on living was because I needed him. He’d pretty much told me so. He had a death wish. That was why he understood mine....


Jack was silent for a long moment. “The girl who did this to me... she was young,” he said. “Like you. She was blond and pretty and brave, and she knew how to love with her whole heart. She opened up... this energy source, absorbed the time vortex itself. She had so much power at her fingertips she could rearrange the universe. And what she did with it, in the end... was to bring me back to life.” He shook his head. “My friend, the Doctor... he said that if anyone else had done that they’d have become a vengeful god. But she was human. Everything she did was so human. She gave me life.”

“And then you were together?”

“I barely even saw her again,” he said. “We didn’t... love each other. Not that way. But that doesn’t matter. She wasn’t evil, Buffy. She was just human.” He kissed me gently on the forehead. “And so are you.”

“I’m part demon, you know,” I confessed.

Jack laughed. “Just enough to make you sexy.”

I mock hit him like a bad puppy, and he only beamed at me. Damn him and those blue eyes. “I really did love him,” I whispered. Even if Spike hadn’t believed me, I kind of wanted Jack to.
“I understand why,” he said. “I’d bring him back for you if I could.”

“Doesn’t that make you evil?” I asked.

Jack paused, and then took in a deep breath. “You know, Buffy... the thing is... I’m not like you.” He smiled, and it was one of the most terrifying things I’d ever seen. “I never once claimed I was good.”
Illyria

My pet is battling. He has been attempting to hit me for several hours now. Why, I cannot tell. He claims that he is making notes for his *clipboard*. The clipboard does not respond to his notations. His notations to not correspond to my powers. And yet he dutifully inscribes on the worthless sheets his ineffective observations. I hurt him, and then he comes back to me. I hurt him again, and he comes back to me. It is enjoyable to hurt this creature, and have him come back to me. I am very fond of him. I would like to keep him for some centuries, and hurt him regularly, simply to watch him come back to me.

Perhaps there is more left of my shell than I would like. She too was fond of this white-haired creature. She trusted and responded to him with friendship. I do not understand friendship. But I do enjoy watching Spike come back to me after I have hurt him.

I hit him again, and he collides against the wall. “That’s it,” he says. I have broken a bone in his body. I heard it crack beneath my hand. “I’m taking a break. And when I come back, you are gonna see some real action, missy.”

“This has been very active,” I say. “You have been very active. You are fun to play with.”

He laughs, and drags himself to his feet. “Same to you, pet,” he says. He has not called me *pet* since I was still only my shell, the one they called Fred. I am not a pet. He would be *my* pet. And yet the endearment touches something inside me, a spark of memory. It feels painful. “Now shut the hell up and stay there. I’ll be back.” My halfbreed pulls himself out the door and leaves. I wait. Time is intrusive. I do not like to be alone with the thoughts and memories of my shell piercing at my awareness.

It is better with others. Wesley. Spike. Even the green faced one helps to fill time so that... fear...
does not engage. I should not feel fear. Others should fear me. And yet Winifred Burkle felt fear, and the sparks of those memories are still bright within me. They are disruptive. I dislike them. I pursue the halfbreed.

My pet is at the machine they call the water cooler. He does not sweat or strain as a pure human would, but his mouth does dry as he exerts himself. As I watch from the corridor he wets his mouth with water and cleanses it into the refuse. The boy who lusted after me yesterday is also in the hallway. He too approaches the water cooler, to slake his human thirst. My pet glances up, ready to ignore his drinking companion, and then stops.

“So, you’re back again, then?” my pet asks of the boy.

“Um... yeah. There was some... prophesy I had to fulfill or something. I get to go home now, though,” he says.

“Prophesy. And you believe that bollocks?”

“Well. Angel did,” the boy says.

“Yeah, Angel does kowtow to that rubbish, don’t he.” The halfbreed shakes his head. “So you’re Connor.”

“Yeah. I saw you yesterday, right?”

“Yeah.” The boy reaches out and makes contact with the halfbreed. Their hands touch briefly. Why do these creatures feel the need for contact? My shell used to require contact. She would hug and hold and touch, and it made her feel warm inside. Now I am cold, and hard. I do not require contact. I am not human like these primitives, saturating themselves in the skin and secretions of others. I only enjoy hitting my pet. That is not the same as this contact they reach for. “Guess Angel thought we should meet.”

“I actually don’t... um... remember you...,” the boy says.

“Spike.” My halfbreed introduces himself. He is connected to that name. He has had others. This is the one he prefers. It means nothing. It is a collection of sharp noises, uniting into a sharp sound, symbolic of a sharp object. Spike is blunt, and round, and tender within his pitiful strength. He is fun to beat upon. Fun is a new concept for me. I enjoy it.

“Are you new here?”

“Eh, sorta new,” Spike says. “Known Angel for a long time, though.”

“You’re another vampire.” The boy is curious. His aura has altered. His emotions are split. He is full of warmth, but distant. His memory has likely been changed when my own and Wesley’s were. This means he also recalls my shell. But he does not recall Spike.

“Yeah, I’m, uh... well, I’m actually kinda related to Angel.”

This makes the boy’s aura shiver. He is suddenly interested. “You’re related to Angel?”

“Yeah.” Spike makes a laughing sound, and his aura reads as nervous. This is important to him to relate for some reason. “Angel was... well, sort of my grandfather in a... vampire way.”

“Then you’re...” The boy Connor stops and swallows back what he was about to say. “I’m, ah... pleased to meet you.” He touches the halfbreed’s hand again.
My halfbreed seems pleased himself. Deeply pleased. There is an opening in his usually closed aura, a desire to reach out, to connect to this boy. Why? The boy is the offspring of their leader, Angel. Spike is also his descendant. Is this a bond of family? I do not understand family. My shell once had family. The memory of them tickle in the back of my mind, like the sound of my halfbreed’s name. Spikes of contact, of laughter, of hidden lies, of what they term as love. Oxytocin and dopamine, such primitive hormonal bonds of attachment. This boy is a new creature to Spike – there can be no hormonal attachment – and yet he reaches for a bond. Why? What could he hope to gain? The boy cannot provide him with power or pleasure or sustenance, and yet he reaches out. I do not understand.

“So... Angel’s your grandfather?”

“Yeah, he sired my sire. We hung out for a bunch of years, kinda all together.”

“Sire...” the boy seems distant. I cannot tell if he is counterfeiting his confusion, or if he is indeed still uncertain of his origins. Unlike Spike, his aura is still closed. He is interested, but not reaching for connection.

“Do you know about how vampires are sired?” Spike asks. “It has to do with blood and all.”

“So I’ve heard... unless something... kinda weird happens,” Connor says.

“Yeah, with magic, weird things can happen,” Spike says. “I was sired by Drusilla. Angel was her Daddy.”

“Drusilla?”

Spike smiles. He rarely smiles like this. In fact, I do not think I have seen this particular smile on my halfbreed’s face before. His aura softens with an ancient warmth – memories. Sparks in his own mind he cannot extinguish. “Dru was... pretty impressive. Cold blooded killer, of course, but... she had a magic all her own. She could see into the future.”

“Hm,” says Connor. “I wonder if she saw anything like me...”

“She might have,” Spike says. “She was always real into family, as she called it.”

Connor looks up, his aura sparking with fright.

“And you’re here with yours, right?” Spike continues. “Your mum and dad, they’re down getting patched up, right?”

The fear in Connor’s aura fades, but there is disingenuousness in Spike’s. He is saying what will make the boy calmer. The boy knows the truth. Spike must know the truth. Why do they both pretend the truth is not the truth? I do not understand. “Thing is, family was always real important to Dru. The four of us... we were kinda family.”

“Four...?”

“Yeah. Angel was sired by a vampire named Darla. Don’t know if you’ve heard anything about her.”

Connor is looking at his hands. “Not a lot.”

Spike’s tone is gentler than I usually hear it. “She was pretty impressive, Darla,” Spike says. “Angel doesn’t really know how to talk about it much. See, he’s got a soul... dunno if you knew
“Yeah, I heard that,” Connor says.

“Well, see, he got that soul and got kinda uppity with it. It made him feel real bad about all the evil he used to do. And without it, he thinks that a vampire can’t have any good in ‘em at all. But you see the thing is, the soul... it’s just another layer. Whatever was there... it was always there, you know? Soul’s just one more bit on top, some bit that can care a little extra, feel a little more. So even though she was a vampire, and she’d kill people and all... when she wasn’t being all evil... there was a joy in her.” He smiles at the boy. “I remember how that pretty little thing used to dance. She’d find the music and pour herself into the movement with such passion and grace. And I remember how she’d tell Angel to shut the hell up when they were at the theater, ’cause she wanted to hear the play... when really he was just there to eat the ones in the box seats.”

“She wasn’t evil?”

“She was evil. I was evil. Your... Angel. He was evil. We did terrible things. Killed hundreds of people. But that’s not all we were, you know? We danced and sang and swam in the ocean. I’d read aloud poetry by firelight... Darla loved Keats. And she had a taste for Sauternes.”

“What?”

“That’s a very sweet wine, out of France,” Spike says. “Chateau d’Yquem, ideally. It was a very very old vineyard, and she remembered it. She was turned long before any of us, and she remembered history.” He chuckles. “You know sometimes, I’ll look back at some book or something, anything from the 1600’s and I think about her. And where she’d have been, then. I mean, she’d have been killing something, sure, but once she did that, there was a whole night when she was just... a lovely woman, enjoying the beauty of the world.” Spike shakes his head and turns back to the water cooler. “Angel forgets about that,” he says. “He makes everything all into good and evil and broods on all the crimes he’s done. He wants to be a good man, you know.” He looks directly at Connor. “He really does want to be.”

Connor frowns. “And you don’t?”

Spike laughs. “What I want doesn’t figure into it,” he says.

“Well, Angel’s the only vampire who has a soul, right?” Connor asks. “Darla... Darla didn’t... didn’t have one... so she couldn’t love. Could she?”

“Let me tell you a secret.” Spike leans forward, encouraging the boy to do likewise. He does, and Spike slaps him on the back of the head, not gently. “Wake up! Didn’t you hear what I was just telling you?”

The boy looks up, almost angry, and very perplexed. “I guess not.”

Spike shakes his head. “Angel looks at the world and sees black and white, good and evil, life and death. And yeah, all those things are in the world. And there’s also the blue of the ocean and the glittering gold of a good white wine, and the blush of a pretty woman. There’s birdsong and the Sex Pistols and wind in the goddamn trees. There’s good in the worst evil. There’s poetry in death.”

Connor stares up at Spike. “You’re a really weird vampire.”

“Always was,” Spike admits. He gestures back behind Connor. “I think your folks are coming up to collect you. You might wanna go... say your goodbyes to Angel and get on your merry way.”
Connor looks behind him. “Oh, yeah.” He regards his mock family. “They... they’re really good people.” He sounds sad. “They love me a lot.”

“Cherish that,” Spike says. “Love... love’s worth cherishing, if you can find it. From anyone. Even if... it’s not who you want it to be.” Spike’s aura thickens again. That longing he denies continues to poison him. It enrages me, that grief. Wesley feels grief for my shell. Wesley’s grief is untenable. Spike’s I do not understand at all. “Anyway, if you ever need help again, any more demons or what all, I’m sure Angel’d be up for it. And if you can’t find him... you can just call on old uncle Spike.”

“So you can hit me upside the head again?” Connor asks.

“If you need it,” Spike says. “Or you can hit me. Sure we could get into a good old sparring match, eh?” He passes a few moves at Connor, and the boy blocks them easily. Suddenly they both freeze, their arms almost locked, and for one moment their auras are the same. They do not speak, but they communicate. They both know they both know. Why do they not acknowledge it now? But they do not. They smile, and step apart.

“Yeah. I think I’d better go say goodbye to... Angel,” Connor says. “Gonna talk to my folks, first. I was really scared when my dad...” He stops. “They shouldn’t have gotten hurt ‘cause of all this.”

“No, they shouldn’t,” Spike says. “You gotta make sure your family doesn’t get hurt.”

“Yeah...” The boy frowns and glances at Spike. “I guess that’s... kinda the point, isn’t it. It was really nice to meet you, Spike.”

“You too, snack-size,” Spike says.

And they part. Spike rinses his mouth once more and returns toward the sparring room. “Get back in there, you stupid cow, I’m not done with you yet,” he says. His braggadocio is amusing. He cannot injure me, and yet he willingly submits to the beatings I administer.

“Why were you sociable with the offspring of the other halfbreed?” I ask.

“And people call me blunt,” Spike says. “Get back in there, and keep that choice tidbit to yourself, eh?”


“And we’re all happier pretendin’ we don’t, right sunshine?”

“I am not happier,” I say. “I do not understand happiness in this time. Happiness is to stand at the height of my empire and look down upon my subjects as they worship at my feet. Happiness is to walk across the backs of my fallen enemies to feast upon their children’s corpses. Happiness is not burying memories and living among lies and playing like infants in a reality in flux, where time is twisted and people are–”

“Some things it’s better to not remember, okay?” Spike says. He pushes me as if he would direct me through the door. I do not move. His force upon my body is negligible. I stand in the hallway, and he stops, as if he were pushing against a tree.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” he asks. “It hurts.”
“As when I do this?” I say. I hit the halfbreed and send him flying through the swinging doors and into the sparring chamber. I follow inside and cock my head to examine him as he picks himself up again.

“Yeah,” he says. “Kinda like that.” He shakes his head and takes a better stance.

“Then why avoid it?” I say. “You do not avoid the pain I cause you. You seem to enjoy it, as I enjoy causing it.”

“There is some I enjoy,” Spike says. “And some I’d avoid like the sodding plague.”

“Is that why you remain here?” I ask.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“You have a strong current of grief,” I say. “Like Wesley has for my shell, but it is not for this form I wear. It is for another. There is a being you think of when I strike at you, yet it is not me.”

“Yeah. Been beaten on by a lot of pretty girls in my time,” Spike says. “You’re just the latest in a long line.”

“Winifred Burkle knew the girl you grieve for. She was a slayer?”

“Don’t matter.”

“Slayers are noble beasts among the primitives.”

“Don’t I know it. Let it go.”

“You feel grief for her? You miss her?”

“Sod off.”

“You feel pain, yet you do not assuage this grief. Do you fear a different pain?”

Spike hits me instead of answering. “Give it a rest,” he says. He looks on me with annoyance and a grim smile. “So. How did that feel?”

“As if you are trying to avoid speaking. Does speaking cause the kind of pain you would avoid?”

“Shut up!” He lunges for me again. He is not actually angry, but he does mean what he says. Parts of himself rise and fall as we battle, and a part I do not see often has risen this day. I slide out from under his attack, faster than he can perceive. From my own perception, he has frozen in place, preparing to strike thin air. I examine my halfbreed. Time and destiny and human bonds are twisted around him, leaving him vulnerable. He feels pain. The blows I cause him do not hurt him despite the injuries I cause. Mentioning the slayer has made his aura darken. Only now have I wounded him.

This does not make sense to me.

Part of me wants to surround him in a protective shell, so that I can keep him safe from the pain he fears. Part of me wants to hurt him anew, so that I could examine and understand it. Winifred Burkle would have advice for him now. It’s been long enough, silly. Call her, why don’t you! Angel knows where she is. Winifred Burkle would have helped him to sneak into Angel’s office, find the information, locate the source of his longing. Winifred would have missed him, when he
left, but she would have helped him to leave.

I will not. I want Spike here, to be my pet. I want to hit him to release some of this fear and anger I am besieged by. I want to ask him my questions; he is one of the few who answer with perfect truth. I cannot face this world I find myself in without companionship. And that truth galls me. I find myself longing for Wesley, but he is couched in his office, pouring fermented grain into his body, plagued by unwanted memories he claimed he desired. These primitives need and desire so much, and it is contradictory. Wesley’s fermented grain is poisoning his own shell, and yet he desires it. Wesley’s grief is poisoning my own existence... and yet I desire him.

I release time, and Spike cannot pull back before he punches the floor. I hear bones crack in his hand. He would have hit me hard. I am sorry I pulled away. I suspect it would have made him feel better, lightened his aura. It is too late now. “I will be silent,” I say to him.

“Ta,” Spike says. He growls low in his throat, the vampire instinct rising. I have caused him pain he does not enjoy. He will not come back after this. Not immediately. “I’m done for the day. We’ll pick this up later.” I know his nature now. He will search out either blood, or fermented grains, or words scribbled on pieces of crumpled paper. Possibly all three. He will not endure me now.

This is foolish. He should seek out his slayer. She would erase his grief. Perhaps he fears some other kind of pain. For himself, or for her? But he will not seek her out, that I know. For my self, I am satisfied. He will stay here, in this kingdom of LA. I may continue to beat on him. I very much enjoy this. Though now he is gone. I am again alone.

Solitude is not solace for my lost empire.

I shall seek out Wesley. We shall cause each other different kinds of pain.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to myrabeth for wanting a bit of a rewrite on Origin. This chapter is thus all her fault.
Buffy

“Um... yeah sorry for the chaos!” I shouted over the screaming baby. “Dawn wanted to do some D&D with Andrew and some of the girls. Would you be okay going out tonight?”

“Good plan!” Jack shouted.

“That’s great. Um... sorry about Francesca’s baby. Are you okay waiting here while I change my shirt?”

Jack nodded, and I ran into the bedroom. It took me longer to change my shirt than I’d thought. I was doing better than I had been, but my functionality had stops and starts. I’d be okay for half a day, and then fall back onto the couch, or sleep for twenty hours straight. Dawn had been a godsend. She really had taken up most of the slack, playing slayer-liaison, and delegating my patrols out to the other slayers. If she did decide she wanted to be a watcher, I could see her taking over from Giles easily. But one chore she wouldn’t do – mostly because I’d told her don’t you dare – was my laundry. If any of my delicates were going to be destroyed, I wanted it to be my fault, dammit. But I didn’t have a clean shirt I was willing to be seen in public with, and I had to keep digging through the piles until I had something I wasn’t too embarrassed by.

When I finally came back out, Jack was holding Francesca’s baby and going “bo-bo-bo” on its belly. The baby was squealing with laughter. Jack looked completely at home with the baby in his arms. Francesca and her girlfriend were using their free hands to set up the D&D game. I almost didn’t want to interrupt, but frankly babies made me kind of uncomfortable, and D&D bored me to tears. I did not see the point of talking about killing monsters when my entire existence circled around actually wandering around cemeteries and dark tunnels and hunting the damn things. “Um... you ready to go?”

“Yeah, you go out, Buffy,” Dawn said, filling a bowl with chips. “You deserve it.”

“Don’t think I’m up to a club,” I confessed to Jack. “Just dinner okay? Then your place?” I thought I was ready for that. Maybe. Truth was, we hadn’t had sex since the night before Angel’s fateful phone call. I’d been too depressed for that. Jack had been coming over on and off to bring
me soup and watch bad movies with me (and occasionally listen to me cry, or tell me stories about Spike and Angel back in the day.)

“Sounds like a plan. I think she’s hungry,” Jack added, and handed the baby off to Mariella. Mariella had settled down to nurse it when Andrew came in.

“Dungeon master’s here,” Dawn announced, and the girls applauded. He came in bowing like a celebrity. Andrew had developed quite the following as a dungeon master lately. I personally thought that was why he hadn’t gone back to Scotland to train further with Giles, but had decided to stay in the Watcher’s Casa and work with us here. He was gathering friends – okay, so they were all slayers, and most of them were lesbian, but they were still friends. He was interesting and American and they seemed to think him intelligent. There was also his obvious crush on Jack. He always looked like he was trying not to throw up or cry whenever he saw Jack and I together.

We headed out into the Roman evening. “Um... I think you got some spit-up on your coat,” I told Jack.

Jack chuckled and wiped it off with a handkerchief. (He kept handkerchiefs... sometimes I was really reminded how old he was.) “Not the first time,” he said. “Well, maybe on this coat,” he amended. “I keep having to switch it out.” He sighed. “Nothing lasts forever but me.”

I took his hand. “It was cute seeing you with a baby.”

Jack squeezed my hand. “I’m done with that, if I can help it,” he said.

I caught the wariness in his tone. “Oh, that wasn’t an invitation,” I said. “I... I’m not sure I want children, actually. I always sort of thought I couldn’t have any. I sort of believed I’d be dead by now, for one. But even if I have a long and monster-free life in front of me, I don’t know if I’d want them. And nothing personal, Jack, but... I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t want yours anyway.”

Now Jack laughed outright.

I supposed it was time to talk about this, since things were now going past the “screw and walk away” stage. “I don’t really want that kind of relationship...” I said. “I mean, with anyone. I kinda like that you go out to find random guys or... or whoever to hook up with, and I like being your friend, but I–”

“Buffy, I’m not falling in love with you,” Jack said. “Not the way you mean it. Thanks, though. I thought I was going to have to be the one to bring this up.”

I looked up at him. “You’re... okay with things still being just... loose?”

“I prefer it,” he said. “I prefer you being free to find something else if you want it. I prefer this not being serious, even if we’re close. I hope you’re okay with that.”

“I am more than okay with that,” I said, relieved. “It’s just... I’m not really looking for forever.”

“There is no forever for me, Buffy,” he said. “Or rather, there’s too much forever. I can’t... be with anyone like that. I’ve tried it... it just doesn’t work. People grow and change, and I just... stay.”

“Tuck Everlasting,” I whispered.

“Huh?”
“Oh, there was a book my mom read to me when I was a kid,” I said. “It’s about this family who drank from a magic spring or something and became immortal. And they gave this girl some water so she could be immortal too, and in the end... she gave it to some frog or something. She decided she wanted to be like everyone else.” I shook my head. “I remember at the time thinking she was stupid, that I’d have taken the water. Now...”

“She made a very wise decision,” Jack said.

I cuddled up to his arm. Something was bothering me. My slayer sense wasn’t tickling, so it wasn’t a monster, but something was bothering me, anyway. “She didn’t really exist,” I said. “It was just a story.”

“Well... it’s my life, I’m afraid. I try not to let people get too attached. I become only a little part of their lives, and then go on my way. They kinda go on without me. It’s better that way, anyway. They go, and I go on, and then... I don’t have to watch them die.”

“I just want to go on,” I said. “Not settle... I told someone once that I was cookie dough, and I wasn’t baked yet. And until I was ready... the guy thing didn’t really matter.”

Jack laughed. “Is that what the oven is off was all about?”

“Yeah,” I said. “The thing is... I think I let my cookies burn.” They’d burned up in Sunnydale, and took my most devoted love with them. “I’m glad you don’t love me. I couldn’t... spend my life with you. Not in any serious way.”

“I do love you, actually,” Jack said, both startling and worrying me, but his next statement calmed me a little. “But that doesn’t really matter. I love a lot of people.”

“I... kinda don’t....”

“Sure you do,” he said. “You love your sister, you love that watcher of yours, you love that witch you’re still kinda pissed off at, and that guy I saw you skyping with – good investment skype, by the way – that guy playing slayer-guide in Africa... whatsisname?”

“Xander.”

“Yeah. You love all them, right?”

“Yeah.”

Jack shrugged. “There you go. Love isn’t such a rigid concept in the 51st century, Buffy. Love is completely separate from the idea of wanting to live together, or screw, or... anything. I can love you easily... and walk away tomorrow. You okay with that?”

“So long as you’re thinking you’re like Xander or something, then yeah,” I said. “Cept I don’t wanna screw Xander.”

“Shame,” Jack said. “He’s got the whole Nick Fury thing going with that eye-patch.”

I laughed. “He’s only had it like a year. Less, even.”

“It suits him.”

“He says it makes him feel more part of the team. He doesn’t have any powers or anything, but he knows what he’s talking about and has the scars to prove it.” This was really bugging me now.
“Jack, would you kiss me?”

He bent, and I turned instead, with a false smile on my face. “No, bend down, really ardent. I’m trying to see behind us.”

Jack tensed a little, but did as I asked, and I was able to kiss him while looking over his shoulder. Someone I’d been seeing a lot at the coffee bar was walking behind us. I’d noticed him when I went to get groceries the other day, too. I’d thought at first he’d just moved into the area, and I hadn’t thought about it since. This wasn’t his neighborhood. I was sure of it now. He was following me.

“Um... Jack?” I said with a coquettish smile, as if I was just really turned on. “Would you come with me to that alley over there?” I gestured to it with my eyes, but not my hand.

“Being followed, are we?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said happily. I giggled like a schoolgirl.

“Want me to do anything...?”

“Yeah, just play bait, will you?” I said.

“Okay.” I took Jack by the hand and all but scampered into the alley. I propped him up in a corner by a doorway, as if he’d pressed me there to make out, and jumped to a balcony to watch the approach.

Our tail wasn’t bad. He hesitated for a moment at the alley entrance, and then pulled out a tourist’s map and studied it, as if he were lost. He didn’t look Italian, though that didn’t mean a lot; the tourist’s map appeared to be in English. I had a sinking suspicion the moment I saw that, but I waited to see what he’d do.

“Oh, Buffy,” Jack breathed passionately in the doorway, writhing a little in the shadows, and I almost burst out laughing. It wasn’t out of character or over the top; it was perfect, but it made our tail look a little embarrassed. Finally I took pity on him, and moved across the balcony to take him out. It wasn’t his fault he’d been sent to stalk me.

I slid across the balcony, jumped down behind our tail, and took him out with a single blow to the jaw. Jack was up alongside me in a second, ready to help. “Hope I didn’t kill him,” I said.

“Oh, you’re better than that,” Jack said. I was, but I hated hitting human beings. I was too strong – it was unfair. “He should just wake up with a headache and maybe an hour or two missing,” Jack said. “You know who he is?”

“He’s human. So there are three possibilities,” I said, bending down to search him. “Either he works for the remnants of the defunct watcher’s council – the guys who don’t like Giles,” I said. “Though mostly I think they’re just running and hiding from the New Slayer Army, and Giles is the one who knows all that stuff, anyway, so they’d probably be tailing him. Two, they work for one of the demon clans around here, and they’re trying to suss me out. But there’s a team on patrol tonight, so... not really the best person to tail just now. Or three...” I opened up the wallet I’d found, and found exactly what I was expecting. “It’s my stupid ex being a twat.”

“What?”

“He’s what?”

“Stalking me. I told you he does that. This guy works for Angel, I’m sure of it,” I said. I snapped the credit card in half and pocketed the pieces, and put the wallet back.

“I thought you said you broke up. He still does that?”

“Oh, all the damn time,” I said. “Follows me around, peers in at me through windows, gets my friends to lie to me about him being there...”

“But... you’re not together...?”

I glared at Jack, but it was Angel I was annoyed with. “He honestly has some weird beef with destiny, and somehow he thinks he and I are gonna ride off into the sunset. How I have no idea, since we want different things, I can’t trust him a lick, he can’t make me happy and I certainly don’t dare try to make him happy, and I’m never gonna forgive him for Spike.”

Jack stared at me. “Angelus is the one who killed Spike?”

I shook my head. “Not really. Look, it’s fucking complicated, all right? Anyway...” The guy on the ground stirred. “Angel likes to stalk me. Not this guy’s fault, dammit.”

“You know he used to do that with his victims, right?” Jack said.

“Yep.” I pulled out my cell phone. “But I’ve always been his victim, really. Sometimes I think he just doesn’t know any other way to interact with me. I’ve been his non-lethal victim ever since I was fifteen. He’ll stalk me and track me and corner me and play these mind games, and then it gets to a certain point – the point at which ordinarily he’d eat me I think – and he freezes. It’s like he has no idea how to go any farther except go for my throat. Yes, hello? Um... ambulanza, I think? Um...”

Jack took the phone from me and asked for the ambulance in perfect Italian. A minute later he handed the phone back to me. “Thanks.” I groaned as I realized something. “Damn. You know what this means, right?”

“What?”

“Angel’s coming here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he’s not just going to sit by and let me be. He wanted me watched, and I’ve just taken out his... minion. He’ll be here himself in a day or so, mark my words.”

“You want me to take care of him?” Jack asked.

“No, thank you. I’m perfectly capable of beating up Angel on my own, thanks.”

Jack grinned. “Yeah, but where’s the fun in that? I mean, he’s a vampire. A big old brawl with passion and drama and angst, all of it about him? Isn’t that what he wants?”

Jack was probably right. “Well, what’s the alternative?”

“Beat him at his own game,” Jack said. “Come on, I know Angelus. The best way to take him out is bloody mind games.”
He looked way too excited by this prospect. “Are you seriously suggesting we just...”

“Fuck with him, from the moment he gets here till the moment he leaves. Make none of it about him, at all. Make the whole trip so damn unpleasant that he’ll think twice about stalking you ever again.”

The idea did have appeal. Doing to Angel what Angel had always done to me. I mean, I’d taunted him with Andrew, but that was different. My team was on his territory then. Now he was on mine, and it pissed me off. And Jack was... “Wait a minute,” I asked. “Are you actually offering to help someone?”

“At this? Sure.”

“Mr. Let The World Go Hang is offering to help me blow off my ex?”

“Hey, he’s kind of my ex, too,” Jack said. “Yeah. I’d love another chance to get one over on the guy. I’ve kind of missed fucking him over, it was fun as hell. Never letting him know where he stood, giving him leeway to be as evil as he wants, and then snatching it away again... oh, those were the days.”

“He’s not... really *trying* to be evil anymore,” I pointed out. “That curse...”

“Yeah, I know, but he’s still Angelus. How different could he be? He’s still got a thing for blonds.” He tousled my head, like I was a kid.

I gazed at him, amused. “Well, so long as you’re dreaming of your halcyon days of youth, you might as well tell me how you plan on fucking with him. I don’t want him dead,” I added.

“Just totally driven nuts, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Leave it to me.”

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“I told you to leave it to me!”

“And I trust you exactly as far as I can throw you, Jack.”

“And how far is that, exactly?”

“Want me to see?” I asked.

Jack grinned, and looked over at his demon friend. “As you can see, she’d like to be involved.”

The head of the Goran clan peered over the desk at me. “So this is the Slayer, eh?” he said. “I was most interested to hear you had come to live amongst us.” I was distinctly reminded of the Godfather. The framed and signed portrait of Marlon Brando on his bookshelf did nothing to discourage this impression. He did not sound quite as friendly as Jack assured me he was.

“Name’s Buffy,” I said. “So are you willing to help?”

“Help the Immortal play one of his games with Wolfram and Hart?” Alfonso Guarneri, the so-called Capo di Famiglia of the Goran clan smiled at me through his yellowish lips. His ears were
set too low on his head. “I would be a-most pleased.”

“Well, it’s not Wolfram and Hart,” I clarified. “It’s really just one guy.” I looked up at Jack. “Do you tweak the nose of Wolfram and Hart a lot?”

“All the time,” Jack said. “They’ve been trying to pin down the source of my power for years. In about four years they’re gonna give MI5 some really sketchy information and totally blast my home base in Cardiff. I hate those guys.” He turned back to Alfonso. “So, we spin the local branch some story about needing to get the head to L.A. or... or what? Gang war?”

“Vendetta,” Alfonso said. “It sounds so much more Italian.” He laughed. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun! Please, you a-must use me as a key courier in the piece. I wouldn’t miss this for the world! I cannot wait to see the look on this ‘Angel’s’ face. Steal the head back, demand a ransom, and then... what? A bomb, perhaps?”

“No killing,” I said.

“Oh, no, no,” Alfonso said. “But you said vampire, yes? Heavy on the shrapnel, light on the explosives. It should only rend his suit.”

The idea of Angel half naked, broke, and bewildered in the middle of Rome was not a bad one. “Can we take pictures?” I asked.

“But of course!” Alfonso said.

Jack leaned forward. “You’re really keen to help? I don’t want to put you out, I mean, you’ve got the kids...”

“The spawn are almost ready for their first molting,” Alfonso said. “I’m sure that seeing it can be an enjoyable occasion would be most a-pleasant for them. We’ll a-call them in, a-shall we?”

“So you’re ready now?”

“You a-happened to come on the best of all possible days. My head has been itching for weeks. It must come off already.” He poked his head out the nearest door and called down the hall. “Tonino? Angelica? Mariana? Come, please.”

A smattering of energetic feet padded down the hall, bearing three children. The number of feet seemed excessive – there were at least twelve. Alfonso explained Jack’s plan to the children in a burst of furious Italian, and the biggest of the children – Tonino – burst into laughter and asked a question. Alfonso nodded his assent, and he ran off back up the stairs.

“Tonino has asked if we can use his bowling case for the discarded,” he said. “He thinks it will be an excellent story to tell and improve his standing on his game nights.”

Jack laughed, and the child came scampering back in with a green bowling ball bag. “I think we’ve got everything set,” Jack said as Alfonso took his seat. “Buffy, did you want to do the honors?”

I found the whole thing distasteful, but it was their biology. I assumed, given the number of extra limbs and the commentary about first molting that such shedding of extra body parts was common for the Goran. “No thanks,” I said with a forced smile.

“I was hoping you would do it, in any case, Senor Immortale. Reminisce of old times, no? Love to have your hands behind my ears again.”
“What?” I asked.

“We had a thing,” Jack said quietly. I stared. “He was younger,” Jack added. Given the extra limbs on the children, I was no less surprised. What did these Gorans look like in their prime? What would an extra leg do? What else were they born with more than one of? I shook my head. Right. Vampires. I could see it. Vampires were clearly just normal in comparison. I no longer felt remotely like a freak.

Jack reached down and took hold of Alfonso’s head. “Ready?” he asked.

“A-more than a-ready,” he said. “Oh, and before you leave, would you sign my book? I swear, it was a life-changer.”

I looked at Jack. “You wrote a book?”

“It’s just a memoir dressed up as science fiction,” he said. “You get bored when you don’t sleep. You ready, Al?”

“Ready,” Alfonso said.

With a squeal and a pop, Jack twisted the Goran’s head, and it came off in his hands. I raised my eyebrows as the kids cheered, and Jack popped the head in the bowling bag.

“Now,” Alfonso said, finally opening the eyes on the head on his shoulders. I had wondered why it hadn’t spoken before. He buttoned his shirt over the new tender skin, covering the space where his previous head had been attached. I’d been speaking to his chest all evening, and it really was starting to worry me. I kept expecting his second head to say, my eyes are up here! “Would either of you care for a tiramisu? My wife, she makes the best.”
“This isn’t about us!” Angel snapped. “This is a dangerous mission that's only gonna get worse if we don't put aside our differences. Look, we have to work together on this to stop The Immortal and save Buffy.” He sighed. “Oh, and pick up that demon body thingy,” he added in an afterthought.

I hated it whenever Angel acted reasonable. It always made me look the ponce when I didn’t respond in kind. And I knew I was just being Charlie Browned, as Lucy here held out the reasonable football and promised not to snatch it away again. Granted, Angel didn’t do that crap anywhere near as often with that soul as he used to when I was a fledge. He was a psychopathic creep then. Now he was a psychopathic creep with a soul, who felt bad about it. “Partners, then?” I asked.

“Just like old times.”

Old times. Old times, when my old sire had me all conditioned to his every whim. Take my hand. This is not a reputation we need. Nothing is yours. Oh, he taught me good, Angelus did. Nothing is yours. Not even her. The ways he tried to get me to obey him... it was pointless, anyway, ‘cause I would have followed the blighter anywhere. All newborns have a bit of the minion in them, really, and I loved Dru, but Angelus... God. I didn’t want to think about this at all.

“You want a drink?” he asked me.

“God, yes.”

Of course, even the offer of a drink was another cruel trick. Those teeny tiny liquor bottles from the plane were a sodding tease. I know how to drink. I can drink Angel under the table any damn day. Always could, even as a fledge. I barely touched the stuff when I was human, ‘course. Old Liam may have been a drunkard, but young silly Willy was a good man, and didn’t drink. Oh, I wanted to. But a proper gentleman didn’t drink, and I knew that. My mum was a complete teetotaler, took the pledge and everything. Temperance, and all. But once I went all evil undead, temperance be damned. One of the first rules I threw out the sodding window the moment I was turned, just after thou shalt not kill and that one about not shagging your murderous sire on a
gravestone with her skirts around her ears. Or maybe that was one of those unwritten rules.

God, I needed another drink.

“The annoying thing about these bottles,” I said to Angel at one point, “are these teeny tiny little necks. I mean, you take a proper shot, and it goes right down in a second. Hit, done. You got to pour these little things, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, and eventually you might get every damn drop.” I shook the bottle, because every damn drop counts when the damn bottles are that sodding small. I’d searched for a cup. Nada. Every once in a while I was reminded that we worked for the ultimate evil. All these teeny weenie little dolly bottles – evil. I should give the damn things to Dru, let her dollies get drunk, ‘cause they sure weren’t doing bugger all for me yet. I opened another one, rather desperately. I was dreading this meeting. “How are you gonna explain it?”

“Explain what?” Angel asked.

“Why you didn’t tell her?”

“Tell her what?”

I looked over at him, just my eyes. Really? You’re gonna play it like that?

He looked away. God, I hoped that was shame, but I didn’t have enough faith in him to think it might be. “Why didn’t you tell her?”

“Din’t have her bleeding phone number did I,” I muttered.

He looked at me in turn. Yeah. And you’re gonna play it like that. Right.

I realized at that look that we were both gonna be in the dog house over this. How the hell had this become my fault? Angel was the envious wanker who had decided to keep my miraculous resurrection on the sodding lowdown. I wanted to get up and grab Angel by the lapels, shake him and shout into his face, I didn’t know how! How the hell are you supposed to walk out of the dead, head back to the love of your life and say, “Hi, kitten, I’m just fine! And that whole ultimate sacrifice thing, yeah, not so much.” And I didn’t want to burden her with me when I realized I didn’t even know if she’s mad at me – ’cause frankly I was so brassed off at her for up and dying on me, I know how that feels – and then what she was like when she came back, you have no idea what she was like, Angel, she made me look like the nice guy, until even I broke down under it, and what if I was gonna go the same way? I didn’t know! And for god’s sake, Angel, you sure as hell didn’t help at all, snogging away at her when we’re finally, finally starting to get somewhere real, and you threw everything we were building aside when you don’t even know her anymore, and what the hell were you doing giving her that godforsaken amulet anyway! Or something maybe a little less rambling. Or a little more rambling. I wasn’t sure. God, I needed another drink. I took one of those instead.

It tasted awful. I took another to chase away the taste of the first. This could be a beautiful cycle, if I played it right.

“Why didn’t you tell her?” I finally asked.

Angel glared at me. “Can’t you guess?”

“Pure unadulterated jealousy, maybe?”

Angel sighed. “You really think that?”
“Yeah, actually, I do.”

We both knew it already. He’d shagged Dru in front of me to prove his ownership every time he thought she might be getting a little too fond. And whenever Darla decided she needed some variety (like the bitch would ever admit publicly she found me just as hot as Dru did) and jumped me like a hunting cat he always beat me to within an inch of my life. Not to mention the things he did to me if I didn’t seem to be paying enough attention to him in the first place.... Yeah. Angel was a jealous git, and there was no point hiding it.

Angel forced more liquor out of one of those tiny little bottles, dribbling it into his mouth. He was clearly as frustrated by them as I was. He hesitated. “Probably was a factor,” he finally admitted.

“Well, that was adult of you,” I snapped.

“Hey, I’m being honest!”

“You’re being a poof,” I said. I threw another bottle of the worst tasting liquor at him. “Get that in you, am I drinking alone, here? You’re like three behind already.”

“Shut up,” Angel said, but he opened the bottle and swallowed it down. “It’s Buffy. Don’t tell me you’re not jealous.”

“Of you, Mister Shag-My-Soul-Away?” I knew I was poking at an open wound – though why it was supposedly shagging that threw his morality in question still buggered me up. He’d been getting laid left right and center, from what I’d heard, and that soul still seemed pretty damn stuck in him. I wasn’t at all sure that was the actual mechanism for its volatility, but it was a bloody fun wound to poke.

Besides. He wasn’t the one on the line here – I was. Angel and Buffy had been on fairly even ground for some time. He stayed in L.A. She stayed in Sunnydale. And very rarely the twain did meet. Now he was in W&H and Buffy was even farther away, and given Andrew’s opinion on the Dana thing I really didn’t think that Buffy was ever going to get back with Angel in any serious way. I still had a chance... unless I didn’t anymore.

God, why couldn’t I have just been left to die? I didn’t really want to kill myself or anything, but even being dead would be easier than this coming conversation. If Angel had said, “Oh, hey, there’s another world-saving thing you could do, it’ll cut your head off, you’re all right with that, right?” I’d have probably nodded and said, “Absolutely.” I dribbled out another shot, and felt the tension start to leave my shoulders. The weight of the world slowly being lifted off. Thank god. Maybe I could get drunk after all.

“What’s your excuse?” Angel asked.

“I don’t make excuses for my behavior,” I snapped.

“Oh, right.”

“I don’t. You have some idea in your head that being all chosen by the Powers That Be make all your screw-ups somehow not your fault.”

“I never said that!”

“I did terrible things,” I said. “I was an evil son of a bitch. Guilty as charged. And since when is being jealous a proper excuse, anyway?”
“I didn’t say that was my excuse,” Angel said. “I said it was a factor.”

Like that made a huge difference. “So what was your excuse gonna be?”

He shrugged. “That I don’t trust you.”

I scoffed. It was one of the funniest things in the world. “I’m more trustworthy than you are!” I said. “You’re the one with the detachable soul!”

“And you’ve only had yours for like a year,” Angel said with dismissive scorn. I gazed at him in utter contempt. He honestly somehow thought his soul was so much better. I wondered if that was what happened when he shagged Buffy – the damn thing got jealous of him paying attention to her instead of itself and buggered off to find someone who could love Angel as much as Angel did.

“And I don’t know what kind of soul it is, or if you’ve changed at all. I know what you are, I know what you’ve done. You expect me to just forget all that?”

I carefully glugged down another shot, trying to push the drunk. “I know what you are, Angel. That’s your real problem. I’ve always been more trustworthy than you.”

“Maybe without a soul,” he admitted. “I was a lot better at being bad.”

“Hey!” I didn’t know why that pissed me off. It should have done the opposite.

“But I also know that you’re selfish and reckless and violent and you don’t really care about what happens around you.”

“I’m like that around you, Angel,” I said. “You piss me off, and you do it on purpose. I’m not selfish, you know. I’m not even reckless anymore, not around everyone else, certainly not with Buffy. Not even with Dru. For a century I was sweet to her, and you know it.” He opened his mouth to answer, “You know it. I was reckless around you, ‘cause what the hell did I have to live for, ‘cept Drusilla? And you did your best to take her from me, or lacking that take me from her. You only let her keep me as her toy, ‘cause you didn’t want to let her go, but you were bored by her already.”

“I didn’t have a soul then.”

I ignored that statement as I always did. A soul did make a difference – I knew it did. Couldn’t miss it. I’d learned that bloody lesson! – but it wasn’t the only thing that made a man, or a vampire, good or evil.

“You tried to make me your minion, and it never took right,” I said. “So sorry. But did it ever occur to you that the things that brassed you off when we were young are the things that make me kinda a nicer guy now?”

“You killed, you tortured, you raped–”

“And you taught me how, mate,” I reminded him. I couldn’t even be mad at him for it anymore. All that poison had been pretty much lanced when I staked him. I won. I knew I won. He knew I won. We both knew why I won. But I wasn’t ever going to forget it, either. “And I never stopped loving Dru, even without a damn soul. I didn’t go hurting her for the hell of it.”

“You tortured Dru, too.”

“When she asked,” I said.
He was about to answer, then conceded that point. It did make a difference. And actually, I never tortured her enough, for her taste. It always just took so much out of me, but she needed it so.... I quickly took another drink. I was starting to feel it in my arms and legs, but it wasn’t happening fast enough, and I feared losing it.

“But you get a soul, you start worrying about things like that,” he went on. “Like I didn’t know what you were really up to, you know? And if you might want to hurt Buffy, or something. And... it’s Buffy.” He shrugged. “I just didn’t trust it.”

“My soul’s just as real as yours, you ponce,” I said, but the barb was without venom. I just really wanted to be drunk. I made myself take another. With a shot you could just swallow it, and didn’t have to taste it so much. These little bottles it just trickled into your mouth, burning all the way down, and god... I’m all for straight liquor, but I found myself wanting a chaser. There wasn’t much on this plane. I found myself contemplating taking Angel’s head off and turning his skull into a cup. Pour enough of these little bottles into the brainpan and you could probably actually get enough in one swallow to make it worth drinking. Chase it down with some nice vampire blood. Get Angel out of the way, and leave Buffy free and unconflicted, with that wretched stake of First Love ripped out of her heart, and leave me to heal the wound. Sure, he’d never really be gone from her, the way he tore her up, just like he tore up Dru, but at least he wouldn’t be in the way anymore.

Nah. He’d probably dust before I got the skull off, leaving me with naught but a handful of ash. And even if he didn’t, those hair products probably soak right into the bone. Make the liquor taste like Dapper Dan, or whatever the hell he uses. And Buffy would be pissed off about it. Oh, and that pesky soul thing that he was casting unwarranted aspersions on would probably make me feel kinda guilty about it. Shame. It would have been fun.

Wait. I was getting dangerously distracted. Where was the booze? I cracked open another bottle. If I didn’t keep this going, I was not going to be able to land a proper drunk.

Angel was still yammering. “Yeah, but there are souls, and there are souls, and you don’t seem to feel a lot of guilt or anything,” he said, almost as if he could hear the trail my thoughts were taking.

“Neither do you Angelus,” I snapped. “Stick all the guilt on some sodding past Not Angel who isn’t you. You just invite split personality disorder, and call it all good!”

He looked down. “I have to.”

I scoffed. “Right. Because it’s easy to wash off all the sin and just claim it was someone else.”

He wouldn’t look at me. “If I don’t, I can’t live with it,” he said. “I just... stop functioning.”

I looked up. “Yeah,” I said. “Been there.” I dribbled another shot into my mouth. “But I still know it was always me.” I held up my empty bottle. “Is there any more Jack?”

Angel looked down, spotted one in the collection of bottles beside him, and said, “Yeah.” He grabbed it, opened it, and swallowed it. “A soul takes time,” he said, ignoring my glare. “You don’t just get a soul and then become a good person, you need to let it work on you, you need–”

“So that’s it,” I said, cutting him off. “You don’t trust me because you don’t trust you.”

“What are you talking about?”

I sucked down another bottle and leaned toward him. “I mean, you got that soul, cried a bunch of
days, and then tried to pretend you didn’t have it. Tried to still be the big bad for Darla and Angelus the Evil One, when you didn’t want to admit that something had changed. You went and killed, and felt bad, and killed more, still felt bad. So you tried to even it up a bit and killed murderers and stuff, and then you still felt bad. You kept trying to be evil. It was different for me. I was trying to be good. I wanted to change. You were cursed, punished, an evil little boy being told you were bad, and shown how in a big soul mirror of look at that.”

“And you weren’t?” Angel demanded. “You just got the thing to impress Buffy. So you could be like me!”

“I got the thing so I wouldn’t be like me anymore,” I said honestly. “If I’m ever, ever like you, Angel, stake me now.”

“Was that an invitation?”

I rolled my eyes. We’d been doing this back-and-forth-bad-for-bad thing for so many decades, it was impossible to stop it. I didn’t even hate the ponce anymore. It wasn’t worth my energy. That was one thing the soul had done for me, was open up my eyes to some really stark truths. Like hating Angel wouldn’t hurt him, only me. Just like loving Buffy by itself didn’t help her any... though it helped me. It was actually really annoying, this honesty and self-awareness bollocks, and I really hated it. (Angel, I could pretty much stop hating. Myself... that was another question.)

As for how I did feel about Angel... that varied. Often I felt really sorry for him. He’d done worse than me, for longer than me, and he’d never been as good at controlling his blood-lust. People say I lack patience – and I do. When it comes to a good fight. But when it came to the blood, I was always the temperate one. Back to that sodding pledge – can you make yourself stop drinking. I could in life. I could in death. I’d just given myself permission to take liquor and learned to savor the blood. So I knew how hard this not-drinking-human thing was for him. I’d learned to make playthings (not proud of that, but I’d done it) which meant I’d learned how and when to stop. From what I understood, Angel couldn’t even stop that time his victim had been love-of-his-life Buffy. Not until it was almost too late. If she hadn’t been a slayer, he’d have killed her.

Sometimes I was angry at him. He treated me with dismissal and contempt even as he was demanding my help and using my strength. But I was kinda used to that. I wasn’t sure how he and I would interact if he wasn’t still treating me like the idiot stepson.

And sometimes... sometimes I just wanted him to turn to me and say, I’m proud of you, Spike. You worked hard and made yourself a better man, and I really believe in you.

Like I wanted just after I was turned. Only then, I wanted him to be proud of how evil I was. And I worked like hell to impress him, going to lengths of evil I would never have considered for my own self. Rape, torture, emotional abuse, things that never gave me any kind of serious rush I dove into and learned just so that Angelus would be impressed. And now he hated me for all those things I did for him.

Now a big part of me wanted him to believe in how good I could be. And I fought for him and worked for him and for the most part did what he asked me, because part of me was still that dumb fledgling wanting my Old Sire to be impressed. He took Dru from me, to prove how evil he was.

Now I was afraid he’d take Buffy, to prove how good.

He always touched first.
God dammit! I was losing my drunk. I hadn’t even gotten there yet, and I could already feel the weight creeping back into my limbs. The god damned world dropping back down on me.... I sucked down another bottle, but it was too late. I’d faded back into barely tipsy already. Drunk was too damned elusive on this sodding flight.

“Huh. You really can’t get drunk off these things,” Angel said.

I had another fleeting thought, that maybe if I sucked all the alcohol out of Angel’s veins I might be able to get at least halfway there. “Not us, anyway,” I said quietly.

Really wasn’t bloody fair. Not any of it.
Giles

The spell I was casting had been prepared for me by the local Italian coven, and to be fair, my Italian wasn’t as good as I would have liked. They made me study Latin, Greek, Sumerian and Sanskrit at the Watcher’s Academy, but quite a lot of my Latin studies had been done while sneaking joints under the desk to my friends, and I got by with a lot of “sounds like that word.” While it worked well enough for the Latin itself, it didn’t translate as well with the rest of the romance languages as much as I would have liked.

I think I had the accent wrong.

In any case, Buffy was quite right when she said I probably should have called her first before I’d jumped in with a locator spell which was probably too potent. I just couldn’t quite accept it.

Buffy was dating another supernatural creature. Angel had called to warn me of the man he called The Immortal, that his agent had been taken out and put in the hospital by this creature. “The foulest evil you could possibly imagine,” he’d described him as. But more, “He was an associate of mine before the soul.”

The Immortal was an associate of Angelus. Like Spike. I knew that Buffy had gotten herself into another emotional muddle, and it was my job to shake her out of it.

Was Buffy all right? Angel had wanted to know. I assured him that I was certain Buffy was fine, she knew how to handle herself. But from what Andrew had told me about Buffy’s new paramour, I knew he and this Immortal had to be one and the same. Buffy hadn’t been forthcoming about anything since Sunnydale. We interacted briefly, by phone or (if Andrew insisted) by computer – another slayer located here, a new demon nest suspected there – and then nothing more.

The daughter of my heart had rejected me, as surely as her own father had rejected her. There was something poetic in that.

So when Angel called me from the airport and described The Immortal, I knew I had to come and intervene personally. Angel hadn’t realized yet that Buffy was already under the thumb of this
creature. I could get to Italy much more quickly than Angel could. I told Angel not to bother, but I didn’t suppose he’d listen. Buffy didn’t trust him any longer, and to be fair, I thought she was probably correct there.

The locator spell the coven prepared for me reeked of sulphur as it boiled, but it was the only way to locate the enormous energies that maintained the creature’s immortality without having an item of his to trace from. It was almost ready. I had already started the incantation to activate the catalyst when Buffy strolled in. “What the hell are you doing here?” she demanded.

I was startled. Buffy looked furious. “How did you know I was here?”

“Andrew told me. You’d pretty much run him out of the house with that stench.”

The watcher’s casa was indeed fairly pungent by now, but I didn’t think that was what had run Andrew off. I thought he’d gone to tell Buffy of my arrival... and likely my plans, as she glared at the bubbling spell without any questions in her eyes. Buffy didn’t know how well I had learned to read her.

“Well? What do you think you’re doing?”

I straightened my shoulders. “I’m helping you, Buffy,” I said frankly. “I’m doing what you, for whatever reason, have failed to do.”

“Trying to track down my boyfriend?” Buffy asked. “That’s what Andrew said you were doing.”

I considered denying it, but no. Not worth it. “Yes.”

“Could’a just said,” Buffy pointed out. She pulled out a mobile and pressed a button. “Hey, Jack, got a minute? Great. Could you stop by Andrew’s place? No, no, my old watcher wants to meet you. Well, I suspect he thinks you’re a vampire.” Buffy smiled at what seemed to be an inside joke, and the softening of her face told me it was already too late. She’d been corrupted. “A very easy mistake. Can you come?” She closed the machine and turned back to me. “Jack’ll be here in ten minutes. You can throw the poison in his face then, or set a hellhound on him, or whatever you wanted to do. And when that fails, and he’s proven he’s not a vampire, you can get the fuck back to England.”

The vitriol in Buffy’s voice was stronger than I expected. She’d been simply not speaking to me. I’d felt we were growing apart. I hadn’t realized the rift was one of active hatred. “Buffy,” I said. “You know I can’t leave it at that.”

“Yes, you can,” Buffy said. “Let me guess. Angel called you.”

I considered denying that, too. “He did. He’s concerned about you.”

“So concerned he set up a babysitter, and called my daddy on me,” Buffy snapped.

“I realize it must seem like that to you, Buffy, but there really–”

“It doesn’t seem,” Buffy said. “It is. This is actually why I didn’t tell you about Jack. I knew you’d freak out.”

“Buffy. I’m only thinking about what’s best for you.”

Buffy stared at me. I’d missed my girl so much. I hadn’t seen her in nearly a year. She looked so strong, so hard, so grown up. The powerful general. But I knew appearances could be deceiving.
She was still so wounded by her affair with that dark force, she was still tilting toward the darkness. I knew how alluring it could be. I knew how it could get away from one. “You don’t know what’s best for me, Giles.”

“I know it’s not this.”

“You don’t even know what this is. Because you didn’t ask this time, either.”

Ah. So that was what this was about. “And it always comes back to this, doesn’t it.”

“Back to what?”

“You’re going to have to let this go, Buffy. I am your watcher. I made a mistake. I admitted as much—”

“Only after he was dead, Giles. Only after he poured out his soul to save the planet. Only after.” She jammed her mobile back into her pocket. “And you’re not my watcher anymore. I told you that. You head the new academy, we consult on slayers. That’s it.”

“That’s not it, Buffy. That can’t be it.”

“That has to be it,” Buffy said. “I can’t trust you any further than that.”

“Buffy, I have already apologized for this.”

“For going behind my back to kill my lieutenant,” Buffy said, “or for helping to depose me? Or was it for abandoning me in the first place, I got a little fuzzy somewhere along the line.” She went to the door and opened it. “I’ll wait outside. If I can prove Jack’s not a vampire, will you leave me the hell alone?”

“Buffy!” To her credit, she stopped and looked at me. “Are we ever going to talk about this? Or are you going to shut me out again?”

Buffy paused, and then let the door close. “What do you have to say, Giles?” she said. “If it’s more about my needing to learn anything from you, we’ve been down that road. Play the next song.”

That was exactly what I’d been wanting to talk about. But it was clear she wasn’t going to listen, so I turned to the actual reason I was there – The Immortal. “What do you really know about this creature, Buffy? The Watcher’s records are sketchy, at best. He’s known in Rome as The Immortal, but there’s some indication he has other aliases. The local coven says—”

“That he shows up dead, I know,” Buffy said. “He’s called Jack, he’s just a guy, he got cursed once. Someone brought him back to life thinking they were doing him a favor. Sound familiar?”

Well, that explained her fascination with the creature. “Just because you and he have shared a similar experience, Buffy, that doesn’t mean that he’s...” The best man for you. A good choice for your life. Safe. “He could be dangerous.”

“He is,” Buffy admitted freely.

That surprised me. “Well, if you believe that, Buffy, then why...?”

“Why date a guy I can’t kill?” Buffy said. “Why don’t you examine that question more carefully, Giles.”
My heart hurt. It came back to Angel. It always came back to Angel with Buffy. I knew it always would. “I’m sorry,” I said. I took off and cleaned my glasses, unsure what else to do. “I made a terrible mistake with you, Buffy,” I admitted. “I made it too early, and… you’ve been paying for it, dearly, ever since.”

Buffy raised her eyebrow. “This is gonna be good. Which mistake are you referring to? I mentioned a few doozies, earlier.”

“I allowed myself to become your friend,” I said. “Not your watcher.”

“Right,” Buffy said. “Was this before, or after you poisoned me?”

“Buffy!”

“You thought I’d forgotten?” Buffy said. “I had. I’d forgotten and forgiven and walked away from all the crap you threw on me. Then we closed the hellmouth. Job done. I moved here to get away from all of you, Giles. I’m a grown-up now. I get to do that. Grown ups don’t have someone telling them who they can and can’t date.”

“But I should have, shouldn’t I,” I said. “I should never have allowed such a destructive affair to damage your psyche.”

“Why does everyone think Spike was so bad for me?”

I looked at Buffy. “I meant Angel.”

I expected to see her blanch, or wince, but again, all she did was raise her eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Soul or not, I should have seen the damage he did to you. You’ve never recovered from it, Buffy. First Spike, now the Immortal. You can’t fill that emptiness by gathering pieces from his past. I know in some ways it must feel like it—”

“Ugh!” The sound of disgust which Buffy made startled me. “You, Willow, Angel, is anyone ever going to believe I let this go?”

“You certainly didn’t give any indication of it before.”

“Giles, I fell in love as a teenager. Yes. It tore me to bits. I’m scarred. I’m not crazy!”

“I never said you were crazy.”

“I didn’t start sleeping with Spike because he was part Angel,” she said. “And I didn’t even know Jack knew the guy until we’d been together over a month. To tell you the truth, that idea kinda creeps me out, but that’s Jack.”

“If you’re ‘creeped out’ why do you continue?”

“Wanna go back to the dating a guy I can’t kill question?” Buffy asked.

“And the guy... you did kill?”

Buffy glared at me. “Which one?” she asked. “The one who came back to break my heart, or the one I broke first?”

It did sound very bleak put that way.
Buffy sighed and then shook her head. “You don’t have any say over this, Giles. You did make a mistake. And I let you. We both decided you were family. You weren’t.”

“I do love you, Buffy,” I said.

“As the daughter you never had?” Buffy asked. “Or the girl you’re supposed to support while you send her out to kill? See, I had a little time with those potential girls. I remember Kendra. I talked to Wes while we were in L.A. You never did your job right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that salary you were getting was supposed to be mine!” she snapped.

I was taken aback. “That was never what I heard,” I said. The watchers got the salary. The slayers performed their calling. That was the way it had always been.

“Yeah, but what was that salary for Giles? Living expenses? We were supposed to be living together. You were supposed to take me from my family, raise me up into a killer like some kind of demon-hunting foster parent, and then when I up and kicked it, you go back to the council like a good little lapdog and report. That’s what the active watchers are supposed to do. But the council didn’t find me until after I was called, so Merrick didn’t have a chance. And then you were sent to Sunnydale. Why you, Giles?”

“What?”

“Wes says you were bottom of the rung in the academy. Strong abilities, but terrible grades. Why’d they send you?”

I hesitated, and then told her the truth. “Merrick’s report,” he said. “It claimed you were... idiosyncratic and... privileged. They thought someone with my background would be better prepared to...”

“To what?”

“To control you.”

“But you never told me the rules,” Buffy said. “You never gave me the Slayer Handbook. What the hell were you doing all this time? That salary was supposed to support both of us, not just you. When I think of all those disgusting doublemeat burgers I flipped...”

“Buffy, that’s a broad interpretation. The slayers are underage and--”

“But I’m not,” Buffy said. “I wasn’t. I survived the Cruciamentum. And you still kept collecting--”

“I was fired, Buffy. If you recall.”

“And what about when I had it reinstated? Did you just forget about that?”

I felt sick. The trouble was, she was absolutely right. There was no protocol in place for financial support of a slayer, and never had been. But the slayers were not typically meant to be independent, either. Nor do they usually make it out of their teens. I’d considered myself as being lenient, too gentle, benevolently granting her her independence. It never occurred to me that meant I was... stealing from her. “You’ve never had to pay for your weaponry,” I said. “Your training, or your gear...”
“Running shoes, sports bras, and you replaced all the clothes that got blood on them, did you? See, you're right. You saw me as family, when this watcher gig was supposed to be your job. And family can be selfish, and thoughtless, and... arrogant. And you...!”

I was relieved when the knock sounded on the door and Buffy turned her piercing gaze from me. It had not occurred to me that not only had I made mistakes, I’d been exploiting the poor girl, as well. “None of this means it’s safe for you to rely on an immortal creature you admit is dangerous!” I called as she turned her back on me.

“Better than relying on you,” Buffy said over her shoulder. “At least Jack admits he lies.”

She opened the door on the creature she had chosen as her paramour. A tall man with a fine face and bright blue eyes and... I knew that face.

“Jack, Giles. Giles, this is–”

“Barrow?”

Barrow blinked those eyes at me, frowned, and then a sting of recognition passed over his face. “Ripper!” Then he smiled, that damning smile I knew so well, with perfect white teeth like a bloody bay window, and his shoulders shifted. “Well, now Ripper. This is a surprise. Miss me?”

I will say that the explosion that happened next as my locator spell over-reacted to The Immortal’s immediate presence was almost a relief.

***

I needed more scotch. Lots more scotch. Barrow and Buffy staring at me over the table in the ostaria – the idea that Barrow and Buffy had been sharing a bed no less! – was an indication that too much scotch might almost be enough. Maybe.

I had survived the explosion with only a few bruises, strangely enough because Buffy and Barrow protected me. Buffy suffered a second-degree burn on her back, but her slayer healing seemed to be handling it without difficulty. Barrow died.

Barrow had died. If I’d had any doubts about the nature of The Immortal’s true immortality, the actual physical manifestation of it put paid to them.

Buffy dragged me and Barrow out of the burning building with a look of long-suffering on her face. I was at least staggering. Barrow was clearly dead as a stone. Broken bones grated, I suspected his spine had ruptured, and his head lolled unnaturally. “My god, Buffy! He’s dead!”

“I know.”

“How did you know...?”

“It’s fine.”

“Barrow! Barrow, man!” I was busy trying to start Barrow’s heart when Buffy rolled her eyes and pulled me back. She set Barrow’s head properly on his shoulders with an air of politeness rather than concern. It hadn’t really hit me yet.

“Really. Giles. It’s fine.”
“Buffy! You of all people know—”

“Shh. Give him a second.”

And Barrow coughed his way back to life. Buffy didn’t look surprised. “Immortal, remember?”

The spell, the explosion, and the basic shock of seeing Barrow here in Rome at all had made my head extremely slow. Not only was this “Jack” the Immortal, but Jack was also Barrow, and Barrow was the Immortal.

Barrow and I both said at roughly the same instant, “I think I need a drink.”

It took another couple of hours to sort things out enough so that we could get our drink, and a chance to talk. Informing the polizia that the explosion was just a science-project gone awry, rather than attempted terrorism. Discouraging the neighbors from repeating that Barrow had appeared dead. Buffy explaining to poor Andrew – whose living space I had basically incinerated – that he could stay at her place for a few days. “What the hell. You basically live there anyway.”

Strangely the harshest thing about that hour was Buffy explaining to Barrow that his coat had gotten scorched. Barrow took it off and laid it over his arm as if he were mourning a friend.

It wasn’t until all of that had been cleared away that we could find a place in a quiet ostaria and I could get something with sufficient alcohol to lubricate all the madness which was trying to slide its way into my head.

“Barrow, since when were you immortal?” I asked him.

“Since always, since when were you a watcher?”

I took a drink. “You knew I was at the academy.”

“I knew you dropped out, because you hated those poncy stuffed shirts as you called them. I thought you had joined a band.”

“That was a long time ago, Barrow.”

“I am afraid to ask how you two know each other,” Buffy said.

“I knew him in London,” I said.

“Ripper and I hung with a mad crowd. Troll, Cassandra, Rayne—”

“Ethan Rayne?” Buffy asked.

“Never liked that asshole. He’s actually why I headed back to Cardiff.”

“I thought you had a boyfriend there,” I said. “A doctor.”

“I said I was looking for a man there,” Barrow said. “He never showed. Not until... oh, never mind. I didn’t like Rayne.”

“Wait, Jack, were you involved with that sign of I-gor thing?”

“Eyghon,” I corrected her.

“And no,” Barrow said. “Rayne wanted me in on it, but it smacked of creepy to me.”
Buffy raised her eyebrows. “I’d have thought you’d be into that kind of rush.”

Barrow laughed. “If you need demon possession to do your orgies, you’re not doing them right,” he said.

“He chickened out,” I said, and was embarrassed by saying it almost the same instant.

“No,” Barrow said. “I didn’t.” He looked at Buffy seriously. “You know I do. The deeper you’re willing to go, the more careful you have to be. You don’t do S&M angry, you don’t do bondage drunk, and you certainly don’t do new experimentation under demon possession. The darker you get, the more vulnerable you are.” He looked back at me. “I could live forever. I didn’t want to wake up one day and find I’d gotten all the rest of them killed when I wasn’t in my own head.”

A heavy silence passed over the table.

“Stopped by a few times and listened to Ripper’s punk band, though,” he said then, lightening the mood. “Wretched, wasn’t it?”

“I’m sure it was,” Buffy said.

“That was the name of the band,” I said glumly.

“You used to rip your t-shirt off on stage,” Barrow said with a grin. “That was hot.”

“Ew.” Buffy held up her hands. “I’m sorry, the thought of Giles and punk and you and hot and... God, Jack, is there anyone I know you haven’t slept with?”

“You want a list of my ex-lovers?”

“No,” Buffy said. “I think the list of who you haven’t slept with is likely to be shorter!”

“Buffy, Barrow and I weren’t—”

“And I really really don’t want to know!” Buffy said. “Really.” She stood up. “I’m going to the ladies room. Where ladies will be. And you will not.” She stalked off still shuddering.

“Anything serious,” Barrow finished for me in a low voice. I looked back into my drink. “You’ve aged well,” he added, and I waved at the barista to bring me another scotch.

“You haven’t aged at all,” I said. I looked him over. The same broad grin, the same little dimple, the same bright blue eyes. The haircut was different, and his eyes seemed deeper – but maybe that was only because I knew. I’d done research into the Immortal here in Rome. It was a story a thousand miles away from the American Vietnam vet I’d thought I’d known in London. “Why didn’t you tell us the truth?” I asked. “We’d have understood.”

“A little too well,” Barrow said. “Sorcerers, witches, time-travelers. People often want a piece of me, Ripper. I can’t bring myself to stay away from the kind of people who believe such things. But I can’t be honest with them, either. Not even when they’re jive and hot.”

“Stop,” I said. “Are you seriously telling me you didn’t know Buffy was my slayer?”

“No, Giles,” he said. “I understood you’d abandoned watcher training, and I only ever really knew you as Ripper. And for your information, it was a long time ago.”

“Thirty years.”
“And then some,” Barrow said. “Or didn’t you catch that through your studies of the Immortal?”

I shrugged. “I’d dismissed the time-travel rumors as a symptom of longevity.”

The weight in Barrow’s suddenly still gaze told me otherwise.

“Besides,” he said. “The way Buffy described you, I’d never have realized it was you.”

“How did she describe me?”

He regarded me evenly. “As a self-righteous liar who abandoned her, betrayed her, and tried to kill her boyfriend,” he said. “All while protesting he was doing it for love.”

I felt as if I’d been punched in the stomach. “She’s a child,” I snapped. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Oh? So you didn’t do any of that, then?”

I took a swallow of my drink. “All I ever did,” I said stiffly, “was done sensibly, logically, and out of a desire to protect her.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Barrow said.

“To be honest, Barrow, you don’t know what you’re talking about, either. You’ve only heard her side of the story, and her judgement...” I shook my head. “It’s been clouded.”

“By what?”

“She fell in love with a vampire,” I said. “It had a soul—”

“Angel. Soul lost again, betrayal, resurrection, yadda yadda, I know this story,” Barrow said. “Angelus is out of her system. Don’t deflect. Was she lying about what you did to her?”

I wanted to say otherwise. “No,” I admitted. “But I really did all of it out of a desire to do what was best for her.”

“Oh, for– Ripper! You are the dumbest brilliant man I’ve ever known.”

“Thanks, ever such.”

“No, you are. You know a dozen languages, most of them dead ones, you have six different dimensional world histories memorized, you have an encyclopedic memory of demonic species. And with all that, you still go with your heart. Every. Single. Time.”

“I do not.”

Barrow looked at me under his eyelid, with a knowing smirk. “And you never, ever admit it.”

“I always think things out logically.”

Barrow took another pull at his pint. “With your heart. Every time. You know who you remind me of?”

“Ethan Rayne?”

“Rayne was a psychopath. You remind me of William the Bloody.”
I nearly spat out my drink. Which would have been quite the loss, since I needed it for this conversation. I forced it down. “Excuse me?” I said through the burn. “You dismiss our old friend as a psychopath, and then accuse me of being a soulless serial killer in the same breath?”

“Ethan was never my friend. But William wasn’t a serial killer, was he. He was a vampire,” Barrow said. “They were human once, but they’re not, really. Yeah, the killing, that’s bad news. But apart from that—”

“Apart from that?”

“You two are really very alike. I knew Willy, you know. Way back when.”

“How well?”

Barrow grinned his broadest grin. “Easily as well as I knew you.” I looked down at my drink. This was disturbing. I couldn’t imagine Buffy didn’t find it even more awkward than I did. “And look at it, Ripper. You’re practically identical in personality.”

“We’re nothing alike.”

“Oh? Punk rock, too much liquor, a nice posh education thrown out into the Thames. Always follow your heart first. You even used to write bad poetry.”

“They were song lyrics,” I insisted.

“And what happened to your real accent?” he asked.

I couldn’t understand how I was feeling. Barrow’s appearance at all was making me question my own reality. The fact that he had known me during my dark age embarrassed me. The idea that he was sleeping with my slayer disturbed me at a level akin to incest. But Buffy hadn’t known of Barrow’s association with the Whirlwind when she started her affair, and no doubt she had no idea of his past relationship with me. Barrow hadn’t aged a day. Immortal beings threw the whole concept of age and propriety entirely out the window, and Buffy was over twenty-one. I almost felt as if I wished to cry.

“Sweet North-London vowels. I miss ‘em, Ripper. You sound like—”

“Like a watcher,” I snapped. “You don’t know, Barrow. Rayne, the rest of us... we went too far. The demon possession, the dark arts—”

“I told you you were going to.”

“And I didn’t listen,” I said. “Not until one of us died. Hell, eventually it killed the whole crew save me and Ethan. It nearly killed Buffy when my past caught up to me! Such recklessness and indulgence, it was—” I caught myself and forced myself calm rather than make a scene in the pub. “Such behavior cannot be condoned.”

Barrow was staring at me. “Is that why you turned on her?” he asked. “Why you turned away from her?”

“I never turned away from her!”

“The way she tells it, Ripper, you did. At least three times. Once when she was newly resurrected—”
“She needed to learn to stand on her own. I was in the way.”

“So you took away her researcher, and made her learn demons and Latin all on her own? That doesn’t even make sense, Ripper.”

I swallowed.

“Then again when you tried to have Spike killed—”

“He was—”

“Dangerous? And then again when you tried to take Buffy’s position as leader away.”

“You don’t know the circumstances, Barrow,” I snapped.

“Then explain. Why’d you run back to England in her darkest hour?”

“As if you weren’t always one for running away. And lying, and keeping secrets.” I gestured to his unchanged form.

“Because I had to,” Barrow said. “Tell me why you left her. She still doesn’t understand it.”

“I explained to her. She needed to stand on her own, and I wanted to help too badly. I couldn’t stop myself from protecting her, and it was going to—” I stopped, and swallowed.

“Going to what?”

“Get her killed.”

Barrow gazed at me. “And you couldn’t endure it again.”

“What?”

Barrow shook his head at me. “I know you, Ripper. She was dead. She’d died, and you mourned, and you closed off. Like you did when Randall died. I saw you, up on that stage. Everything was gone but the music. You vanished. And when Buffy came back… you weren’t prepared to love her again.”

“I did love her!”

“You loved her before she died. You couldn’t let yourself do it again. Not after losing her. You closed off and ran back to the life you knew before. England, Devon. You didn’t leave for her. You left for you.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Dierdre was the same, you know. After Randall died. She needed support, and you’d already run off, to your Wretched band – and apparently back to the Watchers. When you’re hurt, Ripper, you run.” Barrow sighed. “You’re like me that way.”

He wasn’t wrong. The idea of watching Buffy die all over again had felt like being tortured. Every moment I stayed in Sunnydale had been painful. A raw wound I’d wanted to scab over was being picked at and poked at by every turn of Buffy’s head, by the sound of her pained voice, by the knowledge that I’d one day have to see her body, cold and still, endure one more time her death, her burial, the wound gouged so deeply it would tear right through me.
“I came back to Buffy,” I said.

“Only to leave again,” Barrow pointed out.

And again. And again. I’d come back (all but forced to by the coven in Devon) because of Willow, and then left with her. I’d come back when the First Evil endangered the potential girls, and then left again to find more. Then to try and find a solution for Spike’s trigger. Then after Sunnydale, I’d sent Buffy off alone to deal with more vampires. The whole “Scooby” team was scattered to the four winds, but really... I hadn’t wanted to be with Buffy again.

Seeing her now was painful enough. She came up behind Barrow. “You two done? I’d really like to get ready for Angel.”

“Angel?” I asked.

“He’s probably on his way now,” Barrow said.

“You’re seeing Angel again?”

Buffy looked more than annoyed. She looked poisonous. “No. He’s stalking me,” Buffy said. “Like he always does.”

“And you’re getting ready for him?” I asked.

She smiled, the first real smile I’d seen on her face today. “Right. Make myself all pretty. You coming Jack?”

“I’ll catch up,” Barrow said.

Buffy left me, and Barrow gulped the last of his pint. “You need to think about it, Ripper,” he said, pulling his share of the tab out of his pocket. “She’s got every right to be pissed at you.”

“I told her I’d made a mistake,” I said. “In LA. After... everything.”

“But you still haven’t told her why you did it all,” Barrow said. I opened my mouth to say I had. “The real reason.”

“I told her the reasoning.”

“But not the reason,” Barrow said. “Why try to kill Spike without talking to her about it? Why turn on her? Why abandon her? None of the logical reasoning is the reason, Ripper, and you know it.”

“I know no such thing.”

Barrow scoffed. “Well, then. Until you figure it out, you’ve lost her forever. But hell. She was already dead to you once.” He shrugged. “What’s it matter if it happens again?” Barrow bent and kissed me on the forehead. “Nice to see you again, Ripper. Hang loose.”
“Should I change my shirt?” Buffy asked me.

“Buffy. You look great,” I told her. She did. She was wearing a darkly patterned dress with spaghetti straps, and knee high boots. I knew she had a stake strapped to her thigh under the skirt. I could see it press against the fabric sometimes as she moved. “Really. You’ve changed three times. Angel’s barely going to see you. And you look like ten million quid.”

Buffy flinched, as she sometimes did when I dropped a Brit term on her. I’d lived in Cardiff for so long they were second nature to me anymore. “Sorry,” she said. “I just... ugh, Angel puts me on edge. It’s like, there’s so much happy and sad and dumb little girl mixed up in it, you know?”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why he always targeted teenagers, they would become as fixated on him as he was on them.”

Buffy’s slightly deer-in-headlights gaze was drawn by Andrew coming in with a pile of somewhat smoke-smelling laundry. “I got these from the casa, but Buffy! I don’t have time to get my suit dry cleaned, and it stinks of immortal...!” He was brandishing a garment bag at us, and then stopped when he saw me. He blushed pink. “Um... hi.”

My smile snapped on. I could not help it, Andrew was cute as a puppy, like a twelve year old boy who hadn’t realized yet that he was sexual. He was only a couple years younger than Buffy, but she was centuries more mature. “You worried you have too much immortal on you?”

“Um... Giles’s... um... spell,” he stammered. “It-it doesn’t smell nice.” He shifted his attention to Buffy. “I can’t take Francesca and Maria to meet Giles all stinky!”

“I’m sure Giles will be fine meeting the senior slayers in a café, Andrew, you don’t need to go to whatever that restaurant is.”

“But Giles is paying,” Andrew said, in a tone of voice just a step below a whine. “And there’s a
dance floor, and Francesca promised she’d teach me. I wanna look good.”

“That’s easy. Just smile, handsome,” I said.

Andrew’s blush went from pink to red. “But... my suit still... um...”

“You got any vodka?” I asked Buffy.

“You’re gonna start drinking?”

“Trust me.” She pointed at a cupboard and I opened it.

There was a surprising amount of liquor there. Buffy’s drinking had been getting steadily worse ever since she had her break down. I was worried about her. She’d abandoned a lot of her work, started drinking almost religiously, and stopped having sex with me. I was actually all right with that last bit, except I was afraid it meant she wasn’t keeping the pain away any longer. I knew that stage. The functional, working stage when you didn’t feel it except in sudden gusts of grief was better. She’d sunk into the buried stage, when the grief just stayed and stayed. This was where it got bad. This was where you started to believe it had actually happened. This was where the pain became real.

She’d carry it forever now. Now she was reforming inside the chrysalis of the pain. Whoever she’d be when she climbed out of this pit... that was going to be her for the rest of her life.

I wished she’d crack more jokes.

As I taught Andrew how to deodorize his suit with a spritz of vodka and an hour out the window, Dawn caught Buffy. “Xander’s on Skype.”

Buffy rolled her eyes and took a swig of Andrew’s suit cleaner before she turned Dawn’s laptop around. “What is it, Xander?”

Xander, as always, looked rugged and mysterious, but since I’d only ever seen him in exotic locations via Skype, and he’d only seen me in the background of Buffy’s apartment, I knew our impressions of each other were probably flawed and limited. Buffy never spoke to him for more than a few minutes. “Buffy, it’s May fifth.”

“Yeah,” Buffy said.

“Um... it’s May fifth,” Xander said again.

Buffy stared at him in bewilderment. “Happy Cinco de Mayo?” she said experimentally. “Where are you now, anyway.”

“Um... I’m... um...” He stopped. “Is Jack with you?”

Buffy blinked. “Yeah... Jack’s with me. Did you... want to talk to him?”

“No!” Xander said suddenly. “No, nope, never mind. I think I’m gonna have to call you later, though.”

“I’m going out,” Buffy said flatly.

“Oh, but you can’t!” Xander said. Then he stopped. “Or. I suppose you should. Never mind!” he added again.
Buffy was clearly perplexed, in a way that bothered me. I turned away from Andrew and swivelled the laptop my way. “Xander Harris, right?”

“Jack! Hi. Um... do you know yet?”

My eyes narrowed. I knew this dance. “Xander,” I said. “If you have to ask that question, at any point, the answer is usually no.”

Xander blinked. “Right.”

“So stop talking.”

“Right,” he said. He called out, “I’ll see you, Buffy. Later. Later!” His screen went black as he signed off.

“What was that about? Do you and Xander have some kind of secret?”

“No,” I said. But I really didn’t like it. This was the kind of shit that happened to me when my timelines crossed. “But I recommend talking to him tonight, like he says. See what he was on about.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “I don’t need Xander being needy at me right now,” she said. “He’s supposed to find and recruit new slayers, and if he can’t recruit, to at least catalog. Willow tracks them down, he signs them up. That’s his job. I’m only supposed to deal with him when he’s sending one to me to train.”

“You really don’t like dealing with any of them anymore, do you,” Dawn asked. “Willow, Xander, Giles. Are you ever going to forgive them?”

“Why should I?”

“Well... you did me,” Dawn said.

Buffy went up and hugged her. They held each other for a long moment, and Andrew sniffed at my side. “You had an excuse,” Buffy finally said.

“Maybe they did, too,” Dawn said.

Buffy only scoffed, then turned to me. “We ready to go?”

I glanced at my wrist strap. “Yeah, Angel’s plane should be arriving in... ooh, we might be late,” I said. Andrew and Xander had distracted me.

“Angel’s coming?” Andrew asked.

“Yeah,” Buffy said.

“Here?” That was a positive squeak.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re going out?”

“Yes!” Buffy said. She opened the door, and nearly ran smack into a courier.

“Pacchetto, Buffy Summers?” he asked. He held a cardboard box under one arm.
“What? Yes,” Buffy said.

“Si firmerà.” He asked her to sign, and Buffy made a bit of a pother about understanding the Italian.

“I’ll get the taxi,” I said quickly. “Meet you at the corner.”

By the time Buffy made it to me, the taxi had already started counting minutes. Buffy’s breath smelled of more vodka. “Sorry, some package from Willow. I don’t know why she’s sending me a box with big old DON’T OPEN! signs all over it. It’s probably going to blow my apartment up along with Andrew’s casa, but what the fuck.” Oh, yeah, she’d definitely had another drink. I didn’t say anything about it, though. Far be it for me to deprive the world-weary of their liquor.

When we got to the airport, Buffy was disappointed to discover we’d already missed him, but Gina ran the car rental, and we were really only there to see her. “Si, came in twenty minutes early,” Gina said in her thick accent. “You’d think vampire would know better than to rent convertible.”

“I think he thinks he’s going back tonight,” I said.

“Good thing you told me he was coming,” Gina said to Buffy. “You’ve been teaching me slayer sense, and I knew he was vampire. Fingers just itched for the stake.” She pulled out a stake, along with a folder, containing a photo of a cherry red convertible and the licence and registration of the car. “And I get you the extra key,” she said. “Angel and his friend not know what hit them, eh?”

“His friend?”

“Neh, shorter fellow. British.”

“He probably brought an actual lawyer,” I said.

“It’s probably Wes,” Buffy said. “Ex-watcher of mine. One of Angel’s team.” She rolled her eyes. “Probably here to study you, Jack-o.”

“You pay damage deposit?” Gina held the key out. “I know I’m mostly here to check demons coming into the country, but I need paycheck, huh?”

Buffy growled low. “Yeah. A problem a lot of slayers have been having in the last few years. Jack?”

“I’m paying for this jaunt,” I said. I handed Gina an extra bill for her trouble. One thing about my old job, it wasn’t stingy on the salary. And knowledge of time-travel really was helpful on investments.

“So... I guess we go and check out the Capo already?” Buffy asked. She seemed disappointed – or maybe just nervous.

I had never seen Buffy nervous. I’d seen every inch of her, in compromising and occasionally seemingly impossible positions, but nervous I had never before seen. “You okay, Buffy?” I asked in the taxi on the way to the Capo’s magione.

“Yeah,” she said. “Ugh, I’m sorry. I think I always get like this when I see an ex. I’m never sure just what to do. Angel always makes me kinda... slow and sad, or really pissed off. Riley... I just didn’t know where to put my feet with Riley. I mean, I should have been mad at him, but I wasn’t in any place to pass judgement on anyone’s choices right then.”
“What about Spike?” I asked.

Buffy was silent for a long moment. It wasn’t the kind of question I usually asked, but with Ripper in town, I knew Spike was hanging heavy over our heads every second. “Bleeding,” she said. “Heavy bleeding. Either that, or so easy, you’d hardly know.” She stopped and leaned her head against the window. “You know what, about Xander and his Cinco de Mayo?”

“No, what?”

She was silent another moment. “It’s been three hundred and forty-nine days since Sunnydale fell.” She’d told me a little bit about what had happened. A “Big Bad” as she called it. A battle. All the potential slayers called. And Spike had died in the fight. “It was last May. God.” She closed her eyes. “I can’t believe it’s been almost a year. It feels like a lifetime.... I live in a completely different world. Demons are everywhere, suddenly. Slayers are rampant and we’re still not holding it down.... I don’t feel like we ended the apocalypse, it feels like we started it. Like it’s happening every day....” She groaned. “I don’t wanna think about this.”

She looked so damn young as she said this. Just a college kid, in over her head. Fighting a war I’d given up on...

To hell with it. Another Jack Harkness, four years (a millennium) younger, not to mention several hundred tragedies more innocent, was sitting happily in Cardiff right now, contemplating giving his favorite employee Toshiko a raise. He was still saving the world weekly. I’d more than earned my apathy. Right now, I had a prank to play on my old lover.

The Capo was laughing as Buffy and I strolled into his mansion. “They bought it!” he said, howling through his ears. Buffy looked surprised at the amount of noise he could pass through those trumpeting ears of his. (She didn’t understand the power of that erogenous zone. There was a time when I used to nibble those ears... Alfonso was much younger in those days, though, and unmarried.) “The bowling bag was the perfect a-touch! I cannot wait to see their faces when I take it back!” We’d missed them again. Buffy was disappointed, but she perked up when Alfonso offered to drive us to the club in his limo.

She poured herself a bourbon as we drove.

Alfonso and I passed the drive speaking about old times – mostly in Italian so our exploits didn’t make Buffy blush. For a girl who was willing to do what she’d do in the bedroom, she could be a little uptight. I’d come to the realization it was upbringing. She could do it, but she didn’t think it polite to talk about in public. She seemed to feel that good-girls didn’t do such things, and she was willing to admit she wasn’t a good-girl, but not in front of others.

Ianto had been much the same, really. Prudish twenty-first-century pseudo morality. Still, I knew how to be discreet when my partners required it. They could stay closeted. I didn’t have to.

Good thing, because about three of my casual partners met us at the club when I got there. Out of courtesy for Buffy I’d gone a little straight laced, really only pursuing men outside of our relationship. She hadn’t expressly made that a condition of our continued sexcapades (as she called them. So cute!) but even though we weren’t trying to make this relationship anything serious, I could tell it would make her uncomfortable to see me chatting up other women. So I stuck with men, which she seemed to find fun to watch, up to a point. (That point being where things got private.)

“I’m going in,” Buffy said when we got there. “You can handle the blocking?”
“We got it,” I said. My boys were eyeing each other now. The homosexual community of Rome was pretty broad, for a largely Catholic city. Some of the Capo’s men had agreed to help, but a large number of the “thugs” we planned to use for this were guys I knew. I plunged in with hugs and kisses, assuring all of them that even though the man they were pranking was a vampire, he wasn’t the killing kind. Buffy had assured me of that. A lot of my boys were brawlers – I like it rough. They were okay with a little pugilism.

When I got back in, Buffy was at the bar with a negroni in her hand. Her second one, from the empty glass in front of her. “Hey, Buffy. You okay?”

She gave me a nervous laugh I was certainly not used to hearing, and took a sip of her cocktail. The club was loud, with flashing lights and mad music, but it wasn’t hard to be heard if you were close. I slipped in beside her and flashed my eyes at the bartender. Mia knew me. She poured me my usual, and set it down beside Buffy’s.

“Another?” Buffy asked her. Mia raised her eyebrows – that was a lot of alcohol for a tiny woman to be drinking – but it wasn’t her job to play babysitter. She mixed Buffy another negroni.

Buffy played with the curl of orange rind in the nearly empty glass, then pulled it out and nibbled on it. It seemed uncharacteristically anxious. “Buffy, talk to me,” I said. “You having second thoughts? You want to talk to Angel after all?”

“No,” Buffy said. “No,” she added, more forcefully. She swallowed the last of her drink just as Mia tapped the third one onto the bar before her. Buffy flashed her a grin, and took hold of the new glass. It was about eight-thirty. Angel had been in town for almost two hours by now. According to the arbitrary timeline we’d thrown at Wolfram and Hart, he had only six more to kill before he had to get back to LA and either prepare for a turf war, or get the rotting head to the Capo’s family for the “ritual”.

“It’s just...” Buffy took a tiny sip of her drink, and then sighed. “I realized I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what?”

“Had one over on Angel,” she said. “It was always this really painful dance, with Angel, and the thing is... he was always the one leading. It was always his plans, his agenda, him being one or two moves ahead of me. He knew about the Master in Sunnydale, and I didn’t, but he didn’t tell me what he knew. He was just all coy and mysterious and alluring. And then he knew he was a vampire, but I didn’t, and I had to figure him out. And then he knew the prophesy about the first time I died, and then I just... found I had to walk it out.

“And it didn’t end there, not even when we started really dating. He’d set up dates and then actually stand me up – his choice. We’d have big battles, and he’d choose whether or not he’d join in, or if I had to face it alone. He chose when we decided to finally be together. And then even when he was evil, he was still always one step ahead of me, manipulating me, figuring out where I was going to go next, what I was going to do. And then after he came back, he’s the one who decided I needed to trust him again, and then when I finally told him it was over... he came and got into my dreams and threatened suicide, for god’s sake. And I knew I couldn’t leave him alone then, or I’d be killing him all over again – all about him. Again. And then once he got me back on his side, he decided it was over, and left Sunnydale.”

She turned on her bar stool and looked at me, her nervousness gone, replaced by indignation. “And fine, okay, you can choose to end a relationship, but then he decided it was okay to stalk me, but I had to stay away from him. And then he decided to come back after my mom died, but not to
stay. And then he decided to send Faith up to join my little war party – she was another slayer,” she clarified when I looked blank. “And then he showed up right before the end, and gave me that... fucking amulet...” She took another big sip of her drink. “And the last time I spoke to Cordy, she gave me a hint that there were other things I didn’t know... something about other ways he used to track me, and a day I didn’t remember.... She didn’t know details. But all that would have been his decision too.”

She shook her head. “And just... I spend all my life telling myself I’m a strong woman and I do what I want to do. But whenever Angel gets into the mix, it’s his damn waltz, and he leads. Once he shows up, suddenly it’s always, always all about him! What he’s going to do, and how he knows what’s best, and how he’s going to fight evil. All about his supposed destiny. And I’m supposed to dance to the tune of his fucking destiny? Really?” She was getting pissed off now.

“Buffy, I–”

“It’s insane! We’re laying all these traps and we have the whole night mapped out for him, and that’s great, but... you know how much work that took? That means all these things he’s been doing to plot my life out, this wasn’t small. This was all big stuff to him, it wasn’t coincidence. It was plotted. And he’s been doing that to me all my life, before I even met him. He sidles up to my friends, and he conspires with my watcher, and he stalks the newspapers, and he follows me around. What the fuck!”

Buffy was seriously on a roll now. “Why is my life, me, The Slayer, The Chosen One, why is my life supposed to be all about him? He’s one fucking vampire in a world with thousands of the things. He claims he’s got a soul and that’s so damn special, well... he hates that soul. You take it out of him, and he doesn’t want the damn thing back. He’s no different from any other evil vampire! And any decent witch with an Orb of Thesulah can ensoul a vampire. You know why they don’t do it? Because it’s a crappy curse! It doesn’t make a vampire any better than he was! It certainly doesn’t help anything. Doesn’t stop them from being assholes, apparently. Why not just kill him? Gypsies are dumb.”

“Kinda hard to blame the entire Roma race for the mad actions of one crazy clan elder,” I pointed out.

“Fine, that gypsy was dumb,” Buffy grumbled. “But seriously, what’s so special about Angel? I could ensoul every fucking vampire in the world tomorrow. You know what? They’d still be vampires. And I’ll bet you any money, most of them would still be killing. Being all soul-having hasn’t stopped all the other bastards in this world from being murderers and assholes. Look at me!”

Oh, yeah, she was drunk.

“Spike,” she said. She was slurring a little. “Spike was different, you know that? No soul, he made choices, and even when he screwed up (and he screwed up royally, Jack, he really did) he knew he had, and he chose. He opened his heart, he made decisions to be better. I staked him in that heart, you know that? I touched his heart.” She put her hand on my chest, where my heart still beat. “It healed up. Magic gem. But I touched his heart. I wonder if that’s when he fell in love with me?” She sniffed. “Spike let me lead. He’s the one who said dancing was all we’d ever done, and he let me take the lead. He wasn’t weak, but he didn’t try to lead. Not like fucking Angel!”

“Buffy,” I said. “Buffy, we can forget this whole thing. We can let Alfonso take it over, you know he’s keen to–”

“No!” Buffy said. “No! I’m dressed up, and I’m out with a hot guy, and I’m ready to piss Angel off!” She strode out toward the dance floor, only slightly off kilter. “I’m going to dance!”
I knew how to play drunk-tender. And hell, I could dance, too. I followed her.

Buffy was a good dancer.

I spotted Angelus as he came in. I couldn’t see his face in the dim light, but I couldn’t miss Angelus’s arrogance. It gusted into the room along with him. Him and his companion – Wes, Buffy said his name was – two black coats billowing with drama. Well, I couldn’t say a thing. I was mourning my own blue-grey RAF coat. I figured I could get another one, but that particular one was Ianto’s last gift to me. I wondered if my own coat would always remind me of Ianto anymore... God, Ianto. No. Don’t think on it. I nodded at my friends who were guarding the dance floor, and they placed themselves between us and the bar.

We had planned to have them stopped, start a brawl, and steal the head that way, but Angel’s friend started coming over to us, and then Angel just left the head on the bar, and Alfonso took the opportunity to just stroll over and pick it up. Angel and his bleached buddy started bickering. Angelus always bickered with his seconds, as I recall, particularly if they ever so much as stated an opinion that wasn’t exactly the same as Angelus’. Alfonso actually had to pause and catch Angel’s eye to make sure he even knew the head was being stolen. God, Angel’s priorities were off.

But it seemed a shame to miss a nice brawl, so I nodded my friends over to start to play. They started a fight, and Buffy climbed up on table with her camera, to get a good shot.

She was a little too drunk, and she fell. I caught her, but she missed her shot, and by the time I got her back up the brawl was over, and Angel and his companion had already left the club. “Hurry! We’ll miss them!”

“I left the key in the scooter, and Alfonso already found their car,” I said. “They’ll be tootling along like some kind of clown chase. We can catch up.”

Tootling they may have been, but they were still gone by the time we got outside. “Ugh! I missed it! He’s gotta look even more ridiculous with Wes with him,” Buffy said. “A fifteen mile-an-hour motor scooter. He’ll look like an ass. No more billowy-coat-king-of-pain!”

“Please don’t mention coats tonight,” I muttered.

“Sorry, Jack. Think we can still catch the crush shot?”

We missed the crush shot. According to plan, Alfonso ran them down with their own convertible slowly enough that even a human like Wes could roll away from the wreck safely, but fast enough they couldn’t get the scooter out of the way. And we missed the crush shot because the limo got stuck in traffic. Stupid reason.

“We missed it!” Buffy complained when we caught up to Alfonso. “God dammit!” She kicked part of the crushed scooter across the cobblestone street. “What the hell! Why do we keep missing them?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but I didn’t like it. There had been too many near-misses tonight. Between that, and Xander’s Cinco de Mayo, and Buffy’s friend’s magical mystery package, I was beginning to suspect a time-cross. And I hated the idea that there had been a time-cross. Hated it. Because the only way there could have been a time-cross was if I had crossed time, and I couldn’t think why I would cross time except to do something important and heroic, and I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to do less than save the fucking world. Buffy may have had enough of her little dance with Angelus, but I’d had more then enough of my little waltz with time. It kept stepping on my toes.
Also, I hated the only time-travel option available to me just then, and I seriously wanted to avoid it if I could. “What’s our next rendezvous?” Buffy asked. “Is that the bomb already? Please tell me we’re not going to miss the fireworks.”

“We’re not going to miss the fireworks,” I told Buffy as I showed her back into the limo. She poured herself another bourbon, and I was tempted to join her, but no. Not tonight. I had to stay on my toes with Angelus in town. “I’m sure Ilona’s already given them our ‘ransom note’.”

Buffy grunted. “Are you sure we should have trusted Ilona?” she asked. “She’s Wolfram and Hart too. I don’t trust any of them.”

“And you shouldn’t,” I said. “But Ilona’s not quite Wolfram and Hart. She’s Ilona. She’s got her own agenda.”

“Right. I don’t trust it.”

I shook my head. “There’s two ways to become a key player in a Wolfram and Hart facility,” I said. “One is the long, slow slog, working with them, swallowing their ideology, and playing the cards the devil hands to you.”

“And the other?”

“The same way Angel got his job. Become a big enough hassle for them that they themselves say if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Ilona got her job that way. She was a big enough problem for them here in Rome, they gave her that job to get her out of their hair.”

“But doesn’t that just mean she’s been corrupted? Bought?”

“Maybe a bit,” I said. “But I’d be more worried about Wolfram and Hart itself than I would be about Ilona.”

“What are you talking about? Angel’s no saint, but he got lots worse when W&H got hold of him.”

“It really was a lot easier for her to keep control of the city from there, Buffy. That doesn’t mean she’s evil, she just... doesn’t hold with quite the same morality as the Catholic Church. Neither do I.”

“You’re the one who claims he’s not good.”

I didn’t want to have a big argument about the nature of good and evil. “Buffy... Ilona’s doing this for me, not for Wolfram and Hart, not for Angel, not for the Senior Partners or the Powers That Be or whatever the fuck you want to call all of them. Angel would have gotten her involved anyway. This way, everyone has a heads up.”

“But can we trust her?”

“With this? Absolutely. Believe me, Ilona and I go back a long time.”

“Excuse me if I don’t really want to put my faith in your charm, Captain Jack,” Buffy said with scorn. The drink was making her more distrustful of me. I didn’t blame her. “Just because one of your lovers runs the Rome branch of Wolfram and Hart—”

“Ilona’s not one of my lovers, Buffy,” I said wearily.
“Oh, isn’t she then, Mr. Barrow.”

I’d been afraid that was gonna come and bite me. My past relationship with Ripper seemed to wig Buffy out more than my past with the Whirlwind, or my being an impossible thing outside of time. “No,” I told Buffy. I figured I should just come out with it. It wasn’t as if it had to be a secret. “Ilona is my daughter.”

If Buffy had felt she was leading her waltz with me, she’d just realized the music had changed.
Grazie, Prego, Kiss-Kiss

Chapter Summary

Ilona

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, Season 5 during The Girl In Question

Ilona

Cari Mamma;

Been too long since I wrote you, but CEO of the entire Rome branch is a taxing work load, si? Had an exciting week here. Had to do with Papa, so I thought I’d keep you abreast. He’s looking well, Mamma, much better than when he first arrived. So tired, his eyes look so old these days, and can you believe, he confessed he’d found a grey hair? I laughed, but he found another and made it proof. Poor Papa. Going to take him centuries to catch up to you, no?

He asked after you. I told him you were well. I know you say you don’t love each other as you did, but he still remembers you with fondness. Only, he asked me to remind him what your middle name was. Ilona, I told him. Like mine. Poor Papa. I don’t think it’s been only a year since he saw me last. Not for him. He had clearly been through the gate, with his color so pale, and how he did not want me to kiss his cheek. Skin still raw no doubt. He hates this city, no matter what he says, but he always does come back. I think he feels trapped if he cannot step outside of time. Too much time, you need freedom inside it I think. I think he’s some centuries older, Mamma. But he looks the same. And he remembered us.

He never does forget, you know. Even though we’ve not been close since I was little. I had to tell that to your husband. Did you know he complained I never seemed to see Papa? No, my patrigno, I rarely see, but he paid for all my school, and even supplied for you when you had your heart surgery. He comes through in his own way. It must be hard, touching our kind of changing life when he himself stays so unchanged through all of it. But I accept his strangeness. I know I have brothers and sisters across the world who cannot look upon him without cringing. Perhaps, when I look half a century older than he, I too will be disturbed by him. But not as yet. As yet he is still my jet-setting Papa, and I am proud of him, and speak well of The Immortal to any who ask in Rome.

He’s been running with some new ragazza. I know, so strange, for his usual interest. But they
needed my help with a game he was playing with an old flame of his, more his usual style. A vampire, if you can believe – his tastes, Mamma! I swear next time I look he’ll have a lover with a transparent skull. But this vampire is CEO of Los Angeles branch, so I was able to look him up. Angelus, he is called. Big evil from long ago, been trying to redeem his own self, is the tale. He received his appointment to CEO same as I did, carefully brought in when it became clear he already owned the city.

The records do not state exactly how he came to control Los Angeles, but I suspect it was much the same as I came to control Rome. Earn the respect of all citizens, and turn the people against the firm. Wolfram and Hart cannot stand without everyone agreeing that they can. It is easier to control them than to kill them. Like Christianity itself – better to turn the solstice to Christmas than to tell the people they cannot celebrate their pagan ritual. I care little. So long as I get my grande festa, I do not care if you call it a Christian holy day or no. I do not care if you wish to call my control Wolfram and Hart’s. I do what I wish, whatever my title. The joy is still in the day.

Papa claims he does not care, either, though his ragazza is a bit uptight, no? One of the new slayer race that has arisen. I told Papa I had no interest in study or controlling her powers, but she does not believe me. So I have not met her. Papa says she is small, and blonde, and pretty, but very strong. Much like you, Mamma. Does that please you? He still thinks it sad that I take after him in his looks. I do not. My face has never failed.

It did not fail when Angelus and his second arrived. His second is Signor Spike, only recently brought onto the payroll of Wolfram and Hart. Less is known of him, only that he too is a vampire. And Mamma, so handsome! Truly bello, dangerous with high cheekbones and eyes that could put Papa’s to shame. I was surprised that Papa had mentioned only Angelus when he called. Spike is much more his style of ragazzo, but then, Papa has been known to love many. No doubt because he cannot love them long. Like you, Mamma. To grow old together is a gift Papa can never know. Not like you and my patrigno, no?

We were playing a bait and switch, simple, uncomplicated, but the game was to keep Angelus off his balance, and make the night a trouble. I arranged for a so-called ransom to be siphoned off Wolfram and Hart’s discretionary funds. I believe I can keep the Senior Partners from realizing (or at least caring) where the funds have gone. After all, the ransom was quite real, it was only for a discarded molting that no one could care a snap for. I had heard there was to be an explosion which would not injure a vampire. Papa called me from his mobile, told me to be careful of Angelus’s companion, but eh, another vampire. I did not feel the need to protect him. I sent him off with Angelus for the switch, which was a bomb set to destroy their clothing and their pride.

The bomb apparently went without a hitch, but Papa called me again. “Ciao, baby,” he said to me, “Angel should be on his way back to you, do you think you can take a photo for us?”

I’d thought his Buffy had wanted to witness Angelus’s humiliation first hand, but Papa explained to me she’d had a bit much to drink. The poor girl was very ill by that time, and they’d had to stop and let her be sick off the strata. “I can take every photograph you would want,” I told him. “You still want me to dress him like a buffone?”

“Absolutely, baby,” Papa said. “Make him look like an absolute clown.” I heard his amica call something out, and Papa added, “And take care of his friend. Buffy’s not mad at – what was his name?”

The girl said something, but I was bored. “I have sorted this already. We have a Ferrari jacket set up already for him, and I arranged for a perfect replica of the complete outfit for his friend, down to the leather coat. I can even send more to Los Angeles if you’d like.”
Papa said his Buffy would like that. Buffy, he calls her. Pet name, maybe? In any case, he said he was thinking of taking her down to his grotto to sober up. If anything would sober the girl, I’m sure that would! It always sobered me. It still sobered me, keeping the secret from the Senior Partners. But if I didn’t have that secret, and a dozen others, they wouldn’t have made me CEO, no? But that was what struck me about it. She’s more than just a bella faccia if he is showing her the grotto. Slayer race, though. Perhaps he wants to work with her. From what we’ve studied of them, they are strong and have access to powers Wolfram and Hart cannot touch. Their power is of a lighter and more self-sacrificing strain than anything the Senior Partners want anything to deal with. They do want to study it, but not in my branch, I think. I have enough to do to tamp down the fluxes in Time.

And I would not steal a lover from Papa, in any case. He deserves someone if he cannot have you, Mamma. I know you feel the same.

The vampiri returned much the worse for the wear, and I observed them as we were preparing their new wardrobe. They were bickering. They bicker like old lovers, as I believe they are. Truly, Mamma, they bicker like you and Papa do when you spend time together. They fight, they grunt, they know what happens next, and most of the argument happens silently. And when the argument is over, they are exactly where they started. Too many years together to ever learn how to be apart. They do not share, but they no longer even need to. They were complaining after Papa’s ragazza, whom they had been chasing all the night. “Like you even know what she wants,” Spike was saying. “You don’t know anything about her.”

“What we had was epic, it was eternal, it’s destiny,” Angelus said.

“Yeah? Is that why you can’t even remember her eye color?”

“What are you talking about? Blonde hair, blue eyes, just like Darla.”

Spike laughed at him. “Both Darla and Buffy had green eyes.”

“What?”

“Green!” he insisted. “Though I suppose when you were looking into Darla’s they were usually yellow. No, Angel, the only blue-eyed blonde you ever ran with was me.”

“You don’t know who I ran with,” Angelus said, but he sounded awkward.

“The Immortal had blue eyes,” Spike added.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t gazing deeply into them, either.”

There was an awkward pause. “Missed out.”

The two of them sat glumly, and about that time their clothes were ready, so I sent Angelus with my secretary and took care of Spike myself. Given the two of them, the one I wanted to see with his shirt off was Spike. I wasn’t disappointed. The man is bellissimo. Not that Angelus is brutto, but too broody for me. Getting my hands on that sweet torso was the highlight of my night.

I invited Spike to a party – I was sure I could scare one up if I called enough of my employees and made it mandatory – but he claimed he had to get back to Los Angeles. “Why? For your gang war? Let Angelus handle it. It’s his problem, no?”

“His problems have a way of becoming my problems,” Spike said.
I asked why he let them, and he said, “Don’t always have much of a choice.”

“Well, you could have your own problems,” I told him, and made a real ploy for his attention. I thought it couldn’t hurt Papa’s plans to have a pleasant evening of my own. I know, Mamma, you’ll say vampire, but I was at my own offices. I could have him dusted at a single scream, and we all knew it. But he took his hand off my chest when I placed it there.

He looked sad, a little disappointed. “Sorry, love,” he said. “You’re a right catch, I’m sure. Just... not up to it.”

“I’m sure I could make you up to it, signor,” I said, but he pulled away.

“Tried it, love. Fine idea, moving on. I’d love to. But I just... I’m not like her.” He looked so sad. “Wish I was. It would make this easier.” I tried again, but he only turned away after that. He said I was fetching, but that was as far as it got me. You see how depressed he was. He perked up a bit when I pulled out his new coat. “Hey! Where’d you get that! That’s a bit of all right, that is.” I told him I’d searched high and low for the best leather workers in Italy, trying to get a perfect replacement for him. I didn’t want there to be any difference, but he didn’t seem to mind. “It weren’t the original anyway,” he said as I helped him into his new one.

Angelus looked a picture, and he knew he did, and he also seemed completely helpless in his clown coat. As if he were incapable of taking the thing off, or making any decisions on his own. Whatever my father had been doing to him, he had done his job well. Angelus was most a broken man already. Whatever he had been expecting for this evening, his adventures were not it. My secretary got many shots of him both tattered and ridiculous while he was changing. I sent them to Papa’s e-mail.

It was a pleasant evening for me. Papa seems to be doing well, and I was able to establish my standing among the CEOs of Wolfram and Hart. I am most assuredly of a higher standing than Angelus, and that is known now by all. He’s become quite the laughing stock around here! None will take him seriously now. And all I had to do was play that I hated gypsies and pass around a suitcase of money. Speaking of which, spend it well, Mamma.

It would have been nice if I could have landed a pleasant evening with Spike, but I feel he’s not a brief encounter creature. And I’ve since looked up his files in the payroll database. It would seem he has a soul, as well. He never mentioned it. Strange, since Angelus announces his as if it were a lord’s title. Spike seems to view his as a private matter. Much as Papa views what he is, even if the whole of Rome knows him as The Immortal.

I’m looking forward to August to come and visit you, Mamma. Give my love to my patrigno.

Kiss-kiss!

Ilona Costa Bianchi
“You feeling any better?” Jack asked me.

I wasn’t. I didn’t quite know how to tell him I wasn’t. But I wasn’t feeling sick anymore. “I just need to sit down,” I said. I sat on someone’s doorstep and watched the world spin.

Alfonso was still chuckling when we’d caught up to the scene of the explosion. “One more step, and the head-a gets it!” He seemed to think this absolutely hilarious. “We played a-keep away. Hot potato!” He howled through his ears again. To him, of course, it was kind of like threatening a bag of trimmed toenails, so I could see the humor. If I was an alien, or a demon, or whatever he was.

As for me, I was almost glad I’d missed it, I felt so out of it. I wasn’t sure that seeing Angel, even all tattered and torn, was going to be best for me. And him seeing me like this... god no. Jack had called Ilona and asked her to get my Humiliated Angel photo, but really by this time, I just didn’t want anything to do with him. Jack sent Alfonso home in his limo and took over Angel’s rented convertible.

“You want to go home?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “Angel might go there. Same with your place,” I realized. “Not as if your casa is the best kept secret in Rome.” My head felt heavy. “I think I just... need somewhere to lie down.” My place was out. Jack’s place was out. The watcher’s casa was a sulfur smelling war zone. I felt trapped. “Jack? Do you have a spare, I don’t know, couple hundred bucks? We could rent a hotel or something.”

He looked surprised. “You really don’t want to see him that much?”

I just closed my eyes. I wanted another drink, and I wanted to go to sleep. Since I was pretty sure another drink was a bad plan.... I groaned.

That seemed to decide Jack. “I’ll take you to my place.”
“No! All your lovers, someone could tell Angel—”

“I mean my real place. Angel’s got Wolfram and Hart, he might be able to track a hotel, if he’s lucky.”

“But he couldn’t find your place?”

“Trust me, Buffy. No one is finding my place.”

I was a little out of it as we drove, the movement of the car making me very dizzy, but eventually he parked the car and led me downtown. “Where are we going?”

“To church,” Jack said.

He led me up to a bizarre church I’d noted before, one of those that managed to incorporate ancient Roman temples into their architecture. “What’s this?”

“The basilica of San Nicola in Carcere,” Jack said. “But that’s just window dressing. My place is below it.”

“What’s below it?”

“The base of the Temple of Janus,” he said. He pointed at some ruinous free standing columns to the side of the church. “That one,” he clarified.

He actually had a key. If there was a night watchman to the place, they didn’t notice us, or were so used to Jack’s comings and goings they ignored us. “Oh, I remember this place,” I said. Dawn and I had toured it during one of our rambles through the city, before we’d decided to settle here. We’d seen so many old churches – and I had sensed so many vampire signatures in the crypts – that this one had just fallen in amongst them. “Temple of Juno’s on the other side, right? And what, Hope?”

“Spes,” Jack said. “Yeah. The basilica absorbed three different ancient temples. Better than knocking them down, I think. And it makes my place easy to get to.” We walked through the Renaissance holy relics and the fine architecture, our footsteps echoing on the marble floor, ’til we got to the alter. Beneath it were a set of ancient steps. I remembered this, too. Two euros could show us into the crypt (three, if we wanted to hear about the place in English) where we could see the bases of the ancient temples.

Dawn had been fascinated. She really does have some watcher material in amongst her construction. I blame the ancient dimensional key energies, ‘cause she sure as hell didn’t get that from my blood. I’d enjoyed the bones, but was otherwise bored to tears. A bunch of tufa blocks and brick walls and dirt floors and woop-te-doo! Look at that, more rocks. I’d bitched to Dawn about being cheated, but she’d enjoyed it.

“You live down there?”

“Patience, grasshopper,” Jack said, with his occasional casual patronization. I think he missed my eye-roll. He led me down into the basement, and past the ancient bones.

“Why is it that I always hook up with guys who hang out in crypts?”

Jack laughed, and I sighed. Still, if Angel wouldn’t find me here, I could make it work for a few hours. I just needed a place to sit, and didn’t want to be found.
Jack stopped by what the tour guide had once said was the base of the temple of Janus. “Take my arm,” Jack said.

I did, sure he was about to open a door onto another rock-strewn room. The ground beneath our feet was actually the ancient Roman pathway that ran between the temples of Juno and Janus, with little cells in the walls likely for currency exchange from the marketplace that used to sit there. I couldn’t see the wonder of it all, though Dawn had stared in ancient geeky fascination. I made a mental note to tell her to bring Andrew down here, since he was in town. I’d almost thought about her bringing Giles, but I didn’t trust Giles with Dawn, any more than I trusted him with me. But she and Andrew could geek out about boring old rocks until their little geeky hearts gave out.

Jack leaned us both backward against the wall, and tapped a button on his wrist strap. And suddenly, I saw the appeal. With a brilliant flash of light, I was no longer in a dimly lit underground ruin. I was in a bustling Roman marketplace, surrounded by people chattering in Latin. I was in a crashing war-zone, filled with armor-clad warriors. I was in a solemnly torch-lit crypt, full of monks burying their dead. All of these scenes and a thousand more poured into my head in a crashing cacophony of time, tangled together all at once. And the wall I was leaning against vanished.

Jack and I fell into another underground chamber, this one lit with futuristic LEDs that made me blink after the dim incandescence of the bare bulbs in the old basement. I looked around. The stone wall behind me was dark with what I assumed to be the entrance – I could faintly sense something from it, a hum in my slayer senses, like noticing the power running through a sleeping computer. “Where the fuck am I?”

I felt like I was in a library. A crappily curated library, in a cave. The walls were stone, with geometric lines of LED strings laced between shelves against the walls. There were lots of shelves, but only half of them held books. Old looking books, I expected, but some were clearly modern or ultra-modern, or even futuristic texts. Some glowed faintly, or seemed to be computers. And the rest of the shelves were filled with boxes, most of them labeled “Torchwood” with a logo of a tilted T that seemed to be flying away. Beneath the Torchwood logo were hand scrawled notes in black sharpie, saying things like, “Sycoraxian computer core. Use Caution,” and “Sontaran Star of Valor – no intrinsic value. Bargaining chip.” But there was a bed against the wall, not too big. It looked military. So did the ration packs and the water bottles. In fact, all the bits that didn’t seem to be bizarre alien artifacts seemed spartan and military and clean.

I realized, this really was Jack’s place. More than his hotshot rented casa, more than his playing in the clubs. Stripped down, military, utilitarian. This was what Jack became when there was no one else around.

Ah. And a set of martini glasses. That made sense, too.

“What is this place?”

“This is my place,” he said. “Sort of. I’m the only one who can get here, after all. Well, maybe someone with a sonic manipulator. A good sonic manipulator.”

I wasn’t ashamed to admit, I was a little wigged out. “What is this? Where are we? What the hell happened out there?”

“This,” said Jack, “is the threshold of the Janus gate. And that,” he pointed at a little alcove against the wall that looked wholly unremarkable, except for the fact that it had a cage around it. It didn’t look like a locking anything in or out sort of cage. It was like a fire screen, sort of a don’t fall in accidentally sort of cage. “That is the Janus gate. Don’t go over there.”
“I’ve had some experience with Janus thingies,” I said. “A Janus bust once made my entire town morph into their Halloween costumes.”

Jack chuckled. “Sounds fun. What were you?”

“A 16th century noble virgin.”

Jack laughed outright. “You are anything but that!”

“I was a lot younger then,” I said stiffly. And still a virgin. I didn’t mention that.

“Well, usually Janus has more to do with time. Thresholds, doorways, passages, beginnings and endings. This whole little shrine here is in a tiny little pocket of time, slid up into that wall. It takes my wrist strap to activate it.”

“We’re outside of time?”

“Only very slightly. Kind of like a twist of space, really. But that’s why it’s so loud getting in, you get a glimpse of every time anyone ever opened that door to get in here. Ever,” he added. “But time continues inside and outside of this bubble the same. It’s just you can’t detect it without advanced tech, or advanced spellwork. So. Place is all mine!”

“And this is just the threshold,” I said. “What’s the actual gate do?”

“That,” he said, looking at the gate, “will send you through time, if you really wanted to go. You don’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because it kills anyone who does it,” he said. “One of Janus’s little jokes, I guess.”

“Why would anyone make a time portal that kills people?”

“Maybe it broke. All I know is, that’s how it works now. So... don’t try to use it. I come back easy. If I understand, it takes a lot of work to bring you back.”

I blinked at him. All the little hints he’d dropped about coming from one time or another, and why Rome was his base of operations. “You... you’re the only one in the world who can use that, aren’t you.”

“So far as I know,” Jack said. “You can send things, though, and they go through time undamaged. But without my wrist strap there’s no control mechanism, so things just kind of... drop through time, and show up somewhere randomly. Quite a lot of stuff just appears in here now and again, from some time or another. Some of those bones out there were things I had to clean up when I came through, and found someone was a little too careless once upon a time.”

“So... that gate is a real time portal. You can go whenever you want?”

“Within reason,” he said. “It’s kind of a one way. I can go back in time, but not forward in time. Well, back in time until the point when the temple was constructed, about 250 BC. And, I can go forward in time, but only if I’ve been there already. So at this point I could... probably go up to 2009, but... that’s as far as I can go. That’s when I came back from. It’s a finicky little gate. I hate using it, but,” he tapped at his wrist strap. “Someone broke this puppy a few years ago, thinking I was too much trouble hopping through time and space, so...” He shrugged. “Until I get a new one, or this one gets fixed... this is the only reliable time portal I got. Dimensional rifts... can’t control
them well enough.”

“And that’s why this is your home base,” I said. “Why everyone in Rome knows you, and
knows you as the Immortal.”

“Yep. No matter where I go, if I’m going to go any other when, I usually have to go through
here. Which means I come here a lot. But I hate doing it. It hurts.”

“How does it kill you?”

Jack stared at me. “Every single cell in my body is turned off,” he said. “Which would be fine,
except every single one then has to turn back on again. When you die, most of your body is still
alive. Each little cell and such, it’s all still dividing. Takes quite a while to fully die, and by that
time I’m usually alive again. Not with this thing. It’s one of the easier ways to die, but one of the
more painful ways of coming back to life. And I’ve died just about every way you can think of. I
once lived with an alien sadist for a year who liked to turn me into his private Ken doll on a regular
basis.” He held his hands up to indicate being shrunk. It sounded incredibly painful. “I spent nearly
a millennium buried under Cardiff. Believe me when I say, I know all the ways of dying and
coming back to life. And I hate this thing. Probably the second most painful resurrection I ever
endure. I don’t use it lightly.”

Why was he acting like I was asking him to? “What’s the first most painful?” I asked. He was
boasting, so I figured I’d bite.

“When I have to grow back from scratch,” he said. “Some mote of bone or flesh that my soul is
stuck on grows the rest of me back. That’s hell until I grow skin.” He sounded almost cheerful in
his sarcasm.

I wasn’t sure why he’d brought me here, or why he was telling me about how hard it was to
time-travel using this gate, or why he was suddenly confessing it was possible for him to time-
travel at all. I was having troubles this night. He was pissed off about something, too. Each and
every time we missed seeing Angel he’d gotten more and more recalcitrant and... well, if it wasn’t
Jack, I’d say he was nervous. The joy in the prank seemed to have completely died on him. And I
realized I’d been too drunk and wrapped up in myself to notice. So much for the noble slayer.

“Well,” I said, hoping to lighten the mood a bit. “Punching your way out of a coffin sucks, too.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” he said with a grin.

“I don’t think we should compare resurrection notes,” I said. “You’ve clearly got me beat.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. But you even going through it the once... I don’t know.” He came up to me
and touched my cheek. “You know, I don’t usually... share. With anyone. But you understanding,
even a little. Even once. It means a lot.”

“Three times,” I told him.

He frowned.

“I died three times. Two of them were only for a minute. I drowned once, and I was shot, as well
as the infamous Tower of Glory. Once I just... CPR works wonders. The other was a spell, but it
was instantaneous. No being dragged out of heaven or anything. Just... everything went dark, and
then... I was back.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “That’s what it’s like.”
I swallowed. I had noticed the bed, and I really wasn’t up for anything right then. The Giles/Ripper-Barrow/Jack thing was really squicking me. “I think I just need to rest,” I said.

Jack nodded, without apparent annoyance. He’d been really good about that lately. I was starting to think that what we had wasn’t going to be sex-based for much longer. And that made sense, really. I just wasn’t sure what Jack and I were evolving into. Mostly I just hadn’t been in the mood at all. Jack let me go to the bed, and offered me – “Coffee?”

I was surprised. “You’re willingly drinking coffee?”

“I love coffee, Buffy,” Jack said. “That’s why it...”

“Why it makes you sad,” I said. He nodded. Clearly, just like me, he was already sad.

I curled up on his bed with a cup of coffee keeping off the chill of the underground. “So what is all this stuff?” I asked, gesturing to the boxes on the walls. “Just time flotsam?”

“Some of it,” Jack said. “Mostly it’s stuff I don’t have a use for, but don’t want to get rid of just yet. Lots of it’s from my old job.”

“What was your old job?”

“Remember I said I guarded a rift up in Cardiff? The team there was called Torchwood. This is from that.”

“But what was Torchwood?”

“Created by Queen Victoria to hunt down aliens,” Jack said. “They recruited me, I didn’t seek them out. I kinda took over completely in 2006, when the base in London was destroyed by Cybermen.”

He was saying this so nonchalantly. “Right,” I said. “I’ll keep the slayers out of London next year, then.”

Jack blinked. “Oh, don’t listen to me,” he said. “Time’s not fixed, anything could happen between then and now. I’m the only fixed point there is in the universe. That’s just what happened in my perspective. The past and the future could change tomorrow, and you’d never know it.”

“Would you?”

“I’m getting to,” he said. “There was an alien I knew once who could see the different fluctuations in time. I’m not that good, but with the amount of time I’ve got, I may end up becoming a sort of Time Lord yet.”

“So you came from 2009?”

“I came from the 51st century,” Jack said. “But the last time I lived to was 2009, yeah. I didn’t want to live there anymore. I tried to leave Earth, but...” he shook his head. “The galaxy just... didn’t take me out of myself. Twenty-first century is when everything changes. I needed... I needed comfort food,” he said with a sad grin. He took a sip of his coffee. “2005 Rome seemed as good a time as any.”

I thought about this. Seven months after his lover had died was when I met Jack, but that was seven months for Jack. Which meant this was a good four years before Ianto had died. Even if Ianto was far away, Jack was living some-when when his boyfriend was still around. He knew
Ianto was alive up in Cardiff or wherever, and he was hanging out here, not getting in the man’s way. He’d gone to somewhen where Ianto was alive, even if he couldn’t be there beside him. He stayed as close as he could...

It made my heart hurt.

So I changed the subject. “So what’s it all do, this stuff?”

“Different stuff,” Jack said. He opened a random box and pulled out what seemed to be panpipe of some kind. “This makes the somnal song of the Ofilicaft. Alien race. They can’t sleep unless someone is playing one of these. They can get really cranky. And this,” he pulled out something triangular, with strings, “is an extremely old psaltery that dropped through time. Probably worth a decent sized yacht. And this....” He pulled out a ukulele, “This was played by Elvis in Blue Hawaii.”

“That box is all instruments?”

“Yeah.” He grabbed a bigger box. “This one’s got all armor bits. Sontaran glove, Etruscan breastplate. I used to have a cyberhelm, but I figured I should get rid of it. Too dangerous.” He grabbed a plastic box with different compartments to it, like one of Xander’s tool boxes, the kind that carried different sizes of screws. “These are all crystals. You like sparklies, don’t you?”

“I got kind of burned out on them,” I said, but he ignored me.

He opened it and pulled one out. “This is a Metabelius Crystal. It enhances psychic energies.” He held it to his forehead. “And you think I look like an idiot holding this to my head.”

“Very funny. I don’t think you needed a crystal to tell you that,” I said.

He grinned, put it back in its compartment and pulled out another. “This is a warp star,” he said. It was a square crystal dangling from a thin gold chain. “Got it from a friend of mine. Never did manage to use it.”

“Use it for what?”

“This is a warp fold conjunction trapped in a carbonized shell. Or in layman’s terms, a great big explosion waiting to happen.” He tossed it at me, and I reacted exactly as he’d expected I would, I’m sure, by making a freaked out noise. I bet he expected me to back off, though, rather than catch it expertly out of the air. Sometimes he did seem to forget I was a slayer.

I looked at it. It looked like a perfectly ordinary crystal, though it shimmered a lot. “I take it this needs a spell or something to activate?”

“A detonator,” he said. “Though I wouldn’t try to break it with a rock or anything.” He held his hand out, and I tossed it back. He slid it back into the box and stared after it, touching random crystals I couldn’t see. “Triscalite salts, one kronton crystal – they’re useless unless you have a pair – a couple Arcadian diamonds... Ah! Here’s a nasty. They call this a champion’s crystal.” He pulled it out. It was a large clear crystal, unmounted, and gaudy. I didn’t like it.

“What’s that?”

“Power source for the ships of the Anamatte. Callous little things.”

“How come?”
“They’ve a psion based tech with a communal culture, no belief in the elevation of the individual. Everything they do is done for the good of the whole.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, until things need to get done,” Jack said. “Think about it. They believe in utter altruism, and use a psionic based power.”

“What’s psoriasis power?”

Jack smiled at me, his dimples deepening like they did when I go all young and ignorant on him. It was actually kind of annoying, but he seemed to enjoy his power trips. He held up the large clear crystal and let it catch the light. “Buffy, my dear, this little baby is a pretty, glittery, sentient sacrifice. It’s like finding the whole of an Aztec ceremony under your car’s hood, complete with blood and screaming.”

I wasn’t liking the sound of that, at all. I was tasting iron, as if I’d swallowed a mouth full of blood. But I asked anyway. “How does it work?”

“The Anamatte have generational ships. They’re travelers, like gypsies. They claim they’re trying to find habitable worlds without intelligent life on them. I will give them that – they’re gruesome, but they’re not conquerors. They only kill their own. This,” Jack tossed the crystal into the air and caught it. “This powers their engines. They give it to their strongest citizen. It takes up the essence, all that essential life-force – the soul, you’d call it – channels it, fires it, and wheew.” He whistled like a firework, and soared his hand through the air. “Shunted halfway across the galaxy.”

I was trembling from the moment he’d said the word soul. “And it’s a crystal.”

“Yep. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, pretty. What if there was no ship? No Anamatte. What if someone human wore it?”

“Oh, it would fry out a human before it even powered up. No, it would take someone more than human, but someone with that lifespark – the soul. Otherwise – fizzt – nothing to burn. And the really creepy thing?” he asked.

No, something was shouting in my head. No, don’t tell me the creepy thing!

But Jack had this tone in his voice as if he were telling naughty bedtime stories – sort of like Spike’s old habit of telling Dawn monster stories, where he featured as the monster. Jack clearly had a fetish about dangerous alien tech. “It has to be willing,” he went on. “The bearer has to be willing to sacrifice their soul, everything, for the good of the whole. There can’t be any bitterness or desire or anger. Not even fame for what you’re doing. You have to want to see it working. The only way the damn thing kills you is if you’re filled with perfect love.”

Don’t tell me this, part of me was chanting. “And if someone wore it... someone... who had fought to be the best he could be... a champion... someone full of love.... What if there was no ship to move?”

“Unchanneled?” Jack grinned, evilly. “That kind of power could take out a city.”

It did. I knew it had. Something cruel and unforgiving had grabbed hold of my chest. “Someone with a soul... but more than human,” I whispered.
“Yeah. And it sucks, ‘cause they take out their best and brightest. They claim it leaves space for the next best and brightest to step up, but it seems kind of a cruel punishment for being the best of your race. Drains the soul completely.”

I spilled my coffee. “What?”

Jack had finally noticed that I wasn’t titillated, but traumatized. I couldn’t help but feel Spike would have realized from the moment I started to feel uncomfortable. I finally got how Jack could have enthusiastically ‘raped’ someone for a year and never noticed, ‘cause the trauma hadn’t been spelled out for him. Jack wasn’t sadistic, but he could be completely oblivious. “Well, I said it was cruel,” Jack said. “Believe me. That kind of thinking... well, it’s evil.”

That made me angry. “It is not!”

“Huh?”

“He was not evil, he was the best of us!”

“Woah, Buffy?” Jack lowered the hand with the crystal. “Take a step back. I meant the practice, not any one person.”

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Now Jack looked angry. Darkly angry. “Yes. I do. Take out the one for the good of all? Oh, Buffy, I know that evil.”

“You do not,” I barked. “You don’t even understand it. You sit there day after day, living, and you don’t even understand death. There’s no evil in that!”

His blue eyes flashed. “Yes there is,” he said. “I know that evil. I am that evil.”

“Shut up!” I yelled. I jumped off the bed and glared at him. “What do you know? What do you know, Jack? Are you the martyr? Are you the sacrifice? Were you the one to jump off the tower, or burn on the cross, were you the one to die for humanity? No! You’re forever! Death’s just a vacation for you. One moment of black, and then you’re right back in it. You can’t even understand it.”

“No, you don’t understand it,” he said. His tone brooked no argument. “You’re a little girl who believes in the fairy tale of a messiah. I understand the need for sacrifice. I have personally cut the throat of the sacrificial lamb. Needing one is horrific. Using one is evil.”

“Hello! I’ve been the sacrificial lamb, Jack! Remember? I’ve died three times. Don’t you dare diminish his sacrifice, or mine.”

“Who? Stop this.” He bent to my face. “I didn’t say the lamb was evil, I said I was!”

I pushed him back. “You are evil, Jack. You live forever, and you are dead inside!”

Jack reached forward and grabbed my arm. “You’re right,” he said. “I am. Sometimes it takes the dead to step beyond it, and see it for the evil it is.”

I yanked my arm back. He seemed surprised by my strength. “You don’t get it. You didn’t make the sacrifice.”

“Yes, I did!” he snarled. “Are you listening to me, girl? I did. I did it willingly, and with my eyes
“You did not,” I snapped. “You can’t have.”

“I didn’t say I was the sacrifice, I said I did it.” He grabbed me again, and shook me. “Do you want to know what I did, Buffy? Do you want to know who I murdered to save humanity? No. You just play the martyr.”

“Yes, I’ve played the martyr!” I said to his face. “I’ve played the sacrifice, and now you want to call that evil?”

“Making you do it, yes. That is evil. You’ve been the lamb. You don’t understand what it is to be the priest.”

I shrugged his hands off me. “Fuck you, Jack. You think I don’t know? I stabbed my own lover in the chest and sent him to hell,” I snapped. “I strapped a bomb around the neck of the next one, without even caring what it could do, and you’re telling me it burned out his soul! Do you really think anything you did could be worse than that?”

“You–”

“Yes! I killed them both. So one of them came back, he came back an asshole – if he wasn’t one to start with. The other one is gone, gone, gone, and I’m the one who fucking killed him!” I pushed at him. “If you want to call me evil for that, fine. I took out the First Evil and took its place on the goddamn evil throne! But don’t you dare tell me I don’t understand it!”

“I knowingly fed an innocent child into the maw of death.” He said it flatly, as if it was no more than depositing a check at the bank.

I stopped. My anger died in my throat, and I felt like I’d been slapped. Did he mean that? There was no indication that he was exaggerating. “A child?”

“A child,” Jack said. “A child who loved me, and trusted me. I killed my own grandson. I did it while his mother, my... daughter, looked on screaming in horror.” He said it firmly, and then blinked. I wondered if he’d ever said it aloud before. Then he shook his head. “He didn’t know. He knew I needed him for something... but he didn’t know. He trusted me. He asked me what he was supposed to do.... All I could have said was ‘Stand there, and die,’ so I said nothing. I held that button down, and watched him die screaming in pain. And I did it.”

It sounded awful. “Why?”

“Does it matter? I did it.”

I stared at him. “It matters, Jack. It matters why.” I knew he had to have had a reason. He wasn’t a vampire, relishing in pain. The remorse in his eyes was proof enough of that. “You have to tell me why.”

He knew he had to. He’d probably already lost me, but he knew he had to tell me, anyway. “To save the earth,” he said. “Like that matters, but that was why. To save the soul of the earth. To save the children of earth. To save that one out of ten children who were going to be sacrificed to save the rest of the miserable planet.”

“What happened?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”
“It matters. The story matters. The truth of it. The facts can distort. The detail... that’s why I can’t hate myself for it, for any of it. I had to save the earth. I had to. Angel came back and forgave me for it. Spike... he forgave me before it had even taken him completely. If he even thought there was something to forgive. My champion...” I swallowed. “Why’d you do it, Jack? What was it you had to stop?”

He shook his head. “An alien,” he said. “A drug pusher who liked to hit up on living children.”

I winced. Slow torture of living children? “It sounds worse than vampires.”

“Worse than any demon you’ve had to face, I’ll bet. They had powers way beyond anything I had. They were gonna kill everyone. The earth was being held hostage, and the children were the price for release. And do you know what?” This detail clearly horrified him even more than what he had done. His face went white. “Every single country on the planet was willing to do it.”

Jack turned away from me and looked down. “You think it was bad that you stabbed your lover?” he asked. “It’s normal. Everyone will do that. Everyone. Everyone’s a cold blooded killer, and love and innocence and right and wrong, it doesn’t matter. Everyone was going to go right along with it, because the price was right.”

He looked back at me. “That’s why I can’t give a shit about your oh-so-precious world, Buffy. It’s full of monsters. There’s no one righteous to save.”

“That’s not true.”

“Humanity was going to sacrifice their children to save everyone else,” Jack said. “Torture children, willingly, knowingly. I did it, too. I murdered my own grandson to save them. One instead of millions. Millions instead of all. Everyone was trying to save someone, and you know what? It doesn’t make it any better. Don’t you tell me that’s not evil, little girl. I am the face of evil. Handsome and smiling and seductive, and when the chips fall, the sacrifice isn’t worth a damn. Because who the hell are you saving? The same damn people who would hold that button down and listen to that innocent little boy scream.” He made a face of pure despair. “I’m evil, Buffy. The whole damn planet is.”

“You think I care that your soul is drenched in blood?” I asked. “Well, you’re right. Everyone’s is. Spike’s sure as hell was. It didn’t make it any less pure.” I shook my head at Jack. “You don’t understand. Maybe Spike wasn’t a child, maybe he wasn’t the innocent. He might as well have been. You think you’re the evil one, because you sacrificed a little boy to save millions? You think that’s what makes it bad? Because he was young and innocent and didn’t know what was happening, and so now you get to feel all guilty for it. Well fuck you!”

“I–”

“Spike was old!” I yelled. “Old enough to know exactly what he was doing. And he was black as sin, and he took it on willingly, and you know what? It doesn’t make one fucking bit of difference! It’s the same damn thing!” I wrenched my voice back from the tears that were trying to steal it. “And I held his hand,” I said, “and I felt his soul burning against mine, and I knew, I knew there was nothing else to do except die with him, and he wouldn’t let me.” I sobbed. “He was too good to let me.”

I couldn’t stop talking. Now that it was coming out, it wouldn’t stop. “I had to go on living. We all have to go on living! Don’t you dare tell me it wasn’t worth it!”

“It isn’t worth it!” Jack shouted back. “Life, death, it’s all gonna go on without us, whether we
want it or not. That doesn’t make it right. So they all want to go on living. So they force a sacrifice, and take out the lamb. What makes that any better than those Aztecs, bringing forth the rain? They thought the death would save them. The death doesn’t save anybody. It condemns us all, makes every one of us monsters, makes this whole damn place a hell that isn’t worth saving.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” I said, my voice so low it sounded like a growl. “Don’t you dare tell me this world isn’t worth saving, just because you’ve got a little blood on your hands. Don’t you dare tell me what it is that makes this place hell. I’ve been to heaven! Everything is hell. Even the kindness and the beauty and the hope, all of that is hell. But it’s life, dammit you! It’s life, and it keeps on going, and even if you’re stuck in it, Jack, it doesn’t mean it’s not worth it.”

I hit him in the chest. “Even though you’ve got the mother of all death wishes, doesn’t mean the world does! So, your final rest has been denied you. That fucking sucks, Jack. But that doesn’t make the rest of the world your shit box, and it doesn’t make evil your fault. Evil exists. It takes love and forgiveness and sacrifice to defeat it, and you’ve got your sacrifice down pat, but where’s all that forgiveness, Jack? Where’s all that love? Did you ever love anyone?”

“You want me to love you? Is that it?”

“No, I don’t. I really fucking don’t. You know what I want?”

“What?”

“I wish you were strong enough that I could beat you up.” I turned with a snarl and headed for the door – how the hell did it work from this side? – fully intending that to be the final word.

“Do it!” he barked. He jumped after me stood between me and the door.

“What?”

“Just do it! Fucking do it! Beat it out of me!”

“You want me to hurt you?” I demanded. “You want me to make you feel less guilty? Well fuck if I’m gonna help you do that! Guilt is what makes you human, Jack, it’s what makes you real. Believe me. I know what guys are like when they can’t feel it. They’re monsters. I’m not gonna help you purge yourself of it.”

“I don’t want you to take away the guilt, I want you to take away the god damned pain!” he yelled.

“What pain?” I yelled back. “The pain that you’re a murderer? Well join the fucking club!”

“No!” he shouted. “Not for Stephen! I hardly give a damn about Stephen. Yeah, I am a monster. My own grandson, I’m dead to my own daughter, and I can’t even care. Stephen’s just one more innocent on my epic telephone book of I had to do its. You want to know what’s bad?” Now he was crying, too. “The ones that die for nothing. For a mistake. Ianto.” He swallowed. “He didn’t die to save the world. He just died because he was there. He was there, and I should have left him behind. I shouldn’t have taunted that creature, but I did, and he was standing right there beside me. And that creature poisoned the air, and took out a building, and killed everyone in it, including Ianto. And he didn’t save anyone. His death didn’t do a damn thing.” He shook his head. “It was a complete waste.”

“No,” I said. “A death doesn’t have to be for something to be a good one. Let me tell you something, Jack. You’ve been alive a lot longer than me,” damn, Spike had completely infected me, “but you’ve forgotten what life is. It’s precious ‘cause it’s short. You preserve it, ‘cause it’s
short. You take out the bad guys and make that little difference, because each single person is their own universe. And you can save those worlds, you can rewrite the universe. And even one kiss... one moment... one I love you.” (No, you don’t. But thanks for saying it...) “One little crumb,” I went on. “That can save their world.” He looked devastated. “Were you there with him?”

“I-I held him.”


“Even Spike,” he said. “And it was you did it?”

“Yeah. I’m the one who put the damn thing around his neck.” I lifted up Jack’s hand with the champion’s crystal in it. “I think it was one of these.”

Jack’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, damn,” he said. “I didn’t think that was possible.” He frowned. “Spike had a soul?”

“He fought for one,” I said. “He went... he went to get one. A pure one, uncurSED. For me. So that... that he could love me properly or something. So he’d never make another mistake and hurt me.” The heat that had charged my rage boiled into my face, and out my eyes. I couldn’t keep the tears back anymore. Jack put his arms around me, held me against his chest. I let him, but there was no comfort in it. “And that was the only thing that made it okay,” I said through the tears. “He had a soul, so he went on. To heaven, because... how could he not? Saving the whole world from the ultimate evil... how could that not earn him his place?”

Jack made a small sound of regret, and I pulled away. “But now....” I swallowed. “Now you say... the soul... the soul would have been eaten up? No heaven, nothing, just... just the fire?”

Jack opened his mouth, but didn’t say it. I knew why. He didn’t want to be the doctor, confirming the patient dead.

“Well... fuck.” I sobbed. “That’s just bloody brilliant. Way to go, Angel!” I shouted at the ceiling. “You were all jealous of his soul! You got it out of him!”

“Angel?”

“Yeah, he gave me the damn thing. He was gonna use it, but...”

“Angelus... didn’t have the right personality to use something like this,” Jack said. “This thing only works if there aren’t any selfish motivations at all. Not even fame for the sacrifice. I’ve got enough life-force for it to take out half the cosmos, but I couldn’t make it work. It takes... ”

“Love,” I said. “I know. I was there. I felt it. That was what closed the hellmouth, perfect love. And Spike.” I reached for the crystal. “And one of these bloody things.”

I meant to hold it up, and... I don’t know. Pontificate some more on the nature of sacrifice at Jack or something. I didn’t. I was a little too busy bursting into flame.

Chapter End Notes

San Nicola in Carcere is a real church, incorporating real Roman temples. And here is
a link to many, many images and details of this church and its history.

http://www.jeffbondono.com/TouristInRome/SanNicolaInCarcere.html
Giles

I wanted more to drink. But if I had more to drink, I couldn’t think, and I needed to think.

I had every piece of data that I could reach at my fingertips, spread out on the table of the hotel suite. Andrew could work from a computer. I always felt helpless without a table. I had taken most of the important books from the watcher’s casa – which really would be unlivable until I’d had workers in. Fortunately I could afford it. As the sole heir to the Watchers Council, I had access to their accounts and investments, and their fortune was immense. I hadn’t realized how stingy they were until it was my job to oversee their finances.

Of course, I hadn’t realized how stingy I had been until Buffy had pointed it out to me that afternoon.

The ancient Vampyr book was set in the middle of the table, surrounded by every piece of documentation I could think of which might solve the mystery of this monstrosity which seemed to have descended. The watcher’s edition of the Slayer Handbook. The creased and tattered copies of the amulet’s documentation. Merrick’s report of Buffy’s initial contact. My orders assigning me to Sunnydale. Lydia’s thesis on Spike’s history. The documentation of Angelus’s exploits (weighted down with an Orb of Thesulah. I always carried one of those nowadays, ostensibly to protect us should Angelus ever descend again, but truly in honor of Jenny Calender). Jenny’s Romani soul-curse. The report the council drew up on Glorificus. The current Slayer roster. What documentation I could find on Buffy’s scythe. And right at the edge, all the research I had performed on the Immortal, glaring at me as if with a hairy eye, demanding, How in the hell could you see none of it, Ripper?

Much of the papers were freshly printed replicas, thanks to Andrew’s computer savvy and his overhaul of the Watchers’ records, available now on the Watchers’ private... server or whatever it was called. But I had to print them out, and have them at my fingers. I had to study this. I hoped there was an answer in this mass of documentation, and I intended to winnow it out. I had to. There
was a monster I hadn’t seen, one I hadn’t predicted, one that had been right in front of my eyes, that I had looked at and been unable to identify. An almost demonic creature that I had failed to protect my slayer from.

My own hubris.

And I’d thought I’d battled this creature, and won.

I stared at the document strewn table and took off my glasses so I could rub at my eyes again. I wasn’t precisely crying, but tears kept welling in the corners of my eyes all the same. Some of it was smoke poisoning from earlier in the day, some was mere exhaustion, but truly seeing Barrow and Buffy again – seeing them together no less – had filled me with emotion that I was used to denying myself. Stiff upper lip, old boy, I told myself. It didn’t work any better when I said it than when my father had.

A knock – more a persistent thump – sounded on the door, and I abandoned my research to investigate. It was Barrow through the spy hole. I opened the door. “Ripper, tell me you have Buffy’s back, or I’m going somewhere else.”

“What?”

“She doesn’t want to go to the hospital. Are you the man I think you are, or the man she thinks you are?”

Buffy? Hospital? “God, man, where is she?”

“Here.” Buffy’s voice was very small. She came up behind Barrow, and I felt as if I’d been punched in the gut. Her beautiful blond hair was burned off, and what remained stood in a singed halo around her head. Her face was red and blotchy, and she was wearing a man’s shirt – Barrow’s shirt, I realized, as he wore nothing under his braces but a white t-shirt. What I could see of her skin was blistered and red, first and second degree burns marring her perfect skin.

“My god, get in. Barrow, would you go and run cold water into the bath? Buffy, what happened, what–”

“I don’t know,” she said. The last time I heard her sound like this was in Sunnydale. It was after the turok-han had beaten her to within an inch of her life, and left her as a warning to the potentials that they could not defeat the First Evil. After that initial shock Buffy had come down, made a public declaration of war, and had never sounded the same again. She was a different person from the moment of that loss, and I hadn’t even realized it until I heard her voice again. “I don’t know.”

Barrow came back and led Buffy into the bathroom. She slipped off his shirt without a glance in my direction, as if she were past modesty, but I averted my gaze anyway. Barrow led her into the bathtub, and my slayer hissed and cringed as she made her way into the cool water. “Ow! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!” she whimpered. She gripped his hand tightly. He grunted, but ignored whatever pain she might have been causing him.

“I know, baby, I know,” Barrow said. “The water will make it better, I swear. Come on.” He held her left hand, which seemed to have fewer burns than the right. Buffy lowered herself in completely and clenched her teeth on a scream. It was like listening to my own heart burned. Barrow was right. I’d run from Buffy because I couldn’t bear to see her hurt. What a blasted coward!

I glanced at her nude form clinically, assessing damage. Her right hand and arm appeared to
have suffered the most damage, followed by the right side of her face. Her body held superficial burns along her torso and thighs, most likely following the pattern of whatever dress she had been wearing. There were a bunch of nasty blisters around her thigh, surrounding a clear white band – a stake belt. I’d been there when Xander had designed it for her. Barrow had removed it – proper form. Burns became swollen quickly.

“Was there a fire, or is this chemical?” If it was chemical, I should use running water.

“Neither,” Barrow said. He pulled something out of his pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief. “Take this, put it somewhere safe. Don’t touch it! I don’t know what happened. Ah! Buffy, baby... you’re gonna have to ease up.”

Buffy let go Barrow’s hand completely. “Sorry,” she said. She took hold of the support bar on the side of the bath instead – and crushed it like a vice. The pattern of her fingers was quickly molded into the aluminium. “I’m good,” Buffy said, in that tiny voice.

“Is there anything we can get you?” Barrow asked

Buffy nodded. “Call Dawn.” She sank down until her face was partially submerged in the water.

Barrow yanked a mobile out of his pants pocket and pressed a pre-set. “Dawn, baby, I’m at Giles’ hotel. Get your ass over here. Buffy’s been hurt. Yeah, yeah, I’ll talk to Andrew.” He glanced at Buffy. “She’s on her way now.”

Buffy nodded.

“So Angel did come there?” Barrow asked. He looked at Buffy again. “Andrew thinks he’ll be back, is there anything you want to say?” he asked her.

Buffy reached up with her left hand and held the phone to her ear. “Andrew, yeah. Tell Angel I’m sorry. I love him still – I do, it’s stupid – but I don’t ever really stop loving anyone. But he’s gotta stop just... standing in place like this. He’s gotta keep going. Like Spike. Maybe I’ll be willing to see him again some day, but not if he can’t.... He’s got...,” she started to cry, and the phone fell out of her hand. Barrow picked it up before it hit the water.

“Yeah, I got her,” Barrow said. He paused a moment and listened. Then he laughed. “I’m not all that, Andy. I’m what she needs right now is all. Okay, thanks, buddy.” He closed the mobile and returned it to his pocket. “Dawn’s already on her way. Didn’t even wait to ask what was wrong. Want me to call her cell, warn her?”

“No,” Buffy said wearily. “Just get her here.”

“Ripper, you got any ibuprofen?”

“Yes,” I said, jumping to my toiletry bag. Barrow took three, and gave Buffy four, and made her drink water. I left them alone.

I retreated to the center room of the suite and gingerly opened the handkerchief Barrow had given me. Inside was a glittering crystal I recognized... and didn’t want to.

I set it aside and ruffled through the papers on the table, looking for the files on the cleansing amulet Spike had worn. I wasn’t certain it was the same crystal, but it looked similar.

The papers were of no help. While size and general shape appeared similar, there was no image of the crystal, and since this stone was unset, it would be nearly impossible to identify, either way.
I followed Barrow’s advice and did not touch it. A little while later the man himself came out. The light in the bathroom had been turned off. “You have any candles? She wants candlelight. And she’s going to get cold. Coffee maker work in here?”

“I have some ceremonial candles, for spellwork,” I said, and went to my bedroom to unearth them from my suitcase. He collected them from me as he set up the coffee maker.

“Those should do fine,” Barrow said. “We’ll have to get her out of there in another half an hour or so.”

“She’ll get hypothermia if we don’t,” I said. “But I imagine the burns hurt if she takes them out of the cool water.”

“Yeah,” Barrow said.

“What happened?”

Barrow looked helpless. “I still don’t know!” he said. “The Anamatte crystal, she touched it and became instantly immolated. I don’t know why, I can touch it fine. She says she may have seen one before. William the Bloody?”

I relayed a sketch history of the fall of Sunnydale, some of which he already seemed aware of. “But is it really the same sort of crystal?”

“I think it’s actually the same crystal,” Barrow said. “According to my wrist strap – oh, it’s got a temporal monitor in it – it has a temporal signature it didn’t before, now that Buffy’s touched it. I think she may have touched this particular crystal in a different timeline.”

“It’s gone forward in time?”

“I think it’s going to go back in time,” Barrow said. “This is the crystal’s original timeline, and the one she touched had been sent back.” He kicked the cupboard the coffee maker sat on. “I knew this was going to happen! I should never have allowed a hero back into my life!” He glared at me. “I’m not doing it, you hear me? This is someone else’s damn problem!”

“Not doing what?”

“Never mind,” Barrow muttered, and poured Buffy her coffee. He added liberal amounts of cream and sugar before carrying it in to her, along with the candles.

He came back out when Dawn knocked. “What’s wrong with her?” Dawn demanded the moment I opened the door. Barrow told her burns, and she looked annoyed. “Damn. Francesca’s a nurse, and she’s been cataloguing slayer healing. Bites and bruises heal the fastest, cuts after that. Burns actually take a while. I’m gonna check on Buffy, then I’m off to find some second skin or burn cream. You didn’t do any of that, either of you?”

“It only happened about thirty minutes ago,” Barrow said. “And one of us would have had to stay here with her, either way.”

“Fine.” She pushed past Barrow and into the bathroom with Buffy.

Barrow heaved a sigh of relief and went to sit down on the sofa. He seemed to have a headache, or at least feel very overwhelmed. I sat down near him and set some coffee before him. I remembered he liked it black. He gazed at the cup I’d set down and laughed bleakly. “Thanks, Ripper.” He reached out and took it.
“Would contact with the crystal outside of its current timeline have caused that kind of reaction?”

“No,” Barrow said. “That’s what’s screwing me up. There’d be a spark. It might bite her, kind of a static electricity kind of temporal snap, but the full body immolation? It’s like she activated the crystal, but there’s no call for it to have been activated. She dropped it, and between the two of us we put out the fire pretty quickly. Not quite the kind of heat I like to have beneath the covers. Good thing we were in my bedroom.”

I had been trying not to think about that. I knew Barrow had quite the reputation. I’d had one myself, in my time.

“She just... lit! The crystal glowed, her hand caught on fire, then the rest of her. And... god, she laughed, Ripper. She actually laughed.” He rubbed his face. “I thought I’d lost her.”

“She touched Spike,” I told him. “According to her final debriefing. Ah... here.” I pulled the requisite file from the table. Buffy had given a very clinical account of the final battle when I’d demanded details for the watcher’s records. She’d been quite reluctant to inform me of the truth of the matter, much as she had for Acathla, when she hadn’t wanted to admit that Angel’s soul had returned.

Barrow read her statement. I had it memorized. She went on about the battle with the turok-han at great length, stressing the fallen slayers, and mentioning her injury. When the amulet – Barrow had called it an Anamatte crystal? – had activated, it had started slowly. Spike had informed her, but it had not yet incapacitated him. Spike had continued fighting until it was fully charged, when he suddenly seemed incapable. Buffy made a note that she hadn’t been able to break from the fighting to examine him during these early stages, though she had been aware of him. (Which meant he was starting to burn, and she had to ignore him, turning away from her lover while he fought, this strange artifact burning on his chest...) I shook my head and pointed to the relevant passage.

“As the other slayers fled, I turned to Spike. I told him there was still time for him to leave – take off the crystal and leave with me – but he insisted I go without him. I don’t know if the crystal would have done what it did if he had taken it off. I touched his hand, but he still made me go. That’s all.”

What wasn’t in the file was what she hadn’t told me. I’d overheard her in the Hyperion that night, speaking to Faith. “He laughed,” she said. She said it almost randomly. Faith had been talking about something else, and the words had fallen out of Buffy, as if she had been desperate to say them. And who else could she have said the words to? She wasn’t really speaking to any of us. “Spike,” she said, when Faith had looked up. “As I was leaving, as I left the school, he laughed. I heard him laughing...” She’d trailed off and stared into space, probably still staring into the fresh memory. I’d wanted to go to her, but... we hadn’t hugged each other since I’d returned from England. We didn’t have that kind of relationship any longer. I was no longer her support. Spike had been. And he was gone.

Faith had stayed silent for a long moment. She didn’t mention that was impossible for her to have heard him laughing all that distance. Finally she just offered Buffy some tequila. Buffy had laughed herself, then, and then grunted as that pulled at the wound in her abdomen. She’d said something about getting some sleep, and Buffy hadn’t brought the subject up again.

I had. Once. I’d apologized and said something along the lines of her judgement having been proven correct. She had swallowed my apology as if it were cod liver oil, and told me it was my job
to resurrect some version of the watchers council, as we had many slayers now who would need the structure. I’d thought at the time that she was displaying her faith and trust in me. Now I realized she’d been seeing me off. The other slayers were my job. Not her. Never again her. She didn’t need my belated apology. She hadn’t wanted to hear it.

She probably hadn’t even believed it. No doubt correctly, because until this afternoon, I still hadn’t been convinced that I had done wrong. Now... I didn’t know who I was, or what was right anymore.

“You think this was the same crystal?” I said. “Do you think she could have activated it? That her contact with Spike’s flesh had somehow–”

“Soul,” Barrow said. “The crystal is a conduit for psi-energy, Spike would have been burning out his soul.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

Barrow laughed hollowly. “That Spike’s dead and gone and his soul is ash and the hope she’d had of one day meeting up with him in heaven has gone up in flames, and her burns pale in comparison to the pain that thought causes her? Yeah, it probably means that.”

That hadn’t even occurred to me. “I mean she touched his soul.”

Barrow sagged. “Yeah. Probably means that, too.”

“So, the crystal... is there a resonance? An echo, some kind of... kindred souls?” That idea sounded utterly far-fetched to me, and fortunately Barrow didn’t buy it, either.

“Nah,” he said. “Probably something more like a residue. If there was psi-contact after the amulet activated, then there was probably some kind of... cross pollination or something. He got a little bit of soul on her.” Barrow nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. He left fingerprints on her own soul, and they activated the crystal.” He groaned and covered his face. “And the worst part is, I’m going to have to send that thing back. For fuck’s sake, Ripper, do you know what that means?”

I didn’t.

“It means I killed Spike. And I can’t not do it, ‘cause it’s already been done! And... Gah!” He kicked at the table. “Maybe I can send the thing back through the gate with a note attached. Someone’ll send the damn amulet to Angel, and I won’t have to think about it much.”

“Wolfram and Hart,” I said. I pulled the file they’d sent with the amulet off the table. “This is what I saved from Sunnydale. I took the important papers before the final battle, and put them in my pocket. The translation is... sketchy. It seems like some form of ancient Sumerian, but it’s only a xerox of an original document, and some of the notation –”

Barrow grunted when he saw the creased files. “It’s the crib-notes from a section of the Anamatte owners manual,” he said. “And the notes are in my bloody handwriting.” He scrunched the precious papers up and threw them across the room.

“Barrow, what–”

“I’m not doing it again!” he said. “Why am I always the god damned priest?”

“Would you hush?” Dawn came brusquely out of the bathroom. “Buffy’s in pain, and your man-angst is making the room stinky. Jack, would you get me some ice? Giles, I need a clean cotton
I dug both out of my luggage and a few moments later Dawn led a damp and still cringing slayer out of the hotel bathroom and into the bedroom. She set her up on the bed, moved all the candles, and they spoke in low tones for a few moments before she left her.

“Okay,” Dawn said as she pushed past me. “I’m getting the stuff. Her right side is worse than her left, and there’s one really bad one on her back.”

“That was from earlier today,” I said.

Dawn glared at me. “Yeah, I remember. But it’s broken open now, and worse. I’ll be back with first aid stuffs. She says the pain has gone down a bit now, but I wish I had something to make her sleep through the worst of it.”

“I can do that,” Barrow said. “Let me call in a prescription.”

“You’re a doctor?” I asked, bewildered.

Barrow grinned. “I’m a liar,” he said, though I realized with the age of the Immortal he probably could have gone to medical school three times over. “And I have lots of contacts here.” He pulled out a mobile and spoke in fluid Italian for a few moments. “Ugh,” he finally said. “Dawn, I’m going to have to go over there in person. I’ll be at the pharmacy. You give me a list, and you can stay with her?”

“Easier if I just go over with you,” Dawn said. “There’s some things she needs that are first aid, some that are slayer, and some pure Buffy. Giles?” She looked at me as she and Barrow bustled out the door. “Don’t leave her alone.”

I had wanted to get on with the research, I had wanted to solve this mystery of the burning crystal. I had wanted to not have to face this monster I’d apparently been under the thrall of for the past two years.

Don’t leave her alone.

I cleaned my glasses and looked over toward the bedroom, flickering with candles. Fine. I knew how to play the watcher. I squared my shoulders and went into the bedroom.

Buffy lay in the hotel’s bed on the side that had the fewest burns. She was wrapped in my robe, and I could see the pain lines deep in her face. Dawn had wrapped ice in a few hotel wash cloths and set them on a few spots, and Buffy’s hand – which had the worst of the burns – was in the ice bucket. She was lying there, shivering, and yes, she was a slayer, and yes, I knew she’d be fine a few days.

It had never made seeing her in pain any easier to bear.

“Is there anything I can get you?” I asked gently. Like a future free of this kind of pain. Like a past free of heartache. Like a destiny that wasn’t blood and monsters and loneliness? All things I couldn’t get her.

“Where’s Dawn?”

“She had to go get some burn cream. Barrow went with her, to get you some medicine.”

“What is it?”

“I just wanted something to distract me until the healing takes over a bit,” Buffy said. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“Distract you from the pain?”

“I’m fine, Giles,” she said stiffly. “I don’t need anything from you.”

If she’d hit me it couldn’t have been more painful.

I didn’t know what to do. Barrow had given me a hint earlier in the day, though. In the corner of the room was a pile of stuff I’d taken from the Watcher’s casa, unwilling to leave them there in the stench, though they had survived the explosion undamaged. Mostly reference books (including some of Andrew’s Dungeons and Dragons that I had picked up by mistake) and some antiques I didn’t like leaving in a damaged house. But among them was the guitar I left in every watcher’s house. A decent guitar wasn’t too expensive, and there were demons that occasionally could be soothed by music, and...

And there I was again, rationalizing a decision I made from the heart. I just never wanted to be without a guitar, even if I couldn’t carry one with me. I left them stashed about me, like a squirrel with nuts.

“I’m fine,” Buffy said to me. Her tone sounded weak with pain. God, I knew how bad burns could be. If she was anyone but a slayer, she’d have to go to the hospital, or be risking infection and shock and... but she was a slayer. Pain was her lot in life. “There’s nothing you need to check.”

“I know that,” I said. I pulled the guitar out of its case and sat down at the foot of the bed. I strummed it – a bit out of tune. I twiddled the pegs.

“Giles, what are you...?”

“Just rest, dear,” I said. What to play, what...? I strummed a few bars. For a long time I didn’t play anything real, just snatches of melodies, pretty sounding cords. All the times I had tended Buffy’s injuries after her slaying. The bites, the bruises, the scratches. The terrible pain she was in, when she ran to me to patch her up, a little girl running to her watcher.

I wondered what it would have been like if I had been granted custody of Buffy before she was called, like Kendra or Aggie or some of the other potentials I had met. If I’d been given a twelve-year-old Buffy to rear as a slayer, taking her from the Icecapades and the mall and cheerleading. What would it have been if Buffy hadn’t been the perky American teenager her privileged life in L.A. had made of her, but instead an impeccably trained soldier. No friends, no pretense of school or college, no fairy tale prom dresses or dreams of a future beyond slaying. Many of the potential girls who were not called eventually became watchers as well, once the watchers council had permitted women among their ranks. Lydia had been one of these, I’d understood. They spent their childhoods learning vampire lore, and were, frankly, unfit for anything else.

She’d be dead, I realized. I couldn’t have taught her what she’d taught herself. That was why I’d had such faith in her, why I’d given her so much freedom. Too much freedom in the wrong areas, I realized. I’d been her teacher, but not her support. I’d demanded her respect, but kept my love as shielded as I could. I’d made her stand on her own on fronts I should have guarded her from – life, love, all the things I was bad at – and stood in her way on things that should have been her call.

I should have been supporting her. Financially, yes. But in other ways as well.
My fingers had found a melody, and I strummed it idly. No more thoughts. I didn’t wish to think on this. I let the melody take me, and fill up my thoughts with its own lyrics. “No one knows what it’s like,” I sang, “to be the bad man. To be the sad man. Behind blue eyes. No one knows what it’s like. To be hated. To be fated. To telling only lies.”

Buffy closed her eyes and took in a breath. I was almost certain she was going to stop me and tell me to get out, but she didn’t. “But my dreams they aren’t as empty, as my conscience seems to be. I have hours, only lonely. My love is vengeance that’s never free.”

I should have known where the final verse would send her. Even the first verse. I hadn’t been thinking. It had just... seemed the only song to sing. “If I swallow anything evil, put your finger down my throat. If I shiver, please give me a blanket. Keep me warm, let me wear your coat.”

And then she had turned in the bed, all the ice abandoned, and her head was on my lap, and the chosen one, the finest slayer the world had ever known, wept on me as I had never seen her cry before. Not when she knew she was going to be killed, not when Angel had betrayed her, not when her mother had died. I had seen her cry, but not like this. This wasn’t a teenage girl, mourning her childhood. This was a woman, a grown woman, too world-weary to keep the pain at bay any longer.

“Oh, my darling,” I whispered. I slid the guitar to the ground and petted her burned hair. My other hand found her uninjured one, and I stroked her head, and I couldn’t hold the tears back myself.

Then I realized. I hadn’t cried since Buffy had died. My heart had broken that day, the tears had flowed freely until after the funeral, and then... nothing. Everything inside me had turned grey and linear. Even the news that she had been resurrected hadn’t touched me beyond a certain distant shock.

“My god,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry, darling. I didn’t mean...” And then I was crying harder than she was, and within a few moments my slayer, my darling, powerful slayer, who was stronger than I ever was, had sat up and put her arms around me, and was comforting me. I could barely embrace her, fear for her burns, my own right to touch her, not to mention my well-trained British reserve. But as always her American exuberance cut through it, and she didn’t care. She held me hard enough it hurt, and I let her, rubbing her shoulders, hoping I wasn’t making the pain worse. That was my only role – not to make the pain worse.

“I never meant to, my darling,” I whispered. “I make mistakes.”

“I get it,” Buffy said. “I get it. You’re only human.”

Chapter End Notes

Anthony Head singing Behind Blue Eyes, by the Who. (I would have preferred a guitar version, but the only link to that is from the show and has Scoobies talking all over it.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXcqc5BNLuU
The Tower

Chapter Summary

Dawn

Chapter Notes

Takes place during The Girl In Question

Dawn

“I’m not doing it.”

Jack’s tone was adamant, and I supposed I saw his point, though I knew he’d come through. It wasn’t even a question, really. The alternatives were so horrific that there was no real dilemma.

Buffy was bandaged in second-skin gel bandages and non-stick gauze, but she’d refused the sleeping pills until we’d sorted out this mess. Jack had briefed me on what was going on while we were the pharmacy. I was both terrified and over-awed by the idea of time-travel. Almost as terrified and over-awed as I was by Jack casually referencing it. For all I knew, the stories of the Immortal were just that – stories. Jack hadn’t boasted to me before of his age or his exploits or anything. If I hadn’t been told he was the Immortal, I would never have believed it. He never gave any signs of it, unless you counted his kinda outdated wardrobe.

“He’s timeless,” he had said when I put it that way. “My wardrobe is timeless.”

“But it kinda has an air of being a costume more than clothes,” I pointed out. It looked a little less costumey without his grey coat, but much like Spike and his leather duster, he was missing a certain fundamental “Jackness” now that he didn’t have it.

He wasn’t sounding very Jack-like right now, either. I’d come to like Jack a bit since he’d come when I needed help, and he made Buffy a little less suicidal-seeming. Slayers had this suicide-bent. We’d all realized this by now, and it was a common intervention among the girls. Oop, she’s getting reckless. Give her things to live for! I’d been to quite a number of parties thrown just to get some slayer or other in a less suicidally mood. Jack sounded pretty suicidally himself just now. But since what he was proposing pretty much meant the whole world would pay for it, I knew he’d come around.

“I’m not going through the gate right now. I like the time I’m in, it was a bitch getting here, and I’m not playing this game again. Not again.”
“I don’t think you’d have to go through the gate,” Buffy said quietly. “I mean... you said you could just send things through, right? Would your wrist strap send it through without you? And the next time you’re in the past, you’d just pick it up and mail it on?”

“Who would you mail it to?” Giles asked.

“Probably Ilona,” Jack said. “She’d get it to LA somehow. But you do get what you’re asking, right? Even by sending it back. Time is fluid, history alters, but if all the pieces are in play, for the most part destiny just settles itself into established patterns.”

“Meaning even if you don’t go with it,” Buffy said, “the amulet – or the crystal, or whatever it is – will get to Angel when it’s supposed to?”

“We’d have to put a note or something on it,” Giles said.

Good. They were sorting it out. I knew they would.

“Good,” Buffy said. “Put a note on it saying it has to be used by a slayer.”

I looked up. What? What was this?

“Buffy,” Giles said. “What are you saying?”

Buffy looked up at Giles. “I’m saying I’m not doing it, either,” she said calmly. “And you can go to hell if you think otherwise.”

There was no anger in her tone, but it was very resolved. Jack looked thrilled. “You’re not?” he asked.

“No,” Buffy said. “I am not going to willingly and with foreknowledge send the weapon that killed my lover back in time so that it can murder him, no, I’m not. Not without some kind of insurance that it’s not going to happen again. Giles says some of the documentation was in your handwriting?”

“Just the owners manual,” he said. “There’s some notation on it about the type of soul needed, some–”

“Good,” Buffy said. “And that came with the crystal?” Buffy asked Giles.

“Most of that file was what Wolfram and Hart had learned about the First Evil and the Watchers Council and such,” Giles said. “I left all that in Sunnydale. I knew it already. It was a large file to carry. That xerox was the only piece that wasn’t self-explanatory, so I kept it.”

“Right. Well, when you make notes on what you send back, Jack, I want a note saying not just someone with a soul, but more than human. I want it to say slayer.”

“But that would kill you,” Giles said.

“noticed that, did you?” Buffy said. “I don’t mind. I get that the hellmouth needs to be closed, but I’m not sending Spike into battle with a bomb on his chest. Not doing it again.”

“But what about Angel?” Giles asked. “You said he meant to wear it.”

“Angel’s got only half of what he’d need to wield it,” Buffy said. “He has the champion quality, and the self-sacrificing thing, but not the love. Angel has his own destiny, and that’s not it.” Buffy pointed to the glittering crystal. She shook her head. “It can’t be Angel, so it has to be me. The only
“Way I’m sending that thing back is if Spike’s not going to be the one to wear it.”

“Then why do it at all?” Jack asked.

We all turned to stare at him. “What?”

Jack shook his head. “I’m sick of continuity,” he said. “I’m sick of saving the world. I’m sick of sacrificing one for the good of all. It’s a crappy decision to make. Planetary triage. Who the hell said it has to be our job to save the planet?”

*Um, fate!* I thought. Kinda part and parcel of the whole Slayer gig, right? I expected Giles or Buffy to make that point, but they were both staring at Jack as if he’d granted them a reprieve.

“I thought you said you’d have to,” Buffy said.

“Buffy, if you can change history so you’re the one to die instead of Spike, why don’t we just take the option away and let the cards fall as they will?”

“What would that do?”

Jack shrugged. “Rip apart time and space, end the planet. Or maybe nothing. Maybe someone else will step up. Either way, there’s no law that says it has to be *our* job to do it. You don’t want to do it. I don’t want to do it. Ripper? You want–?”

“No,” Giles said.

“So, then,” Jack said. “We don’t do it. Let the universe sort it out some other way.”

“But isn’t that kinda dangerous?” Buffy asked. “Weren’t there laws of time and space and things?”

“I am the fundamental broken law of time and space,” Jack snapped. “Maybe I’m not a Time Lord, but if I have to deal with the hell trips of time anomalies, I can pick and choose what I do, dammit.”

“But shouldn’t we keep things as close to the original timeline as we can?” Buffy asked. “Someone has to close the hellmouth. I’m willing to do it.”

“I’m not,” Jack said.

“Jack, it’s my choice.”

“And mine,” he snapped. He glared at Buffy. “You don’t want to kill your lover. I’m not about to go back in time and arrange to kill mine.”

“Who...?” Buffy asked, and then stopped. “Oh.”

If anything could tell me that what Jack and Buffy had wasn’t love, that was it. She didn’t even think of herself as his lover. Jack gave a rueful smirk, but he didn’t look offended.

“And I told you, Buffy,” Jack said. “I’m done saving the world. Let the girl go. Not my job to save the planet. I refuse to be the shadow man.”

I was sure Giles would step up at this point. This was where he played the adult card and knew what was best. I knew he’d put aside emotion and make Jack and Buffy see reason, but he just sat there.
“Can we really do that?” Buffy asked. “Just... not do it?”

Jack shrugged. “It can be not my job, okay? Look, I’ll just stick the thing back in my vault, and let time take over. Maybe something else will happen to send the crystal back on its own. There are other time travelers, maybe one of them will take it up in a few generations. Or hell, maybe I’ll change my mind by then. God knows, I’ll still be around. Maybe I won’t give a shit when you’ve been dead a few centuries.”

He sounded very bleak when he put it that way.

“No,” Buffy said suddenly, and her face was hard as stone. “No! No, absolutely not, I am not going to just give this thing to the tides of fate and watch it kill Spike again!”

“But we wouldn’t have to be the ones to do it.”

“By not doing something different now, we’ll be doing it anyway!” Buffy said. “Don’t you get that? If we do anything other than send it back with my name on it then we’re sentencing Spike to death!”

“And we won’t do that,” Giles said quietly.

I blinked at Giles. Did he really just say what I thought he just said?

Buffy seemed to have made up with Giles. I didn’t know what had happened while Jack and I were gone, but when we’d come back Buffy’s head was on his knee, and he was playing her his guitar, so I figured whatever it was they weren’t enemies anymore. Giles was clearly trying to keep that new-found reconciliation, because his stance on Spike had just done as big a turn around as mine had.

“You’re right,” Giles said. “We didn’t know what the amulet could do before, but now we do. It’s irresponsible to just put it away and wash our hands of it. We do need to make a decision. And if you think Spike shouldn’t be made to bear it unknowingly, then we won’t let it happen.”

“We could just make the notes more clear,” Jack said. “Make it so you’d all know what you were getting into.”

“He knew,” Buffy said quietly. “He knew that he didn’t care. That’s more than enough.” She closed her eyes. “I’m not doing it,” she said.

“Well, you know I don’t want to,” Jack said.

“It’s not my decision to make, Buffy,” Giles said. “This one’s on you.”

I knew what she’d decide. It was obvious. There was no other choice.

Buffy stared at the glittering crystal on the table, the device she did not dare touch, the thing that had taken Spike from our lives. “Don’t suppose you have a hammer?” she asked Giles.

My mouth fell open.

Giles only shook his head, and Jack mentioned a marble knickknack on the sideboard, and Buffy stood up to get it, and... God! What a bunch of self-centered children!

I darted in and caught up the crystal before Buffy could come back and smash it. “Don’t you dare!” I barked. I held the crystal tightly. “You’ll have to smash me before you break this thing!”
“Dawn...” Buffy said, as if I held a gun to my head. Given the number of bandages slapped all over her, she probably did feel that way. “Dawn, put that down. It’s volatile.”

“So are you!” I snapped. “God, I can’t believe what I just heard! You were really gonna do it, weren’t you,” I said to Buffy. “You were really going to smash this, you were really going to play Russian Roulette with the world just to save your boyfriend. No wonder Angelus killed so many people in Sunnydale! You’re such a prick when it comes to your precious man-love!”

Buffy’s cheeks flushed. “What are you talking about?”

“Giles knows, don’t you Giles,” I said. “Jenny Calendar. And, like, how many of your classmates? ‘Cause you decided you’d rather kick Angelus in the balls than take him out properly, and then you sat on your ass dithering for how many months while he up and slaughtered half the town. You knew where he was, and you didn’t go after him.”

“Dawn, you didn’t even exist then!”

“I still remember it clear as day,” I snapped. “You knew what was right, but you couldn’t kill your boyfriend!”

“I did kill him!” Buffy yelled at me.

“Eventually. Took you long enough! And now you’re doing it again, and the world’s gonna pay for it again.”

“Dawn, I thought we’d dealt with this,” Buffy said. “There’s no call for you to hate Spike!”

“Then why do you hate him?” I asked.

“I...!” She couldn’t say it. She always found it so hard to say she loved Spike, and I’d known she loved him even when he was still trying to kill her. She’d loved fighting with him, she’d loved having him as her enemy. I figured that counted, even if it hadn’t meant she’d wanted to marry him or anything. It was still love. “I don’t,” she said quietly.

“Then why are you trying to take away his sacrifice?” I asked. “That’s what you said,” I reminded her. “That he died for me, and for you, and for the whole world, so that we could grow and change and learn in it. And now you want to take that away from him?”

“He didn’t know what it was going to do.”

“You said he did,” I pointed out. “At the end, he had the choice to take it off, and you said he didn’t. You said he knew then. Perfect love, you said.” I released my grip on the crystal a little bit.

“This was his legacy,” I said. I let the crystal catch the light. “This was how he could show his love. This was important to him, saving you, saving me, saving everyone. This was what he got that soul for, Buffy. To be the best kind of man he could be. And you’re just going to crush it?”

Buffy’s face twisted, and she looked away. “I don’t want to do it again,” she whispered. “Not again.”

“Dawn,” Jack said. “You don’t understand. Buffy was all right with him dying, but this is more than that. That crystal ate up his immortal soul.”

I hadn’t known that, but I still knew what Spike would say if he were here. I’d only just gotten him back – the Spike I’d thought I’d known. The one I loved. “And what would he say?” I asked quietly. “Without the soul, what would he have said? Burn it up. He never expected to have one in
the first place. He only got it for you, Buffy. If what you needed was to burn it up again, he’d have been okay with that, if it meant saving you.”

“I’m not okay with it,” Buffy whispered. “I thought we’d at least get heaven.”

“He didn’t,” I said. “When you were dead, he knew he’d never see you again. There wasn’t going to be heaven for him. There was no immortal soul for him. He knew that. He didn’t try to throw away your sacrifice.” I slid the crystal back into my palm. “Don’t throw away his.”

There was a heavy silence in the room. I realized I was still the only adult in it. “Jack?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be safer if you took the crystal back yourself?”

“The gate hurts.”

“Then I’m really sorry,” I said. “I’ll make you some soup when you get back. Giles? You said you had a copy of the documentation for this thing?”

“It’s in the corner,” he said.

“Right. Make sure you make an original copy for Jack to take back with him, so that there’s something to make that xerox in the first place. Buffy?”

Buffy was crying.

“You’re not killing him, Buffy,” I told her.

“I put it around his neck,” she said stiffly. “I killed him.”

“Then I killed you?” I asked. She looked up at me. “When you jumped off the tower and sealed the rift so that I wouldn’t have to, was that me killing you?”

“Oh, no, baby,” Buffy said quickly. “I did that all on my...” Then she stopped. She’d seen it. She already knew this, but the pain was blinding her a bit.

I said it anyway. “This is his tower, Buffy,” I said, letting the crystal catch the light again. “This is what he had to do.”

“It’s different,” she said quietly. “I went to heaven. He’s just... gone. Turns out the only part left of him is some... stupid souly fingerprints he left on me.”

I hugged her. “Then I guess he lives on in you,” I said. “He’d like that.”

I turned back to Jack, who was looking at me with annoyance. “I reserve the right to think you a cast iron bitch,” he said.

I bowed. “With pleasure,” I said. “You’re still taking the crystal back.” He nodded. “All right, then.”

“I wish there was some other way of doing this,” Buffy said. “Something that wouldn’t make me feel like a murderer.”

“How about we resurrect Spike’s soul?” Giles asked idly.
It sounded insane. It sounded impossible. Moreover, it sounded \textit{way} too good to be true. And I dated Angel; I’d learned the hard way – if it sounds too good to be true, it most assuredly is.

“It can’t work,” I said. “Someone would have told me.”

“Okay,” Dawn said. “Twenty minutes ago, you were ready to risk the world to avoid sending Spike to the pyre, and now you’re arguing against bringing him back?”

Twenty minutes ago. A lifetime ago. Twenty minutes ago I’d been terrified I was about to kill Spike again. Twenty minutes ago I’d been in the usual \textit{Fuck it, don’t wanna} moment that I almost always have when I’m forced to save the world. Twenty minutes ago I’d been desperate to crush that amulet before reason prevailed and made me into a murderer – again, again, \textit{again}.

Jack was right, to an extent. And I wanted to be like Jack so much, I’d rushed when I made my decision to just crush the damn thing, quick, \textit{quick}, before you change your mind again! But that was an impulse, born of grief and pain and desperation. This was a decision, cold and calculated and impossible. To try and bring Spike \textit{back}.

Dawn was still talking. “You know he’s not in heaven, he’s not anywhere.”

“I’m not arguing against it!” I said. “I just don’t \textit{believe} it.”

“Why not?” Giles asked me.

I looked at him rather pointedly. “Well, I have a hard time believing this isn’t some scheme you just concocted to placate me, but still make me send that thing back to kill Spike.”

Giles didn’t answer. There really wasn’t anything much he could say to that. Assuring me he’d never do such a thing wouldn’t fly, and he knew it. Particularly when it came to Spike. I may have forgiven him, but it was gonna be a lot of years before I trusted him again.
“Well, would you believe me?” Jack asked.

“Jack, this doesn’t even make sense,” I said. “You left Giles a message in that xerox that he couldn’t read until just now? Sounds awfully convenient, doesn’t it? I feel like I’m being railroaded here!”

“That’s what time travel does,” Jack said. “Why do you think I didn’t want to do it? You get tangled up in your own timeline and suddenly you’re on a path destiny has already laid out for you, and you can’t get off it. Suddenly you find yourself lying to protect a timeline, and avoiding family and friends and lovers, and needing to be somewhere at sometime, and swallowing retcon to forget it all, and for god’s sake, you keep suddenly finding yourself missing things for no reason!”

I blinked. “You mean tonight, don’t you. Why we kept missing our photo.”

Jack nodded. “Some things end up quantum locked once you’re in a fixed timeline. Like seeing people, or hearing about things. And once you cross your own timeline, you’re almost always fixing a point in time. That’s why we’re supposed to avoid it. Time is supposed to be fluid. I’m a big old wound in time and space, I’m like a disease, because I just have to be here. I can’t not. Everything else? You, Rome, the world itself, yeah, all that’s fluid. But whenever you cross your own timeline in any way, it’s like you’re weaving yourself into place. And yeah, suddenly you feel stuck there. Because you are. There’s almost no way around it. It is a lot like being on a railroad track.”

“Is it like a prophecy?” I asked. “Because there are, like, so many ways around those.”

“In some ways, yeah,” Jack said. “Prophecies are peeks through time. Even by looking, you’re fixing a point. And yes, there are ways around them, but Buffy... why would you want to find a way around this? You yourself said you wanted your second chance!”

“I do, but....” I still couldn’t believe it. I got my second chance with Angel, and it was only a further nightmare. I got my second (not to mention third and fourth) chances at life, and it resulted in dead slayers, released evils, and frank misery. Changing the past... somehow that didn’t seem so terrible a course as... walking it. “Someone would have told me,” I said.

“Not if we told them not to,” Giles said.

I glared. “Oh, so we encourage everyone on the planet to lie to me again? Like whenever Angel came up to stalk me, and told you and all my friends, and didn’t tell me? Or whenever the council wanted to poison me and kill me or try to send a wetworks team after me or Faith, and kept it all on the down low? Or when you go behind my back to kill my soldiers? Yeah. Let’s all lie to Buffy. Great idea.”

Giles actually blushed.

“You don’t get it, Jack,” I said, turning back to him. “It’s too big. Angel and his team, all the girls, hell, Andrew even! Spike’s too well known. The news would have gotten to me somehow. Even if we play out this little cheater’s walkthrough you apparently left to Giles in the margins, there’s no way it would work. Someone, somewhere, would have seen Spike, recognized him, and I’d have heard about it. I’d know he was....” I stopped.

The smell of cut bone, the sound of tearing flesh, still, pale hands, dropping one by one to the damp floor. I felt sick.
“Why wouldn’t anyone have told me?” I whispered.

“They couldn’t,” Jack said gently. “If he is, as I suspect, in temporal flux, there’s one reality wherein he’s alive and well and waiting for us to come to this decision. There’s another reality where we don’t do it, and there’s nothing. And the only way – the only way – we come to this decision is this night, here, all of us together.”

“But why couldn’t I know?” I asked. I was suddenly furious. “Why couldn’t I be told? Why couldn’t I have been living happy with Spike, and someone just say to me, ‘Oh, and Buffy, you’re gonna have to do this on the fifth of May, two-thousand and...’” I stopped. It’s May fifth. Bloody Xander. He did know something. Lying ponce, Spike’s voice said in my head. “If Spike’s out there, why did I have to spend the last fucking three hundred and forty-nine days grieving?” I snarled.

Jack came up to me then. “Because I’d never have looked at you twice if you weren’t.”

I looked up at him. He was right. We’d bonded over grief, real, potent, no-two-ways-about-it grief.

“If I didn’t care about you, Buffy... I wouldn’t even be considering this.”

“You dated Spike, too.”

“I dated William the Bloody, so many years ago now that it doesn’t even matter. I can’t do this for myself, Buffy. I don’t dare. I’d be doing it for eons. At last check... my lifespan is about five billion, and that’s not even taking time travel into account. I can’t go around dragging lovers back so that I’m not so alone for another century or so. I have to move on, I have to find someone new.”

He reached out and touched my cheek. “Someone young and strong who will understand when I have to leave them behind... or watch them die.”

He meant what he’d said, so casually and so dismissively in the road the other night. Jack did love me. The way he understood love, something that encompassed sex and friendship and respect and distance. Something that didn’t need to be defined with a ring or a title like friend or lover or marriage. Jack had gone past all that, I realized. He just loved people, and kept walking. Like a man moving through a forest, he loved the trees and left them behind, as he kept moving, and they stood still. He would always keep moving. He would never, ever rest. Not for five billion plus years....

“Let me do this for you, Buffy. Let me try.”

“You actually want to help?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It’s not all about me.”

I hugged him, and I meant it. For a long moment I let myself hold him. So very real, so very alive, and so very stuck in this body he’d been cursed into. He was warm and human and he smelled amazing. I loved him too, in my own strange way. But he wasn’t my equal, he wasn’t my opposite, we didn’t fit together in the perfect yin and yang, and we both knew that. He wanted to find that for me. He wanted to bring back my darkness touched with light, to complement my light stained with darkness. The vampire for the slayer. I listened to Jack’s eternal heartbeat, and wished... wished I could do for him what he was offering to do for me.

A moment later I let him go, and he smiled at me, his charming dimples and his heavy blue eyes, and he seemed almost embarrassed.

“All right, Giles,” I said. “What do we do in this walkthrough again?”
Jack had left Giles messages in bloody song lyrics. The bizarre translation Angel had been dealing with of “scrubbing bubbles” was actually from an unreleased Pink Floyd single from 1967, called *Scream Thy Last Scream* which Giles had been known to illegally cover in his band in his Ripper days. “She’ll be scrubbing bubbles on all fours. Scream thy last scream old woman with a casket.”

The thing was, Giles apparently only sang that song when asked for an encore. *Wretched* never put it in their regular set, because frankly it was a bizarre little thing, *Wretched* had a limited repertoire, and they always played their better songs first. Until Giles had been told that the notation was from Jack, he’d completely dismissed all the little references he was getting as he tried to translate what was apparently the Anamatte owner’s manual.

Scrubbing bubbles meant encore. Or it did to Giles and Jack, anyway.

I lost track of the number of bizarre references. The file was in Sumerian – a language both Jack and Giles knew – and Giles quickly translated everything that hadn’t made sense when he’d thought it was a faulty transcription. He made the assumption that everything that hadn’t made sense was a personal message (something one is never to do when translating ancient texts, apparently, which was why Giles hadn’t done it before.) The practical upshot of the bizarre Pink Floyd and Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Who references boiled down to something that was already in the text about residual psi-energy.

Frankly, I didn’t understand any of it. This was what Dawn explained to me once she’d sussed it. The crystal was meant to absorb the energy of a soul, and then emit it as power. A powerful soul would create a powerful emission. So, powerful Spike, big old fireball of Sunnydale crater. A soul of small power, a fraction of a soul, would only emit a small amount of power, but such a small fraction of a soul would not activate the crystal in the first place.

But, once the crystal had been activated, that soul was tuned to the crystal, automatically activating the gem. Which meant my little souly residue fingerprints from when Spike touched me would automatically activate the crystal, (hence my pretty burns) and emit that soul in a fiery projection. Or, to put it another way; “If we can capture the residue Spike left on your spirit, Buffy, and reintroduce it to the crystal, we can resurrect a projection of his soul. In essence, bring Spike back, out of what he left with you.”

“But I’m not Spike,” I’d protested. “If he left anything with me, it’s like... less than a fingernail of soullyness, right?”

“But any soul is all soul,” Jack had said. “I’ve been grown back from an atom no bigger than a fingernail. I’m still me when I come back. Spike left... a seed, if you will, of himself in you.” I tried not to blush at the image. He’d done similar things a lot in his time.... “He won’t be the same at first,” Jack had continued. “His spirit would be raw – tender. He’d be who he is, but he wouldn’t have the depth. Not until he’d grown into himself again. It would take time. Also, I don’t know how we’d get it to activate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, whatever we got off your soul would be in essence dead. It takes life energy to make a soul real and, you know, aware, and that would take a living catalyst. A blood relative would do it, some kind of biological continuity. Do we have any way of tracking Drusilla?”

“No,” I said. “But Angel is right where we left him.” I looked up at Giles. “He’d do, right?”

“No doubt,” Giles said.
It wasn’t without its drawbacks. The crystal’s emissions had a range – about the same range as
the Sunnydale Crater, unsurprisingly – so Spike’s hot wandering soul power would be in essence
tied to the crystal until we came up with some kind of alternative to house it. Also, it would be
slowly eating him. “The soul residue can’t grow back until it’s active, but the act of being active
will also be slowly burning up the psi-energy it’s made of.”

“Which means... what?”

“He’d be growing more and more like himself every day, and also be getting weaker and
weaker. The emission, the projection, whatever you call it, would slowly lose heat, then eventually
lose cohesion, and...”

“And he’d die again,” I said. “His seed soul would be burned up. That’s what you’re saying. We
might be bringing him back just to kill him all over again.”

“We’d have to come up with some other vessel to hold his spirit in, yeah,” Jack said. “But that’s
not impossible. They have them as early as the 22nd century, flesh aspects they’re called. Just build
a new tank.”

I glared at Jack. “And you have access to the 22nd century?” I asked.

I already knew he didn’t. He couldn’t go farther forward than 2009. He sighed.

“I hardly think that’s our priority now,” Giles said. “Our first task would be to... if you’ll pardon
the term, scrape Spike’s soul residue from off of yours, Buffy.”

I shuddered. “Why does this feel like creating a clone out of skin cells?”

“Because it’s not that different,” Jack said. “Only it’s psi-energy, and it involves a little more
personal continuity. It will still be Spike. It’ll just be... like what happens to me when I get blown
up. Only the soul will come all the way back first, and we’ll figure out some kind of body later.
And hopefully it won’t hurt him anywhere near as much.”

“We’ll be dropping him off without a body, unable to touch or taste or smell, in Angel’s office at
Wolfram and Hart,” I said. “He’ll feel like only half himself, and his soul will be slowly dying
even as it’s getting stronger. Does this sound like it won’t hurt?” I rubbed my eyes. “Maybe I
should just let him stay dead. He won’t thank me.”

“Buffy?” Dawn asked. “Don’t you want him back?”

I cringed as if I’d been slapped.

“Then he’ll thank you. No matter what he has to endure.”

She was right. And I did want him back. I looked to Jack. “And we’re absolutely sure he’s not in
heaven, right? We’re not pulling him from any eternal reward?”

“Buffy,” Giles said. “I think by doing this we’d be creating his eternal reward.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, how do we get this soul residue off me?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Giles said. He threw something at me, and I caught it without
thinking, slayer muscles automatic and all that. I looked at it.

“An Orb of Thesulah?”
“It’s made to hold a soul,” he said.

“Hey, look at that!” Jack said. He took the orb from me. “A Thessen testicular stone! The Thessen breeding tanks need these in order to copulate. It’s a hell of a session, though, even made me kinda tire...” he stopped as we all stared at him. “Um. Yeah. It’s made for a soul to pass through,” he said, quickly putting the orb down. “You think you have a way to make it hold a human soul?”

“I have a curse,” Giles said. “I think I can adapt it to simply use the orb as a container to hold what Buffy is currently holding.”

“You sure that wouldn’t be cursing Spike, the way Angel was? No more happiness and that shit?” I asked. I did not want to saddle Spike with that kind of burden.

“The curse part is in the sealing the soul to a vampire,” Giles said. “This would just be holding the soul. There’s no vampire to curse right now.”

“So we get the soul-seed into the stone, and then we... what? Pour the soul from the orb to the crystal and then send you back to give it to Angel?”

“It’s not that simple,” Jack said. “The crystal would have to go through its proper timeline sequence first. I’d have to get the crystal to Angel clean, as it is, let Spike go through his ultimate sacrifice, and only after he’s taken out the hellmouth reintroduce the soul fragment.”

“But how would you even find the amulet in that crater?” I asked.

“I’ll find a way,” Jack said. He looked resolute. I had a deeply unpleasant idea of how he meant to do this. I reached up and I kissed his cheek. He kissed me back, not on the cheek, and I didn’t mind.

“So you have the curse,” I asked Giles. “Do we need anything else?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Giles said, and he explained how the ritual was going to work. The orb needed three voices to work it, and I couldn’t be one of them. I was going to be in a trance on the bed, trying to hold onto my soul while the Orb of Thesulah was trying to siphon off the fragment of Spike’s. “We’re going to need one more person to cast this spell. You’ll need an anchor, Buffy.”

“What’s it take to be an anchor?”

“Someone who knows you, preferably longer than you’ve known Spike, who will be able to tell the difference between any memories that are yours and any residue that is his.”

“Well, that’s easy. We call in Andrew, and Dawn’s my anchor.”

“I’m afraid that won’t work, Buffy.”

“Why not? Andrew knows how to summon demons, he can do spellwork.”

“That’s not the point,” Giles said.

“My memories aren’t real,” Dawn said. “They’re all yours, kinda tilted over. It would be like using yourself as an anchor, and that won’t do it.”

“Then you’ll be my anchor,” I said to Giles. “And Andrew can—”

“Andrew isn’t a sorcerer, Buffy,” Giles said. “And he isn’t... mature enough to handle the
adaptations. I need to be the center figure in the spell.”

I looked at Jack, and we both knew that wasn’t an option. God dammit! Who did I know who could...

A knock sounded on the door. Giles frowned, peered through the peep hole, and then opened the door. “How did you get here?” he asked.

“I told you,” Xander’s voice said from the hall. “It’s May fifth.”
A Nice Plate of Crow

Chapter Summary

Xander

Chapter Notes

Takes place during The Girl In Question

Xander

I just... Buffy please. Will you sit down so we can talk? Just you and me, okay? Heh. I mean, I’m good with the talk. I can make the talk all day, and whether or not I actually say anything right... well, that’s... that’s been kinda hit or miss. I practice these talks, you know. Dunno if you know that. I’ll get up in the morning, and I’ll go up to the mirror, and I’ll brush my teeth, and I’ll shave, and I’ll look at myself and say, “And here you are, Xander Harris. You’re a man who knows what he wants to say.” And then I’ll say it. And sometimes I come out sounding like a complete jackass.

You didn’t have to look like you agreed with me so wholeheartedly.

I suppose I earned that. I remember after... after what I did to Anya coming up with this whole wonderful speech about how horrible I was, and about how I wanted to take away the hurt, and how I’d wake up in the morning and wonder in horror, “Is this my life?” And it worked, until I ran out of speech, and suddenly it occurred to me that all my great practice hadn’t actually solved the underlying problem... which was that I didn’t want to get married. I should never have asked her in the first place. Or at least, I should never have set a date for it, not so soon. And then I tripped over my own speech, and it was basically over. ‘Cause all the talk in the world... didn’t solve that problem.

No, please, sit down. Please, Buffy, you need me! And I’m trying to make a point here, and... and I realize I’m doing a piss-poor job of it.

The point is Buffy, I’m sorry.

I know that I should be. And I-I didn’t realize that. Not for the longest time. I went off to war blithely thinking that I still had my two best friends. And at the end of that battle in Sunnydale, I’d lost Anya. I had completely lost her, and... and we’d been kinda in an on-again stage of on-again-off-again. But it was off-again forever at that point, and I was so... so tangled up about that, that I didn’t realize I’d... I’d lost you too.
Don’t pretend it isn’t true, Buffy. Sending me off to track down slayers is, okay, fine, work that needs to be done. But every time I get a break, and I plan to come by to see you, you suddenly sending me off somewhere else? Every time I ask about what’s going on, you have a slayer meeting or something? Half the time when I call Dawn she says you’re on your way out the door? Once or twice is you being busy. Every single time is a pattern. So I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to tell me the truth. The absolute unvarnished truth. Am I right when I say that you and I aren’t friends anymore?

I was afraid of that.

The thing is, I knew it. I kinda knew it when you tried to send me off with Dawn. I was all proud that you’d send me off to protect your sister, but... that wasn’t it. After that night when we decided to follow Faith instead of you, you didn’t trust me anymore. You didn’t trust me, and you didn’t trust her, and you didn’t need either of us. You wanted us both out of the way so you wouldn’t have to worry about us sticking a knife in your back. Am I right?

I get that that wasn’t the only reason. But I’m not wrong, am I.

See, I knew it. I’d killed our friendship. And here I’d been blithely wandering along thinking that it was alive and kicking... when what I was seeing was a vampire. Something undead and evil that looked like our friendship, and moved like our friendship, and had all the memories of our friendship, but when I tried to reach out and touch it... it was cold, and it bit me.

The thing is... the thing is, I miss Anya every day. I thought... I thought when she and I were broken up that that was as bad as it could get. That I was wandering around empty, like she’d taken out my heart and filled it up with darkness. But I didn’t realize until she was dead how much worse it was when she just... wasn’t.

I mean, breaking up hurt. It was like being bruised, or even being mangled. Like having an arm that wouldn’t work right because it was all hurt and pained and broken, and all that pain feels like it’s the end of all. But then you cut that arm off... and it’s so much worse. Because all the pain is still there in your head, but the rest isn’t. There’s no healing, there’s no sorting it out, there’s no stitching it together. It’s gone. And I wake up, and I think that she’s there, and I turn around, and I see foreign currency, and I think, “Anya would think this was pretty,” and then I’d realize that she’d probably already seen it, and I’d wonder if she bothered to look at Ugandan currency when she was a vengeance demon, because vengeance demons don’t need money, and I’d want to show her and ask her, and... and I can’t.

No, this isn’t about that, Buffy! It’s not about me, because I realized that all this... all this stuff that I’m going through, dealing with Anya? You’ve been dealing with it too. About Spike. Weren’t you.

And I was such an awful friend, I’d forgotten all about it.

See, I know this is my fault. It’s been my fault... all along. Spike and I... we always had this thing. Circumstances kept throwing us together, and we’d insult each other and curse each other and he’d steal stuff from me, and I’d threaten him, and... and I don’t know. I... I was kinda jealous of him. ‘Cause when you needed help, he’s the first one you’d turn to. Even when you said you hated him, you’d go running to him, to find Dawn, or protect your mom, or... or... everything. When I wanted to be that for you, Buffy. But I... I knew I couldn’t. I knew I couldn’t be what you needed, not physically, not emotionally.

And yeah, Angel was a thousand times the champion, and Riley was all Captain America commando, but for both of them, I knew I had something they didn’t. You and me, we had fun
together. And I got very jealous of any man who seemed about to take that space with you. The fun huggy guy, you know?

Spike... he may have been a blood-sucking, sarcastic fiend, but he knew how to have fun. I know, because he and I had it sometimes. We’d banter, and we’d shout at the tv, and we’d played cards and stuff when he lived in my basement. I knew how much fun he could be. And I always felt... what use would I be to you if you had him?

And then, you always kept saying you hated him, and there was this very primal, “Protect girl!” thing that would get into me about him. And when that thing happened in your bathroom –

No, I do know, now. Dawn told me. Not... a lot. She just said I had the wrong view of it, and I made things worse. And I’m sure... I’m sure I was always making things worse all along. And I know it was jealousy. ‘Cause I knew I couldn’t compete.

Look, I know it wasn’t a competition, but guys don’t always think that out so logically, okay? And I look back and I wonder... I realize... that if I hadn’t been such an ass about Spike that maybe... maybe you’d have told me you two had a thing. And maybe if that rift hadn’t happened there, there wouldn’t have been so much distrust on my side. So that when I was tired and still in pain and on drugs and my other best friend and everyone around me was turning against you, I could have seen better.

Because it didn’t matter whether you were right or wrong that night – and yeah, it was established pretty conclusively that you were absolutely right, so go ahead and serve me another helping of crow on that one – but even if you’d been wrong... we still weren’t right.

And I totally get that now. I shouldn’t have let it get that far. I shouldn’t have let the discussion even continue, we should have sat back and let tempers cool, and the drugs get out of my system, let Spike get back, and god, get the girls out of there, and shunted Pedigree Kennedy along with them. Should have kept her with the rest of the potentials where she belonged, instead of letting her walk all over Willow and you, and bitch about how she... never mind.

No, I don’t like her much, but it doesn’t even matter anymore. She and Willow broke up. She didn’t tell you?

I guess you’re not talking to her anymore, either. I get that. We really screwed the pooch that night, and I... I just really hope the pooch can be unscrewed, Buffy. And I know... that what we did to you was awful.

There are two days when I look back, and I put myself in someone’s place, and I’m just horrified. One is the day I left the love of my life at the altar. I see her standing there, all her dreams crashing around her, and her heart breaking... and I just... I go blank with it. The pain is too much to bear. And the other day... night... is when you had a job to do, and every single one of us slowly turned on you, one by one, leaving you all alone. I-I can’t even imagine how you mustered the courage to face any of us again, how you found the strength to do... what we were too stupid to know needed to be done.

Spike, huh? Why does that not surprise me? Out of all the people in the world... it had to be him, didn’t it.

We should have stood by you, Buffy. We should have had your back. And if we couldn’t agree, we should have settled down and cooled off until we could agree. It was a bad, bad day. I was sick with it. I’ve started having nightmares about it. I just have to hope... that if you can forgive Angel... if you can forgive Spike... that you can one day look at your friend who went... crazy evil for one
night and turned on you... I just hope that one day you could forgive me.

I want to be your friend again, and I know you need me tonight. Oh, well, that’s a complicated story and I’m... um. Well. You know that slayer cell I was with? We were on the trail of a vampire, and it caught up to us. I got separated from the slayers, and it kind of... well. I think I nearly died.

It was a little more complicated than that. The vampire was Drusilla.
“It’s happening now,” I said to my latest dolly. He was a slight little thing I’d picked up on a corner, all alone, unknowing what could happen in the dark. I had happened in the dark, happened upon him, happened to him, and happened to bring him here to my lair. To dress up and play with. I loved my dollies. “All across the world, pretty threads are coming together.”

My dolly squealed as he tried to get up and get away, but he should have known better than that. “Hush,” I told him. “There’s no getting out of bed before morning. Mummy gets all cross. You’ll be too tired for church.”

“Yeah... yeah... take... take me to church!” my dolly said. “I... I could go to church.”

I smiled at him. He was adorable. I knew what he was thinking. There are people in church. People who aren’t me.

Silly boy. He truly thought it would save him. “I thought running to the church would save me, once,” I said. “To hide behind the cross. You’ll make me cross, you naughty boy. You look like my little son,” I told him. “Did I tell you about my son? He’s grown up and moved away, now. I knew he’d grow up. Can’t cling to mummy’s apron strings forever, you know.” I tied the strings holding my dolly tighter. Couldn’t have him get away. “Now, you sit quiet and mummy will tell you a bedtime story.”

I ensured my dolly would sit quiet by tying his mouth shut with a pretty pink ribbon. “Hush, hush, pretty baby. Run and catch... run and catch...” I kissed his sweating forehead. Such sweet fear salt sweat. “Won’t be long now, sweet, and the sun will rise.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled my dolly partly into my lap. His hands were bound, and his feet, and I’d bound up his chattering mouth, but I’d left his eyes clear so that I could read them. Stories were told in their eyes. Good stories, and naughty stories. This little dolly had fear stories, and they were pretty pretty things. I petted his head.
“Once upon a time a beautiful princess lived with her son, the finest knight in all the land. He slaughtered dragons and damsels and demons and brought their heads home for his princess. Such sweet slaughter. Such beautiful blood.” I added my nails into my dolly’s scalp, and sweet blood thickened his hair. He moaned prettily. “And then one day, a nasty group of tin soldiers caught the black knight, and put bright spots in his brain. And the bright spots grew, and burned at him, until he couldn’t see his dark princess anymore. Poor pretty Spike.” I bent down and whispered into my dolly’s ear, “That was his name, my dark knight. Pretty Spike.” I bit at the ear I had whispered into, and then resumed my story.

“But Spike’s princess mummy could see that the bright spots would burn him up, the pretty boy. He’d be blown away on the wind, and be washed away, and there would be no more slaughter.” I shook my head sadly. “He tasted of ashes. But the knight was always a creature of light and dark. Peel away the black skin, and inside he longed for the sunlight.

“Now. There was a sharp fire of sunlight who caught up my pretty boy. A slayer. It was dark where she lived. His black heart could shed light in her darkness, just as her bright fire could dim his burning. He was too bright, and she was too dark, and when they touched they found the silver moonlight, that could hold both of them. But she didn’t understand how he was burning. She let him burn and burn in his brightness until he was all burned up.” I glared down at my dolly, rage darkening my features, bringing the demon into my eyes. “Wasn’t that naughty of her?” I demanded.

My dolly gasped and panted in terror, shuddering, cringing away from me, screaming through his ribbons. He hadn’t seen my true face before. “Aww...” I said, softening. “Poor baby. No more anger. I know how the story’s going to end!” I kissed my dolly’s nose, but that didn’t seem to make him any less afraid. For a long moment I rocked him, humming, staring into his eyes, until I took his fear and squished it like a grape, and he couldn’t cry out any more. He fell limp into my hands.

“The slayer had two pets,” I said, “a pretty red cat and a faithful dog. But the slayer missed her moonlight knight so badly she sent her pets away. The cat fled to the south, where she waited to learn her part. But the puppy went all the way to Africa, where I found him.

“The slayer’s pet had surrounded himself with a web of amazons. More slayers. Many more. Hundreds more. He had two handfuls he hid behind, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and the other one. I led them on a merry chase, kissing corpses to leave them a trail, all across the continent. Country and city and country again, a trail of death, sometimes leaving a nest of babies for them to eat. Had to leave a trail even the puppy could follow. And follow he did. He and his slayers followed my trail of crumbs all the way to the right village.

“Now, I’d left them a pretty picture. A whole nest of newborn babes, babes in the woods, still toddling on new fangs. So many of them I knew the slayers would get scared, and cling to each other, and leave their puppy behind. And they did. He howled at the moon, annoyed with being left in the room all alone.”

The then took over for the now in my mind. Or was I still then, and this now was the future? It was all one, sometimes. Yes. I was still in Africa, now. I must be. And I look down at the slayer’s one-eyed dog, as he paces and chews on the furniture as his amazons have left him behind.

He looks up and sees me in his room. “You can’t come in here,” he says. He scrabbles for a cross. “I... I didn’t invite you!”

“Was already here,” I tell him. “And you don’t own this place. This is not your home.”

The dog hides behind the cross and backs away. “Y-you... you... you can’t touch me,” he said.
“I... I’m not....” He has no excuse.

“We don’t have time,” I tell him. “The dark knight is here and not here, and unless you follow me, slayer’s pet, he will never rise again.”

“What are you talking about?”

Making him think takes too long. Making him see with only one eye. That will be easier. I hold up my two claw fingers, and then lower one of them, making him track my claw with his eye. Then I bring it across again. Again and again until he forgets about the cross he’s holding, and his fear of me, and his right place in the world. “Follow me,” I tell him, and he drops the cross and follows.

He is nicely shaped, this one. He smells of demon’s dreams. He is a cornerstone of fate, holding up pillars of strength, unseen... but seeing with his single eye. I know he’ll see the way of it.

I lead him across the desert, farther and farther, until he stumbles and falls, his mortal body weak. I lift him and carry him by the scruff of his shirt, farther across the sands, through a village which has learned to call me by the name of Gizani. “Darkness.”

“Darkness has risen!” Voices whisper in their African tongue as they peer through the safety of their tiny homes, knowing not to invite me. I’ve been here before. Again and again I’ve been here. I told my sweet son he would come here one day. And he did, to earn the burden he would carry which would let me blow away his ashes and bring him back. For he had to burn... I had seen it. But I would not let my son die. He was meant to live on, climb up out of the coffin and rise again, just as he was born.

I dropped the slayer’s pet in the heart of the cave just as the sun was rising. The soul-eater, the soul-finder, the lurking demon who had tortured my son and cursed and blessed him with his ugly saving soul was sleeping now. He would not rise again this year. The slayer’s pet was safe from him. But not from me.

I pulled him into my lap, just as I would pull my dolly into my lap in my future – when...? Where...? It mattered not. I pulled the dog into my lap and pulled off his black eye. I petted at the empty hollow where his other eye should have been. “Poor one eyed dog.” I licked at the space.

The dreams I had given him faded at my touch, and he startled awake, held tight in my embrace. “Ah! Ew!” Then he stopped. “Wait a minute, what did you call me?” The charming yapping puppy lost his temper and pulled away from me, forgetting he’d been afraid. “One eyed dog?”

“Slayer’s pet,” I said.

“Okay,” he said, annoyed, and it made me smile. “That’s a bit much. I’m not a pet, I’m not a dog, and I am most assuredly not your chew toy.” He stood up. “Drusilla, if you’re going to kill me, you’d better do it fast, because I... I could... um...” He lost his momentum. “I didn’t really think that one out,” he said “Um...” He stopped. “Please don’t kill me?” he tried with casual amusement, already knowing that as far as pleas went, that was both pitiful and unlikely to work.

I laughed at him. He was charming, this sweet slayer’s pet. “I thought to make you my own, once,” I told him. “Offered you my eternal kiss. Do you remember?”

“Um... kind of a whirlwind relationship, as I recall,” the dog said. “More of a... creepy backfired-love-spell-threatening-to-kill-me-in-the-middle-of-an-angry-mob-of-women kind of proposition. Not really what I’d call a lasting basis for eternal romance.” He shuddered. “And why do I always land the demons?” he muttered to himself. “Um... um....” he giggled nervously. “Hi,
Dru. How’s tricks? Um. Not that you’re turning tricks. Just.” He was so delightfully nervous. No.
Terrified, that was the one. He was so delightfully terrified.

I jumped up and grabbed him in an instant, and he froze beneath my grip. “Do you want the sun
to rise?” I asked.

“Oh, so much,” he whispered.

I danced around him, sliding my hand over his torso, his arm, his back, scratching at his sweet
flesh, cutting through his shirt. “So do I,” I whispered “I want my son. I want him, you see. Even
all grown up and crying, I want him. But he’s not real. You know that, don’t you? All he is is
Pepper’s reflections and the ticking clock. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick…” I lifted the dog’s hand, and
found the wrong kind of watch on it. This was a square of science, with electric numbers clicking
over one by one. “Electricity lies,” I told him, and the watch crumbled in my fingers. “Only head
and heart matter. And he has neither.” I grabbed the dog by the hair and bent his head until I could
whisper in his ear. “Where is my son?” I asked.

“Um... you mean Spike?” he asked. His fear scent heightened. “I... I don’t... I don’t know...”

“Yes, you do,” I told him. “Tell me where he is.”

He closed his eyes, sure this would be his last words. “He burned. In Sunnydale. He... never
made it out.”

“And where’s the rest of him?” I asked.

He hadn’t expected that question. “What do you mean?”

“My son scattered his ashes all over before he burned,” I said. “He left his soul with the slayer.
He left his head with my Angel. He left his heart in the air. He left his years with me. And do you
know where he left his blood?”

The dog shook his head. He couldn’t speak. It probably had something to do with my fingers
locked around his throat. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to do something about that or not. “He
left his blood here,” I said into the dog’s ear, and then I kissed his warm fear flesh and tasted the
terror of him. It wasn’t as sweet as happiness. He was too sad for that. “Missing your own mistress
of death, I see,” I said, releasing the dog’s throat.

And the death took me. “So many men,” I whispered. “So much screaming. So much hatred.
Hatred... such pain behind that hatred. So lonely. The demon so lonely, for so many centuries, all
alone, no warmth, no bliss, no kisses, empty... she was so empty.... Why did you leave her so
empty?” I demanded. I felt ill with the emptiness I felt. “Such pain behind the vengeance. Such
sorrow. Such hurt. She loved you so, for all the things you hated in yourself... the silly, and the
stumble, and the sweet.” I groaned. “Ah! You tore through her hope! New life... real life...!”

He had begun to look upon me with his lips parted as he understood my vision. “Anya...” he
whispered.

The vision had left me by then. But not what it meant. “She bore your children in her dreams,”
she said. “She gave you a son. She called him Alexi and bought him savings bonds and had you
build him his own bunk-bed, so that he could invite friends over.” I was wounded by the dreams.
“And the girl. She was Anne. ‘A’ names, so they’d always be the first in line in school. She was
never dreamed out of the cradle, that one. She passed her to you, and you held her in your arms,
and you wept. You nearly dropped her, you were so terrified. Two little lives. Never dreamed out
into the real. She wanted you to give them to her, so she could give them back to you.”

The dog has gone white. He has tears sparking and drowning his single eye. Swimming in the socket of the empty one. “She never said....”

“She feared them. The words for them. You feared them so. But she cherished them in the unspoken future. *Pop, pop!* Take off their heads, eat their little lives, never hatched out of time now.” I leaned forward. “Do you want your dream puppies, slayer’s dog? You want their dam? You want it all back now?”

He bent his head, his eye taken off me, his tears salt rain drops on the stone floor.

“So you?” I pressed.

“Yes,” he confesses, whisper soft.


He is dropped on the floor like a sack of meal. He gasps and shudders, still stained with grief tears and fear. “I don’t know... what brought back Angel,” the dog says. “I don’t know... how to get Spike back.”

“No need, puppy,” I tell him. “He’s been brought.” I gesture around the cave. “He got himself an ugly soul for a pretty purpose. He would burn for the slayer, yes. We both knew. This way, he gets to come back. No soul to grab, nothing else to bring back. But he souled himself up good, pretty boy. Carbon copies. Now we just need a paper to print him on.”

The dog is in a lot of pain now, and he cannot follow his nose. “What are you talking about?”

The nose knows. I follow the scent and catch it up. A single stone among stones, and I lift it and hold it in the dim light. Can the dog even see in this light? That had not been wondered before. I hold the stone before him. “A drop of his cold blood,” I tell him. It is more than a drop. It is a splash of dark stain on the stone, from when his trials brought him here, to face more trials, to save his soul, to make him climb from the coffin. “You need to bring this to the pickettywitch,” I tell him. “She knows what to do. You’ll tell her?”

“How can I tell her what she already knows?”

I lost my temper. (There were reins. They slipped from my fingers...) “You are a complete twat, aren’t you,” I said, letting my son color my words. He’s always in me. Just as Angel is always in me, and my mummy, and Miss Edith, and my other dark, and the pretty nun. Always in me, all the time. “Take this stone to the red witch and have her bring back my Spike, or you’ll never have your slayer in hand again!”

“Buffy?” He looks confused now. “This is about Buffy?”

I hit him, and then grab him, my teeth bared. “This is about my William! Unless you think I should just make a new child. Out of you, slayer’s pet.”

“No!” the dog says. “No, no, I got you. You want me to bring this stone to Willow, right? It has some of Spike’s blood on it? Just bring it to Willow. That’s all you want me to do?”
“Can you, without being my own? I give you eternal life, you’ll follow me. You’d walk into the sun, you were my son. Can you listen, with only one eye? I could take out the other one. Then you’d have to listen hard.”

He is trembling. “I hear you,” he whispers. “I hear you. You want... this stone taken to Willow. I know how to find her. I do. I swear it.”

I look at him. “I’ll know,” I say. “You plan to dance away and throw stones? Skip the stone across the water. Drop it in to hear the plonk, and I’ll hear it too, you know that?”

“Yeah,” the dog says. “Yeah, I... I do know. I mean it. I’ll take the stone to Willow, I will.”

I release him. “You understand now, do you? Do you need me to seal your memory?”

“I... I don’t...”

“You do,” I say. “We have a bargain, sunshine. Sealed with a kiss.” I plunge for his throat and give the puppy a nip, just enough to make him listen. I hear his unborn children cry in his blood. I taste the color of sorrow. I smell regret inside him. He does not taste good.

I drop him, weakly moving like an exposed maggot, and leave him within sight of the cave entrance. Then I retreat below, where I find my dolly, and now, because that was then, and now I’m here in Prague, with a new dolly to play with, and no slayer’s dogs to vex me.

“They don’t understand,” I tell my dolly. “My boy’s always with me. Change the channel. Angelus is considering eternal life. He’s stopped chasing his heartbeat. My daughter grandmummy Darla is dancing inside her own pretty son, destiny tidied all away. And sweet William is to be real for real now. No nasty ghosties, or soft quicksand time to slip beneath. All they need is to know their dates and calendars, and I’m no good with then and now. The Immortal can sort that nonsense for them. He’s all about the time.”

Mmm... the Immortal. I remembered the Immortal. He tasted like sunshine... “Do you taste like sunshine?” I asked my dolly, but he wouldn’t know. He was past answering, anyway. “I guess we’ll see, won’t we, Miss Edith?” I asked my little doll about my dolly. Miss Edith wasn’t answering today. All well and good for her. She didn’t need to eat.

I drank my dolly’s life away, and swallowed him down. He tasted like street corners and scraps of blue sky. I dropped him after his heart broke, and the tick-tick of time stopped flowing for him. Dead was good. Dead was the best future of them all. Pain is over.

“The sun is rising,” I said to myself. He was. This was the day my son would proper rise.
I was propped up on pillows allowing my body to relax and my mind to focus. Xander was perched a little beside me on the bed, nervously twitching his thumb, his hand tied to mine by a silver cord that Giles called a spiritual tether. Giles was chanting, Dawn was echoing a refrain line, Jack was waving around some smoke and muttering about psy-matrixes, and wishing we had something called a theta-inducer, rather than this primitive mumbo-jumbo. And I still wasn’t trancing out.

“Buffy, you’re going to have to cooperate,” Giles said. “Is it Xander?”

“Hey,” Xander said. “I’m doing everything right for once.”

“It’s not Xander,” I said. It really wasn’t. His apology had sounded genuine, and I remembered that on that night of ultimate betrayal he really hadn’t said much at all. Just that he couldn’t see straight. He was probably right about the drugs he’d been on. He hadn’t stood up for me, but he hadn’t really been one of the ones attacking.

“I’ve taught you how to meditate. You’ve done this before. It’s really not that difficult.”

I glared at Giles. “Then you do it,” I snapped.

“You know what, guys?” Jack said suddenly. “Can I talk to Buffy a minute?”

The others folded up their spellwork and trooped back to the living area of the suite. “You don’t want to do this, do you,” Jack said after they’d left us alone.

“I do!” I said. “I really do. I know this isn’t like what happened with me, I know we really are... saving him.”

“You want him back,” Jack said. “I know that. You don’t want to do this.” He gestured to the
Orb of Thesulah on the bed in front of me, and the whole convoluted spell around us.

I sighed. Jack had come back and interrupted Xander before he’d been able to tell me much about his encounter with Drusilla. I still didn’t know how he’d known to come here, or what Dru had seen, or anything. And apparently I still wasn’t supposed to know. “The timeline is fragile right now,” Jack had said. “Telling anyone anything that they don’t already know can be devastating. You say the wrong thing, and you can shatter this entire project. You can make fixed something you don’t want, or it can all unhappen in an instant.”

Until that moment I hadn’t realized how precarious this endeavor still was. Jack and Giles had been talking like bringing Spike back was a foregone conclusion. Now it seemed it wasn’t. I was steeling myself for the possibility – inevitability – that the whole thing was about to go up in smoke. I never got the guy. The guy always abandoned me, betrayed me, or I killed him. There was no happy ending for the slayer. Just... endings. Endless endings.

How the hell could anything I did cause a new beginning?

“Tell me true, Jack. Are we just doing a song and dance, here?”

Jack shrugged. “I know no more than you do. But I do know that if any part of this fails... then yes. We might be indulging in an elaborate pantomime, and I’ll come back to a world just as Spikeless as the one we’ve been living in. But that idea isn’t what scares you.”

I sighed. I’d been living Spikeless for nearly a year now. I felt as if I had a big hollow in my heart, one that would never be filled. But I also knew I could survive that way. I had been surviving that way, without going suicidal, or particularly homicidal (natural slayer tendencies aside) and I was even starting to reforge some alliances that I’d thought were severed forever. I could be the Slayer without Spike. It was Buffy I found hard to be without him.

“What is it that’s holding you back?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Jack looked over his shoulder at the door, and then reached for something on the bedside table. “Well. Ripper may be a ritual purist, but I happen to know, this shit works without magic or belief. The right machine could tap your psy-energy and do what they’re doing with their literal smoke and mirrors. Hell, good enough tech, you wouldn’t even have to play through this little spirit-quest, the machine would do it for you. But we’re not that far in the future yet.” He opened a bottle in his hand and poured out three little white oblongs. “The dose for this is one. You’re a slayer, so I was going to recommend two. Here’s three.” He put the sleeping pills in my hand. “Find your trance at least. Then figure out what’s stopping you from following through.”

I considered this. It wasn’t too much of an overdose. The alcohol from earlier was firmly out of my system, I could tell. Jack handed me a glass of water, and I took the cheat.

Ten minutes later he called the others back in to start up their ritual.

Twenty minutes later, I’d found my trance.

I was in a large, echoing cavern, fretted with smoke and golden fire, tilting under my feet with every breath. There was closeness and distance and there was nothing and everything. Everything felt natural and real and right and dreamlike, and I was part of the whole. I could have faded away entirely, almost immediately. I would have gladly let it take me, but a flat, familiar voice caught my attention. “Oh, wow, weird.”
I looked. There was Xander, standing behind me, opening and closing his eyes as if he was trying to make one of those weird 3D pictures work. “Okay, this is trippy.”

“Is this you being my anchor?” I asked. My voice sounded distant. Dreamlike.

“I guess. I’m actually still in the hotel room unless I close my eyes. Giles, is it supposed to be like this?”

If Giles responded, I didn’t hear him. The spell tether was still connecting my index finger to Xander’s.

“Giles says do whatever you need to do to find the residue of Spike’s soul, and let it free to enter the orb,” Xander said.

An echoing boom of *How?* resounded off the dream walls around me, though I didn’t speak.

Xander winced, and repeated the question. “Giles says you’re the only one who would know that. And to stop asking him questions, he needs to keep chanting, or this won’t work. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I said, turning away from him. He didn’t seem particularly important. He wasn’t part of this place. I was.

“Oh, cool. I’m trying that mind-speak thing that Willow taught me, so I don’t bug Giles. Just you and me now.” He looked about him. The shiny silver cord stretched between us as I wandered away, and didn’t seem likely to break. He followed me anyway. “What is this place?”

“The hellmouth,” I said. I’d seen it before. This was what it was like when the Turok-Han were mustering, how the space had appeared during the final battle. Where Spike had died. There were no Turok-Han now. There were no fallen slayer girls. There was no miasma of the First Evil poisoning the atmosphere.

“Great! There’s Spike!” Xander said behind me. “Perfect. This won’t take long at all.”

“He’s not here,” I said, though I saw him too. Staring up at the light, love pouring from his amulet, seething out of his soul. Calm and resolute and powerful, as I had seen him at the last. I had loved him then. Truly loved him, loved everything about him. I’d loved what he was going to do. I’d loved that he was willing to do it. I loved all the little bits and pieces of him that had made him the kind of man/vampire/soulful-creature that could be the instrument of ultimate sacrifice. I’d loved that he’d done it all for me... and hated that I’d done it to him.

“But he’s right there, I can see him,” Xander said.

“It’s not him.” I knew it wasn’t.

I walked past the image and climbed up the stone stairs, into the basement of the school, and there was Spike again. Twisted and mad and tangled, pacing like a tiger in a cage, the First’s influence poisoning his mind. All the things he had let slip, then, without knowing it. Caned as a little boy. His heart fallen on the floor. Glowing... what’s a word means glowing. Got to rhyme.

How he was a bad, bad man, who hurt the girl – *no hurting the girl!*

Spike’s voice echoed from the crazy maze of the basement, and Xander cringed, but I knew that wasn’t Spike, either. Xander stared at Spike, punching himself in the face as he moaned about hurting the girl. “Was he... really that bad?” he asked.
Xander hadn’t seen him at his worst. I’d made Spike don lucidity like a coat before I’d taken him to Xander’s apartment. Xander had only really spoken to mad Spike that one time when we were looking for Willow. He’d been scattered, then, but not twisted, and was actually seeing more clearly than we were, though we hadn’t realized it at the time. Xander hadn’t seen the self-loathing.

“Worse,” I said. I walked past that Spike too, and up into the hall of the school. It was our old school up there, not Dawn’s rebuilt modern monstrosity. There was Spike again, vamped up and soaring, his black coat flapping like a bat, the first time he’d tried to kill me. Xander didn’t even ask about this one. We both knew this wasn’t really Spike.

I went out the double doors and walked past a Spike trying desperately to restore Drusilla in an abandoned church, and a Spike chained in Giles’ bathtub, and a Spike bruised and battered from facing a hellgod in defense of Dawn. I saw a Spike clutching a victim alongside Harmony, and a Spike smoking a cigarette beneath the tree outside my house, and a Spike standing behind me at the Bronze.

“Oh, my god,” Xander said. I had already walked past, but he was still flabbergasted. “I was right there. I mean I was right there. I’m looking at it, I was right there!”

It would have been funny if I was in any mood to laugh. I kept walking, but Xander ran up and stopped me. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Right there, and I didn’t see it.”

“I told you it happened,” I told Xander. He had to have guessed he’d see things like this, once we knew what we were going past. Not the balcony at the Bronze, specifically, but moments between me and Spike. He had to have guessed there’d be erotic ones. “There’s no cause to be so horrified by it now.”

“That’s not what I’m horrified by,” Xander said. He turned and pointed at the image of himself and Anya and Willow, dancing down below, completely oblivious. “That,” he said. “I had two eyes, then. How the hell couldn’t I see what was in front of them?”

I shrugged. “None of you could,” I said. “You only really saw yourselves.”

Xander looked like I’d hit him.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I did the same thing.” We only really looked into mirrors when we looked into each other’s eyes. I’d done it with Spike, seeing only myself, my own hatred, my own self-loathing.

I couldn’t focus on Xander, really. Xander wasn’t part of this world, and I had more to cross through. I pushed through the Bronze and out into the alley, where... oh, god. I stopped.

“Buffy?”

I didn’t want to go there.

“Buffy? Are we moving on?”

I could hear the fight going on already. I wished I could let it be over and pass by it after, but I knew I couldn’t. “You’re not going to like this, Xander.”
“What?”

“You’re not going to like... any of this.”

I was beating Spike in the alleyway. Beating him and beating him, hitting him so hard his skull cracked slightly beneath my fists. It replayed over and over, and it was a long passage to get through. I had to look at it, though. I couldn’t put it behind me until I’d looked at it.

“My god...” Xander whispered. “When was this? When you first met him...?”

“No,” I said. “This was while we were... the year I came back.”

Xander stared at me. He couldn’t believe it. Hell, when I looked back on it, I couldn’t believe it, either. I had turned myself into such a monster, and reflected all that hatred onto Spike.

“You nearly...”

“Killed him. I know,” I said. “Because I didn’t want to love him. I needed to hate. I hated you, and Willow, and Giles, and Dawn. I hated everything I was. He was the only one strong enough to bear it.”

Xander didn’t understand. “Couldn’t you have just... found a punching bag? Or a demon, even, one... less helpful than Spike.”

“I don’t mean physically,” I said. “Though he was that too. Aren’t you listening?”

Xander hadn’t been. He’d been too horrified by my mad eyes and my brutality. You don’t have a soul. There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside. You can’t feel anything real.

And in between that, Spike's voice. That’s it. That’s my girl. Put it all on me.

Xander looked ill. “Buffy....”

“I was in a bad space.”

I was in a broken house, collapsing around us, as Spike and I fell into each other. Xander turned his face away, realizing this was private. What he didn’t realize was, it had all, always, been private.

We were getting deeper now. I didn’t want to go any deeper. I knew I had to.

We were in my bathroom. Xander’s chest puffed up, but strangely, I didn’t even relive that moment I’d relived over and over again. It was the moment after I saw, when Spike stood horrified by his own actions. “Buffy... I didn’t...!”

“Because I stopped you.”

I had stopped him. Then he’d stopped himself. I had been too injured that evening to really fight him, and we both knew it. Now Xander knew it, too.

“Why?”

Spike in the church, his shirt off, his madness seizing him. Buffy, shame on you. Why does a man do what he mustn’t? For her sake. For her. To be hers.

It was harder to move, now. Spike had to be somewhere... instead of everywhere.
Curled in his embrace in another abandoned house, asleep. Cared for. Content, for once. His gentle fingers in my hair, his lips chaste on my forehead. *I seem to remember a certain amount of connecting.*

*You’re a hell of a woman. You’re the one, Buffy.*

I pushed through the empty house, and there I was in the basement. It was Spike’s basement, his cot against the wall, the potential slayers’ training gear piled haphazardly all anyhow. But Spike wasn’t there. I was, but I looked about five years old. I was standing defiantly with something clenched in my little arms. The little-girl-me glared at Xander. “He can’t come in here.”

“It’s okay,” I told me. “He’s not really here.”

“Okay, then.” Little me curled back onto Spike’s cot and held fast to her stuffed animal. It was Mr. Gordo, my favorite stuffed pig, the one I brought with me to college unafraid of being teased about it.

“There’s Spike,” I said. I knew it, as surely as I’d know the others weren’t really him. I reached for the stuffed animal.

“NO!” The very walls roared the cry. Little girl me clutched Mr. Gordo close, and the lights went out. “YOU CAN’T HAVE HIM!”

Xander cried out, staggering as the walls shook and the world spun. “No, we’re okay, Giles,” he said suddenly. “Just... having some trouble. I think Buffy’s handling it. Keep chanting.”

“I’m not letting him go!”

I sat down on the cot beside the little girl. “If he’s going to be real, I have to.”

“He’s already as real as he can be,” little me said. “You’d never let him be real.” She clutched Mr. Gordo under her chin and held him so tightly I couldn’t see a single plush leg of him.

“I know I wouldn’t,” I said. “I turned him into a thing, and it was evil of me.”

“This way I can keep him.”

I agreed. I wanted to keep him, too. She was me, after all. If Xander hadn’t been there I’d have curled up on that cot, cuddled the girl and the pig close, and never gotten up again. This was where I wanted to be, somewhere quiet, and peaceful, and dim, where time didn’t mean anything, where I was held, and loved. I’d recreated heaven.

But Spike was dead inside it.

“It’s not fair to him,” I said. “It was never fair to him. I told myself I was angry, for what had happened at the end. I kept him at arm’s length, for so long, even after he came back. It’s easier when he’s just a dead thing I can cling to.” I shook my head. “I was afraid of what I’d do. Who I’d become if I took him back. I was afraid I’d hurt him again. Hurt myself again. I was afraid what it would mean. What it would do to us both, if I admitted... how I loved him.”

*No, you don’t. But thanks for sayin’ it.*

The words echoed, just a whisper, that I wasn’t even sure Xander had heard. A whisper from the stuffed pig. The last moment. The moment we’d touched.
I’d thought on what Spike had said at the end for so long. I’d tried to understand it six ways from Sunday, as he would have said. I never arrived at any conclusion for what he’d meant. It could have meant anything – that he didn’t believe in how I’d felt. That he didn’t want me to be hurt. That there was something else between us besides love, transcending love, but the words were nice to hear. It could even have just been something stupid and noble sounding, like Han Solo’s “I know,” in Star Wars, something other than the trite, “I love you, too,” which is the only real response to an *I Love You*. Perhaps he hadn’t had time to think it out. I knew he was full of love at that moment, but what he’d meant by those words? I was at a loss.

But maybe he was right. Maybe I didn’t love him. In the same way I’d insisted that he didn’t love me, back before he had a soul. It’s not love, it’s just obsession. Love was neutral. Love was generous. Love gave of itself. It demanded nothing. All I’d ever done with Spike was take, take, take. I took his acceptance and the love he offered me, and I’d poured my hatred and my rage and my vitriol into him, but I had never, ever, been generous. Even when I’d helped him, or saved him, or kissed him, or made love to him, those were all things I’d wanted. I’d wanted safety, or his touch, or to have him back.

What the hell had I ever given him?

I knew I could be sweet. I’d been sweet to Angel, and to Riley, and even to Parker, and to those handfuls of guys I’d dated that hadn’t gotten anywhere real, Robin among the others. The only man I’d never been sweet to was Spike.

What Spike and I had was different from all of those. Deeper. Stronger. So strong it had tangled me up inside. And now my soul was clutching the last remnant of his so tightly, I didn’t want to let it go, not even when it meant having him back.

*No, you don’t.*

What if I’d already ruined it? What if I’d waited too long to tell him? What if I brought Spike back... and he didn’t love me anymore? What if it all went up in smoke, and I’d really lost him... for real? Even this tiny fragment....

Didn’t matter. That was the rub. Did I want Spike back for *me*, or did I want him back for *himself*?

If it was for me, then he was right. I didn’t love him.

“We have to let him go, Buffy,” I told the little girl. “Even if that means we never get him back. We have to let him go.”

“But I want him,” the little girl said.

“I know.”

The room groaned and trembled, and then finally became still. Very, very reluctantly, the little girl passed me Mr. Gordo.

He felt exactly the same as Mr. Gordo always felt, worn and soft, the stuffing just a little off kilter from all the hugging he’d endured over the years. It was Spike. Every drop of what he’d left with me.

I stood up. “We can go now.”

“Thank god!” Xander said. I tried to open my eyes, to shake off my trance and rejoin the world,
releasing the soul-fragment to be caught by the orb. That wasn’t what happened.

It was possible I couldn’t shake off the trance due to Jack’s sleeping pills. (They probably didn’t help.) But I’m much more inclined to blame what happened next entirely on the Powers That Be.

Xander left the dreamscape just fine, opened his eyes, popped back to Giles and the chanting. And I was suddenly in a big black arena, with a severed anchor chain dangling from my finger, and a demon between me and reality.
Fight, Fight, Fight

Chapter Summary

Cordelia

Chapter Notes

Takes place during The Girl In Question

Cordelia

It’s really hard to understand higher dimensions, or the webs of destiny, or any of that crap. Time was constantly bleeding into itself, bodies were only afterthoughts, and There and Then were constantly getting tangled up with Here and Now. Anyone used to a human plane of existence couldn’t make sense of it. I could tell Buffy had decided to perceive everything through her own Slayer’s view of the universe, so that she could make sense of it. Which meant she was in a big black gym arena, fighting a big old nasty demon that wanted to stop her. And because she was Buffy, she was fighting first and asking questions later.

And it looked like I’d gotten here just in time.

The rest of the Powers were sitting in the bleachers, munching on popcorn and eating hotdogs, and a few of them were clearly betting on the outcome. I was pissed. “What the hell, guys! Why’d you set her this task? We have nothing to do with this.”

A couple of the powers looked over at me and dismissed me. It might have been because I was new to the whole Higher Being gig, but I think some of it might have been because Buffy’s little mind-universe had dressed me in my old Sunnydale cheerleading outfit. What? Did she expect me to jump up shouting, “Sunnydale, fight, fight, fight!”

Well, given that the last time she saw me pretty much was while we were still in highschool, it kinda made sense she’d still see me this way. And she did have a fight to win, apparently. I rolled my eyes as Doyle smirked at me. He’d come with me when I’d asked for him, and Buffy’s subconscious had put him in a Sunnydale ball cap. He was waving a little pennant. “Don’t say it,” I told him.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said with a smirk.

I supposed Buffy wasn’t entirely off, here. We were here on her side. The rest of the Powers were mostly perceived as teachers, and one was definitely seen as Principal Snyder, (like he could have gotten up here!) though a few were demons, and one was the Mayor. People in power who liked to watch sporting events, and didn’t care who got hurt in the process. I supposed that made
Buffy sailed through a roundhouse kick and slammed her demon opponent to the other side of the arena, and a couple of the Powers gave him a sip of water and a quick massage (reinforcing the stop-measure) and sent him back. Buffy, of course, was all alone.

“Why the hell are we here?” I demanded.

“It is the Chosen One. She is using the power of the Eternal Element to rewrite destiny.”

Buffy saw that Power as Snyder. I supposed she had his personality down. I’d always found this guy a sniveling little Power with an inflated ego and no real goal for his officiousness. “And?”

“The Eternal Element is out of our jurisdiction,” Snyder-Power said. “It’s cheating.”

I hadn’t looked at the Eternal Element before. I looked back at history while Buffy was punched in the face by her demon. She’d stuffed something into her belt so she could use both hands to fight. Was that a stuffed pig? It stood for something else, I could tell; she was just perceiving it as a stuffed toy.

Ah, there it was. The Eternal Element (Buffy knew him as a man called Jack) was a random fixed point in time and space, caused by an entirely different set of universal laws, permanently linked through a time vortex. I glanced through what we knew of him. Bad Wolf, the last of the Time Lords, the Face of Boe, both good and bad paths of fate... time traveler. He was utterly neutral. “Yeah, fine, so?”

“So?” Snyder-Power looked annoyed. “This wasn’t our plan.”

“Buffy’s a human being,” I said. “She can make plans of her own.”

“The Eternal Element has forged a bond with the Chosen One,” said another Power. “Together they are attempting to reforge the Rebel Soul.”

I rolled my eyes. Chosen One, Eternal Element, Rebel Soul... it sounded like a dumb Dungeons and Dragons campaign. I wished the Higher Powers believed in names.

Rebel Soul... that meant Spike. I laughed. Yeah, that would throw a spoke in their destiny wheel, sure enough. So Jack and Buffy had decided to recreate Spike. So that was what the stuffed pig represented – a bit of Spike’s soul. I’d known it wasn’t going to be so easy for them to get rid of that guy! Particularly not with Buffy body-slamming her stop demon so hard into the ring that its scream echoed through the gym. “So?” I said. “Buffy’s bringing back her boyfriend. You did it once.”

“That was for The Dark Soul. Our Champion,” said the Power. She meant Angel. “The Rebel Soul has not been destined. The Rebel Soul was meant to perish at the hellmouth. We must stop the reforging.”

“Why?”

The Power that answered had the look of the school guidance counselor, and spoke to me like I was an idiot. “Two Champions, two vampiric souls on earth, twisted into the fate of the Chosen One. It leaves too many paths open. The Chosen One has a destiny to walk. The Rebel Soul is a chaotic element. He has no destiny.”

“He had one once,” I said. I’d glanced into Angel and Buffy and everyone else’s so-called
I glanced up at him. "For a while." Doyle and I usually had different jurisdictions, so he tended to know a little less than I did about how destiny had played out. "Willow brought Buffy back to earth, and that let the First Evil out," I told him. "First it went back in time a little and tried to take out Angel, and when that didn’t work, it came up to destroy the slayer line through ultimate betrayal."

"Why?"

"Rogue Power," I told him. "Kinda like Jasmine, only pure Evil, instead of just wrong. Buffy’s resurrection had opened the door for it, but with the slayer in the way, it couldn’t have free rein. The Powers saw it was going to happen, and brought back Angel so that he could take it out, ’cause a redeemed vampiric soul has like... crazy anti-Evil mojo. But by the time the First Evil made its move, Angel and Buffy had too much baggage between them, and they’d both kinda moved on. It wouldn’t have worked real well."

It was so cool how I had easy access to all this knowledge. It was like having a destiny internet in my own mind. Sometimes I loved being a Higher Being. "Fortunately, Spike had gone to get his own soul, so the Powers set him on that path to take out the First Evil," I told Doyle.

"It was an arduous path both the demon itself and the soul chose to take," said another Power. I liked this Power. Buffy had given it the shape of Ms. Calendar. It wasn’t her, any more than Snyder was Snyder, but she was reasonable and insightful. "It was the Rebel Soul’s attempt to free her destiny. It was noble."

"The Rebel Soul was a chaotic element to begin with,” the Snyder-Power said, dismissive. “We were all much better off with him out of the picture.”

"So, that’s why you’ve put this big old stop-block on Buffy reforging his soul?" I asked. It was pummeling Buffy pretty hard, and she was grunting. As I watched she twisted, grabbed it, and flipped it over her head with a cry of rage. She checked her little Spike soul-fragment before beating on the demon again. "He left that bit with her," I said. And she clearly loved it a lot. Childhood toys were not dismissed easily. She was also fighting the destiny stop like a tiger. I was glad she’d seen the stop as a demon rather than a wall, because she wouldn’t have known to fight through a wall. "Let her do what she wants with it."

"Her destiny is not free," another Power said. "Her threads have been caught and woven in again. She is meant for Shanshu."

Now I lost my temper. "You’re trying to tie her up with Angel again? Are you insane?"

The Powers all stopped eating their popcorn and stared at me.

"Were you looking at what they did to each other?" I rolled my eyes. "I’ve never seen two people worse for each other in the history of the planet! She turns him into a broody, manipulative, misogynistic freak who wants to protect the little lady. He turns her into a weepy, empty eyed angst-ball who can’t even think straight. The only time either of them are themselves around each other is when they’re pissed off enough to hate each other properly! Their personalities don’t
mesh, their history is riddled with heavy lead bullets, and I don’t think either one of them ever really loved the other at all!”

The Powers all looked uncomfortable at this point. I hoped I was getting through to them, because this was a really dumb plan they’d made. It made sense that they didn’t get it. None of them had ever been human. Love was more than just two people fucking – it was who you were around the other person. They didn’t get that human souls interacted in more ways than they could see. It was the day-to-day stuff that made humanity, not the grand destiny-laden gestures.

I tried to explain it to them. “Buffy was a teenager who loved to be in love. Angel was a vampire who loved the idea of loving someone. Neither of them even really knew the other very well. What the hell makes you think they’d hit it off together now?”

“We have threads of destiny,” said the Power that looked like the Mayor. “I have plans, you know.”

“I don’t give a shit,” I said, surprising them all again. I didn’t care about being crass. I may have been dressed like a teenager, but these Powers weren’t my teachers, and there was no suspending me anymore. Not for speaking my mind. “We are not playing this game. I’ve seen what happens when some rogue Power gets hold of your life, writes out the play, and forces some kind of mystic nookie for their own selfish ends. What? Are you hoping for some kind of supernatural pregnancy?”

I’d been joking, but the dead silence indicted that at least some of them did have this plan.

“Well, fuck that idea,” I snapped, standing up. Cheerleader I may have been, but I was sure as shit not letting this go down. “We’ve done this. I paid for it, and so did Connor. It’s not romantic. It’s not erotic. It’s rape, rape through pre-determinism, and I’m not letting you do that to Buffy, Angel, or frankly anyone else in history, ever again!”

“It was your destiny.”

“It was assault!”

“The Power that became called Jasmine was a rogue,” the Ms. Calendar voice said.

“Who destroyed free will, ate people for breakfast, and nearly ended the whole planet. And she was one of you. What makes this destiny plan of yours any better than hers?”

“What happened to you was not our choosing.”

“But you’re going to be choosing for Buffy?” I said. “You can see she’s pissed off at Angel! She wants nothing to do with him! They’ve both moved on from their high school crush, and now you plan to, what, fiddle with destiny and fuck with their impulses so that the two of them can have some kind of crazy universe-shattering space sex, and force a rape-baby out of her? Don’t you see how creepy that is? I thought she was your Chosen One, shouldn’t that mean you should have some kind of respect for her?”

“We have the greatest respect and love for the Chosen One.”

“Then she should have bodily autonomy!” I barked. “Or you’ve turned her into your fucking sex-slave to serve your personal narrative of how things should go.”

“She is our Chosen hero,” said the Mayor-Power.
“Uh-uh,” I said, with utter contempt. “You don’t get to play it that way, if that’s your plan. A woman used for sex and pregnancy, at someone else’s whim? That’s not a Chosen hero, that’s a bound victim, raped for your pleasure.”

“Can I say she’s right?” said Doyle beside me. I was glad to have his voice here, though he was more my assistant than a higher being himself. He still knew what he was talking about, and they owed him. “Choice is needed for destiny to work. I chose to pass on my visions to Cordelia rather than Angel, and it made for a better future. That was ’cause I came to care for her, and that was all me. No destiny to it. Who’s to say who Buffy chooses to love isn’t going to make a better path?”

“But that is not her destiny,” Snyder-Power whined. God, sometimes I loved Buffy. She’d really given this guy the best possible avatar.

“None of it was,” Doyle said. “From what Angel told me, she was destined to live happy with Angel for a few years in another time, where he’d been made human. Angel chose to steal that destiny from her and from himself both, so that he could be a vampire again.”

“That was the chosen path of the Dark Soul.”

“Aye, but Buffy didn’t choose that. Doesn’t that mean he stole that destiny from her, at the suggestion of your oracles? That’s a theft, if not a kind of rape.” He shook his head. “Doesn’t seem right to me.”

“You do not have a say here, Messenger.”

“Yeah, well, I do,” I snapped. “Buffy and Angel are over. It’s clear every time they get together. Let her pick her own destiny! If she wants Spike or the Rebel Soul or whatever you want to call him, let her have him. What harm could it do?”

“You are saying allow her to place the wild-card into play,” said the Ms. Calendar-Power. “Give the Chosen One and the Rebel Soul and the Dark Soul free will, and allow them to sort their own destiny?”

“It’s either that, or you’re nothing but slave traders,” I said. “If you keep breaking our free-will, you’re no better than Jasmine.” They didn’t seem entirely willing to listen to me. They didn’t particularly care whether Buffy was happy playing out her destiny. “If you don’t leave her her autonomy, I’m not helping anymore,” I said. “And I’ll do everything in my power to make sure none of my friends listen to you ever again. Including Angel.”

This was serious. They had a lot of mojo sunk into Angel. And Angel, unlike Buffy or Spike, was much more willing to dance to their tune. I had been too. I often wondered if I would have if I’d known then what I knew now. I probably wouldn’t. The Powers That Be weren’t, as I had once thought, All Good, All Knowing, All Powerful. You were lucky if they were two out of three at any given time. Usually, they were none of the above.

“Very well,” the Mayor Power said then. “We will not remove the pattern of our chosen destiny. It is already in play. But we will not interfere in her choice here.”

So. They did have some stupid idea in place about destiny-sex and mystic pregnancies, and they weren’t going to erase that. But Buffy got to put her wild-card into play. “And if your chosen destiny pattern is broken in the process?” I asked.

There was another heavy silence. “Then that is the new fate,” was the ultimate reply.

“Fine,” I said. I could live with that. “You gonna turn off the destiny stop now?”
“There is no need,” said the Ms. Calendar-Power. “She is about to break through on her own.”

I looked. Buffy had the demon on the ground, and was stomping its head into the floor of the arena. Buffy had gotten more badass since I’d seen her last. Good for her!

“But we will not set another one.”

The Snyder-Power reluctantly sighed, and gestured at another powerful demon, who had been sitting in the wings. The demon shaped destiny-stop looked glum and trudged out of the gym.

Well, cool! Buffy’d won her battle, and I’d won mine. Buffy stood and panted over her defeated demon. It seemed wrong somehow. Poor girl wasn’t used to winning anymore. Probably had something to do with that tiny stuffed pig in her belt. Staring in glum resolution wasn’t right. She should be celebrating! She’d won!

Hell, so I had I.

“Don’t say one word,” I said to Doyle. I jumped off the bleachers as the whistle blew, indicating end of the round. Buffy blinked when she saw me. “We won!” I shouted at her.

Buffy looked disbelievingly up at the crowd, which was not going wild, but was certainly riveted. “We won?”

“You won!” I held up my hands, and Buffy finally seemed to get it. With a sudden laugh she lifted up both hands and gave me a double high-five. Then we both fell into Sunnydale’s most popular victory cheer routine. I was surprised she remembered the steps, since she’d only been an alternate for a few weeks. Some part of her never stopped being the queen cheerleader, though.

“We won – the game!” clap-clap “You are – so lame!” clap-clap “You’re all losers, and we are – to blame!” clap-clap “Sunnydale, Sunnydale, YEAH!”

Cheerleader hugs followed, and I whispered into Buffy’s ear, “Keep fighting, sister!”

She clutched her little stuffed pig as she ran out the double doors, and back into reality.

“Really,” I said to the grinning Doyle as the sensible and logical pattern of Buffy’s reality began to fade around us, leaving us again in the Higher Plane. “Not. One. Word.”
“Destiny’s a right joke, innit?” someone said almost in my ear. “Destined to live, destined to die, destined for one life or another. Destined to be together. Like Buffy and Angel, they were totally destined. And now that destiny is, what...? Just forgotten?”

“It can’t be forgotten,” said another voice. The voice was around me or beside me somewhere, but I couldn’t open my eyes or move to respond to it. “That’s not what destiny means. If something is destined it means it’s going to happen whether you want it to or not. But what about things that no one says is destined? Maybe Buffy and Angel were destined to fall in love, but what about Buffy falling in love with Spike? Was that just her filling in time until destiny kicked in again?”

“Maybe that destiny was over. Maybe there were other destinies, which included Spike, or Riley even. Or maybe destiny isn’t so solid as all that,” said someone else. “Maybe there are only certain things which are destined, and the rest was fluid. Maybe she and Spike just... happened on it. Fell in love by accident like.”

“Or maybe that wasn’t love,” said a nasal voice that really grated on my nerves. I think I already knew I was dreaming, but the voices sounded very real. “Think about it. Isn’t it funny how Buffy’s like, ‘No, no, no,’ all the way through, and right at the end she’s all, ‘Oh, I love Spike!’ suddenly. No one could buy that. She was just being nice ‘cause he was gonna die. That’s Buffy all over. She’s good and supportive when it counts, but she couldn’t have meant it.”

“What, so suddenly she’s a liar?” It was another voice. I was sleeping off a drunk I’d finally, finally managed to land, but I wasn’t sleeping it off well. I was immobile in the airplane seat, and something was going on around me – a conference, or a vision, or a dream. I didn’t know what was or wasn’t real. “Buffy said she loved Spike. And now everyone is to believe she’s not telling the truth about that?”

“She said she loved Angel, too. She said she loved Riley.”
“Oh, and people can’t love more than one person in a lifetime?”

“No, but why believe she loved Spike? She hated him. She said so. And she never really tried to have a relationship with him or anything. She used him and kept pushing him away.” It wasn’t just two voices. It was half a dozen or so, all of them sounding kind of young and self-important. I didn’t recognize any of them specifically. Some sounded like the Scoobies, some sounded like those slayer chicks Buffy had hanging around, some of them sounded like Angel’s crew. But none of them sounded like anyone in particular. Maybe they were all just me. Me, unable to pin anything down in my head.

“Buffy pulled Spike out of a torture chamber!” one of them said. “Why didn’t she stake him when he told her to? Why didn’t she let him leave when he offered? Why’d she try so hard to save him from the First if she didn’t love him?”

“She’s The One. She’s Buffy. She’d do that for anyone. Besides, he said why. She likes men who hurt her. He knows it’s not love. He said so.”

“Spike is incredibly insecure, and Buffy did terrible things to him. Why wouldn’t he be skeptical? Just because he finds it hard to believe doesn’t mean that she’s lying. She said she loved him.”

“But even Spike said that wasn’t true. He told her she didn’t love him. He knew. She was still in love with Angel, and always would be, and Spike was just wasting his time pining for her. She used him as a warrior, and she once used him for sex. Sex isn’t love.”

“It’s not nothing, either. And it wasn’t just once. It was months of sex. They were shagging for a long, long time. Spike had more of her than Angel ever did. He did more for her than Angel ever would. Spike and Buffy were friends as well as lovers. Spike spent more time with her and talked to her and helped her. Even while she was dead, he helped Dawn and her friends, while Angel mooned about in LA, making up to Cordelia and Fred and Darla. Spike didn’t know Buffy was coming back, but he did what she would have wanted, helped the people she cared for in her name. That’s love.”

“Yeah, on his part. But what about Buffy? She was so sweet to Angel, so generous, so loving. And she was all romantic with Riley. With Spike they just hung out, and shagged a lot. It was different with Angel. It was destiny, it was foretold. Buffy and Angel were the perfect romance. It was so touching and tragic, the kind of Romeo and Juliet story that people write epic poetry about. Star-crossed romance, how can you not respect that? Think about how awful it is that they can’t be together, when it’s what she wants! How could anyone not hope for the time when destiny calls, and they can finally have their happy ever after?”

“That happy ever after will never, ever happen! If Angel wanted to be with her, he’d be with her. He’d find a way. Spike found a way. Don’t look at what Angel says, look at what he does. He never does anything for her, and Spike’s been there for her all through. There’s no reason why Buffy and Spike couldn’t ride off into the sunset right now.”

“Yeah, but Spike’s not with her, either, is he. Why’d he go flaking about LA for the last however-long-it’s-been, getting in Angel’s face? It’s because he knows Buffy doesn’t love him, and he’s just staying out of her way. He must know in his heart she doesn’t want to see him.”

“Buffy must not want to see him.” Another voice carried that thought on. “She must know he’s alive. Andrew, those slayers, one of Angel’s team, someone must have told her by now. It’s not as if he’s been hiding or anything. If Buffy wanted to see Spike, she’d come see him. But he hasn’t called her, and she hasn’t called him. It’s clear they don’t really love each other. He just wanted to
get into her pants, and now he’s looking for someone else. Harmony, maybe, or... I don’t know. Illyria seems to like him.” I nearly started awake at that terrifying scenario, but I was too far out. “Angel was Buffy’s first love, and it was perfect love. Nothing can top that.”

“So, because Buffy can’t be with her first love, she should live celibate for the rest of her life? That’s insane. Why couldn’t she be with a person who loves her and is willing to go through hell to be what she wants?”

“So, just because Spike’s obsessed with her, she’s obligated to love him in return? That’s insane.”

“So, just because Angel claims they have a forever love, Buffy is obligated to live like a nun?”

“Even if she did go for Spike,” someone said, “wouldn’t that just be settling?”

“Of course it would be,” said another voice. “And would that be fair to either of them?”

“It couldn’t possibly be settling,” said someone more sensible. “What they had may not have been perfect, but it was perfectly real. He wouldn’t be just not Angel, he’d be Spike.”

“But after that perfect love with Angel, any love she has after that won’t be the same.”

“But Spike’s a creepy stalkery sod who tried to rape her! How could anyone forgive that?” said a voice that nearly tore me open with its vitriol. “Angel never tried to rape her.”

“Spike didn’t really try to rape Buffy,” said a more reasonable voice. “He got confused. Her signals were all messed up, and she’d been using him. He’d be saying you have to leave, and she’d hold him down and have her way with him. She was constantly saying don’t, stop, and he’d say stop me, and she wouldn’t. They were doing dominance play all over the place. That’s gotta mess up anyone’s head.”

“Oh, so no means yes, now? That’s fucked up. No one could forgive that kind of assault. No one. I don’t care what he did after, he tried to rape her, and that’s unforgivable.”

“That was without a soul. And you’re forgetting what Angelus did to her. He tortured her for like half a year, and Spike screwed up once. And then practically killed himself to make it up to her.”

“Spike tortured her, too,” said a bratty sounding little voice. “All those chains and whips and handcuffs, good girls don’t do stuff like that. He was taking advantage of how messed up she was, trying to bring her down into the dark with him. And it fucked her up, she nearly ended up raped by that RJ guy with the magic roofie coat because she’d become such a slut, and Spike made her that way. He corrupted her. He was such a jerk.”

“Oh, so, because Buffy’s a good girl, she can’t enjoy a little kink? She can’t want sex without it making her a slut? And the sex was awesome. I mean, absolute primo shagging going on there, that was obvious. Five hours straight, and kept coming back for more, to the point he found it hard to keep up. Don’t tell me there wasn’t something there with that.”

“Something doesn’t make it love. That’s like saying you can have a deep and meaningful relationship with a vibrator. That’s all Spike was to Buffy, just a thing. She said as much. It was just shagging, that’s all it ever was. Besides, that was when Spike didn’t have a soul, so none of
what he felt was real. It was just creepy obsession. Angel says you can’t love without a soul, and he should know, he’s had one the longest. Besides, even without a soul, Angel never tried to rape Buffy. He used to sneak into her house at night. He had the chance to rape her, and he didn’t.”

“Because slayer strength vanishes once she falls asleep, and Angel couldn’t possibly be a coward who was too scared to make a move on her,” a voice added sarcastically. “That’s the same argument used against Spike. Spike stalked Buffy, so he’s evil. Angel stalked Buffy, but that didn’t count, because it was true love, and he didn’t try to rape her then. But Spike didn’t try to rape Buffy either when he had her chained up. And Angel always saved the rape-her-to-death for the end game. Like he did with Drusilla – and he was playing the same game with Buffy that he did with Drusilla. Spike never ever wanted to rape Buffy, it was never premeditated. He just pushed too far once. Angelus wanted to, had it planned and plotted out. And don’t pretend that Angel was so much better, because she and Angel had sex when she was just seventeen! Statutory rape in California as it is. And that was with the oh-so-vaunted soul.”

“That was consensual, and beautiful,” another voice said, ignoring the statutory rape concept. “That relationship made perfect happiness. It’s not their fault Angel’s soul was cursed onto him. The sex she had with Spike made perfect misery for both of them.”

“It made them both better.” I would have kissed the owner of that voice, if it was real, and I could move. “It happened because it had to happen. Not because of destiny, but because that was where their relationship had been heading for years, and that was where it got to. It was the only way either of them could move forward from where they were. Buffy’s darkness was healed a bit. Spike was made into a better man.”

“He needed to be. He was evil.”

“So was Angel. Angel’s no better than Spike. They’re both evil vampires, and now they both have souls. Spike loved her, with or without the soul. Without a soul, Angel couldn’t love her at all, and Spike loved her so much he got tortured for her. That’s real. The question is, which one loves her best?”

“That’s not the question,” another voice said. “The question is, which one does she love? And Buffy made that clear when she kissed Angel and sent him away for his own protection. She loves Angel. She always has, she always will. She sent Spike to die, because she didn’t want to be with him.”

I twitched in my sleep, trying to sit up, to argue, but I was paralyzed. Still drunk, I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t wake up, and I couldn’t even be sure I was dreaming or not. The voices were relentless.

“I don’t think she should be with either of them.” This was a new voice now, something stronger and louder than any of the adolescent chattering I’d been hearing before. “She deserves someone who was never ever a crazy stalking rapist serial killer. But she’s really strong, so she needs someone better than human. Not Riley, he was an ass, but someone equal to her. Someone strong and powerful and able to fight at her side, but not some common vampire. Someone more like The Immortal.”

“Right!” There was a general murmur of agreement. “He’d be perfect for her. Those eyes, and that chin. And he’s really smart, and he can fight with her, and she won’t ever have to lose him. It’s like he was made for her!”

“You’re right, that’s a much better choice. They’re very alike, really. If she’s ready for a real long-term thing, the Immortal is a better choice than either of those evil sods. And Spike the idiot
can just spin on it.”

A general assent passed around the voices, even the gentle ones who had seemed to be on my side. “Much better off.” “Really, no comparison.” “Couldn’t agree more.” “Never really in question.” “Good point.” “Absolutely right.”

Sod off! My need to say it was so great it shook off the dream itself. When I finally forced myself into an actual state of awake, there were tears in my eyes. I touched them away before Angel noticed.

I dragged myself up from the chair I’d passed out in. The alcohol had lost its numbing, lightening effect. Now I just felt heavy and sick and not properly put together. I could either force myself back into the drunk, or sober up. I looked at the time. We’d be back in LA in an hour or so. I decided to embrace the sober. Or at least shake hands with it a bit until I was back in my basement apartment, preparing for a demon turf war. Which meant I needed to eat something.

It was a long trip, the flight from Rome to LA. They must have supplied for us. I went through the jet, past Angel, and over to the little kitchen. The fridge had been freshly stocked with blood. I opened a jar and sniffed. “Pig,” I said. Angel made a slight noise behind me. “Want?”

“Yeah.” I closed the jar and threw it behind me without looking, and heard Angel catch it without getting up. It was fun having a vamp around who wasn’t some pissant minion, too young to work at my level. Bar Drusilla, who was barmy, I hadn’t really spent much time with other vampires I wasn’t far and away superior to. Not since I’d killed my first slayer. I opened my own jar and took a swig. Not bad. I enjoyed the variety W&H gave us, but pig really was closest to human, so long as it had been raised well. You raise a pig on garbage, the blood tastes like it. This was organic, a bit nutty. “You want anything else?” I asked.

“Nah. I’m good,” he said, not surprising me. I was more into human food than Angel ever was. I rummaged through the plane’s cupboards anyway. Mostly snack food. Bags of peanuts (how traditional) little packages of crackers, crisps, some other stuff. I grabbed a random package and bit it open, washing the human food down with the blood. I leaned back against the side of the counter and looked at Angel. I knew Angel’s expressions. He was taking the whole Buffy’s moved on thing even worse than I was. And I was having nightmares and waking up in tears.

“How you holding up?” I asked. I felt like a idiot the moment I asked. This was Angel. I wasn’t supposed to give a damn.

Dumb soul.

He glared at me, with a world-weary weight I already knew. “I’m about to inform my people we have a demon turf war to fight,” he said. “In which dozens, possibly hundreds of humans are going to die. How do you think I am?”

“Pull the one with bells on,” I said with a bit of a smirk. Yeah, I was a bit upset about that, too, but that was business. That would be a prickle of excitement up the back, and a little tilt of guilt in the corner, but mostly just a job to do. “You know I was asking ‘bout her.”

“This has got to be temporary,” Angel said. “Cookie dough. It can’t be real, I just have to be patient.”

I couldn’t believe it. He was in active denial. “Is that what you said ‘bout her and me?” I said. “Can’t be real?”
“Well, I knew you had to be some... phase or something. I mean, Captain Peroxide? I knew better.” I’d felt much the same way when she’d shacked up with Riley, truth to tell, so I couldn’t even hate him for that opinion. “She was playing with you.”

Okay, using me, abusing me, never really loved me, even going through a phase, I could take all that. But, whatever it might have been, “It wasn’t a game,” I told Angel.

“Maybe not. But I know it couldn’t have been real. She needed help, and you were there. Convenient.”

Since that was exactly what I was telling myself in the darkest corners of my mind, I resented hearing him say that. “Yeah,” I said, annoyed. “I was there, and you weren’t. Where were you, Angel? Getting it on with Darla and Cordelia and god knows how many others, while you expected her to sit celibate in Sunnydale?” I shook my head. “You know, I know I don’t deserve her. You were her bloody high-school crush, and it couldn’t even survive when you both wanted it to.”

“You don’t even understand it. We’re soulmates.”

“What about other kinds of mates?” I asked.

“You’re disgusting.”

I almost laughed in his face. “Well, there’s that, but I meant mates. Friends, chums, partners in crime.” I grinned at him. “You ever see her drunk?” I asked. “You ever played gin rummy? Or Monopoly? Or listened to her bitch about her sis? Or—”

“All right!” Angel barked. “I get it, you were all up in her face! If she found you a tenth as annoying as I do, she’ll hate you for life. I think you’re more annoying with the soul than you were without it,” he muttered.

“I find that epically true of you, mate,” I said. “But I’m no different.” We’d gone through this earlier, but we hadn’t arrived at anything. We probably never would. Angel and I were always into these constant debates, anyway. Same argument, different day. The soul thing was going to make for centuries of argument, if I knew Angel and myself. “I’ve changed, but I’m not a different person with a soul in me. I don’t play that game. You can, if it makes you feel better. I won’t.”

“Why won’t you?”

I shrugged. “I love too much of what I was when I didn’t have it,” I said. “If that’s not me, then I’m nothing. Too much of what I am is what I was.”

“A murderer, a killer, a soulless raping—”

“Man,” I said. “Who had a dark and epic love with Drusilla, who became a seasoned warrior, who battled against a hellgod, who played gin rummy with Dawn, and who first and foremost had a passionate and life-changing affair with a vampire slayer.” I felt my throat closing as emotion rose again, but I tamped it down. I took a swallow of my blood to distract me. “I can’t throw that all away. I need all that to be me at all.”

Angel was looking at me strangely.

“What?”

“Affair?”
I frowned. “Yeah. Thought you knew that, mate.”

“Before the soul?”

He hadn’t known this? “Yeah.”

“You had an affair with Buffy without the soul.”

“Yeah, that was when things got hot,” I said. It wasn’t when things were best. For the most part. There were moments... brief ones. But I wouldn’t throw them away for the world.

Then I realized... Angel meant what he had said when we fought over the Cup of Destiny. He really thought I got the soul just to get into Buffy’s pants. Buffy and I had talked about it, a bit, that last year. I had the impression that the soul meant a lot to her, but it wasn’t why she forgave me. And strangely, I didn’t want her forgiveness once I had the soul. But whatever the reason, I’d already gotten into Buffy’s pants. It wasn’t the shiny get-the-girl trophy Angel had pretended it was. I don’t think he’d realized that until this moment.

This moment as he stared at me as if I’d hit him in the gut.

I felt sorry for the guy. Truly sorry. Without the soul, he hadn’t been able to feel her at all. It was just rage and hate and bloodlust. He hadn’t been able to see past the evil without it. “It’s better with,” I said honestly.

“Yeah, well, it couldn’t have been real without,” he said, looking flustered. “I mean, I don’t think it was real at all, but even for you, couldn’t have felt anything. Can’t have that-that happiness. That...” He quickly screwed the cap on his jar of blood and set it aside. “None of that matters now, anyway. We have to get ready to face the Capo’s family, handle this power vacuum, considering you lost us the head.”

“Excuse me! I’m not the one who left it unguarded on the bar as I tried to chase down my ex!”

“No, you were just trying to start a barroom brawl.”

“And I left the head in good hands, I thought!”

“And you really thought I’d just let you waltz right over there. You’re the one who left it first. I blame you.”

“God!” I think I was yelling, I was so pissed off suddenly. “Nothing I ever do is good enough for you, is it?” I demanded.

He looked taken aback. “That’s a big leap. I just said you should have guarded the head.”

“Why? Why me? Why does this have to be my fault? Why are you always pissing on everything I do?”

“Maybe because you’re not good at anything.”

“How would you know? You’re too busy casting aspersions on it all to even look at what I’m doing.”

“Says the guy who had his hands cut off and needed me to save him.”

I grit my teeth. “Off my game ‘cause I didn’t like to hurt the chit, and even that’s not good enough for you!” I snapped. “I thought you were supposed to be the one with all the compassion.
You know what it was like dealing with those potentials? Like looking at a crashing school-bus. Kids. Just kids, dragged into a war. I looked at that girl, and I saw the slayers I killed, and I saw Buffy, and yeah, I saw every one of those poor innocent birds, and yeah, all right, it seized me up a bit. She only got me ’cause I was trying not to kill her. The only way she won on me the first time I faced her was ’cause she threw me out the window and ran – and she did that ’cause she knew I had her bested. And if I remember correctly, you didn’t win that fight all on your lonesome, hero.”

The look on Angel’s face was almost funny. It was as if he’d forgotten both of those things. He’d had a completely different view on my fight with Dana – he believed I’d charged in half-cocked and had to be rescued twice. First time she’d panicked, and the second time I’d been holding back. Angel had only bested the mad slayer because he had his entire Angel’s Avengers Squad packed behind him like chattel. “You still needed help,” he said awkwardly.

“Like you never had an off day. Like I’ve never saved your bacon. But do you remember those days? Hell no!”

“I remember,” Angel said, but he looked uncomfortable.

“It’s always been like this, from the second Dru brought me home.” I realized I was complaining, and I hated myself for it, but I was more than a little brassed off. “I follow around doing evil with you, and it was never enough. I wasn’t cruel enough, not inventive enough, not sadistic enough. I was always better than you in the brawl, but that wasn’t good enough. That wasn’t artistry. So I’m just an animal, while you’re an angel of death. Fine. So, now the table’s turned. Now I do good, but that’s not enough, because... why? Because I’m not wasting everyone’s time wallowing in guilt?”

“Exactly!” he said. “You don’t feel the guilt, you shook off the shame, so what makes you any better than you were before?”

“I feel it,” I said quietly. I looked down at my shoes. “I just don’t whinge on about it forever. What good’s that gonna do anyone?” I shrugged. “It pissed Buffy off. She was right, it’s just self-indulgent. I got better things to do.”

He was still staring at me. “It pissed Buffy off?”

I shrugged again. “Feeling all soulfully guilty and longing for forgiveness makes it all about me, don’t it?” I shook my head. “It’s not about me. It was never about me, any of it. Even the soul’s not about me. Never was. Not even about Buffy, in the end.” I looked up at him. “You’re not wrong. I did get it for her. But not as a trophy, and not to get her... back. Not really. I just... wanted to be what she’d want me to be. Even when she was dead and gone... even if I never see her again. I’ll always try to be what she’d want me to be.”

“I try that too,” Angel said quietly. There was a heavy silence between us. We were both seeing her yellow hair bouncing beside the Immortal in that club. “If you lost it,” Angel asked. “Would you want it back?”

I looked at him. “Wanted it in the first place,” I said. “It was hard to bear at first, but I got it mostly worn in now. I think I’d miss it.” I was getting kinda fond of all the little bits and bobs and corners. Subtlety. Nuance. Depth. Yeah, I’d miss all the things the soul had given me. The guilt was a heavy burden, and the conscience limiting my actions, and the modesty I’d acquired, some of that was annoying. But... one night snuggling Buffy had made it more than worth it. I knew it wouldn’t have felt the same without the soul. It couldn’t have. And would I have been living now if I hadn’t had a soul? I was pretty sure the answer to that was no. It was my demon-touched-soul that had been brought back, after all. The body had just been an afterthought. And despite my
occasional suicidal gust of misery, so long as Buffy was somewhere in the world, I was for the most part glad to be alive.

I adjusted my new coat on my shoulders. I was almost relieved about it. No more pretending it was something it wasn’t. The new leather didn’t smell right, didn’t wear right, didn’t feel right. And that was right. It was a new beginning and all. New start, with all the same memories. Hell, yeah. I should have replaced the damn coat the moment I knew it wasn’t the real one. “Don’t you miss it at all when it’s gone?” I asked Angel.

Angel looked away, and I knew the answer was no. I munched on my snack, so the silence didn’t seem too awkward.

“That’s impressive,” he said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“The soul,” he said finally. “That you could choose it. Fight for it, even. That’s...” He swallowed. “Darla... said to me when she was still human... something about having to carry it alone. The soul. And how hard that was.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t carrying it alone, was I,” I said. “I had a big old First Evil taking on you and Dru and Buffy and every bugger I ever killed and beating me over the head with ‘em. I’d have given my teeth to be alone in it.”

“But Buffy wasn’t,” he said. “I never thanked you for that. For picking up the threads I had to drop. It was... hard. Leaving her. But I couldn’t... be near her. I couldn’t trust myself.” He glanced up at me, then looked away again. “Seems I could sort of trust you. I’m glad of that.”

Had he actually just done what it seemed like he’d done? I couldn’t believe it. I wanted to laugh in his face, and say Told you so! I wanted to fawn on him like a sodding minion and say I’d do anything he ever wanted of me, just to make him proud. I wanted to tell him I’d buggered up, and exactly how badly I’d buggered up with Buffy, and ask his forgiveness for it. I wanted to punch him in the face for waiting over one hundred years to say anything like that, and for dribbling it out so grudgingly as he had when he finally did. And I wanted, of all things, to tell the bastard I loved him, too.

The weight between us was suddenly painfully heavy. There was too much history between us for anything this serious. It was gonna drag us down. “So you were an ass, you were still ten times better than the Immortal,” Angel said.

“Oh, yeah, no question,” I said, pouncing on our mutual hatred of the guy. I was so glad he’d brought it up.

“It’s not serious,” he said. “It really can’t be. She’s... she’s not ready, you know?”

I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything. They’d been... snuggling. That dream... not a evil rapist vampire. The Immortal didn’t look like so bad a choice, when I looked at my own history. I took a bite, to cover my confusion.

Angel finally looked at me, and frowned. “What’s that you’re eating?”

I looked down at the package in my hand. I hadn’t really thought about it. I’d mostly grabbed it for texture, to spice up the blood. “Coupla biscuits.”

“Huh?”
Right. He’d spent more time in America than I had in the last hundred years. To him biscuits had turned into some kind of scone. “Some cookies,” I said. “There’s one left, want it?”

Angel stared at me, as if he was watching me eat a toddler, post-soul-having. His fist clenched slowly, but not in fighting mode. Just... steeling himself for some reason. “No.” He took a swallow of his blood and stared out the necro-tempered glass window at the sunlit world. The world Buffy and the Immortal could walk in, but we common vampires couldn’t. “No. I don’t.”
Buffy came out of her trance laughing. We’d all been nervous about her, since Xander swore she was supposed to be coming out with him, and without an anchor anything could happen to her spirit. In theory she was only going down into her own self, but this trance did have the potential to send her to other dimensions, if she got very lost. She could have been anywhere, on any plane of reality, and unable to find her way back to her body. She could have ended up comatose. But Ripper had said he’d keep chanting until his voice gave out, and he kept going. He had already been hoarse.

Then Buffy popped her eyes open with a gasp, not unlike what it was like when I came back to life. She chuckled when the Thessan testicular orb sparkled a bit, and then went dim. “You got it?”

Ripper sagged. He panted, but Dawn answered for him. “We got it,” she said.

Buffy got up and made Ripper lie down. He was so tired he was starting to look his age, which was a shame, ’cause he was still a damn handsome bugger. “Let me take care of him,” I told Buffy.

“Okay.” Buffy kissed her watcher’s pale cheek, whispered him a thank you, and left him to me.

Once the other three had gone I helped Ripper undress and got him into bed. I’d done this before, but the last time I’d done this for the man he’d been black-out drunk and a good thirty years younger. His arms had been rubber and his eyes unfocused because of alcohol. This time, it was because he’d overextended himself. For Buffy. “You’re not the sorcerer you pretend to be, are you,” I chided him.

“I don’t... pretend,” Ripper said quietly. “I know rituals, binding and summoning, mostly. More binding. Demons... watchers have to... bind sometimes. This... wasn’t as difficult as... if I’d called the soul from another dimension... I only had to reach Buffy.”

“That’s been pretty hard to do, lately.”
“How did you get to her?” Ripper asked.

I put the covers over him. “She got to me. She’s been wounded – deeply, deeply wounded by all of you. But inherently she’s a very social creature. She wants to have connections, friendships, have her relationships have meaning beyond business.”

“What business?”

“Sex partner or watcher or co-worker or family. Inside she wants a lover, and a father, and a friend, and a sister. Not what people do for her, but who they are. When there’s no emotion to it, it pains her.” I smiled. “One of the things I love about her.”

“And you two are...? Why are you wanting to... Spike?”

The magic had terribly drained him. “Because I can’t be what she needs, Ripper. Spike already is, or was. He will be again, if I can do anything about it. I can’t turn myself into what she needs. Spike already did.”

“Did he?”

I laughed. “It would shock me if he didn’t. William the Bloody always reinvented himself for everyone he loved. He was happier that way. As for what he’d turn himself into for Buffy... god help the evildoer if he ever loved her.” I shook my head. “He’d be everything she needed, and more.”

“And you... want to give her... what she needs?”

I smiled at him. “Don’t you?”

He looked so tired, and so old... when I knew he wasn’t, really. The world weighed heavy on his shoulders. Buffy was his weakness. He could have killed himself pulling this off. I think Buffy had already realized that.

“Oh, god,” Ripper said suddenly. “I stood Andrew up!”

I laughed. “He’s out with his two favorite slayer buddies on your tab. I’m sure he did fine. Get some sleep, Ripper.” I set his glasses on the bedside table and gently touched his cheek. If things went the way I meant them to go, I might not see him for a while.

I went back out. Buffy was holding the Thessan Orb, and Dawn was holding the Anamatte crystal up to the light. Xander was looking incredibly content, with both the Summers girls curled up on either side of him. Buffy looked exhausted, with her scorched hair and her slowly healing burns. Xander had pulled up the box he’d brought with him. Apparently he’d stopped at Buffy’s place, and Andrew had directed him here, after Dawn left.

“Jack, hey. You and Buffy forgot this, earlier,” Xander said. He pushed it across the table at me

“What is it?” Buffy asked.

“Willow... um... maybe I shouldn’t say,” Xander said. “Is it after midnight yet?”

“Yeah.”

“Then Jack, you’re the one to open it. You cool with that?”

I shrugged. I opened the box. Inside was a letter from Willow, with a big sign on it, “Open Me
First!” I glanced through the letter, and then passed it to Buffy. Under that was an unmarked cardboard box, taped shut. It was heavy, and I knew better than to open it, after Willow’s letter. And underneath that... “Oh, she really shouldn’t have.”

“I don’t think she did,” Xander said. “I think that’s from you.”

Buffy laughed at the slightly embarrassed look on my face. “Is time travel always like this?” she asked.

“About a third of the time. The other two thirds are even worse.”

I pulled out my gift. An RAF coat, my size, smelling slightly of damp must and gunpowder and coffee... the Torchwood hub. Oh. It was that coat. Well, that made sense. It had to have gone somewhere. That was nice. So nice I nearly teared up at the thought. I ran my hand down it. So it didn’t come from Ianto, it still....

“Go on, Jack,” Buffy said. “Put it on. You know you’re not yourself without it.”

“Okay.” I flung the coat around my shoulders and stood up.

Buffy watched me, as I put Captain Jack Harkness back on. Suddenly her breath caught, and she surged up and kissed me. “What was that for?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you in a bit,” she whispered.

“I should get going,” I said. “Some things I need to do before I hit the Janus gate.”

“Stay a bit,” Buffy said.

“Yeah, I brought food,” Dawn said. “You shouldn’t time-travel on an empty stomach.”

We sat, and rested, and ate. I wasn’t opposed to putting off my trip. This wasn’t going to be fun.

Buffy was a different person around Xander. Willow’s letter I thought had helped quite a bit, too. Buffy was easy going, she cracked jokes. Lots of jokes. Some really bad puns. The grieving young woman was still there, but there was something else inside her. Something younger, and full of fun. Whatever it was that had made her laugh when she came out of that trance, I realized had reset her to some extent. She was more the person she had been when she and Xander had been young Scoobies together. Her experiences, the war against evil, all of that was still with her. But she no longer seemed closed off from what she had been.

“You seem a lot more hopeful about this than you were when we started.”

Buffy grinned at me. “Someone tried to stop me.”

“What?”

“That was what happened, when I didn’t come back with Xander. Someone, somewhere, tried to stop me.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t believe it before now. I couldn’t, it all seemed too good to be true. But the thing is... no one ever wanted me to have Spike. No one. Not you, not Willow, not even Tara thought it was a good idea,” she said to Xander.

“Hey, I was never opposed to you and Spike!” Dawn said. “Well... not until after he chained you up, anyway.”

Xander looked uncomfortable. “You gotta admit I had a point, Buff. I mean, vampire. After the
whole thing with Angel went south, you can see why I’d be leery of you going down that path again.”

“And yet you were all pro-Riley, the gun-toting bite-addict on amphetamines who thought torturing sentient creatures was a-okay.”

“Buffy, I think we’ve already addressed my not-being-perfect-judgement-guy here tonight, haven’t we? It’s not like I didn’t have reasons.”

“I don’t want to go over the past, really,” Buffy said. “It’s just... I couldn’t believe it could be that easy. Hell, even I used to fight against me and Spike. By the end, even he was fighting it. And I went, and I found that little fragment, and you were helping, and Xander, and Giles, and Dawn, and it was like... it can’t work. And then someone tried to stop me.”

“Who?”

Buffy shrugged. “Fate, time, the Powers That Be. Maybe it was my own psyche, even. Something. I’m not sure what happened, all I know is that I had to fight. And if I have to fight for it... maybe it’s real.” She looked over at Xander. “Cordy was there.”

“Cordelia?”

“Yeah. Did you know she became part demon?”

Xander sighed and stared at the ceiling. “Yeah, I had heard that.” He looked at me. “Jack, do I just have demon mate tattooed on my forehead, in some kind of pheremone I can’t detect? Because that would make so much sense.”

“He and Cordy had a thing in high school,” Buffy told me.

I knew nothing about this Cordelia, other than that Angel had called Buffy when she’d died. “Well, I don’t know about the demons, but I think you’re pretty cute,” I said to Xander.

“No!” Buffy snapped. She grabbed the now-blushing Xander and dragged him over her to the other side of the sofa, putting herself and Dawn between me and Xander. “Absolutely not, you are not going to sleep with anyone else I know, Jack. It’s already getting way too creepy. You never dated a werewolf called Oz, did you?”

I smirked. “If the answer is yes, would you actually want me to tell you?”

“No!” said Xander, Buffy, and Dawn all in unison.

“Though it would be really funny if he ever dated Riley,” Dawn added.

“He’d never have dated Riley,” Buffy said.

“Who’s this Riley?”

“My ex,” Buffy said. “That guy I mentioned who couldn’t deal with my being a slayer. He couldn’t have dealt with you being immortal, or... well, frankly, he’d have freaked out if he thought he was even a little homo-inclined, no matter how hot you are, Jack. Spike always said Riley had the personality of... of that.” She pointed at the cardboard box on the table.

“That’s an intricate and extremely volatile spell matrix,” Xander said.

“I just meant the box,” Buffy said.
“So, how did this get here tonight?” Dawn asked. “And why did you show up, Xander? Is this some kind of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey weirdness I’m not getting?”

“Um... Jack...?” Xander asked. “How much am I allowed to say at this point?”

“Go for it,” I said. “We’re in time-paradox happy-land by now, and I’m pretty much committed.”

“Well, you made a big deal about not interrupting the time-streams and stuff.”

“And as I once said, ‘Time is like a river. You can throw in the occasional shopping trolley, and it’ll still get to the ocean.’ I think we’re far enough along now we have a pretty good idea what’s happening.”

“You called me on Skype just after Willow had finished this spell. We were about to call Buffy, and you said wait. That it wasn’t time yet.”

“And you just believed me?” I said.

“Well, I knew you were dating Buffy, and you weren’t making us wait real long. Willow only did this like a month ago.”

“What happened a month ago?”

“Fred died,” Xander said.

Buffy looked like she’d been struck. “Fred? How are all the others? Wes? Lorne?”

“I thought you didn’t want us staying in contact with Angel’s team.”

Buffy looked sad. “I can’t... trust... Wolfram and Hart,” she said. “I can’t. That doesn’t mean I want them to...” She looked at Xander. “What happened to Fred?”

“That I don’t know, but Willow says the outer-planes are really sure that there’s nothing that can be done. Her soul’s been... gutted or something. By something powerful.”

Buffy reached down and picked up the Orb of Thessulah. “Maybe... maybe she’s...”

“If it was anything like that,” Dawn said, “whatever held what was left of her would have to want to grow her soul back. And... this really isn’t our fight.”

“But it seems to have gotten tangled up in us, anyway,” Buffy said. She looked up at me. “Jack? Are you... ready?”

“I have to stop by and see Ilona before I go,” I said. I knew Buffy didn’t want a single slayer to set foot in the Wolfram and Hart offices. “Your apartment is on the way, you want I should leave you there?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Buffy said. “But don’t you dare leave without me. I want to say goodbye. Properly.”

I liked that idea.

“I should write Spike a letter,” she realized. “So at least he’s not confused by the whole time-paradox, you-have-to-stay-away-from-me thing.”
“Good idea.”

“Can I write one, too?” Dawn asked.

“Sure.”

“I’ll stay here,” Xander said. “Sleep on the couch, be here for Giles when he wakes up.”

“Thanks, Xanman,” Buffy said. Buffy and Dawn both hugged Xander hard before they left.

“Um... Jack?” Xander asked as I was about to follow them. I hung back and raised an eyebrow.

“Thanks for doing this. For Buffy. But. Um. Why are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... you’re dating. And bringing Spike back would... pretty much mean you won’t be able to be dating anymore.” Which just went to show how very provincial and 21st century Xander was with his monogamy taboos, but I let that slide. “I mean... why are you doing this for Buffy, when it means you’ll never have her?”

“Why are you?” I asked.

“She’s my friend. I love her.”

I smiled. “Answered your own question, Harris,” I said. “Thanks for keeping an eye on Ripper for me.”

I dropped Dawn and Buffy off outside their apartment before I stopped by Wolfram and Hart.

“Ah, yes, yes, The Immortal,” Ilona said as I strode into her offices. “I half expected you this evening, my old... ah... friend. I will handle this, personally,” she announced to the other lawyers, looked at me with her sultry barracuda eyes, led me into her office, locked the door, and beamed!

It was a lot easier letting everyone think we had a sexual relationship than admit that we were family. No one at Wolfram and Hart knew what Ilona and I were to each other. It was safer that way. “I almost expected you to arrive and make a play for Angelus earlier,” she told me.

“Buffy was a little stressed out by him. They used to—”

“Ah! Yes. The slayer, Angelus used to be so fond of,” Ilona said. “Angel,” she amended. “He prefers Angel these days. I must thank you so, Papa, for this most delightful jest!”

“Have fun with him, did you?”

“They were charming, Papa, breathtaking, I tell you, the—”


Ilona looked alarmed. “Time travel again, Papa? You’ve only just recovered, it seems.”

Recovering from the Janus gate always did take an absurd amount of time, compared to any other death. “It only feels that way, gattina,” I said. I’d called her kitten since she was a baby. “I need information on an amulet given to Angel as part of his deal with Wolfram and Hart. I just need to know what you know.”

And that was when things got complicated. Ilona tracked down the information, and found...
nothing.

“Nothing?”

Ilona shook her head. “Angelus signed his contract in exchange for a memory block about his son,” Ilona said. “Ah, that’s classified to top brass, by the way,” she added, pretty much pleading with me not to mention it. She’d be in trouble if she was found to have revealed it. “There’s no mention of any type of amulet.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I know Wolfram and Hart was involved, there was a whole file.”

“Well…” Ilona asked me. “How did you plan on working with this? If you thought Wolfram and Hart were part of the exchange?”

“I… I thought I’d go back in time and arrange something through you. It was only a year ago. You’re telling me you didn’t?”

Ilona shook her head. “Though… there are time lines involved, no? Perhaps I haven’t yet, and my timeline is fluid?”

“The more I play with this, the more solid it seems to be getting.” I eyed my daughter. She was looking so grown-up these days. I hadn’t asked about Spike yet. I’d been afraid to. I was still afraid to. If I heard that Spike wasn’t alive, then that could be the self-fulfilling prophecy that ended this endeavor before it began. What could I ask her? “Angel,” I said. “What does Wolfram and Hart know of him?”

Ilona raised her eyebrow. “Do you want the entire library?”

I rolled my eyes. Two hundred years of history could take lifetimes to research. “What is Wolfram and Hart’s interest in him?” I asked. “What are the Senior Partners after?”

“That I’m not entirely sure,” Ilona said. “There’s a prophecy, Angelus, the vampire with the soul. He is meant to play a deep part in the apocalypse. The Powers That Be have claimed him for their side, the Senior Partners want him for their own.”

“And your opinion?”

“My job is to keep Rome, and Italy,” my daughter said. “Safe and trouble free. For you and for my children.”

I dismissed the Powers as being incidental to what was actually before my eyes right now. “Your opinion on Angel, and what the Senior Partners want of him?”

“They want him corrupted, not dead,” Ilona said. “From what I have seen… stalking and chasing down a girl who has rejected him, because she had begun to date you? They have succeed in their agenda of corruption.”

“Corrupted,” I said. “They want his soul turned to evil?”

“Or lost,” she said. “They tried a few times to have it burned from him with an old lover. Ah….” She went looking through a file for a name.

“Darla,” I said. It had to be Darla. If it was for Angel, and they didn’t use Buffy, it would have to be Darla.
“Yes. The attempt backfired, as I understand.”

They were trying to burn out his soul.... “Did they ever think of using an Anamatte Crystal?” I asked.

“Ah....” Ilona cross referenced the file on her laptop. “There was some reference to searching for one. Never found one in time. Now that he works for the Senior Partners, they seem to feel he’s been corrupted enough. They haven’t been trying on him any longer.” She pushed the file away from her. “I think they’ve become complacent about him. As they have with me. Much safer place to be, right under their noses. It’s harder to be seen there.”

Ilona had had a terrible time with Wolfram and Hart before they’d hired her. She was never at ease here, though you wouldn’t have thought as much from her powerhouse performance outside this office.

What was I going to do? I’d had several stops to make on this train-trip through destiny, and it seemed the first station on the track didn’t exist. Wolfram and Hart hadn’t actually given Angel the amulet.

But they had.

“Who made the offer to Angel?” I asked. “Who was their liaison? Who gave him the job?”

Ilona looked that up. “One of our infernal operatives, Lilah Morgan.”

“Infernal operatives?”

“One whose contract signed on loyalty beyond death,” Ilona said.

“How does that work?”

“Psi-energy saturated with a tracer, and pulled back into reanimated flesh after release,” Ilona said. “They’re hard to maintain in this dimension, so they’re usually kept in... well, hell. But they can be brought back for specific functions. Nasty business. We’ve phased it out in Rome.”

“This Lilah... did she know Angel before she died?”

“Si. I think that’s why she was tapped. I guess they thought a familiar face could make the offer more appealing.” Ilona pulled up Lilah’s file. “Ah. That’s interesting. It would seem Angelus killed her.”

“Killed her?” I looked at the file. “Well, fed from her. Some indication she might have already been dead.”

“Probably revivable before the vampire got hold of her, but yes,” Ilona said. “Does that have meaning, Papa?”

I thought it probably did. “When did she die?” I looked at the dates. “Can I keep this file?” I asked.

“Of course, Papa,” she said. “It’s only a copy.”

I’d thought it was going to be easy, but now I was going to have to think outside the box. I was frustrated, but not hopeless. I couldn’t use Ilona for the transfer.... But if my hunch was correct, it meant I’d have to set the Janus Gate for an earlier time than a year ago. I couldn’t just drop the
When I got back to Buffy’s apartment, Andrew was the one who greeted me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you and Buffy were dating other people?” he demanded the moment he opened the door.

I blinked. That was not what I’d expected to hear. “Cause it wasn’t your business?”

“But it was,” Andrew looked hurt. “I... I thought you two were... you know. Exclusive.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I knew it was awful of me, but god! Andrew’d been begging for it from the moment I first saw him. I grabbed him by the head and pulled him into a kiss. There was no tongue – he wasn’t up for that, I knew – much more of an Italian familial thing than anything romantic, but as I pulled away I realized it might well have been Andrew’s first. He stared at me in a mixture of awe and bewilderment. “Do I look like the exclusive type?” I asked.

Andrew stammered something. Then he elaborated on his stammer. He clarified that with an incoherent mumble. It was adorable. I kissed him again and then went in to Buffy.

Buffy had a very happy look on her face, for a girl in bandages. She’d changed into something loose fitting and comfortable. “I wrote Spike’s letter. I hope he’ll understand, he’s really insecure.”

“I think whatever you had to say will be fine,” I said. I planned on waiting as long as I could before I brought him back. The less time he spent as a ghost, or trying to understand his resurrection on his own, the better for him. As we crossed the town to the Janus gate she snuggled up to me in a way she had never done in a taxi before. Buffy was snuggly? More than just collapsed in grief, she was... affectionate? If there had been anything that could tell me I was doing the right thing for her, this was it. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t thank me yet, I haven’t succeeded.”

She put her arms around me. “Yes, you have.”

“How would you know?”

“Xander, Willow, Dawn, Giles. They’ve all come forward for this. I think... I think I have my family back.” She looked up at me. “That’s why I kissed you earlier, so sudden. That’s... that’s all on you.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

She stared at me. “You brought me back to life.”

I brushed a tendril of her scorched hair out of her face. Andrew had trimmed it for her (that man had talents he could not see) into a fashionable pixie cut. “I think you may have done the same for me,” I said. “You know, I’ll miss you.”

“You won’t be gone long.”

She hadn’t figured out what I meant to do. Better that way, I supposed. “No, I guess I won’t.”

We walked down the aisle and beneath the altar to the threshold of the Janus Gate for the second time that evening. It was hard to believe it was the same night... but it was. When the sun set, Buffy
had been grieving the death of the man she loved. I hoped, hoped beyond hope, that by the time the sun rose, that death would be no more.

But we still had a few more hours before sunrise. I took Buffy to my small military bed, and we made the most of them.

When I finally tore myself away, Buffy was soft and glowing. We had to be careful, with her burns, but I would have been tender for this night, anyway. It was going to have to sustain me for a long while. Then I donned my timeless uniform, hitched my coat around my shoulders, and kissed my slayer one last time. I collected the witch’s box, Dawn and Buffy’s letter, the Orb of Thessolah and the Champion’s Crystal, and Ilona’s abbreviated files on the Angel saga. I calibrated the gate to the time I needed to travel to, took a deep breath, and –

And Buffy stopped me with one last kiss. She stood right at the edge of the gate, so close if she was anyone else I’d have been terrified for her. But she was Buffy, the vampire slayer. She knew how close she could stand to death and walk away unscathed. Her kiss tasted of courage, and loss, and hope, and power. Her eyes, when I pulled away, were young in years, aged with pain, and heavy with the weight of the world.

The world I didn’t care about anymore.

Except for her.

“Thank you,” she whispered one more time. “I....”

I knew what she meant. I knew it was so hard for her to say. The poor girl had had that word so poisoned, had so many ugly needs attached to it. I’d known another who could never say it, either, and there hadn’t been a single person he’d ever met whom he hadn’t loved. Maybe that was why the word was so hard. Like the Doctor, Buffy loved... everyone.

And that was why I loved her.

“Love you, too,” I said. “I’ll see you soon.”

And I stepped through the gate.

My last sight before the gate snuffed my life away was of Buffy glowing and grateful and full of hope. That was how I needed to see her.

‘Cause I was going to be gone for a long time.
“Keep me in a daydream,” I sang, bringing Superstition to a fever pitch, even though there wasn’t enough audience to really appreciate it. Despite the dead crowd, this was one of my favorite places in LA, now that Caritas was out of commission. As far as demon bars went, mine had been better. This place was a dive. But it had something of a similar feel, and sometimes... hell. Sometimes I just needed to get my groove on.

“Keep me goin' strong. You don't wanna save me, sad is my song.” I was doing my Stevie Wonder pretty wonderful, if I did say so myself. This place only had karaoke on Sundays, but that worked out fine for me.

And apparently for the guy at the bar, who had been enjoying listening to my little impromptu set. The stage had been empty before I showed up. It would stay empty after I left. But he kept smiling at me, and I enjoyed smiling back at him.

“When you believe in things that you don't understand, Then you suffer, Superstition ain't the way.”

The guy was a real looker, a true movie star type. I got down off the stage to find that he’d already bought me a drink. That was kinda sweet. “Hi, there. Bartender said Sea Breeze,” he said.

“Absolutely, Tinker-Tailor,” I said as I slid up onto the bar beside him. “Nice looking coat. So. What side of the pond did you crawl out of, sweet cheeks?”

“A lot of different places,” he said. “You must know what that’s like. Not seen many Jadeans on this planet before.”

“Oh,” he said. He frowned. “Didn’t know Pyleans could sing.”

“I’m unique,” I said with a grin.

“I could tell.”

“You seem pretty unique yourself, hot stuff,” I said. “Never seen a guy who looked at me without a blink before, ‘less they were demons themselves, or thought it was all make-up. You’re not a demon hunter, are you?”

I realized I was setting myself up for a fall with that one, but he only grinned, showing off a smile any toothpaste company would have killed to trademark. “Not at the moment,” he said. “So you classify yourself as demon, not alien?” he asked. “Don’t know much about Pylea.”

“Dimensional portal, not alien space-craft,” I said. “‘Round here that all means demon. More demon-centric ‘round here, anyway. LA’s a hotbed for diversity. There’s a hellmouth up north, too.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” he said. “So, what’s a hot demon like you doing in a dive like this?”

I laughed. “That’s your best line?”

“I had a hard trip to get here,” he said. “I’m too tired to think up anything more clever, and I figured it was better to be obvious than ineffective. So. What you doing here?”

“You mean here, or on Earth?”

He shrugged. “I was just trying to start a conversation, so whichever’s your pleasure.”

I laughed. “Just blew in on the wind, stranger.”

He smiled, a loin-clenching thing with a lot of weight to it. “Me too.”

“Nah,” I said. “Sometimes I just need to sing. I used to run this karaoke bar, Caritas? It’s... been kinda thrown into chaos a few too many times, but–”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard of Caritas,” he said. “I was pissed off it was closed. That was yours?”

“Yep,” I said. “I thought about calling it Lorne’s Lounge, but... seemed a little self-aggrandizing, and didn’t really have the... flair I was looking for, you know?”

“Caritas was legendary,” he said, and I beamed, flattered beyond words. Suffice it to say, the guy had charmed me already. “I heard about it all the way in Britain. I was told it was the best place for a hook-up this side of the Rockies, if you were into something more than... well... plain Jane.”

“Brought in every demon from the man-eaters to the fluffy-bunnies,” I said. “Which was a problem when they were the same thing.”

He laughed. “I’m a bit of a man-eater at times,” he said. “Figuratively speaking.”

“Yeah, I thought you might be.” I sipped at my Sea Breeze. He’d made sure it was made with a real grapefruit. We chatted a bit. He spun me some yarn about being here on business, but I knew whatever it was was personal. I’d started to be curious about him. As an empath, I was often drawn to people who would have a meaning or effect on my life, and this guy was ringing enough bells to make me think it was Christmas morning. But I couldn’t quite get enough out of him unless I could get him to sing.
Fortunately, he wasn’t the shy type. I talked about Vegas, he started talking about the Rat Pack, I mentioned Dean Martin, he hinted something about his rumored sexuality, I mentioned Pyleans were a little ambisexual, he said something about people being far too categorized in this century, I said Barbra Streisand, he said Gloria Gaynor, and before I knew it the man was up on stage singing *I Am What I Am* with a vodka martini in his hand, and I was sighing wistfully before he was done, because I was pretty damn sure the rest of this evening was not going to go the way either of us wanted it to.

Damn shame, too. He had some sweet, sweet pipes.

“Oh, man,” I told him when he sat back down. “That was a dream come out of a vision come out of a flashback sequence from a Broadway musical,” I said.

“Thanks.”

“My ass is just pounding. Oh, that’s, ah... where I keep my heart.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “That could be very interesting.”

“Really, that was some kinda crooning, buddy. I-I almost don’t care that you’re about to drug me.”

Jack looked at me strangely. “I am, am I?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And why am I about to do that?”

“Cause I’m about to inform you that I’m an empath demon who can see the patterns of the future. And, ah... that Angel is kinda my boss.” Jack looked he’d just run out of shampoo or something, that kind of annoyed disappointment. “Or landlord. Or... tangled into my future in a way that makes me cringe in horror when I look at it, but you know, I try not to read too much into the bleak. I mean, Angel sees bleak in the sweetest cocktail party you can imagine.” I frowned at Jack. “How the hell do you know him?”

“I don’t think I’d better tell you too much,” he said.

“Like I said, you’re about to drug me. No chance of it damaging my vocal cords, is it? ‘Cause I have a concert in two days. Tiny little gig, but I’m hoping to pick up enough for the end of the month.”

“It’s harmless,” he said. “Called retcon, it’ll make you a little sleepy, and then you’ll forget this evening. Not even any hangover.”

“Sounds like it could be the perfect date-rape drug.”

“I suppose it could be,” Jack said. “But I’d never use it for that.”

“Yeah,” I said, annoyed. “Though you’re gonna take my memories anyway.”

“It’s only for safety,” he said. “For you, and for the world, too, if you caught as much as I think you might have.” I believed him, but it still bothered me. I didn’t want to forget meeting him. “Really, won’t hurt you. Promise.”

“I buy it,” I said. “You’re usually one of the good guys, I could tell.”
He laughed. I knew he didn’t believe that. “If you’re going to sleep with me, I’d want you to remember. Hell, you’d wanna remember. The drug’s not painful or anything, and you never miss the time. Wanna see a capsule?”

“Oh, yeah.” He handed one to me, and I looked it over. It did look harmless enough. “And this’ll make me forget all about you, huh?”

“Yeap,” Jack said with regret. “And let your brain fill in the gap with whatever makes the most sense to you. Dissolves tastelessly in any liquid, and there are no side-effects. Well, not with occasional use. Shame. I was... kinda enjoying the evening.”

“We could just skip the drugging part.”

“We’re not going to.”

“I see the future all the time.”

“Possible futures,” Jack said, “and I’m still feeling this little jaunt out. Really – Lorne, was it? There’s lives at stake. The wrong person knows the wrong thing in this, and the wrong person will die.”

I was more sad than anything else. I could have used a good night with a sexy man, and from his aura, his song, and just his eyes, I could tell Jack could, too. “Wish we could skip it.”

“I can’t risk it.”

“I know that.” I set the capsule down. “Thanks for being honest about it.”

“You already know all about it, apparently,” he said. “Empath, huh?”

I shrugged. “Kinda hard to classify what I do. Easier to call it empathy than anything else. You bare your soul when you sing. Each soul has a path it’s on. I can see where it is, where its headed, and what the likelihood of all of it is. And you’re a sweet transvestite of a future happening, Jack. And apparently you’re planning on getting all up in Angel’s face and mucking about with his destiny, so...”

“Hey, I’m just trying to save a friend of mine.”

“I caught that, sweetcakes. You don’t mean anyone any real harm. But you’ve also got a crush on Angel’s sweetie.”

“Ex-sweetie,” he said. “Buffy’s been over Angel for some time, I understand.”

“Angel’s not made for finally found the love of a lifetime,” I said. “I knew that the first time he brought over a girl to sing for me. That Darla chick, she was a sweet set, but—”

“I know,” he said. “All about the stamina, that one.”

I eyed him again. He was old, I knew that. Old beyond thought already, and he was going to be older than the stars before he was through, poor guy. “Well, let me tell you, handsome, I think I owe you a thanks. ‘Cause if you hadn’t decided to turn on the time paradox, we’d have a nasty strain of apocalypse on our hands.”

“What do you mean?”

“I see paths of the future,” I said. “And in your sweet tune I see two of them. One where you’re
somewhere filing your nails, and this one where you seem to be right in the thick of it. And in the one where you’re nowhere, I see death. Lots of death. I see a hundred little girls slaughtered one by one. I see Buffy and her little buddies eaten up by some super-vamps of death. Even Angel might get caught up in that fight – like he doesn’t have enough on his plate here, with our future slouching toward hellfire.”


I frowned. “No... there’s no future where that’s a problem. It’s that other souled vampire’s sacrifice for the slayer that takes that one out. The big bad in a path of redemption through sacrifice for love, that’s what sounds the death knell of the First. I mean, that’s an epic story, that’s The Last Temptation of Christ meets Blade.” I chuckled. Angel trying to step into the middle of that. It was adorable how he still thought true love was a high school crush. Whatever Buffy had with that other guy... that was very adult and very real, and it was only something that big which could take out the First Evil.

“But the hellmouth, that’s another story. In one version it stays open, vomiting vampires up and eating a whole slew of little girls before the slayer line manages to quell it. And in another version... it’s just swallowed up in a great big crater, and that’s enough of that story.” I smiled up at Jack. “And it seems you’re all happy with the crater idea.”

“Is that a good plan?”

“Seems to be,” I said. “Sounds like my favorite reboot. I’d rather that then a whole bunch of super-vamps scattering like an ant’s nest all over California, slaughtering their way through the populous.” I regarded him. “And you want the hellmouth closed, Angel safe here out of the way, the Slayer free of that burden, and everything all nicely tied up and ended.”

“I want Buffy free of another burden too,” he said. “What about the vampire? Can I bring him back?”

“If you stick on course, and hurry it up,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got an orb that’s meant for a soul to pass through it, not to hold a soul indefinitely,” I said. “Let it sit there for too long, and the thing will crumble before you bring the vamp back.”

Jack looked horrified. “How long have I got?”

“You’ll make it to your apocalypse,” I said. “But not for too many days after.” I frowned. “Whole thing is a bit of a house of cards, isn’t it? I mean... what, he can’t be saved if the girl knows he’s been saved?” That was gonna make some troubles. From what I’d read in Jack’s song, I was going to know this vampire and pretty well, too. How the hell was that gonna play out? How would I manage not to try and tell the girl her honey was hanging around? Didn’t match my nature, to hide someone’s love, not even on Angel’s say-so. Still, maybe something would happen and I’d be too busy or crazy or... or maybe I’d remember just enough of this night despite the retcon to know to keep my Pylean mouth shut.

That made more sense than anything else.

Something else didn’t sit right, though. “You’re not down with the Powers, are you.”

“And you are?” he asked.
“I’ve discovered they can make some serious waves if you get in their way.”

“Yeah, well. I knew a Time Lord once. You know what he told me is the best way to handle fate? *Run!*”

I shrugged. “I’m all down with making your own destiny, but you might be mucking with someone else’s.”

“Whose?”

“Angel. Your other guy... the souled vampire Buffy has on staff? I think he’s meant to die, not to come back. That would make him a champion, like Angel. Now Angel’s got a pretty powerful destiny lined up. Another souled vampiric champion might really throw that destiny out of whack.”

“Is that my problem?”

I considered this. “Angel’s destiny’s been stolen before without ending the planet,” I mused. “You know... in exchange for closing the hellmouth and saving the life of Angel’s sweet slayer-ex... I think destiny can handle a spanner in the works.”

Jack was surprised. “Buffy’s life is in danger?”

“I thought you already knew that.”

Jack shook his head. “You’re saying if I don’t go through with this damn plan, the slayer dies?”

“There’s life and there’s life,” I said. “One life you know. In one life, you love her. In the other...” I shrugged. “There’s no saying what would happen. But I don’t like the look of it, pal.”

“And in that other life, with the death and the destruction and only one souled vampire... that’s the one where destiny’s all clear,” Jack said. “And this one that I’m making now, that’s the one against the great cosmic plan?”

I shrugged. “There are clear paths and murky ones. The clear paths are where The Powers have marked out the trail. When you decide to cross-country fate, there’s no telling what might happen. This other vampire...”

“Spike.”

“Spike. Well, he’s not meant to be. Not meant to be with Buffy, not meant to be anymore at all once the show’s over and the fat lady finishes her pretty aria.”

“But without me breaking up this plan,” Jack said, “you get Buffy in trouble, and Angel maybe eaten up, too. So what would that do to the pretty destiny path?”

I shrugged. “I really don’t know, sweetcheeks.”

“You know...” he said, sounding *seriously* annoyed. “I don’t know what destiny thinks it’s got planned, but it sounds like it set up a bunch of half-assed ideas without thinking through what any of that means to their own continuity or the personalities or opinions of the people involved. It sounds like some jerk somewhere said, ‘Oh, that’ll look neat!’ grabbed a bunch of action figures off the shelf and started parading them around the chessboard, yanking in Barbie and a plastic T-Rex and a whole barrel of monkeys. Meanwhile the big players, people like me, and Buffy, and Angel, we end up having to make wild gambits. And somewhere along the lines, innocent lives are lost for no good reason while we’re trying to win *someone else’s game*!”
The man had a point. “I can see why you want to throw over the table, Jack,” I said. I’d seen some of his history. The guy was seriously in self-loathing-ville. It made Angel and his brooding look like a St. Paddy’s day parade, complete with sparkling green sequins. Thing was, Jack handled his guilt and misery like a pro, shaking it off and walking on, where Angel still wrestled with his daily in what was comparatively guilt/misery amateur hour. Jack’s guilt was to Angel’s the way his fabulous singing was to that... quacking Angel did to Barry Manilow.

“And to top it all off,” Jack said with annoyance, “the best prospect I’ve found in LA I’m gonna have to retcon, and the rest of my night’s gonna suck. And not in the good way.”

I was... extremely flattered, to say the least. “We could always wait on the retcon until morning,” I suggested. “I mean, I’m kinda agreeing to it at this point.”

“I’m not doing that,” Jack said. He took a sip of his martini. “I messed up with someone once, and he ended up feeling raped. I’d need you to remember me.”

“Shame we can’t measure it until just before you sang,” I said. “Cause... if I had to fill in a most-likely-memory from that point, it would most surely include an evening... not entirely alone. Or even better, just take a bite out of the night from the point you sang, and start over without any crooning. I mean... unless you think I wouldn’t like you without that... admittedly fine set of vocal cords you got.”

Jack stared at me for a long moment. “I can measure it down to minutes,” he said, all energy. “That pill there will only eat an hour. How long ago did I sing?”

I looked at the clock. When I looked back, Jack had on his toothpaste commercial grin again. “Looks like this evening won’t be so bad after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Here is a clip of Andy Hallett singing Superstitious, and one of John Barrowman singing I Am What I Am. Enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrPEgUH_Y0I
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW-AxyBQ1kA
Ace of Diamonds

Chapter Summary

Lilah

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Angel, season 4, before Habeas Corpses

Lilah

Work is exhausting, life is wearing, and there are precious few joys in any of it. “I’m just getting home now,” I say into my cell phone. I’m glad Wes has called. “Yeah, another late night. Why? Were you hoping I’d get into my car and come to your place instead?”

“Mm,” he says. “No.”

He’s reluctant. I can’t say I blame him. I make him think about things he doesn’t want to admit about himself. The fact that I want him... well. There are things I don’t want to admit about myself, either. I joined Wolfram and Hart because I needed the support, and I loved my mother, and I couldn’t bear to watch her fall anymore. I sold my soul (figuratively. I still held it, though apparently the Senior Partners had an option for lease upon my death) for money and safety, but it was because I was human. Because I loved.

Wes... was... adorable. All that pain and all that grief and all that loneliness, and I wanted to wrap myself in him, and let it hum. I never admitted it. We didn’t talk about it. But I was with Wes because we felt exactly the same about... life. About everything. There were things he had lost that he would never get back. There were things I would never get back, either.

But I wanted him. And he, whether he wanted to or not, wanted me.

“No, huh.” I set my purse on the table by the door and wander into the kitchen. Wes got off on phone sex, and frankly so did I, that prim British accent of his getting all hot and bothered and sultry, knowing I was making him hard from over a mile away, sliding into his life when I wasn’t even there. Yeah. “Seems a shame. I’m all tired and sweaty from a day working. Ready to just... melt into bed....”

“What are you wearing?”

“The brown dress suit,” I say. “You know, the powersuit.”
“The one with the zipper on the hip?”

“Uh-huh,” I say. “I’m in my kitchen now.” I reach into the fridge. “I’m pulling out some
strawberries.”

“Are you.”

“Mm-hmm. They’ve been in the fridge and they’re nice and cold.”

“Are they wet?” Wesley asks with a low tilt to his voice.

“Not yet,” I breathe. “Want me to wash them?”

“Yeah...” he says slowly. “Yeah, get them wet. And unzip your skirt.”

I put the strawberries in the sink and turn on the water. “Water’s running.”

“And...?”

“And... zipper...” I breathe. “How long are you going to just listen? Don’t you want to come
over?”

Wesley hesitates. He can never decide if he really wants me or not. He wants me – god, he wants
me – but he doesn’t want to. “Not yet,” he says. “The zipper’s down?”

“The zipper... is down,” I say. “And the strawberries are rinsed.”

“And they look mighty tasty, too,” says a voice behind me.

I whirl, Wes’s voice still sultry in my ear. “Hm. Now, I want you to carry them to the bedroom,
and you know where I’m going to have you put one...?”

“Call you back,” I say, my voice flat.

The intruder eyes me. “I didn’t want to interrupt your phone call, but I thought you might not
want me overhearing,” he says. He’s tall, handsome in a showy way, rather than distinctly
masculine or rugged. He’s wearing garb I can’t quite identify, something vaguely military, but old.
The coat is quite distinctive. Hell, so’s the rest of him.

“How did you get in here?” I’m buying time. My purse is by the door, and my gun is in it. If I
could keep this guy talking, and get around back into the livingroom... I suppose any other woman
would have announced there was a problem to her manly and protective lover, and hoped Wes
would get off his lazy, ambivalent ass and come crashing through the door to save me, but I’m not
that kind of woman, and Wes isn’t that kind of lover. Not for me, anyway.

The man reaches over and casually turns off my sink, as if he owned the place. “I charmed your
landlord,” he says. “Or I came in through the window. Or I can walk through walls. It’s gotta be
one of them.”

I know this dance. He knew how dangerous I could be. He clearly wanted me to know how
dangerous he was.

“I take it this isn’t just some random burglary I’ve interrupted,” I say.

“You’re right, Lilah. It’s not.”
So, he surely did come here on purpose. “Well,” I say as I surreptitiously zip my skirt back up. “If I didn’t interrupt you robbing me, and you’re not lunging for the savage rape immediately, and you don’t already have some kind of weapon trained on me.” He turns his eyes on me, and Jesus Christ, maybe he does. Those eyes hold power. I’ve seen eyes that old before, but only on demons freshly taken out of hell-dimensions. (You learn to read people quickly when you work for Wolfram and Hart.) “Then I’m going to take it this is some sort of business arrangement. What are you after?”

He regards me. “What are you after, Ms. Morgan?” he says. Surname. He’s gone formal. Respectful. He does not see me as his inferior, or at least not overtly so.

“Cut the game,” I say. “You came here, you’re the one who holds the cards. Deal a few out, and we’ll see where we stand.”

He shrugs. “You’ve been working for Wolfram and Hart for... how long now?”

Okay, work related. Not surprising. Everything is work related.

“Head of Special Projects?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“And what, exactly, is the primary focus of Special Projects, Ms. Morgan?”

“If you’re going for the philosophical Socratic dialogue, I’m afraid I dropped out of philosophy. It was dull. I took women’s studies instead,” I say. “And business contracts. And the history of the varangians. And I’m much better with those subjects, so I recommend cutting to the chase more quickly, before I get bored.”

He smiles. “I think I like you, Ms. Morgan,” he says. I half expect him to make a pass at me, but instead he throws a file with a Wolfram and Hart logo on it on my kitchen table. “I’ve read a lot about you.”

I eye the file. “So Wolfram and Hart gave you the skivvy on me, I see. Unless you’re a thief as well as an intruder.”

“I’m neither,” he says. “Well, I’m both, but mostly I know how to get you what you want, Ms. Morgan.”

“And what do you think I want Mr...?”

“Hm. You can call me Mr. Green.”

“Can I. How generous,” I say. Very clearly an alias. Well, I wasn’t born with the name Lilah Morgan, either. “So what can Wolfram and Hart do for you, Mr. Green?”

“If I wanted to deal with Wolfram and Hart, I’d have come to their offices. If you hadn’t noticed, Ms. Morgan... I came here.”

“Oh, I couldn’t miss it,” I say. I reach down to pick up the folder. It’s just my personnel file, so I close it again. “Saw something you liked, and decided to examine the creature in its natural habitat? I don’t think so.” I slide casually back into the living room, without taking my eyes from the man. He follows, without any obvious malice. “Would you like a drink?” I offer, as an excuse for going to the living room. I slide up to the bar, which is a bit closer to my purse. What excuse could I have for going to it? Think, bitch.
“I’d sooner slit my own throat than take a drink in your presence, Ms. Morgan.”

“Don’t want to sully yourself by going down to my level?”

“No,” he says. “I just think you’d have no compunction poisoning me, and I know all too well how easily you could do it. But feel free to have one yourself. We’re friends here.”

“Friends,” I say, with amiable scorn. “I see, and you frequently break into your friends’ apartments and throw them veiled threats while refusing to come to the point.”

“You’re the one who hasn’t come to the point yet, Ms. Morgan,” he says. “The point is already in your hand, and you haven’t even looked at it.”

Annoyed, I open the folder again. The sign had been so big, I’d completely missed it. My eye catches on it now. A great big stamp watermarked over every single page in the file. DECEASED.

My blood chills. The taste of iron floods my mouth as the fear rushes me. I look back up at him. “Who hired you?” I ask, brisk and frankly desperate. “And can I make a better offer?”

“Hired me?”

“You’re here to kill me, right? The Senior Partners think I’ve failed them some way or other, and filled in their paperwork before they sent the assassin? I knew they were efficient. This is taking their efficiency to new heights. Usually they don’t bother with the surreptitious assault. Why didn’t they just kill me at my desk? That’s their usual play. Make an example.” I’m babbling now, but I’m too busy to be frightened. I throw the file down on my couch, the fear replaced by fury. “Trying to use my death to elevate someone else? Who are they wooing now, Mr. Green? You? Do you just get off on murdering women, and I’m the cost of doing business?”

I no longer have time or patience to wait for a convenient excuse. I stride over to my purse and pull out my gun. The weight of it feels solid and comforting in my hand, though I know it’s mostly just an illusion of security. I’ve learned how well illusions work in my career. I’d rather hide behind an illusion than nothing. “Well, I’m not going down without a fight. Ah, don’t like that, do you?” Actually his expression has not changed, but I keep on as if he’s as afraid as I am. If I play it that way, he might actually become so. “I’m not some crying little miss you get to watch scream. Well? Go on. Make your move.”

He blinks at me, a little frown creasing his eyebrows. “You don’t trust your employers much, do you Ms. Morgan.”

“I know what cutthroat business practices look like,” I say darkly.

“I’m... quite sure you do. That wasn’t meant as a threat, Ms. Morgan. And if you’d looked at the dates, you’d see that the record of your demise is not for some time.”

“I will make a detailed examination of that file after you tell me what the hell you want!” I snap.

Mr. Green flashes his unarmed hands. “Fair enough. I wanted to make a deal with you. A deal which might just make the Senior Partners deal more gently with you. My understanding of your contract indicates that you may well become what is known in the firm as an infernal operative.”

I scoff. “They’d never do that to me.”

It’s bluster. If the Senior Partners thought they could milk a single ounce of leverage out of me
after my death, they’d drag my soul through hell and back, and gladly, and I know it, too.

“Do you really think the Senior Partners are merciful enough to simply let you rest in peace?”

“I don’t know what leverage they could get out of me,” I say. “I’m just an ordinary human being.”

“Human being, yes,” Mr. Green says with a smile. “But ordinary, Lilah Morgan, you are not. They’re never just going to let you go.”

My tongue still tastes of iron, but it is starting to taste of bile as well. The full reality of what you’ve signed up for always shocks people in my line of work. I’d been shocked by it several times in my career. I would, no doubt, be shocked by it again.

“They’re going to hold on to you,” he says. “They’re going to drag your soul through the fires of hell, and use it to their ends.”

“It was going to hell anyway, in time,” I say. “No doubt being a strong career woman will be just as rewarding there as it was here.”

He shrugs. “I have no knowledge of heaven or hell,” he says. “But I do know time. And I know leverage. And I know that you are going to need some, in the position you’re going to find yourself.”

“And what position is that?”

“Dead. Bound. Tormented. With no one left as your friend.”

I consider him. “And you’ll be a friend to me, I take it?”

“Do you have any others?”

Wesley. The word finds its way into my mouth along with the fear and the bile, but I leave it there, stillborn.

“I don’t pretend I’m your friend,” he says. “But we have a mutual acquaintance. Angelus.”

“He’s your friend? Or enemy, perhaps?”

“Both and neither, at times. And he is your...?”

He was a pain in my ass, is what he was. I don’t say that. “Project,” I say.

“He’s more than that. Angelus is going to kill you one day.”

I’m surprised. “Is that in that file?”

“I didn’t include that page,” he says. “Certain details... you might not want to see.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” I say. “Angel needs me. We’re not allies, but...” I shake my head. Angel’s too soft to just up and kill me. Wes wouldn’t let him.

Or would he?

Truly, I don’t know what Wes would do.
“The long and short of it is, Ms. Morgan, I know what’s going to happen to you, and it’s not a pretty picture.”

“Why should you care what happens to me?”

He shrugs. “I don’t. I know Angelus. I know him... very well. And I do care what happens to him.”

“You’re not the first mad-man with a beef against Angel to come barging into my rooms and demanding my help.”

“I’m not demanding your help. I’m offering mine.”

I regard him. “I’m listening.”

“Have you ever heard of an Anamatte crystal?”

I shake my head.

“What about a Champion’s Crystal, ever heard of those?”

I had heard of those. They were a reliable method of burning the soul out of a demonic or supernaturally enhanced creature. Two years ago Wolfram and Hart had been racking the world trying to shake one out of the underground, or call a ship in from beyond the solar system. The crystals were so rare, however, and the alien ships were so infrequent, there had only ever been three recorded on Earth in the history of mankind. Two had been reported used, one burning out an island that might have been Atlantis, and one had been lost in a volcanic eruption – might well have sparked the volcanic eruption – in south America. The third was inaccessible, rumored to be guarded by a mysterious figure in Rome known as The Immortal, but all attempts through the Roman branch of Wolfram and Hart to reach him had proven fruitless. The Immortal was known to be glib, sly, unpredictable, incredibly handsome...

And I’m a total dumb shit, aren’t I. I’m staring right at him.

Which means my gun in his face is probably only an annoyance to him. Still, it’s an option for temporary incapacitation.

“What are you offering?” I ask. “What’s your price?”

“No price. A gift.”

“Now I really don’t trust your offer.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crystal. It’s gaudy, beautiful, and if it is what he claims it is, terrible in the extreme. But completely harmless as far as I am concerned. It would take a true champion to activate that fucker.

A champion like Angel. At least, that had been the theory.

“Research me,” he says. “You’ve guessed who I am by now, haven’t you Ms. Morgan. You know Angelus and I were associates. Use your own judgement.”

“Why do you want to burn out Angel’s soul?”

“I don’t,” he says. “There’s a slayer, up north, battling one of the Powers, known as the First Evil. This crystal would help her to defeat it.”
“This is someone else’s problem.”

“Indeed,” he says. “But there will come a time when you’ll have a problem. When you’ll be dead, and trapped, and probably just a little pissed off at Angel. And when that time comes...” he set the crystal gently on my lamp table. “This could just be the leverage you need.”

“Against whom?”

He shrugs. “The Senior Partners, the Powers That Be, Angel himself. You wanted me to place my cards on the table. This is the ace of diamonds, Lilah,” he indicates the crystal. “It’s yours now, to do as you wish. One day – believe me on this, Lilah – one day you’ll have no cards left to play. Not life, not love, not choice. And when that day comes, this card... may be the only one left in your hand.”

The Immortal was known to be cryptic at times. What we knew of him, at least. Rome’s branch of Wolfram and Hart did a piss-poor job of keeping track of the fucker, from what I knew. “And what do you get out of this?”

“I get to stay out of it. Which is what I always want.”

“Stay out of it, but put your card in play all the same?”

“Precisely. Believe me, I wouldn’t be using you if I thought I could do this myself.”

“Using me?” I pounce on the word.

“Helping you,” he amends. He shrugs. “Or not. Don’t use it. Throw it away. Or give it to your Senior Partners and see what they do with it. Hell, give it to Angel right now, I don’t care. One way or another, it will get to where it needs to go, I’m almost sure of it.”

“And when that happens?”

“And when that happens, Lilah, I’m hoping you won’t have wasted an opportunity. You’re a strong woman, and I respect that. Use this to your advantage, and see if you can make eternal hellfire a little less hellish.”

I’m not sure it would have that effect. The Senior Partners gave up searching for the Champion’s Crystal years ago, just after Angel had arranged for his little vampire coven to eat up most of LA’s lawyers, all save me and Lindsey. They claimed he wasn’t pure enough for it to even work. If that was the case, giving it to Angel even to take out an Evil Power wouldn’t be effective as far as the Senior Partners were concerned.

It wouldn’t save my soul.

But it might piss a few people off, I realize. And there might come a time when that would be more sweet to me than almost anything else. In certain hell dimensions, I’ve heard, there were other ladders to climb, other plays to make. An ace up my sleeve, played for whatever reason, might well be very welcome.

One day.

But only if this thing was what I thought it was. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

He shrugs. “I guess you don’t.”
“Well, I already know you’re playing me. And I’ve guessed who you are, if that crystal is what you say it is.”

“It is.”

“In that case,” I say, “when I shoot you, you’ll just up and walk off.”

His head lowers, and his eyes narrow. “Why would you do that?”

“Just to test a theory,” I say. “And ‘cause I get kinda pissed off when strange men break into my apartment.”

He hesitated. “Head, please. I hate having to replace this coat.”

“Fair enough.”

The gun bucks in my hand, and the smell of gunpowder fills the room. I’ve only grazed him, so I fire again, and he finally goes down. Blood pools on my carpet. Bastard. I collect the file, and shove the crystal in my pocket – I’ll have to get it set. No one will believe it’s important if it stays unset like this. I quickly look for anything big and exciting in the man’s pockets, but apart from a wallet with a few credit cards – not my interest – there’s nothing unique about him. He has a big wristwatch and a gun in a shoulder holster. I leave him both of those, and leave the room, locking the door behind me as I stalk off, as outwardly unshaken as if I’d just hung up on a business call.

Inwardly I’m crying and shaking and screaming at the inner walls of my psyche. There was a little girl once who loved her mother, was good in school, and dreamed of a big white wedding with all her friends. That little girl is dead, and her mother is senile, and her work is brutal, and the idea of a wedding is laughable.

She runs away from the man she’s just killed – I have just killed – and I head down to my car pretending that my hands don’t shake. If that is the Immortal, it will serve to authenticate the stone. I can’t rely on Wolfram and Hart’s authenticators if this is to be the ace up my sleeve. If that body is still there when I come back, I’ll come up with something. If it’s gone, I’ll know the stone is real. And I’ll also know it’s time to change apartments. Again.

I pretend I’m not scared. I pretend that the great big DECEASED stamp on my file means nothing. I pretend I’m completely in control.

Damn job.

No. No, it’s a wonderful job. It gives me power and prestige and... and safety. (When you’re terrified every day?) Stop it, Lilah. You are a cutthroat businesswoman in the multiverse’s most prominent law firm. You don’t need to run to your lover and cry into his chest and tell him you’re scared.

But I’m going to go to Wes anyway. And I’m going to fall to my knees before him, and give him what his body wants, in exchange for his gentle voice and his hard hands and the goodness I can feel still bleeding through his dark nature. I’m going to comfort myself with him, and devour him, and fall beneath him, because he’s like me. The dark bleeding through his white coat, the passion pouring from his pained heart. I don’t need him.... I am him.

This crystal is a nice bauble to have. Because as much as I like to think of Wes as the ace up my sleeve... I don’t think he’s my ace of hearts. The ace of diamonds is likely to be more reliable.
Flavors of Death

Chapter Summary

Jack

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Buffy, season 7, immediately after Chosen, with reference to flashbacks in The Girl In Question.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack

The sun sets. It’s reliable like that. Sun goes up, sun goes down, like the tide goes in and the tide goes out. There’s never a miscommunication. Gravity works whether you want it to or not. I kept telling myself that. The sun will set. The sun will set.

Sometimes I really, really hated that damn flesh-burning day-star of hell. I’d been trying to scream for a good hour, now, and I seriously wished I could. Screaming was cathartic. It gave the pain voice. You knew it was real, then, and you weren’t just going crazy.

I was mostly torso at this point. Spinal column had grown back first, because we didn’t want to miss any single nuance of pain, now. I had fingers and toes, but they were mostly just bone. I was still growing tissue. I didn’t know whether I’d burned up or been blown to pieces, and really it didn’t matter. I’d been unconscious for most of the growing back process – small favors – but I’d become conscious sometime before sunset. That had been a problem, because my eyes had grown back, but my eyelids hadn’t yet, and the sunlight had been murder.

I’m doing this for Buffy, I told myself. I’m doing this for Buffy and for William the Bloody and... and... god this sucked.

No one ever wants to hear me describe this stuff except serial killers. I’d had beautiful discussions of the more intimately gruesome details of my immortality with vampires. Otherwise, it tends to put people off their lunch.

Lunch. I’d have given a lot to be someone’s lunch just now. I let myself think about how I’d met William.

***
It was dark, and I was still muddled. The fall down the mineshaft had killed me, but that didn’t seem to mean much, these days. There were voices around me... the light was dim, and all I could see were shadows.

“Who is this?”

“I thought it was dead.”

“Never never, that holy grail. It runneth over and over.”

“What do we do with it?”

All spoke English – that made things easier. The accents varied. Female, American, but muddled with it; world traveler. Another female, pure cockney. The male, north London, maybe? There was something buried in that one, something more genteel.

“Well.” That guy was an extremely muddy Irish – couldn’t place the province. I opened my eyes in the dim light of the mine shaft to find four creatures standing over me. “We have limited provision down here.” A finely planed face framed by an over-styled mane came into my line of view. “Someone pull out four of his ribs. I say we draw straws.”

“Or we could just take turns,” said the American.

“You must be... the Whirlwind...” I choked out.

Their ersatz leader narrowed his eyes at me and smiled. He was a handsome devil, and he knew it, too. “And if you know who we are,” he said with a dark certainty, “then you must be one of those _Vampirjäger_ that have been after us.”

“Yes,” I said, dragging myself to a sitting position. “And no. They were after me, too.”

“Liar.” American said. A stunningly dressed blonde sexed into view. “He has a heartbeat. He’s not one of us.”

“I’m not... one of them... either... according to the _Vampirjäger_,” I gasped, still recovering.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Irish asked.

“What’s it bloody matter?” North London growled low. “He’s a warm body, and we’ve been down here days.” He came up to Irish. “Fight you for him.”

“You think you deserve first bite, do ye?” Irish asked, looking annoyed.

“No, Dru.” North London stepped into view. Could only see the back of his head, but he was dressed like a working man, unlike the other two, who were upper-class. “Leg’s broke, innit? Nice meal will fix her right up.”

“There’s no need to fight, boys,” American said with a sultry grin. “I’m sure we can sort out this tidbit between ourselves without resorting to violence.” She knelt down and stared into my face. “I’d like his eye fluid,” she said. “They’re a pretty blue.”

“Hey, Dru gets the eyes!” North London snarled again. “She always gets the eyes!”

“She’s not a child, you eejit!”
“Yeah, but she’s hurt!”

“Not a problem.” Cockney did sound kind of childlike. She hobbled as she came into the light. Her clothing was higher quality, but more modest than American’s. “He’s got more than enough for all of us.”

“Um...” Damn. I only just realized I probably did. “Now just... just wait a minute....” I said. I was too late. Cockney had dropped all pretense of normality, her face was a mask of yellow-eyed death, and she was already on my throat. I think some of the others jumped in. I was past noticing pretty quickly.

“All right.” North London said a while later. I didn’t know how long it had been. I’d spent most of it dead. The last few times I’d come back to life, I’d been killed before I knew what to do with myself. “Back again. This is getting kinda fun.”

Irish looked scared, though, and he grabbed me by my – by now – blood saturated shirt. I was still pretty... well, stoned, is what I’d have called it in my day. I’d never been drained by a vampire before. I hated to admit it, but it was damned erotic. I was a fifty-first century guy, we tended to pride ourselves on how many different alien species we could gladly accept as partners. I’d done less erotic things while actually having sex. There also seemed to be something in the vampire venom which moved the pain from *Ow* to *Oh!* I felt drugged, and half in love.

Probably not a safe place to be, mentally. I hadn’t been safe for years, though. Immortality was already waning on me.

“All right, you,” Irish glared. “What the hell are you?”

“I’m just... just me.”

Cockney sidled up, sliding her hand over Irish’s shoulder with ethereal grace. “The Immortal is immortal, my immortal,” she said with a sweet smile. “He’ll always come back for you, over and over again. No guilt in the death.”

“No guilt in any death,” Irish snapped at her. His face still showed fear. “You’re not one of us. Heartbeat, blood, but you won’t die. Now how does that happen?”

“I don’t know.”

Irish shook me. “How does that happen!”

“I said I don’t know!” I snapped. “I was shot. I opened my eyes, and I was just fine. It happens all the time, poison, drowning, stray javelin. I can’t die.”

Irish looked damn frightened now, but he was not one to cower with it – which I suppose spoke to a certain level of bravery even in the face of the uncanny. “We’ll just have to see about that. Willy!”

“It’s Spike!” snarled North London from across the mine shaft.

Irish ignored him. “Show our friend here the many forms of death.”

“No!”

“Willy!”
“I’m not your sodding lap dog!”

“And I gave you an order, boy!”

“Right, daddy, say please,” North London said with scorn.

Irish released my throat and stepped away. “William, my friend,” he said, obviously pandering. “You like a brawl. You’re good with the pugilism. Dive in, fist and fangs, I’m just keen to see the man in action.”


“I merely defer to the skills of William the Bloody,” Irish said with a slightly mocking bow. “So show us what they are.”

North London bent in the shadows, cracked his neck, squared his shoulders, and stepped into the light with his fists at the ready. I nearly burst with joy. “James!”

“Huh?” The vampire stared at me without any recognition. I knew it was James. Had to be James. Hair was all wrong, but no one else had those eyes, those lips – god, those lips! I flung myself at him and kissed him passionately.

He tasted of blood and demonic musk, and I knew the vampire shtick wasn’t an act. Shame. Still, it was fantastic to not be alone in this hell-hole of a backwards time, and it wasn’t as if he was any more deadly now he was a vampire. James had always had a dark penchant toward making his kinks a little too permanent. I pulled away, overjoyed and grinning, and he stared at me with shocked bewilderment.

I was dead a second later. I think he snapped my neck.

When I came back to life this time, James had me tied in a knot against a support pillar, fanged and furious. “What the hell are you playing at?” he snarled at me.

“James, it’s me!” I said. “You gotta remember. Time agency? How much retcon did they give you?”

“What?”

For the first time I began to question whether it was really my old boyfriend/rival/partner/time agent. “James, that you?” The vampire glared at me, and now I was really doubting it. “It’s me.”

“He’s cracked!” North London snapped. “What’s he on about, Dru?”

“He’s seeing you again, my William,” Cockney – Dru – said. She looked lots better than she did before. Apparently my blood was somewhat restorative. Actually, every one of the crew looked stronger and healthier than they did when I got here, which probably defeated the purpose of the vampire hunters who had thrown me down. I, of course, was dehydrated and exhausted, but none of that would kill me. “Another turn of the clock,” she went on. “A lifetime of a lifetime, a doddle of a doppelgänger. Welcome back to Germany sweets.”

“Nice to meet you, sweet stuff,” I said. “Miss London, do you?”

She looked at me as if pleased to be acknowledged. “I found foundlings there,” she said dreamily. “I find everything I need. I found my sweet William.” She sidled up to Not-James with his North London accent.
“Your name’s William, is it?” I asked. “Really and truly? You didn’t just... wake up in London one day with no real memory of who and what you were and just... imagine yourself to be William? Who was your mother?”

William hit me hard – really hard, he shattered my cheekbone. “Shut your gob, yank!”

He wasn’t my fellow time agent, not even going by a different name. My heart sank, but really I was no worse off than I was before.

“All right, what do you say we tear him apart a bit? I’ll bet you he’ll have a hard time getting back to life if we take his sodding head off.”

“Wait a minute,” said American – Darla, I’d gathered her name was. “I’m getting an idea.”

“And what’s that, then?” said Irish. “I think with this cornucopia of dinner here, we could live quite happily in this mine shaft for some time.”

“If I was going to live underground,” Darla said with her eyes narrowed, “I wouldn’t have stayed with the puppy. No matter how cute his big brown eyes.”

“And how about long tongue?” Irish asked.

“Down, boy,” Darla said with a seductive smile. She reached past and took hold of my throat, taking me easily from William. “You said the Vampirjäger threw you down here,” she said. “So then... you’re not particularly fond of them, either, are you.”

“Well... no.”

“Well then, what do you say you go up and kill them all for us?”

“Like they’d let me do that!”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll kill you,” Darla said with a smile. “But... what’s that to you?”

“You’re the vampires,” I choked out. Her hand on my throat was getting a little tight. “You’re the ones... who kill so well.”

“But my boys here could turn to dust so easily,” she said. “And besides, they’re cowards.”

“Hey, now!”

“Not exactly flattering, beautiful.”

“Hush up,” Darla said. She petted my head. “Listen. We can make it very, very unpleasant for you down here. Or we can make it very pleasant for you up top. What do you say, pretty thing?”

Eventually I said yes. I was lying. After I came up top I told the Vampirjäger that I’d killed them all, and the vampire hunters rewarded me by killing me, cutting off my head, and locking me in a box, because I was an evil creature who couldn’t be killed, either. But in doing so... they stopped blocking the entrance to the mine shaft, and the Whirlwind escaped.

It was William who sniffed me out and found me, I think only because Drusilla had told him to. I was so glad they put my head back on. Growing it back wasn’t going to be fun. Getting out of the box after I’d grown it back would have been even worse. Not that the Whirlwind didn’t drain me dry again after that, but by that time... I was more than looking forward to it.
They killed me. They saved my life. I lied to them. It was a back and forth, a give and take, a whirlwind relationship across half of Europe, through Germany, down into Austria and Hungary, over into Switzerland, and finally down into Italy.

Where the Janus gate was.

***

2003

Buffy had no idea how much I hated the Janus gate. I would have preferred to boil myself alive – that actually doesn’t hurt much after a few moments. The nerve centers in your skin get boiled dead, and after that you’re just floating in and out of death until you’re taken out. The worst part about being boiled alive is the smell. Similar problem to being burned. Human beings smell like roasted pig. And people wonder why I don’t like cookouts.

The Janus Gate doesn’t create any lingering odors, but the pain lasts days after coming out of it. Even growing myself back the pain doesn’t linger like that. It’s not as intense as growing back – not like the pain I was suffering through just then, as flesh slowly boiled itself out of nothing to reset the fixed point in time and space that was me. But it lingers, and lasts, and still seems to stab through my cells for days after I go through. But I went through it, went back through the Janus gate to 2003, in time to get Lilah the amulet before she was killed.

I hadn’t really anticipated Lilah killing me, though it made sense. I had broken into her apartment. That was an implied threat if not an overt one. But I had to make her listen, and I knew no gesture smaller than that would affect her. I’d given her, along with her deceased personnel file (minus a few details of her demise, like the date and exact method) the annotated Anamatte owner’s manual that Ripper and I had cooked up, and a general rundown of what was happening in Sunnydale, courtesy of Sunnydale’s resident watcher.

And she’d very politely shot me in the head. The first shot stung like bees, and left me woozy and gasping, before she’d shot me the second time, and I dropped like a deer. I woke up alone in her apartment, the crystal, and the file, and Lilah, gone. My coat had blood on it, but no holes. I knew how to get bloodstains out. Hydrogen peroxide did wonders.

A gunshot is a fairly benign flavor of death. Sudden, but not particularly painful, not even on the way back out. One’s brain doesn’t have any pain receptors, you see. There is often a dull kind of headache, but nothing like the piercing pain a sucking chest wound will give you.

After I delivered the crystal to Lilah, I hung about LA for a bit. Rented myself an apartment, which turned out to be haunted. (Like I didn’t have enough residual psi-energy on my plate.) Fortunately the ghost seemed pretty reasonable once he failed to drive me off. We used alphabet blocks to communicate. He was waiting for his roommate to come back, and didn’t like me taking her place. He had a hard time understanding – if I had rented the place, she wasn’t likely to be coming back.

He was stuck. I knew what to do. He’d missed his chance to go wherever psi-energy dissipates to upon death, and had gotten stuck his own mini dimensional anomaly. It was actually fairly common. All I had to do was arrange to soften the dimensional cohesion enough for psi-energy to be released, and open the window for him again. It would take a psi-focused electrical collapse.

Basically, all I had to do was die. I used a heroin overdose, because this was LA, and it was easy to get, and I didn’t feel like shooting myself in the head again. It was a shame I couldn’t become a
drug addict – like madness, addiction was too much of a change, and the drugs always just stopped working after a bit. The ghost left, with an air of finally finding freedom, a previously locked door... opened.

That was a positively ecstatic flavor of death. It was almost sweet, opening the door for the guy, and the happy hit didn’t hurt me any either. Shame I couldn’t use it more than once or twice. I often wished if I couldn’t disappear in death, I could use drugs. But it wasn’t effective on me. That mostly left sex.

Fortunately, that was also easy to get in LA.

I stayed for a while, but I never settled in. I never did run into Lorne again, as much as I would have liked to. I couldn’t risk it. I also had to steer clear of Angel. Maybe it was that, and maybe it was the rain of fire, but something told me to high-tail it out of LA, because there was some serious nasty going down there, too. I could have gotten my nose into it, and tried to save the world. Or I could do what I wanted to do – declare it not my problem, and go do something else.

I went to do something else.

I screamed again. Thinking about my recent past wasn’t distracting enough. How many flavors of death had I gone through since I’d agreed to do this for Buffy? Bloody bitch. I roared out my agony and then rested, trying to gather strength to go through the rest of this. My head tilted back, I watched the moon and blinked – hey, I had eyelids! That was going to be helpful – blinked back tears. Salt was not going to help my smarting facial muscles any.

Crying never really helped with the pain.

***

1894

Angelus laughed at the tears on my cheeks. I cursed him. Being drained was one thing. This torture thing he’d decided to pull...

Okay, it was a bit of a tit for tat. When the Whirlwind came upon Rome, Angelus had declared it his territory, and tried to kill indiscriminately. I really, really didn’t want to have to kill him, so I’d captured him and set him and William up in what I euphemistically called the Room of Pain. I did nothing to them a vampire couldn’t shake off, but I needed to establish dominance. This was a very common practice among other vampires. I knew for a fact Angelus had done it with all of the rest of the Whirlwind, and Darla had done it to him. Culturally, vampires didn’t hold with the usual rules of BDSM, because they weren’t interested in everyone having a good time, and the concept of consent didn’t even occur to them. I followed what I had learned in my days traveling the universe, and finding alien partners: their cultural rules apply.

I had tortured both the boys, to get them to respect Rome as my territory. I wasn’t that into the torture personally, but when in Rome....

I couldn’t afford to have Rome buckling down on immortal creatures. I needed free and clear access to the Janus gate. Even if it was a bitch to use, even if I couldn’t use it to track down the Doctor, even if I couldn’t use it to go into the future, the limited access it granted me to time travel was very important to me. That meant Rome was mine, and was going to stay mine, and every alien and demon and vampire was going to know that, and that included Angelus’s gang, no matter
how cute they were.

I’d gone to express the same sentiment to the girls, Darla and Drusilla, and found they had no issues. They were just fine with Rome falling under my territory, and in fact they used the opportunity to do more than drain me of just blood. I’d had a very pleasant evening, and Darla and Dru agreed not to kill in Rome anymore. Well... anyone other than me. I think they were both stuffed anyway by the time I wandered out of there, still reeling from the aftereffects of their venom.

The attempt at dominance over the male members of the Whirlwind... it hadn’t backfired, exactly, but it hadn’t gone well. Angelus had grown even more frightened of me, and there was a sexual resentment brewing now as well. They hadn’t killed in Rome anymore (apart from one of my guards, which I was resentful about) but they’d set themselves up to capture and do to me what I had done to them.

Except Angelus was a real sadist, and William seemed more than angry. He’d kept leaving as I was tortured, claiming he was bored by my screams. Unfortunately for Angelus, every time I came back to life he grew more and more frightened. I had gone through a positive smorgasbord of death, and the tears I was shedding weren’t even from pain. I was just exhausted. I listened to Angelus laugh as I bled out yet again.

This time when I came back it hurt like hell, and I yelled awake. Angelus was gone. It was William who had me now. I was unchained, and William had me up against the wall. I was impaled by something – I couldn’t look down enough to see what. “What’s it gonna take to properly kill you?” he intoned.

“Good question!” I said, with bitter irony. I looked around. “Where’s Angelus?”

William scoffed. “He’s done with hurting you. I’m not.”

“Oh?”

He twisted the implement in my gut. “I’m going to find a way to kill you,” he said darkly. “What if I took off your god-damned head?”

“You know that doesn’t work.”

“What if we don’t ever put it back?”


“I’m all right with that,” William said, though he sounded disappointed. “And if I set you on fire?”

“Same,” I said. “Only I grow back everything. It’s like burning in reverse.”

“All sounds like fun,” William said.

I stared into his blue eyes. “No it doesn’t. You’re not like Angelus.”

“Aren’t I?” He twisted the implement deep in my body. I screamed – it did hurt.

“No,” I panted when he was done. “If you were... you... you would have stayed... to watch me scream.”
William pulled himself away. “I don’t want you in pain, I want you gone,” he snarled. He yanked the implement out of my chest – Ah, a railroad spike! Right. Strangely even knowing what it was made it feel better.

“Why?” I asked. I staggered from the wall and sucked in a breath as the power that charged my immortality – whatever it was – closed the wound in my gut.

“You don’t deserve to live, you sodding bastard!”

“Why? ‘Cause I claim Rome as my territory?”

“No!” he shouted. He hit me. He seemed to find it cathartic. I was so numb anymore, it didn’t hurt. “For Drusilla! You violated her.”

“Dru? You want me gone because I slept with Dru?”

“She was mine!” William roared.

“She belongs to herself!” I snapped back. “She can do whatever she wants.”

“No!” William barked. “She can’t! She doesn’t... she doesn’t know enough, she can’t just agree!”

“She knows plenty.”

“No! Not about that, she’s... there’s the child in her. She’s.... You took advantage!”

“She’s sensible enough to consent!” I snapped. “She’s not a child.” These were modern thoughts, but it was what he seemed to be getting at.

“No! Her and me, we’re eternal, see! I – I – it’s supposed to be just us! I get Angelus, fine. He’s her sire, he has certain rights, the bastard, but you! You’re... you’re!”

I was genuinely shocked. This wasn’t an ownership thing. It wasn’t even a consent thing. William felt... betrayed. What vampire gave a shit about monogamy? “I wasn’t taking her from you, William.”

“Oh, shut it!” he snarled. He reached forward and snapped my neck.

When I came back to life, William was sitting beside me, and doing something I had never expected to see.

William the Bloody was crying.

The vampire was sobbing into his hands like the tears were more torturous to him than pain. I crawled very softly to a sitting position and – damn he looked like James! – put my arms around him.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he whispered. “We were bonded, it was us. She was for me, and I was for her. I was... I was hers....”

I finally got it. He was the youngest of them. He wasn’t a restoration era wanton like Darla. He wasn’t an enlightenment era free-thinker like Angelus. He wasn’t open to strange ideas like the unfathomable Drusilla. William was a product of Victorian ideals, and he’d thought he and Drusilla were pair-bonded. While the others got on with the lust and blood-lust of being, while they reveled in the concept of evil and defying god and all that, William was still tangled in romantic ideals of
fidelity and honor.

Being a vampire was probably confusing as hell for him.

I pulled him to my blood-stained chest and stroked his hair. “It isn’t fair,” I heard him whisper. “I only wanted to be hers. Why can’t she... can’t she just love me?”

“Oh, sweet William,” I said, falling into Drusilla’s pattern of speech. “Can’t you see? She can love others, and still love thee.”

He groaned as if I’d wounded him and clutched at me, and I stopped pretending I was anything but enamored and kissed him, hard. He was hesitant at first, but eventually he relaxed. “Take it back, if you want,” I told him. “Take her back from me.”

He wanted.

***

2003

That was what I was trying to bring back for Buffy. A creature so soft and so loving that even within the social pattern of a sadistic demon, he still loved so deeply the idea of betrayal collapsed him into tears.

Buffy deserved that kind of devotion. The world deserved that depth of a soul.

I considered just spending the time between the rain of fire and the fall of Sunnydale in Sunnydale, but the population there became so short so quick I abandoned that idea. It would be too easy for Buffy to catch a glimpse of me too early, and frankly I’m pretty memorable. And if Spike was there, he’d know me in a whiff, and he wouldn’t trust me a lick. Better to just avoid the place until it was nearly time.

I set myself up in a college town in Oregon, ‘cause it’s easy to go unnoticed in Oregon, no matter how flashy you are. I spent the time monitoring Spike’s Orb of Thessulah. Lorne’s premonition had been right; it was degenerating. This was serious. I could have gone back to Rome and jumped forward to the fall of Sunnydale but... god, I hated the Janus gate.

It wasn’t just that I was avoiding pain. Another reason I wanted to avoid time travel was because I wasn’t sure the effect the gate would have on the soul through multiple uses. I knew most objects passed through just fine. But those were objects. A fragment of a soul? Willow’s spell? They both might be affected by the time-jump in a way I hadn’t anticipated. Better to just keep them safe and only risk the one jump.

But with the orb decaying, I was worried. I had planned on keeping them all with me until nearly the time I originally met up with Buffy, six or so months after the fall of Sunnydale. That would give Spike time to grow his soul back properly, but not so much time that he might end up in trouble. But I might not have time for that. I realized I might have to resurrect Spike sooner. So I kept monitoring the orb and trusted to Lorne’s assurance that it would make it to my mini-apocalypse.

That reminded me of another problem I was going to have – tracking Spike’s amulet in Sunnydale. From what Buffy described, the amulet had created a big crater, and trying to find it in the middle of acres of destruction was going to be nearly impossible.
Unless I had some idea where it was going to be. Which meant I’d have to be... near the center of the blast. I didn’t have to survive it, but the orb of Thessulah did, and Willow’s spell, and... and frankly waking up naked was never much fun. I knew what I’d need if I was going to put myself at Anamatte Crystal ground zero.

I also knew only one place to get it.

***

2003

Before the fall of Sunnydale

The phone answered without a greeting, as was expected. We knew better than to announce “Torchwood!” to any random caller. “Hey, Tosh, I have job for you.” I said.

“It’s me,” said the voice on the other line.

I stopped. “Fuck.”

“Right.”

We both breathed silently into the phone for a moment. “I forgot about this,” I said.

“Can’t have been very important.”

“Wasn’t,” I said. “Just need some equipment sent somewhere. Was hoping to talk to Tosh.”

“She doesn’t have security clearance yet.”

“Nothing secure,” I said.

“All right then. Transferring.”

“Thanks.”

The younger Jack hesitated on the line. “Going well?”

“As well as can be expected.”

“That bad, huh?”

“As always.”

“Thanks a bundle.” And he transferred the phone.

I heard it ringing a few times. “Hallo?”

“Toshiko, it’s Jack.”

“Oh!” Tosh sounded very nervous. She’d only been working for Torchwood for a few weeks, hadn’t even been granted security clearance to any alien technology. I remembered her like this, just torn from the prospect of a tortured life in an undisclosed prison with all her genius drifting away with the passing days. She’d been pulled from that horror, and there she was in the hub. A new life. A new job. A new world. Aliens! Time travel! Dimensional rifts! A young, brilliant
woman, excited, terrified, bewildered, fascinated. She didn’t trust me yet. She barely knew me yet. She had not yet grown to love me so deeply as her leader that she would die for me. She had a good four or five years before that would happen.

“Jack?” she sounded very confused. She hesitated. “Um... aren’t you in your office?” I could just imagine her glancing up at the old me sitting at my desk, sipping coffee. It had been just me and Tosh for a while, as she nervously grew to understand the dynamic that was Torchwood. This – a random time-anomaly of her boss calling her from out of the blue when he was clearly sitting quietly in his office – was one of the lessons she’d learned.

“Yeah, I am. Don’t worry about it.” It was nice to hear Tosh’s voice. By the end of 2009, she’d been dead for over a year. Warn her! said the dark corner of my mind I’d been trained to ignore since before I was immortal. She already knows life expectancy at Torchwood is short, said the sensible part. “Look, I need you to send one of the black boxes to LA, to me, care of the central post office.”

“The black boxes?” The ‘black boxes’ were just steel cases designed to withstand nuclear annihilation. They weren’t even alien tech. “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Steal my coat.”

“What?”

“Steal my coat, and send it with. Just take it off the coat rack, right in front of me. I’ll be able to get another one. I won’t stop you.” This I did remember. Tosh striding in bold as brass and stealing my coat right out from under my nose. I’d never called her on it. It had broken the ice between us – we’d still been on very nervous professional ground before that.

“Um... why am I...?”

“Just do it. Send it with the box, I need it.”

“Okay,” Tosh said. She sounded very confused. “Is... is that all?”

“Yep. Oh, and Toshiko?”

“Yeah?”

“I may not say it again for a while, but... you do great work.”

Tosh sounded embarrassed. “Um. Thanks.”

I hung up the phone. “I’m sorry, Tosh,” I whispered.

It hurt talking to Tosh. That flavor of death was bitter. That death wasn’t going to be mine.

I collected the black box, and arranged to ship the coat to Willow in Brazil in early April. That seemed to be about when Xander said I’d contacted him.

***
2003

I was together enough now to stop screaming. The pain had faded, but I was so damn tired. “All
right,” I said. “Time to get to work.” I sat up, naked as I was, and turned to the black box beside me.

Okay. Not beside me. The entire landscape was changed, and everything had been moved or burned or melted out of recognition. I’d known the date of the fall of Sunnydale, and knew that ground zero was the high school. I’d figured out where the hellmouth was, gone to the second floor above the principal’s office, and waited.

It hadn’t taken long. A fierce golden light had burst up through the floor before noon. I clutched the black box and waited for the end. I think I was initially killed by falling rubble, but after that the amulet took me as completely as it took Spike.

It was gonna be a bitch finding a single crystal amulet in all this rubble. Fortunately, I knew my wrist strap would help me locate it. Unfortunately my wrist strap, along with the degenerating Orb of Thessulah, Willow’s cardboard box, my coat, and the rest of my clothes, was in the black box, and I couldn’t see it anywhere.

I didn’t manage to find the black box until after the sun rose. Government and secret helicopters circled overhead, a few fires lit as the last few injured Turok-Hans were caught and burned by the sunshine, and I paraded naked through the rubble like an Emperor in his new clothes. When I finally found the black box my feet were full of splinters and I was cursing Buffy, Spike, Angel, the First Evil, and Ianto all within an inch of their lives.

I felt better once I’d opened the box and donned my own gear again. I felt more naked without the wrist strap than I did without my clothes. The Orb of Thessulah looked so bad it pained me to see it. The hairline cracks had become a mosaic all around the pink stone, and I didn’t dare touch it. I left it and Willow’s spell in the black box while I set my wrist strap to detecting the source of the psi-energy.

I found it, but it was deep, buried deep, deep beneath the rubble. Fortunately, none of the debris was beyond my ability to lift. I found myself talking to Buffy as I hoisted and shoveled and dug. “Really could have used some slayer strength about now, bitch,” I said. “I mean, honestly.” Rescue workers found and tried to rescue me. I talked them into leaving me some food and water and letting me get on with it – an immortal lifetime’s worth of lying a wonderful resource to fall back on. I had my own rescue to perform. Some of them helped me move some rubble, but the dust and debris was so toxic I mostly just made them leave me. They could get cancer and die. I’d just cough a lot.

When I finally found the crystal, I bitched at that, too. “Really, Spike, couldn’t you have like... flown or something? Landed your crystal on top of the rubble?” I lifted the glittering thing up out of the dust and polished it on my coat. “You always were a drama queen. Not so bad as Angelus, I guess. But really.”

I carried the crystal back to the black box and looked inside. “Damn!” The Orb of Thessulah was nearly completely eroded. The thing looked like it was a collection of child’s blocks, held together with spit and friction. The fragment of Spike’s soul was still inside it, I could see the slight glow, but I didn’t have a moment to waste.

Fortunately, there was no ceremony to transferring the psi-energy. I took up the crystal, tapped it on the orb, and the orb shattered, crumbling to gravel. The Anamatte crystal flared once, heat gathering, and then went inert.

“Thank god that worked,” I said. I pocketed the crystal. “Now all we have to do is send you to Angel to activate you, and you’re home free,” I said. There was limited time on that too, of course.
Poor Spike. He was going to have to spend a year before he could see Buffy. Still, at least he’d know what was what, thanks to Buffy’s letter. I collected Willow’s spell and headed off toward the edge of the crater, keeping my eyes peeled for any search-and-rescue helicopters I might be able to wave down, which could make my walk shorter.

From my calculations, with the time it would take me to get to LA, I could have Spike’s soul, and the box which would make Spike’s body, to Angel at Wolfram and Hart within a week. Sounded like a plan. Hell, it almost sounded too easy. I was beginning to have Buffy’s doubts about anything that seemed too easy....

Then I realized something ugly. Angel was not going to be happy to see me. I’d played pretty evil when I’d known him – the only way he’d have accepted me as companion was to pretend to be evil as he was. I’d left him guessing, of course, saved victims from him and William, distracted them with other demons, played all kinds of games, but he wasn’t going to think of me as one of the good guys. There was no way he’d just... trust me if I handed this stuff over. And from what Buffy had told me of Spike and Angel, their relationship had gone from occasionally irritating family member, to full-on rivalry or even hatred.

So going up to Angel as the “evil” Immortal and handing him Spike’s soul so that he could be reunited with Buffy in a year’s time... nope. That was not going to fly.

Of course, I only really needed Angel for the first part of this scheme. I pulled out the amulet. “All right, Spike,” I said. “I’m sending you anonymously. I’ll send Buffy’s letter with Willow’s spell, sound about right? You’ll all be confused for a day, but Angel won’t be able to back out of it.”

That sounded like a reasonable solution.

Yeah. That would work. One day as a ghost to let the soul figure out where it was, and then ship Spike Willow’s spell. Sounded like a plan everyone could work with. Spike back, Angel free, Buffy with a future of... well, if not happiness, nothing like the grief she currently felt. Sounded perfect.

Easy. All Spike had to do was open a cardboard box. What could go wrong with that?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to onar for reminding me I had these flashback scenes, and encouraging me to find a way to post them!
Cardboard Box

It started out as a simple, empty, cardboard box. It had been crafted from pulped spruce, formed into shape, and shipped flat halfway across the world, where it sat unused, unloved, and unimpressive, until it fell into the hands of a witch. The witch folded it, turned it properly into a box, and smiled at it.

It was only then that the box could be anything more than just a box. But it didn’t know that, of course. It was only folded cardboard.

“This’ll do,” the witch said to her friend. The box didn’t hear this, because the box didn’t have ears, and wouldn’t have understood it anyway, because it didn’t have a brain. It was just a box. But the words passed over it anyway.

The friend had looked at the box. “I dunno, Willow. It looks kinda flimsy,” he said. “Are you sure this’ll hold a spell with this much power?”

“Xander, I know what I’m doing,” Willow said. “The box isn’t holding the spell. The spell is just... there. The spell is holding itself, the box is just the framework around which the spell can be moved. I need something inert, with no sentimental or magical properties. Anything hand-made or heirloom or made for security or something would have an effect on the soul. We don’t want that. It needs to be as boring and as plain as possible so the soul can control how the body manifests.”

“You’ve already lost me,” Xander said.

“Just don’t worry about it,” Willow said. “This is perfect. We have the box, we have the blood, we have the Baltic stone, we have the catalyst. I think we’re set. Put the box in the middle of the circle.”

The box was put down, open and empty.

“Okay,” Xander said. “What do I have to do?”
“Well, you’re gonna take my hands, and if I go white-haired and distant, sit tight. If I go black, try and shake me out of it.”

“And what about if you kill me while I’m doing that?”

“I won’t,” Willow said. “I’m mostly pretty good at this these days.”

“Mostly?”

“Okay. Here I go.”

“Wait,” Xander said. “What if I have to scratch my nose or something?”

“Just don’t leave the circle,” she said. “Okay. We’re ready.” She closed her eyes and prepared to enter her magical trance...

“Um. I think I need to go to the bathroom.”

Willow glared at him. “Xander!” She paused a moment. “Well, okay. Good idea,” she said. “Hurry up!” she said a minute later. “I think I should go too!”

Five minutes later the two friends sat down again within the circle and Willow took a deep breath. “Now. No more interruptions. I’m tapping into the fabric of the universe and bringing in a force which could potentially destroy the planet.”

“The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant compared to the power of the Force!” Xander said.

“Xander, is this really the time for Star Wars references?”

“You’re the one who brought up The Force.”

“Xander.”

“It surrounds us, and penetrates us, and binds the universe together. But we shouldn’t underestimate the power of the Dark Side.”

“Xander.”

“Well, once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing,” Willow said. She took his hands. “Just try not to get in the way of the power. I don’t want to fry out your retinas or something.”

“Retina,” Xander said.

“Good point. I guess I’ll only have to be half as careful. Here we go.”

And it was really quiet after that. Xander hummed Star Wars tunes and fidgeted, and did scratch his nose a few times, as Willow wandered across the dimensions, gathering power. The phone rang at one point. Both the friends ignored it. Then Xander’s cellphone rang, and he let go of one of Willow’s hands to answer it. “Yeah? Hi, Giles. No, she’s astral-bodying right now. Angel called, huh? Well, she said her power was somewhere in the Himalayas, her outer form needed me to stay here and ground her, and she wasn’t going to be done for kinda a while.”

Xander listened for a little bit longer, but the box, if it had ears, wouldn’t have been able to hear
what the phone, which did have a speaker, said.

“Willow said Fred is gone already,” Xander said. “She’s kinda upset about it, actually. That’s why she’s doing this spell.”

Xander, the air hummed, the sound echoing through the cardboard box. Hang up the phone!

Xander started. “Um...” Willow was staring white-eyed and empty into nothingness. “Willow? I... thought you were somewhere else.”

Emergency warning spell, the air hummed. To get you to buckle down and focus! You’ve never been able to concentrate on just one thing, should I have turned on the TV for you? Are you still five? Aquaman underoos, Xander. I need you. Focus.

“Gotta go, Giles,” Xander said. “Willow left a spell to insult me while she’s away. Which really tells you a lot about how well she knows me.”

Xander!

“Bye.” Xander hung up the phone.

And sometime later Willow coughed, and shuddered, and seemed to vomit bright nothingness into the cardboard box. The box was transformed, mystically, from a collection of folded wood pulp to a receptacle of greatness, an epic container of unfathomable energies, a carton of witchery such as the universe had never before known! Had the box the impetus to take over the planet, the box had the power. It was the power! It contained magic enough to become the master of the entire planet!

But of course it was just a box, so it considered none of this.

Willow’s hair faded from white back to red, and she calmly and quietly closed the lid on the box.

“That... actually looked kinda gross,” Xander said with distaste.

“Ever seen a baby born?” Willow said without inflection. The box would have thought they both had a point. That was an epic and world-changing event that had the effect of creating life! It was still kinda gross.“I think I’m going to go to sleep now,” Willow added. And she fell over.

Xander carried Willow out of the room, leaving the box, not forgotten, but set aside, until, presumably, the witch recovered. It stayed set aside for two days. Apparently Xander decided the better part of valor was to just pretend the box wasn’t there until he got instructions from her. So the box sat in the middle of the floor, collecting unseen particles of dust, quietly containing the magical equivalent of a small sun within its cardboard walls. Alone. Neglected. Not pining, or anything, because it was a box. And it was made of pulped spruce, anyway, not pine.

In fact, no one did anything with the box until Xander opened up another box – his laptop in this instance – and was startled to see the face of a man who had been dating his friend Buffy.

“Xander,” said the man. “You’re there at Willow’s, right?”

“Jack?” Xander asked. “What are you calling me for? Is Buffy in trouble?”

“Not exactly,” Jack said.

Xander sipped at a soda and wandered down to the couch, where his nachos were. He’d had to
make the nachos himself because, (as the box would have heard Xander muttering if it had had ears,) no one in Brazil seemed to know how to make nachos. He had made the nachos in a plastic and glass and metal box known as a microwave, which generated radio waves at a frequency that excited water at a molecular level, generating heat. It was a very exciting box, that had once been held in a dull cardboard box like the one on the floor.

Xander poked at his computer. This was another exciting box, filled up with wires and plastic and silicon, and it could do anything. It could talk to other boxes across the world. It could project faces of human beings. It could contain epic prose, such as the Doogie Howser fanfiction which Xander kept on all of his computers, in deference to Willow, who didn’t want her beloved stories to disappear if any of her laptops crashed, even if, she admitted, it was certifiably lame.

Boxes upon boxes, and the cardboard box on the floor was quiet and unassuming, despite the power within its cardboard facade. No one would have suspected it was more powerful than all of them.

Xander stuck this box on top of the cardboard box and nibbled at his nachos, still talking to Jack.

“Did you two just do a spell?” Jack asked.

“No,” Xander said. “Willow’s asleep. Oh, but a couple days ago we did to this really big... oh. Wait.” He moved the laptop off the cardboard box, and brushed the nacho crumbs onto the floor. “Yeah. We did. It’s in a cardboard box. We’re about to send it to Buffy.”

“Good,” Jack said. “Wait a bit on that.”

“What do you mean? Spike’s—”

“Don’t! Don’t talk, don’t mention it, don’t tell anyone what or why!” Jack said.

“Well, why not?”

“I don’t need to know what’s in Willow’s box! Believe me, no man on earth needs to know what’s in Willow’s box. Willow’s box is private, do you hear me Xander?”

Xander was staring at Jack, somewhat perplexed. “Okay. I wasn’t inviting you to look inside her box or anything.”

“Good. I don’t think she would want me to look in her box. And I need you to book a flight to Rome.”

“Rome? Why?”

“You’re needed for another spell,” Jack said. “Just make sure you’re in Rome on May fifth, can you do that? And Willow should send her box then, too.”


“Temporal causality,” Jack said.

Xander blinked at the perfectly straight-faced Jack. “You’re a time traveler?”

“Well... yeah.”

There was another long moment of silence. “Really.”
“Yep.”

“And I’m buying this because I’m stupid?” Xander said.

“No, you’re buying this because you were once turned into a twin of yourself, you’ve never dated anyone who wasn’t at least part demon at one time or another in their lives, and you know I’m dating Buffy. What else happens around her but the impossible?”

“Fair point,” Xander said.

“Oh, and you have a delivery. Put it with the box,” Jack added, without consulting the box on how it felt about taking on a roommate.

“I have a delivery?” Xander got up, dropping more crumbs on the cardboard box, and went out to the hall. Sure enough, the hotel staff had placed a large cardboard box in the hall. He carried the large cardboard box and put it next to the smaller cardboard box. The smaller box would have had cardboard envy, but it didn't, because it was a box. “What’s in this?”

“My coat,” Jack said. “Just ship it to me with the box, fair enough?”

“Okay, fine,” Xander said. “But I don’t like keeping secrets from Buffy.”

“You’re not,” Jack said. “How often do you talk to her?”

Xander looked hurt. “Fair point.”

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going to come good on May fifth, I swear.”

Xander poked at his laptop, and pulled up a calendar. “That’s only like three weeks away.”

“I know,” Jack said. “And you’re all right on schedule. Thanks, Xanman.”

Then Xander went into the other room, to talk to Willow. When he came back out, he put the cardboard box inside the other cardboard box. Then the box in the box had a letter taped to it. The box was now a gestalt entity, box within a box, coat and box and letter, letter upon box, the items merging and becoming one, each adding to the sum, until the entire assemblage became a package, a separate item, its disparate components only complete within themselves.

And then the box was shipped. There really wasn’t much for the box to do within the box, other than sit there and be a box. If it had been really bored it could have read the letter, which would have read as follows:

Dear Buffy, the letter read.

I know you’ve been really mad at all of us, and you have a right to be. I haven’t known what to say to you about it. There was nothing I could say that didn’t sound self-serving. But I’ve noticed it, and Xander’s noticed it, and Giles and even Dawn. I think you’ve never forgiven us for the night we kicked you out of the house. And I totally get that! Really, I do. But, I wanted you to know, there were circumstances.

We all took some blame. Believe me, we should have fought harder. But I wanted you to know that it wasn’t entirely our fault what happened that night. The real culprit was Caleb and the First Evil. I know you didn’t know it, but you came back from that encounter with Caleb at the school steeped in a miasma of evil. That was why the First made Caleb leave you alive; it wasn’t trying to kill you, it was trying to break you, and us. Our entire unit.
I’ve been researching it, both on Earth and in the astral plane, ‘cause it didn’t make sense why I turned on you, and I didn’t like it. But everything I’ve found on the First Evil makes it all make sense. The First Evil’s goal wasn’t death, it was pain. Killing you would have just called another Slayer, and we’d have grieved and rallied around Faith or whoever, all of us coming together. But breaking you, breaking our faith in you, that would feed the evil, and make it stronger.

The evil cloud surrounding you seeped into everyone that night. It brought out the worst traits and tendencies in all of us. It made Anya a vengeful demoness who would say anything to hurt. It turned Giles into an officious pedagogue who was convinced he knew better than anyone else. It turned Dawn into an entitled adolescent, who believed she owned everything, and couldn’t see beyond herself. It turned Xander into a helpless idiot who couldn’t see or trust anything around him. And for Kennedy, it took her naturally outspoken greed for power and privilege and brought it to the fore. And I didn’t know what to do that night. I wanted to stand with Kennedy, and I wanted to stand with you, and all my evil-influenced-impulses said, “Stand by your girlfriend. Don’t screw up with her like you did with Tara.” So, I screwed up with you. And I’m sorry.

I didn’t know how to say that. I mean, I could bake cookies all day, and I can’t make up for it. And even though it’s not really my fault, it still feels like it’s my fault, you know?

If I hadn’t been all spell-casted by Caleb’s evil energies, I know I’d have stood by you that night. And the thing is, it affected you too. You listened to us, and you left, when you should have told us to shut the hell up and reminded us that we were there only because we were all hanging on you. And that we were only in trouble because I messed up in bringing you back. And really, it was just a bad, bad night, Buffy. And I’m sorry.

I’m trying to put everything right again. Xander says that I shouldn’t give you this spell until the right time. I’m not sure I really trust Jack. I’ll wait like he says, but I’m mailing this to you direct. I really love you, Buffy.

P.S. Kennedy and I broke up. I don’t love her. I love you.

P.P.S. Not in a groinal way or anything.

P.P.P.S. Not that you’re not cute. I just don’t think of you that way. And you’re not gay. Though if you were maybe we’d think about it, but.... I’m gonna stop writing now. Enjoy your box. It was a hard batch of I’m Really Sorry cookies to bake, but if this works, then the First Evil can go screw itself. I want my best friend back.

Love Willow.

But even reading the letter would have palled after a time. Fortunately, cardboard boxes don’t get bored easily.

The cardboard box nestled in the box with the coat and the letter until it was shipped halfway across the world. Then, brutally, without consenting, it was removed from it’s outer-box, left to stand alone again as what it was. From that point on it could no longer be part of the gestalt item that was the package. It was only itself again.

And then itself was insultingly compared to a man named Riley from Buffy’s past. “My ex,” Buffy said. “Spike always said Riley had the personality of... of that.”

The cardboard box would have found that insulting. It didn’t like Buffy after that. It hadn’t liked Buffy before that, of course, because it was a box, and was incapable of liking people. But that was still an insulting comparison.
Fortunately, the box didn’t have to spend much time with Buffy. In a brutal twist of historical irony, two more letters were taped to the box, and it was shunted across time, and back across the world.

It sat on shelves, and Jack lugged it around, and put it into storage, and didn’t talk to it. He treated it like a cardboard box he didn’t need yet. Which the box didn’t mind, because boxes don’t mind being treated like boxes. They are, after all, in fact, boxes.

But eventually the box was shipped, yet again, this time with an address on it. Spike the address read. C/O Angel, Offices of Wolfram and Hart.

And this was where things became very interesting for the box. Because it was picked up by a set of manicured hands and delivered to a room with strange symbols painted on its walls, and dropped on a table.

“What’s this?” said a man with slight Texas drawl to his accent.

“Lindsey, my love,” said the woman with the manicured hands, “this is our ticket to get to Angel.”

“What are you talking about?” Lindsey picked up the box and was about to open it, which made the woman snatch it out of his hands. “Eve!”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Eve said. “Not time yet. You remember I told you about the amulet that arrived in the mail yesterday in Angel’s office?”

“It had one of Angel’s old demonspawn in it, I know,” Lindsey said.

“The ghost of one of his demonspawn,” Eve corrected him. “And he doesn’t know where that amulet came from, and Spike doesn’t know, either.”

“What’s that got to do with us?” Lindsey said, sounding annoyed. “I need to know how to undermine him, not shrug my shoulders over his new allies.”

“This will undermine him,” Eve said. “Read this.” Eve handed Lindsey the envelope that had been attached to the box.

Lindsey opened the envelope. Inside were two letters. Lindsey read the first one, which read as follows:

Dear Spike, it read.

Yes, I bloody do! Don’t you tell me how I feel, dammit. You are such a moron. A dope and an idiot and you’re shirty. And I miss you like hell. I miss you every day. I miss you like half the world has fallen into that crater with you, and I miss you like my eyes are constantly burning with tears like I saw you burning, and I miss you like it’s all my fault I put that damn suicide shiny around your neck, and I miss you. And I have to keep missing you, apparently, or you’ll never come back.

The amulet was from a man you know as The Immortal. That’s an insanely long story, but the short version is, we reconstituted your soul and it’s being powered by the amulet. It won’t last for too long, and you probably feel kind of weird. It was only a fragment of your soul that was brought back, but everyone swears to me you’ll feel more like yourself soon, as soon as you grow back into it. Any soul is all soul they say. It’s like we’ve cloned you, but you’re you. They swear it. I’m sorry, I hope you don’t mind, but we know you weren’t in heaven. I was holding what was left of your soul. (I hope you don’t mind that, either.)
Anyway, the amulet will also eat you up again if we use that for long, so Willow cast a spell that’s been put in this box. It should give you a new body – I hope you like it, ‘cause it’ll only look like how you think you look or something, and I know you don’t have any mirrors. I won’t care what you look like. I won’t care about anything so long as I can have you back. I knew that, when I pulled you out of that chamber with the Chaka-khan. Turok-han. I knew I’d go through anything to have you back.

I guess you’d know how that feels.

I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wait until May fifth to come and see me. I’ll be in Rome. There’s reasons, really really good ones, but I can’t talk to you or know you’re alive before then, or none of this will work. I know you’re not good with patience, but I think you can come up with something to fill the time. I hope it’s not too long for you. It’s okay, Angel will be there, too, and we’ll be pissing him off. You can watch us piss Angel off! You’ll love it. After that, I want you to meet me outside the church of San Nicola in Carceres in Rome, just before dawn. Can you do that? After that I’ll take you home, and show you that I really do mean what I say. Don’t you ever say I don’t again. Don’t you ever.

I know what you are, Spike. I saw all of it in that last moment. You are a vampire, but you’re also a man. I touched your soul. I held your soul. I need you back. Please, have patience, and just know this.

I love you. (And yes. I do mean that.)

Buffy.

“There’s another letter,” Eve said, passing it over. “Much the same, only from some job called Dawn.”

Lindsey laughed. “Cute,” he said. “What’s this got to do with us?”

“You wanted a way to undermine Angel. This is it.”

“I don’t get it.”


“How is that a problem?”

“Well, probably won’t be, but if we can talk Angel into believing that he’s not the one the prophecy was speaking about…. I mean, think about it. Angel’s put his whole being into that prophecy. Everything he does, ever, is based on trying to make that damn thing come to pass. Put another ensouled vampiric champion into the works, and the whole prophecy is in question.”

“And again, how is that our problem? When something like that goes down, the Powers shake up the world a little bit and just settle things back into place.”

“But what if while they’re shaking things up, we get to Angel. If we go through this Spike guy, and make him think the prophecy is about him, then we can make Angel think it’s not about himself. And what will that do to his precious self-esteem?”

“Self-esteem is for everybody,” Lindsey suddenly sang. “Self-esteem is for everyone.” The tune was evil. Even without consciousness, even the box knew it.
Eve didn’t seem to notice. “Stop watching daytime television,” Eve said, turning off another box full of tubes and wires.

“Sorry. The damn tune’s catchy,” Lindsey said.

“I swear, that box is going to rot your brain.”

“And you think this box might well rot Angel’s,” Lindsey said. He shook his head. “Won’t work. This Spike guy will just high-tail it out of here. Why would he hang around mooning about here when he’s got the love of his life to look forward to?”

Eve shrugged. “We could just keep the box and leave Spike a ghost until he’s settled in,” she said. “He and Angel seem to have some strange dynamic going on. I looked it up in Angel’s file. This Spike was Angel’s right-hand man for decades. Angelus had him conditioned to jump at the smallest nod. Yeah, he became a bit of a wild card once Angel got his soul, but now, look at this, Spike has a soul too. They’ll fall into old patterns, you know they will. Angelus always falls back into the same pattern he used to have with his old associates.”

“Darla...” Lindsey whispered, so low Eve couldn’t hear it, but the cardboard box, if it had ears, could have heard just fine.

“If we just repeat the whole agent of the Powers-That-Be sends visions shtick to this Spike, we should be able to convince him, and Angel that the Powers have chosen him as their champion.”

“Why would he want to be the champion?”

“To get the girl?” Eve asked.

“He’s got the girl,” Lindsey said, throwing the letter onto the table.

“He doesn’t know that,” Eve said. “And he doesn’t have to.”

Lindsey shook his head. “If he’s like Angel, that won’t be enough. He’ll have to be playing the hero. That means we’ll have to put real people in danger and let him... I dunno. Save little girls in alleyways kinda thing.”

Eve considered Lindsey. “Is that a problem?”

Lindsey seemed to consider this.

“No. Actually, it’s not.”

And the box got put on a shelf for a long, long time after that.

The television box was on a lot. The cardboard box would have heard the Self-Esteem song at least five times as Smile Time went through reruns over and over again. It was probably a good thing it didn’t have ears.

It would have heard other things, as Eve and Lindsey played games and made plans, but it wasn’t paying attention. Mostly it just sat on the shelf and waited.

Until eventually Eve came back in. “The cyborgs didn’t work,” Eve told Lindsey, “but I think we have to activate Spike. Do you have everything prepared for that?”

“I’ve still got a few more vampires I need to pay off,” Lindsey said. “They’re pretty convinced I’m going to send someone to hunt them, and they’re not real keen on being dusted.”
“Well, Spike’s losing cohesion. He’s gotten stronger, but his mind is a bit addled. He’s talking glibly about having sex with robots and his mom trying to shag him. I think it’s what that letter said, about the amulet eating him up? We’ve run out of time.”

“Do you think he’s back under Angel’s control?” Lindsey asked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Eve said. “If we wait too much longer, he’ll just fizzle out, and there’ll be nothing left of his soul.”

“And you’re sure that wouldn’t undermine Angel more?” Lindsey asked. “His old lieutenant, zapped away?”

“No,” Eve said. “They’re bickering like an old married couple. They’re rivals. Let them rival up.”

“Okay,” Lindsey took the cardboard box down from the shelf, dusted it off, and handed it to Eve. “Send it on, baby. Operation Undermine Angel is a go.”

The box was tossed into a mail bag the next morning, and carried around an office building, and eventually delivered to a desk, where a blonde vampire opened it for an incorporeal ghost. A bright flash of light fell out of the box as it was opened, leaving the ghost-no-longer saying, “Well, that was a slap and a tickle.”

And suddenly, the box was empty. It was no longer full of the power of a sun. It no longer had the mystical energy needed to change the laws of physics. It was no longer full of the essence of a powerful witch. It was, in all reality, no longer Willow’s box. Bereft, abandoned, alone, the box was diminished, become ordinary and sad. There was nothing for it anymore. It had no true future.

It was an empty receptacle, useful only for what it contained. And it contained... nothing.

In the ensuing chaos, the box was forgotten, except for one moment when it was picked up and examined. “This is the box?” Angel asked.

“That’s it, boss,” said the blonde vampire.

“No sign of who sent it,” he said flippantly, and threw the box away.

That was the last time the box was touched by sentient hands.

Eventually the box was thrown in with the rest of the recycling, pulped, and turned into another box. But it didn’t mind. It wasn’t as if it could have told them anything important. It couldn’t have told them who sent it. It didn’t know, ultimately, that it had ever been Willow’s box. It was, after all, only cardboard.

Chapter End Notes

In particular, I should thank bewildered of ensouled sock fame for helping beta this chapter.
Willow

I knew where my body was. It was sitting on the floor in a hotel room in Rio, holding onto Xander’s hands, so that I could use his life-force to find it again.

I knew where my power was. It was out beyond the consciousness, shunted through a transfer point in a monastery in the Himalayas, reaching into The Everything, and arranging what I needed for the spell I had to do. It was a spell that twisted destinies, rearranged matter, changed the rules of nature. If I did it wrong, it could break reality. If I did it right – and I was going to do it right – it would right a wrong I had done to myself, to my friend, and to the world.

And I knew where my soul was. Where it always went when I went this far down into the magic, when I was basically transforming myself temporarily into a goddess. My soul had fled to its safe space, the place where I could let the power do what it needed to do, without corrupting my self. So while my power was off playing with the fabric of the universe, my soul hung out here. With Tara.

Sometimes I wondered if this place was Heaven, the place where Buffy had been when I ripped her out and made her come back to earth. When I was on earth, I couldn’t remember this place very well – just peace, and safety. But whenever I was here, it all made perfect sense. And when I was here, there was Tara.

I never remembered her, either.

We sat beneath what I saw as a tree, on a bright autumn day, in a sunny green park. It was probably a memory of the day we sang. And she snuggled up inside my arms, and I held her soul, and I missed her....

She held me back, and smiled up at me. “What are you up to this time? Finding more slayers?”

“Not today.”

“Is that Xander’s aura I sense?” she asked.
“Yeah, he’s my anchor today. I just broke up with Kennedy.”

Tara said nothing for a long moment, just held me.

“Nothing to say?”

“Kinda saw that coming,” she said low.

I laughed. “Yeah. You and everyone else. I thought it would work, it just... I couldn’t make it last.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. You can’t expect everyone to have what we had,” Tara said. “I was glad you’d found someone.”

“I know you were. But she wasn’t right. I thought she’d settle down and... well. Learn to love. You know, in some way that wasn’t selfish.”

“And she didn’t?”

“She seemed to think that the best way to handle my being unhappy was to throw money at me.”

“That wasn’t gonna work for long.”

“Well... it was like what I did with you,” I said. “I thought magic could hold us together when we were falling apart. She seemed to think that money could.”

“Was that what sparked the breakup?”

“Part of it,” I said. “Part of it was, she didn’t want me doing this spell.”

“What spell are you doing?”

“I’m resurrecting Spike.”

Tara took in a deep breath and sat up, staring at me. “Didn’t you learn this lesson?” she demanded.

“It’s not the same,” I said. “Spike’s soul is already there, on earth, he just... he doesn’t have a body. I don’t know how that happened, but Fred’s been calling me since, like, just after Sunnydale fell. That was when he showed up in Angel’s office. Less than a month after the fall.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to stay in contact with Angel’s team, ‘cause they were on the wrong side of the war.”

“They are, but Fred wasn’t. I mean... she was Fred. We got on so well, if I hadn’t had Kennedy, and if Fred was... more bi than she was, you know? Something might have happened. That’s probably why Kennedy didn’t like me talking to Fred, though. She got jealous... and I think that’s why she started blocking Fred’s calls.”

“She was blocking your calls?”

“I know,” I said.

“That’s how my dad controlled us,” Tara said. “Mom and me. He kept our friends from reaching us, kept us isolated so we had to depend on him.”
“I know,” I said. “It... it meant I wasn’t there for Fred. And she needed me.”

Fred had first called about a month after Sunnydale fell, and said she had a problem. There was a ghost haunting Wolfram and Hart, but it wasn’t a ghost. She gave me parameters, details, said the spirit seemed to be connected to a relic, but when I asked for specific details, she always got coy. “Um... Angel... um. He doesn’t really want that information made public. But I just needed to know if you had any idea of how to recorporealize such a manifest spirit.”

I’d told her what I knew. We talked back and forth for months. I’d warned her it was nearly impossible. The most powerful necromancers still needed something to resurrect a body. I’d managed to bring Buffy back, but once I’d manifested her soul, I still needed to create something to house it in. I’d reconstituted her body, using her own corpse. Trying to make a body out of nothing but a soul? If there’d been even a bit of blood or something for a pattern to follow, but out of nothing? I wasn’t sure it could be done.

Fred consulted me on a machine she was making. I told her how to integrate the needed spells into it, but I warned her the amount of power she’d need would be the equivalent of nuclear evil. I told her I’d manifested that much before, but only a couple of times, and it had nearly killed me each time. Once I’d nearly destroyed the world with it. Once, I’d helped to change it. I wished her luck, and left her to it.

I’d told Kennedy about it. “What is she trying to do? Bring back a ghost? Isn’t that risky?”

“Yeah, but she thinks it’s important.”

“But isn’t she one of Angel’s team?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to talk to them.”

I shrugged. “It’s Fred.”

Kennedy had looked disapproving, but said nothing.

I heard nothing from Fred for months after that. I’d thought nothing of it. Fred had a job to do, I had slayers to find. It made sense.

Then I got a call from, of all people, Angel. “Hey, Willow, hi. Um. Do you have Buffy’s phone number?”

“Angel? How did you get this number?”

“Fred. Um. I need to talk to Buffy.”

“Why?”

“I needed to talk to you, too. It’s Cordelia.”

I’d known Cordelia was hurt. I’d visited her in the hospital before I left LA. The tone of Angel’s voice was enough to tell me what had happened. I sat down. Cordelia had been my friend – well, okay, she’d started as my tormenter, but became my friend – since I was in kindergarten. “Did she ever wake up?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “Not really. Can you give me Buffy’s number?”
I considered this. “I can tell her,” I said. “It might be better coming from me.”

“No,” Angel said. “I really... I really have to talk to her. There are some things... more than Cordelia.”

“Angel...”

“Please, Willow. If you knew how important this was. I have to talk to her myself.”

I considered even harder. Buffy and Angel had been really close, and Angel and Cordelia had been really close. For Angel’s sake, I knew he probably wanted to talk to Buffy, desperately. True, Buffy hadn’t wanted to deal with him... but that was for business, Wolfram and Hart potentially evil business. This was clearly personal.

I’d never been able to forget holding Buffy as her world collapsed when Angel betrayed her and became Angelus, and again when he’d broken up with her. Angel said Buffy was part of his destiny. I knew the Powers That Be were powerful entities. Maybe he was right, and it really was important. Maybe he and Buffy could make up, or bond over this, and Buffy could finally have some kind of happy ending. My heart was broken for her a lot... and she’d sworn she’d never stop loving Angel. Granted, that had been years before, but even last year she said she’d loved Angel more than she was ever going to love anybody. I believed in eternal love, and they did have that whole star-crossed thing.

Okay. I should have asked her first.

Instead I gave him the number of Buffy’s land line. It was just as untraceable as her cell phone, but was never used for slayer business. I mostly used it to talk to Dawn.

It was a mistake. A really pissed off Buffy called me about an hour later. “I’m sorry, Buffy. God, Buffy, I’m sorry! I didn’t think it was going to be a big deal!”

“What’s she on about now?” Kennedy demanded as she overheard.

She didn’t want anything to do with Angel, and it wasn’t just on a professional basis. Whatever she’d meant by that love him more than I’ll love anything didn’t mean she still did love him. I kind of hadn’t gotten that.

I felt awful. I tried to call her and talk about it, make it up to her, but she kept avoiding my calls. That was when I realized, she’d been avoiding my calls for months. In fact, her annoyed rant at my giving Angel her phone number had been the first personal phone call I’d gotten from Buffy since she went to Europe, and she’d only called me to yell at me.

I cried about it. I cried about it a lot, over and over, for days, and Kennedy would stroke my hair and get indignant. But I understood where Buffy was coming from. She wasn’t the happy teenage girl she had been when she loved Angel. I’d been hoping that Angel calling about Cordelia, maybe they’d bond, and she could be that girl again.

I had been trying to resurrect her again. Even using a method other than magic, I should have known better than that. But I didn’t know how to make it up to her. I’d thought she’d forgiven us for that night we all turned on her. It wasn’t until I realized she wasn’t talking to me personally at all anymore that I realized... she kind of hadn’t.

Which meant that in her heart, Buffy still felt closed off, kicked out, betrayed. It meant that Buffy was still all alone.
But I don’t think Kennedy ever forgave Buffy for making me cry. I started calling Xander a lot, because Kennedy just wasn’t sympathetic about Buffy, and Xander was. But he was hard to reach, traveling all over the globe, so it was easier when he called me when his cell phone had reception and the roaming rates worked. Kennedy didn’t like that – sometimes he called at two in the morning, if that was when his line freed up.

Then he stopped calling, and I let him. I thought he was busy, and Kennedy got really needy about that point. Back rubs and sex and I’m having trouble with this slayer, and ooh, I need you to come meet my parents with me, and it’s really important that I go to this dinner with this uppity-up, and you need to come too, and... I didn’t notice. I just... let it go.

I didn’t suspect anything was wrong until Xander showed up at my door. After a flurry of delighted hugs, I’d asked why he hadn’t warned me he was coming.

“What are you talking about, Willow? I’ve been trying to call you for weeks. Don’t you ever answer your phone?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, I’ve called you like... twenty times. I ran into Drusilla, she gave me this thing, said it had to go to you.”

“What thing?”

“This stone.” He handed it to me. “Apparently it has Spike’s blood on it. She said you needed it.” That had startled me on a lot of levels, but I still had the other mystery to solve. “Why the hell didn’t you call me back?”

“I’m telling you, Xander, you never called.”

“I left like a dozen messages on your voice mail.”

I hadn’t gotten any messages. I hadn’t received any calls. I checked my cell phone. There were no missed calls. “It’s working fine.”

Xander pulled out his cell phone and tried to call me. “It’s ringing,” he said.

But my phone wasn’t. “That’s weird.” I sat down to figure out what was going on. It took me a little while to figure it out, but I found it eventually. “That’s weird. Your number’s been blocked.”

“Press the wrong button one time?” Xander asked. I knew that wasn’t impossible.

Except it was. “A bunch of numbers have been blocked.”

“Whose?”

“You... Buffy... Dawn...” I looked up at Xander. “And Fred.”

None of the slayers. Not Giles. Not the coven. Just my friends.

Tara listened to all this. “What did Kennedy say when you called her on it?” she asked.

“She denied it,” I said. “And then she tried to defend it. And then she got her back up and got even angrier. She said Xander was calling at all hours, and Buffy just made me cry, and we weren’t supposed to be talking to Fred anyway. And if it had been really important, I could have called them, or they could have called her first. Which... meant she was screening my calls for me”
“Yeah, that’s not right,” Tara said.

“No, it’s not right. I felt so... betrayed, Tara! So controlled, so....” I stopped. The truth was, I finally knew how Tara had felt when she figured out about the memory spell. Violated.

And Kennedy had thought she was just making our life together easier. But then, she was always trying to grab control she wasn’t entitled to. Being a slayer wasn’t a sacred calling for Kennedy. It was a privilege, like being Prom Queen, or getting a promotion. She’d always felt entitled – to her status as potential, to the biggest bedroom in the house, to the big comfy bed, to blow off her training. Entitled to my body.

And I’d let her be. In my desperation to move on from my mistakes, I’d let her take my control from me.

And it was time to take it back.

And also maybe remind her she wasn’t the queen she thought she was. “So after... that big fight which was basically already a break-up, I called Giles and reminded him she’d never finished her slayer’s spirit quest.”

“What did he do?” Tara asked.

“He took her off active duty and assigned her to the delinquents, until he finds time to arrange for his little Hokey-Pokey questy duties.”

The delinquents were slayers who hadn’t taken to the power well. There was a mad girl who had gone killer in California, and another who had gone cataleptic, and there was a pair of twins which had gone so far as to be unable to be apart from each other, which needed detailed synchronicity in their training. There were several others who were simply adjusting badly to the dreams.

Robin Wood had been running that camp with Faith, but they weren’t getting on very well anymore – a relationship as doomed as me and Kennedy had been, really – so he needed more muscle. Kennedy had been furious, but it was either follow her new assignment or resign from the slayer ranks. And the slayers were the ones who got called when there were demon sightings. Without us, she would have a hard time getting her slay on.

“What’d she say to that?”

“I don’t care,” I said. That wasn’t true, of course. I cared a lot. My heart was broken, and I felt mean and bruised. She called me names, said I’d used her, her money and her strength and hadn’t she brought me back to life? But what kind of life? I’d asked. One where I betray my friends, where I feel alone and isolated, where I’m bought? I felt like a whore.

It was ugly. Very ugly. A slayer and a powerful witch. Demonic essence and the residue of dark sorcery. Even without bringing in fists and magic, the break-up made the air boil between us.

Finally she’d left, and I’d had a week left in the hotel room she’d already paid for. It was for the best. After that I’d go back to the slayer barracks with Rona and the others. I would have liked to go to Buffy... but until I knew she wasn’t angry at me, I couldn’t face her. I couldn’t face another slayer-witch shouting match. My soul wasn’t strong enough for that.

It snuggled into Tara, and I half wished I could stay there forever.

“Kennedy... really did try to love you,” Tara said gently. “You’re very lovable.”
“I know. We both tried to make it work, but... after that night when she made me turn on Buffy... it was inevitable it would crumble. She was always a selfish bitch anyway,” I muttered.

“You didn’t always think that,” Tara said.

I felt sick. “Maybe I should have.” I shook my head. “Maybe it wasn’t really her fault. I think if she hadn’t played hooky from the spirit quest so she could come on to me, she might not have been so... *I Have The Power* and been so against Buffy. That night, when we all turned on her... it might not have happened.”

“I thought that was ‘cause of Caleb,” Tara said.

“It was Caleb, and the First Evil,” I said. “But it was also me. I was so afraid of screwing things up with Kennedy the way I had with you... I think I’d have done anything to keep her from being mad at me. When she turned on Buffy, I felt I had to stand with her, so I wouldn’t be fighting with my girlfriend. And that... that’s not the right way to feel.”

“No,” Tara said. She fell back against me and snuggled my spirit, and I held her tightly.

“Giles said he might actually foist the spirit quest off to Andrew,” I said.

Tara laughed. “I doubt Kennedy would like that much.”

“No,” I said. “But Giles is busy. It’s... really a mess down on Earth right now.”

“Well, with the First Evil, and Jasmine, and Wolfram and Hart’s Senior Partners, the Powers are kind of going... Powery,” Tara said.

“I know,” I said. “It’s an apocalypse, and we need every Slayer I helped to awaken. But... I think we need Spike, too. I know Buffy does. She’s... she’s alone.”

“She’d be okay without Spike.”

“I know she would. But she shouldn’t have to be. He died ‘cause of what I did, Tara. And now his soul is just... wafting there on earth, and giving him a body is the least I can do to make it up to him. And Buffy. And Fred. I owe Fred. For letting Kennedy come between us.”

“I’m sure Fred would understand,” Tara said.

“Fred’s dead,” I said.

Tara stared at me. “What?”

“She left me a bunch of voice mails I never got,” I said. “The last few were... really hard to listen to. I’d helped her design this machine which was supposed to work on the ghost, and she called to tell me the machine was broken. I never got that message, or any of the ones after that. But that was when she broke Angel’s rule and told me the ghost she was trying to help was Spike. He’d given up his chance to be solid so that he could save her, and she was done keeping him a secret after that. She kept calling, but... her number was blocked, so I didn’t know.”

The last call about Spike had said, “I don’t know. He can move coffee cups now. Maybe... maybe that’ll mean something to you? Please get back to me. You have no idea how pathetic he looks with those eyes, and he’s all alone. And he’s driving Angel nuts. I don’t know. Maybe you could at least tell Buffy? My number for her doesn’t work, and I’m starting to get desperate. The readings I’m doing say the amulet’s power is fading. I haven’t told anyone this, but he’s not going
to last much longer unless I can find a body for him. I... I suggested that we get a necromancer, and that he go into a cadaver, and... and he said he’d rather just fade away. He wouldn’t take another innocent life, even if it was already dead. I think we need to get Buffy in on this. He’s really miserable. He’s been talking about his dead mother, and like... it just seems off. I think he’s going a little crazy. Please call me back.”

Then she’d given up on me, but the last call had been from the day before I found out about the blocked numbers.

“Willow,” she’d said. “It’s Fred. I’m... I’m sick. It’s something... something we can’t....” She coughed. “Help. Please help. Please call....”

“What happened when you called back?” Tara asked me.

“I got some guy called Knox, who said she was dead. When I asked about Spike he was really squirrelly, and I couldn’t get a straight answer, something about him not saving her and a Deeper Well. I didn’t understand. So I pulled up the divination cards, like you taught me?” I swallowed. “He was right. Fred was gone. And the divination said I should use the blood Xander brought, and cast her spell. For Fred. And for Spike, and for Buffy. For everyone.” I took a deep breath. “I should have done it when Fred first asked me. If she’d told me the truth at first... if Kennedy hadn’t been between us... I don’t know.”

“Maybe this was the way it had to be,” Tara said. “You’re the one who said everything happens for a reason.”

Tara was right. I did used to say that. I looked down at her, and thought about the bullet pushing through her body, and her hot blood as it sprayed on to my face, and I didn’t want to think that there had been a reason for that. I couldn’t hold with that reasons thing anymore. Sometimes things just happened. I had to believe that, or I’d go crazy Dark Willow again. ‘Cause the only reasons for that happening... they would only make me angry.

“Maybe,” I said.

“So you’re getting Spike a body?” Tara asked.

“It’s gonna be easier than what Fred was gonna do,” I said. “With that stone Drusilla found, I have something to build on. You know Drusilla could sort of see the future sometimes – or Spike said she could. Anyway, with that I can invoke blood magics, and give the spell a physical pattern to follow.”

“You’re cloning Spike out of his blood?”

“Sort of,” I said. “I’m using the physical pattern from the blood to reinforce the psi-pattern that his soul is already projecting. The power I need is mostly manifesting the form from his psi-energy. Breaking just a few of the laws of physics to transfer energy into matter. Not the laws of nature or dimensions. Just physics. I mean, I do that every time I float something.”

“This is gonna be a little bigger than floating something,” Tara said, “or you wouldn’t have had to shunt your soul here for safekeeping.”


“You can’t stay here,” she said.

“Not yet,” I said. “I know. And I can’t become a higher being, or make myself one of the
Powers for very long, or slice my way through the universe. I’m better off human. I know that.”

“I love you, though,” Tara said.

“I love you, too.”

“How are you going to get the spell to Spike, if Fred’s already dead?”

“I’m gonna do what Fred said,” I said. “Tell Buffy. She’ll get the spell to him. But I’m gonna wait until it works, ‘cause I don’t want to get her hopes up.”

“Like with Dawn?” Tara said.

“This really is different, Tara. I’m not bringing any souls through dimensions or anything.”

“I know,” Tara said. “This does feel different.” Tara sometimes seemed to have access to things I couldn’t understand, living up here.

“Like it’s destined?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “There’s no destiny in this. I know there isn’t. Or if there is, it’s bigger than the Powers and their little plans. Maybe it’s from the power behind the Powers. It feels like... this is what’s right.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I did wrong by bringing Buffy back. And that let out the First Evil, and threw the world into chaos, and it made Spike die. Maybe I’m putting things back the way they should be this time.” I looked down at Tara. “Tell me if I’m doing wrong, and I’ll stop. Please?”

Tara looked up. “That’s not what I’m here for.”

“I know.”

Tara gripped my hand hard and stared up into my eyes. “Willow? I agree this isn’t wrong, so long as you’re not shunting around souls through dimensions. But... I want you to ask yourself. Are you sure you’re doing this for Spike and Buffy, and not for some other reason?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...,” she said. “You brought Buffy back. You kinda said you were hoping Angel could bring the old Buffy back. Are you sure you’re not thinking the same thing about Spike? That he could bring her back?”

I frowned. “There is the whole I’m really sorry, let me make cookies thing to this, I admit,” I said. “But I think it’s not quite the same. I mean... Spike and Buffy had what they had, and I don’t think he’s going to make her young again. Far from it. It’s just...” I shrugged. “It does feel right.”

“I just wanted you to make sure,” Tara said. “I mean... you wanted to bring me back.”

“And I couldn’t,” I said. “I know. But... this feels different than that. And actually... I could now.”

“What?”

“I could. Bring you back,” I said. “Once I activated the slayers, I knew how to do... almost anything. I know the way to bring you back now. Osiris couldn’t stop me, no one could stop me. I don’t need the power of other Powers now. Now all I’d have to do is go goddess and make it
happen.” I kissed Tara very gently. “But I know it’s not right. It would hurt you. It would hurt the world. Even if nothing went wrong, it would be wrong. This isn’t like that. It’s just... helping a soul be itself, not tearing the world apart to bring back what’s gone. It doesn’t feel wrong.”

“But you’re still bringing back Buffy’s lover.”

“Someone else already did that,” I said. “Souls know where they belong. Spike belongs on the same plane as Buffy. And you....”

“I belong here,” Tara said decisively. She smiled up at me. “You will too, one day,” she promised. “When it’s time. And when it’s time, I’m gonna save another space beside you, for who ever else you come to love.”

“Not Kennedy.”

“I guess not Kennedy,” she said. “But don’t close off your heart all the same, okay?”

“I won’t,” I said. “That’s what I try to remember, from this place. That’s what it’s about. All of it, the magic, and power, life itself. All of it. It’s all about the love.”
I love you.

No, you don’t.

No, you don’t. No, you don’t. No, you don’t.

Spike’s words echoed in me over and over after Jack stepped through his gate. Jack hadn’t led me to believe that it was going to be enjoyable for him, this trip. It wasn’t until after I’d kissed him goodbye that I realized: I’d just sent another lover to his death.

Granted, with Jack, that wasn’t a permanent state. But then... it hadn’t been for Angel, either. Or for Spike, if this worked.

Was it my lot in life to send my loves to die?

No, you don’t. No, you don’t. No, you don’t.

There was another moment that had haunted me in the past. Another time Spike had tried to tell me how I felt. “Because you love me. Why do you keep lying to yourself?”

Love.

The word held so much violence in it. As if I couldn’t even believe that I loved unless I was speaking with my fists. So elusive, so hard to pin down. Two weeks ago, I would have sworn I didn’t love Jack. Two years ago, I would have sworn up and down I didn’t love Spike. A few years before that, Riley was convinced I didn’t love him, and he was probably right. No, the only person love ever came easily with was Angel. And what was that so-called love? If any of the girls came up to me now and told me the story of their epic eternal love and it was what I’d had with Angel before we slept together... I’d laugh.
I could just see it, a girl younger than Dawn, on the cusp of her seventeenth birthday, insisting that she’d found the love of a lifetime. Some guy she’d met six months previously who looked hot and mysterious, who had given her his coat at a club, who smiled at her in that special way, who got jealous over her male friends. *It’s eternal!* she’d say. *It’s forever! I love him!*

And I would tell her, in all honesty, *No. You don’t.*

*You only think you do.*

But if that same slayer came back in a couple years and told me about some guy she’d known for a while, some guy she argued with and hung out with and worked beside and drank with, some guy who took care of her family when she couldn’t, who didn’t put up with her shit, who worked like a dog to make it up to her when he made a mistake... some guy who made her breath catch and confused her even when she was angry at him... if she said she loved *that* guy? What would I say to her?

*Be careful,* is what I would say. *Be. Careful.*

My definition of love had changed a lot over the years. Love was usually pain. Love carried a lot of death. Love was the potential for betrayal.

Did I love Jack? In a way, I knew I did. But somehow, that thought didn’t hurt me at all. I wasn’t used to love being without pain, but then, this wasn’t what I would have called love. Not when I was young and idealistic and believed in forever. I was okay with what Jack and I had – whatever that was – and didn’t feel any desire to try and make it about epic destiny, love and marriage and children and forever. I would have fought for him, if he needed me to. If he was trapped and hurt, I’d go through hell and high water to free him. I’d... probably be willing to risk death to free him. But with Jack, I still felt like cookie dough. Like that wasn’t finished and wasn’t ever going to be.

But Spike...

And I couldn’t even finish the thought through the pain of it. The grief hadn’t been fading over the last year. If anything, it was deeper now. I could work around it, I knew, but... did I love...?

*No, you don’t.*

It was silly. It wasn’t even a question.

What if this didn’t work? What if it wouldn’t work? What if I’d given up my inner soul-piggy Spikeness for nothing? I stared at that Janus gate and waited for Jack to come through. He’d promised me I wouldn’t have to wait long.

“Ready to go?” Jack said from behind me.

I whirled. My head went from the Janus gate, to the threshold entrance, and back about three times before I realized what had happened. Jack didn’t look any different. But then... what was strange about that?

My mouth fell open. “Oh, god!” I whispered. He hadn’t come back through the gate. This whole last year he’d just... lived it. Twice. There was really nothing I could say to that. I was dumbfounded for a long moment, and even in my shock, I could tell he was kind of enjoying that. I didn’t begrudge him. He deserved something for all that time. “I... I’m so sorry.”

Jack shrugged. “Years are cheap for me, Buffy,” he said. Then he smiled. “It’s nice to see you
again."

I wanted to fall into his arms and kiss him, and I also realized... I didn’t. And he... wasn’t kissing me either. In the last ten minutes at least a whole year had fallen between us, and even if I hadn’t experienced it... I felt it.

He felt it too. He stepped forward and touched my face, as if trying to remember it. “Hi, there,” he said.

It was fond, but distant. Maybe death wasn’t permanent for Jack. Things changed anyway. What we’d had was dead. It wasn’t ruined, we weren’t estranged, but it was a year and possibly several deaths away. And I hadn’t realized it would happen.

Or had I? I’d been very keen on that last kiss.

“Um. Hi. I....” I said. I didn’t know what else to say. Slayerness took over. “Did the mission succeed?”

He nodded. “I think so. Amulet to Wolfram and Hart, orb to Sunnydale, soul fragment to amulet, amulet to Angel, box following on, and I even called Willow last month and had her send us the box at the right time. I think I hit every point.”

I was trembling as I asked. “So did you see Spike outside?”

He looked confused. “What?”

“I told Spike in my letter to meet us outside the church just before dawn. That should be in like... twenty minutes.”

Jack looked at the time. “Dawn’s at six. That’s in ten minutes. I didn’t see him outside. If he’s planning to be there, he’s cutting it fine.”

“Or he’s hiding from the evil Immortal,” I said with a grin. I knew – I just knew it had to have worked. I grabbed Jack’s arm and dragged him behind me, back through the threshold entrance, back through the eerie ancient tunnels, back through the church basement, up through the altar, and back out into the floating teal blue of an early morning in Rome.

The sun hadn’t risen. There were enough shadows that Spike could have hung out for quite a while after sunrise, anyway. And there was no Spike.

“Spike!” I called out, in case he really was hiding.

There was nothing. The name echoed around the mostly empty street.

Spike simply wasn’t there. I could have waited, assumed he was late.

Bullshit. Spike wasn’t going to be late. “Jack, what? Did you miss any steps?”

“No! I told you,” Jack said.

“Well, did you check? Did you call to see if it had worked?”

Jack shook his head. “You don’t understand, Buffy, I didn’t dare. This is a fixed slip, not a transitional one.”

“What’s that mean?”
“We're not changing history. We're just... part of it. I couldn’t go around asking in advance whether Spike was out there, alive and well.”

“Why not?”

“Because if we heard a no, a no was all we were ever going to hear.”

“There’d be nothing we could do?”

He shook his head. “Not without causing a paradox and ripping a hole in the fabric of spacetime. And I’m not doing that today.”

No, no, no. I didn’t know if I was chanting the words to myself to deny what was happening, or just focusing on Jack’s word. No, no, no.

No!

“Well, he’s not here. And I will not accept no for an answer. Can we ask now?”

“No,” Jack said. “Not safely. Things have to just fall into place for a set timeframe like this, you can’t force it.”

I was annoyed. There was no way my only recourse was to sit passive and let the chips fall where they may. “Okay, so, you haven’t been asking questions, in case the answer is no?” I asked. What did that mean? “So,” I said. “We track down the yes.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “How do you plan to do that?”

“We track down the places where we already know there is one.” I turned to Jack. “Willow made that spell for a reason, yeah? Someone asked her to?” I pulled out my cellphone and dialed her number.

Willow answered instantly, which she hadn’t done the last few times I called on business. “Buffy?”

“Willow,” I said. “That spell you sent me, what was it for exactly?”

“I’m supposed to tell you now? Between Xander and Drusilla and Jack and my divination cards, I’ve been really confused about that.”

“Yes,” I said. “Exactly why did you make that spell in the cardboard box?”

“Because I needed to make a body for Spike,” she said, and I nearly whooped with triumph.

“Where’d you hear that? Did you actually see Spike and his disembodied soullyness?”

“No,” Willow said. Damn. “But I got that information from Fred.”

“Fred,” I said. Fred was a dead end, unfortunately. But Fred worked with Angel, Angel worked in LA with... “Andrew!”

“No, her last name was Burkle,” Willow said.

“No, I know that,” I said. I looked around for Jack, who seemed to have disappeared. A second later he came tootling around the corner on another little scooter. He did have a fondness for the things. They made sense with the traffic in Rome. “I’ll talk to you later, Willow. Oh, oh, Willow?”
“Yeah?” She sounded really insecure.

“I’m sorry about you and Kennedy. Well, I’m not sorry, ‘cause I always thought she was a cast-iron bitch, but I’m sorry if you’re hurting.”

I could actually hear her gulp over the phone. “Really?”

“Yeah. Yeah, really. We should get together. You and me and Xander, like old times. I’ll call you, okay? I gotta go.” I jumped on the back of Jack’s scooter. “Take me home.”

I held on to Jack, his wool coat making my cheek itch, but I still didn’t want to let him go. Not until I knew what had happened.

When we got to my apartment, Andrew was sprawled snoring on the couch. “Andrew!” I kicked the couch and shook him awake. “Andrew!”


“L.A.” I said. “Did you work with Fred Burkle?”

“Fred?” he shook his head. “No, I was mostly working with Angel and Sp– um. Um, someone. Um. Else.”

I grabbed him by his Luke Skywalker pajama tops. “Say it! Who were you working with!”

“With Spike, okay! He was fighting the slayer!”

Fighting the slayer. That meant he was solid!

But Andrew sounded like I’d just twisted him to pieces. He actually started crying as I dropped him on the couch. Okay, now what was going on? “Andrew, what’s wrong?”

“He... he told me not to tell you. He... he said... I’ve... I’ve broken my vow!”

I nearly laughed in his face. “That’s fine,” I said. “The vow was only through last night, I can know now!”

Andrew shook his head. “Spike didn’t say anything about you not being able to know. He just... he didn’t seem to want you to know, and with you and... and... you...!” He was staring at Jack as he said it, tragic and noble.

“Buffy’s not gonna break my heart, Andrew,” Jack said gently. “Really. It’s gonna be fine. You don’t need to protect me.”

“You... I’m not breaking up an epic and expanding love stretching between fate and dimensions?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Jack, you handle this. I have another call to make.” I pulled out the cell phone. “Hi, Alfonso?” I asked. “I wanted to ask you – who was with Angel last night as you were doing the exchange? You kept saying them. Was his name Wesley?” This was a direct question, but it wasn’t too bad if I got a no about Spike. It might just mean Spike didn’t come to Rome, not that he wasn’t alive and well and waiting for me somewhere.

“No, no, not Wesley. I don’t remember precisely. Something... strange hair, that one. I should remember...”

“Yes. Yes, all of those,” Alfonso said. “Incidentally, I left the head in your apartment. Was... was that what you wanted me to do with it, or did you only want it discarded? I thought, you could discard it, if you didn’t want, and I didn’t know. I couldn’t reach to you.”

The head. So that was what the smell was. The bowling bag with Alfonso’s shed head was waiting on the table by the window. “Ew. Thanks,” I said.

“My pleasure. Any time you and The Immortal want to play another wicked, wicked game, you just call on me, no?”

“Be sure of it,” I said. I hung up the phone and turned to Jack. “Confirmed. It is definitely confirmed, we have a yes for Spike here last night!”

“You didn’t need to call Al,” Jack said, with a kind of glum amusement. He’d been talking to Andrew. “Scrappy Doo here says he sent Spike on his merry way just five hours ago.”

“What?”

“He was still here while you were starting your trance,” Jack said. “By the time you came out of it, he would have been half-way across the Atlantic, if he was in one of Wolfram and Hart’s jets. They have alien tech in some of their jets, they go pretty fast.”

I glared at Andrew. “You sent Spike away?”

“I just... I just....” He looked miserable, and more than a little scared.

“He implied you’d moved on, Buffy,” Jack said. “Like he thought you had. I’ve been explaining that you and I don’t love like that.”

“Not each other, anyway,” I said. “Andrew, how could you?” Like Spike wasn’t insecure enough without that! No wonder he’d decided not to meet up at the church.

Jack shook his head. “Think about it, Buffy. No one told him why he shouldn’t tell you. Since he couldn’t have told you, or it would have made its own paradox, there had to be some other reason.”

“And what reason was that?”

Andrew just cried.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine, Andrew, I’m not about to kick you off watcher training or anything. Just –”

“Buffy?” Jack said. “Why don’t you let me handle Andrew in a day or two, when things get settled down? I can teach him a bit about temporal mechanics and... relationships.”

“Fine. Whatever. I’m making another phone call.”

“You calling Angel?”

“Nope,” I said. I didn’t trust Angel. “I’m booking a plane to LA.”

“Don’t,” Jack said.

“Don’t try to stop me, Jack! Spike’s got the wrong idea in his head, and I need to–”
“I know you do. Just... Come on outside with me.”

“Why?”

“Just do it,” he said. As we went out the door he collected Alfonso’s stinky head. “Al drop this off?”

“Yeah. What’s he expect us to do with it?”

“I was going to mail it to Angel with a note,” he said. “I have a better idea. Andrew? Buffy and I are going to LA for a few days, you’ll tell Dawn, won’t you?”

“Oh... uh. Yeah. Yeah. I can do that.”

“Okay. Catch you soon?”

“Um... yeah,” Andrew said, blushing.

Jack closed the door behind us and led me down the dark entry foyer of the apartment building.

“Jack, why didn’t you want me to book a flight?”

“You don’t need one. Take hold of me.”

“What?”

Jack looked seriously into my face. “You tell anyone I fixed this strap, I’ll deny it, you hear me?”

“Your wrist strap?” I looked at it. “I didn’t know it was broken.”

“It is broken. It’s supposed to take me through time and space with the touch of a button.”

“And it doesn’t anymore?” Clearly, or he wouldn’t have needed to use the Janus gate.

“Well... not time.” He pressed a button. The world shut on me, like a book, all the pages collapsing into a solid mass, leaving me pressed between the pages. Then the book opened... and I was on another page.

I was no longer in the early morning in my entry foyer in Italy. The air was different, the sky was different, and I was outside. It was night. Rough sounds tore at me as much as the rough transport. Jack had teleported us! I felt sick, as if all my entrails were trying to become my extrails, and I felt cold. Really cold. The air was warm and balmy and polluted – L.A. Couldn’t mistake it – but I was chilled to my core. It took a second of grunting and shaking my body around before I felt normal. Jack was beside me going, “Ugh! Ack!” as well, and without surprise, so this was apparently normal.

“You have a teleporter, and you didn’t tell me?”

“It’s not real reliable anymore,” he said as he recovered. “Someone decided I was too much trouble jumping through time and space and sonicked it all – buggered up,” he said. “I’ve sort of fixed it, but I don’t like using it often.”

“What happens if it stops working?”

“Oh, we’d turn into our component molecules, and likely be dispersed as water vapor,” he said. “Wouldn’t really be a problem for me, but–”
“Jack! I didn’t resurrect Spike to commit suicide!”

Jack grinned at me, and I realized he’d been teasing. Probably. He had a bit of a wicked streak.

But I was really only attracted to guys when they did.

“Where are we?” I knew it was LA. The air was unmistakable. I looked around me, and froze.

“Jack...”

“We’re outside,” he said. “I could have popped us right into the lobby. I know you don’t want any slayers inside the Wolfram and Hart offices.”

“Ever,” I said. I looked up at the staggered steps of the W&H building, the glowing lights as their likely enslaved night workers burned the midnight oil. That was probably unfair of me. I didn’t think Angel would intentionally keep people enslaved. Not... not on purpose.

Now that I was here, I felt suddenly incredibly shy. What was I supposed to do? “I... it’s night,” I said.

“And by a funny quirk of timezones and luck, it’s May fifth again,” Jack said. “About nine-thirty. If they’re using a Wolfram and Hart jet, they probably are about to make it back to the office... well, any time now. I’m gonna go put this in Angel’s office,” he said.

“It’s getting a little ripe.”

He grinned. “That’s the idea. Sit tight. I’ll send him out.”

“Angel, or...?”

Jack reached forward and finally kissed me. It was gentle, almost paternal, the barest peck on the lips. “Hate to tell the little lady that I got this,” he said, only half joking, “but I got this. I’ll be right back.”

I almost expected him to pop out with his wrist strap again, but he just strode into the front door with a swagger, the bag in his hand. A second later I saw him through the windows, sliding into the elevator.

A little while later Jack came back down, sans bag, the big grin still plastered on his face. A second or so later he looked behind him.

Two figures in black were exiting the building. One was tall, slouching rather, no coat, his hair dark, and god, I did not want to see Angel just now.

The other stood behind him, almost half a head shorter, platinum blond, slightly built, and he moved like a panther in that coat. It had to be. No, you don’t. It had to be.

No, you don’t.

Yes, I fucking do.

I stepped forward.
My office reeked of decaying flesh. I mean reeked of it. Even a human being would have been disturbed by the pong that wafted up from that bowling bag, but as a vampire, it was like being grabbed around the throat and thrown into a cesspit. Vampires actually prefer fresh blood, fresh death. True, skeletons and things tend to look kinda sexy to us, but rotting death can be really disturbing. That was one of the reasons I had turned away from the Master instantly. Him and his followers worshiped death, and kept their kills hanging around. The reek of rotting flesh had permeated those underground tunnels he insisted on living in. Just like it was going to permeate my office, probably for days.

Ugh.

I remembered keeping a pair of rotting victims in our lair just after Spike was turned. I’d done it solely for his training, as I conditioned him to what to expect as one of my minions. Well... not that Spike had ever really been a minion. No, he was always Drusilla’s toy, and that made him family in a way that a minion wasn’t. I enjoyed training him; he’d been a brilliant pupil, actually, a thought which – he was right – horrified me now. It had been so easy for me to make him happy. His actual nature was happy puppy. I’d had to work hard, establishing my dominance over Drusilla, over him, leave him second guessing. I’d had to teach him how to get angry, how to let the hatred simmer, how to be miserable.

And right now we were both miserable. Over Buffy.

“Can’t we just... lock her away in a box where no one can ever touch her?” Spike asked. “You know? Like we did with Pavayne?”

I knew this game. He’d just fallen back into one of his more eloquent hyperboles. I remembered these. He used to do this about Drusilla, too. Can’t we just... I don’t know... reach inside her head and just put all the cogs right? Couldn’t we just... kill every other man on the planet, so that she doesn’t chase after them anymore? Couldn’t we just... teach her how to actually fly so when she jumps off these buildings it doesn’t hurt her?
And my job was to pretend the request was logical, but impossible. *The cogs are kinda rusty, they might not fit together anymore. There’s too many, the humans keep breeding like rabbits. Yeah, but she might fly away and not find her way back.*

It was kinda nice how he just slid back into our old game, among other things reminding me how it wasn’t the first time some woman was between us. I really felt absurdly fond of Spike at that moment. “I don’t think she’d let us. Uh, she’s pretty strong.”

“We could do a spell. Some kind of mind control.”

“Oh, she’d figure it out. You know, she’s pretty smart.”

Usually Spike went on in this vein. I was expecting options of dimensional portals, extravagant bribes, or turning her into a mermaid, and was disappointed when Spike couldn’t keep the game going. This was different. Usually when he was pissed off at Dru, she was in the other room ready to take him back again. Buffy was still in Rome, with the Immortal. Spike sank onto the desk instead, his melancholy just dripping off him into puddles. “So, what?” he said glumly. “We just have to live with it? Get on with our lives?”

“ ‘Fraid so.”

He sighed, and I almost wanted to put my arm around him. There was a time I would have. The trouble was, that was also the time I’d have stabbed him casually in the stomach for daring to complain in my presence, and he would never have been sure which was coming. It was a shame that we’d never find that ease of companionship again, even though we both found each other quite legitimately annoying. Sometimes I missed it.

The truth was, as Drusilla’s toy, he’d helped me a lot. Dru had been somewhat hard to manage. And I loved Dru, as an artist loves his masterpiece, as a father loves his daughter. And I loved Buffy, as foolishly as if she were my first love. And for both of them... Spike was a link between me and them.

“Fine,” he said, sniffling a little. “No problem. I was plannin’ on doin’ that anyway.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

“Actually, I’m doin’ it right now. As we speak, I’m movin’ on.”

It was the most absurd thing I’d ever heard. That simply wasn’t Spike. I wanted to slap him on the back of the head and ask, *What, soul make you soft?* Spike was tenacious. When he set his sights on something he never, ever gave up until everything in his path was dead. The only time I personally remembered him giving up on something was when he’d given up trying to permanently kill the Immortal. And... well. That was the Immortal. I never did find out why Spike was willing to let him go. I’d been okay with just hurting the man for a while, but I’d told Spike we could bury him alive if it made him feel better. Spike always did get awful territorial around anyone Drusilla had slept with. But he’d declined the buried alive option.

He’d given up on the Immortal. And I just realized... he’d given up on Buffy, too.

Well, that was sad.

“Movin’ on,” I said.

“Oh, yeah.”
We both knew we were both lying, and it didn’t even matter.

“Right now.”

“Movin’,” Spike added. There was a long and empty pause. “You know, this head really stinks.”

“I know, I know,” I said, focusing on the problem at hand. “We’ll just get it to the Capo’s family, and they can deal with it.” I picked it up. A thin fluid leaked out the bottom of the bag, and I made a face.

“I can’t imagine this thing is going to hatch,” Spike said. “It looks half rotted.”

“Let’s just... get it where it needs to go.” I poked my head out the door. “Gunn? Gunn!”

“What?” He poked his head out of his office, looking flustered.

“Where’s this Capo’s family anyway? I want to get this thing out of here.”

“I’m trying to reach them,” Gunn said, indicating the phone at his ear. “The number I had for them is disconnected.”

I put the bag down and headed out to follow up with Gunn. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure it does,” a glib voice said. I turned my head just in time to catch the Immortal in the elevator, a smug smile gracing his handsome face. It had been a lot of years since I’d seen the man. Could never forget that face.

“You!” I snapped, but by the time I got to the elevator, the door was closed.

“What do you–?” Spike asked, at my side in a moment as soon my voice was raised. Damn, I’d trained him well.

“That was the Immortal,” I said.

“Here? What’s he doing here?”

“I don’t know! Stirring up trouble!” I stabbed at the elevator button. “Gunn! Did you know the Immortal was here?”

“The Immortal?” Gunn abandoned his phone call and came up to me. “No, I thought that was just a courier.”

“No, that was the Immortal!” I snapped. “How long has he been here?”

Gunn shrugged. “Showed up just before you did. Are we in any danger?”

“Probably not,” Spike said. “But the ponce has a reckoning coming. How the hell did he get here?”

“The Immortal has powers we never really understood,” I pointed out. “There’s a lot of things he knew that we didn’t.”

“Yeah, but if he’s not with Buffy, where is she?”

The elevator finally opened, and Spike and I jumped inside. “Keep trying the Capo’s family,” I said to Gunn as the elevator doors closed. “I need to get that thing out of my office!”
The elevator had never seemed so damn slow.

When we finally made it to the lobby, I was sure we’d missed him, but... no. He seemed to be waiting for us. Another flick of his eyebrow, and a swirl of his coat – nice coat. WWII Royal Air Force – and he was out the door and into the front apron of the office building. “You wait!” I shouted after him.

“Get back here, you berk!” Spike shouted. “Come on. He didn’t come all the way here just to *not* talk to us. What game’s he playin’ now?”

“I don’t know!” I said. “Something to do with Buffy?”

“It would have to be, wouldn’t it?” Spike said.

We both tried to get out the door at the same time, and ended up stumbling over each other’s feet. God dammit, what was it about Buffy that always turned me into an adolescent kid?

“Calm down, boys.” He was standing just outside the doors with that smirk still on his face. The smirk widened as Spike finally stumbled out after me. “Hey there, handsome,” he said to Spike. “Love the hair.”

“You,” Spike said. “You just *had* to claim her, didn’t you. Do you hate me, is that it?”

The Immortal’s grin broadened. “You know it was nothing to do with you, William. Or... you go by Spike these days, yeah?”

“Yeah, but she was mine. Ours,” I added hurriedly.

“Hers,” Spike said. “She’s had her heart broken enough! You do anything to hurt her, and I will personally cut you into tiny little bits, and stick every one of those bits in an individual box, and bury that box under the earth, and you bloody enjoy coming back from *that!*”

The Immortal laughed. “Or you could just burn me to ashes with a super-powerful crystal necklace, and let me scream my way back to life in the middle of a crater.” That was uncannily accurate, and Spike shifted. “You missed an appointment,” the Immortal added.

“With you?” we demanded. Well, I demanded.

He didn’t even answer, but his smile softened. He took a step aside.

And there was Buffy. It took me a second to recognize her, she looked so different. Her hair was startlingly short, almost shorn, like cat fur around her face. She had a few bandages on her arms and neck, and one hand looked badly injured, though, slayerwise, she didn’t seem to be feeling it much.

She walked right past the Immortal, and I half expected her to come to me. She didn’t. If she didn’t come to me, I expected her to yell at Spike. She didn’t do that either. For a long moment the two stood and stared at each other. Spike looked embarrassed, as if he didn’t know what to say, and he shuffled his feet. “Um.... Hi, Buffy,” he tried.

She didn’t let him get any further than that. Without a word Buffy reached out a hand and touched his cheek, held his face, her eyes full, and her face open and vulnerable in a way I hadn’t seen it since Christmas of ’98. Then she grabbed him and held him, and she didn’t let go.

For a long moment the Immortal and I stood there. And waited. And waited. Neither of them
were moving. Spike and Buffy weren’t even kissing or fondling or groping at each other. It was as if both of them had just frozen, as if their bodies didn’t matter anymore, and...

She hadn’t even looked at me. She hadn’t looked at me, she wasn’t thinking about me, she didn’t care about me.

That was it, wasn’t it. She didn’t care about me. Spike was alive, and that was all she cared about right now. And it wasn’t even his body, or hers – it wasn’t just “shagging” as Spike called it. It wasn’t even love. It was beyond any kind of base romantic bond or any sort of sexual energy or even any kind of friendship. This was life and death and everything. Spike really did have a soul. I couldn’t see it, but I knew. He had one, and it was holding onto Buffy, melding with Buffy’s, and it wasn’t just their bodies holding each other, it was...

“Well, shit,” the Immortal said beside me.

I glanced over at him.

“I was gonna try and play for a ménage à trois, but... I’m not getting in between that, am I.”

He was pretty much echoing what I was thinking, except perhaps bar the ménage à trois part. “Nope,” I said. Didn’t look like I was, either.

He drew in a deep breath. “Damn,” he said, letting it out. Then he shrugged. “Oh well.” He looked over at me. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Not too bad,” I said.

“See you finally got a job. How’s that treating you?”

“Not too great,” I said. “It’s not really... well, it’s kind of questionable. Don’t really want to talk about it.”

The Immortal smiled. “I see you lost that dumb sounding accent.”

“The Irish lilt is a beautiful and musical thing–”

“Agreed.” The Immortal cut me off. “It just sounded dumb on you.”

I rolled my eyes. The Immortal and I had always been kind of at loggerheads. Spike and Buffy were still locked together. It didn’t look as if they were going to be moving apart... well, ever.

“They’re still at it.”

“Yeah, they might be for a while,” the Immortal said. “She missed him.”

I knew I should have been busy being heartbroken, but... it was like when Buffy had died. It bothered me, but I could live with it. They were... not going to care what I felt, anyway, were they. There they were. Still. Standing holding each other.

I was already bored. “There’s a bar I know, did you wanna...?”

“Oh, god, yes,” the Immortal said.

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Twenty minutes later the two of us were sitting at the bar drinking Irish whiskey. “Well that was
a touching little scene,” I said with bitter irony.

“Wasn’t it, though?” the Immortal asked, without a drop of it. He ordered more liquor and grinned at me. “I’ve been looking forward to that.”

I think I may have growled. All I knew was I wasn’t drunk enough yet. “I thought all they had between them was sex,” I muttered.

The Immortal looked at me. “No, that was me,” he said. “They’d gone long past that stage.”

“You were snuggling,” I accused.

“She was crying over him,” he accused back. “What would you have done?”

She was crying over him? God... that hadn’t occurred to me before. I’d been thinking, it’s only Spike. He was just in her way, driving her crazy like he used to drive me. Getting into her things, spreading his insipid evil over everything. It hadn’t even occurred to me that she might have been... really grieving.

Which made me feel like an insensitive clod, right enough.

“No,” I said. “But she told me. She told me she didn’t love him. That he wasn’t her boyfriend.”

“And you’ve never grieved for a friend or a colleague or someone you weren’t dating?” the Immortal asked me. “What kind of cold hearted bitch do you think she is?”

I stared into my drink. “I just thought she loved me.”

“You and only you, huh?” he asked. “Like she’d never have another friend or another lover or maybe, just maybe, someone who didn’t screw her over at every turn and make every damn thing about him.”

“Hey, you don’t know what Buffy and I had.”

“You don’t know what Buffy and Spike had.”

“Can’t have been real,” I said, more trying to convince myself than him. I’d been hoping... really hoping. After what had happened with Darla, I’d come to the realization that it wasn’t strict celibacy which would keep my soul intact. Yes, sex... was a big part of it. I’d always been a sensual creature, and that sex-act had been really important to me. But after Darla had come the furies and... well, okay, that wasn’t really sex, but it was really close, and then Eve...

Eve had been the clincher. I’d had an absolutely wonderful time making love to Eve in my office. We were at it for hours. I could barely stop even as I was issuing orders. And perfect happiness hadn’t even been on the menu. I had been enjoying her, but never once forgot who I was or what I was doing or what I had to do in life. It hadn’t made me perfectly happy. It had made me quite happy, and the relief of it was palpable; I felt the release in tension for weeks. But I’d never felt in any danger of losing my soul.

I’d been considering... things. Nina, for one. We’d kind of been dating. But then Buffy had landed in my lap again, and I’d thought... I’d hoped....

But not with her out in that courtyard holding on to Spike.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “She said she didn’t love him.”
“Did she really?” he asked. “Or did she just avoid the question?”

Damn. He knew Buffy pretty well, didn’t he. Which, between him and Spike, meant only one thing. “I’m never gonna get her back, am I.”

“Oh, did you really want her anyway?” the Immortal said. “I mean, really. You were always kinda happy whenever Darla ran off. You like being in control, and you like getting laid, but you don’t like cohabiting with other people.”

“I’m not the same as I was then.”

“Oh, so you’ve managed to commit to someone in the last hundred years?” he asked. “I’ve had a dozen spouses, how many have you had?”

“That doesn’t make you committed. It makes you a serial... something.”

The Immortal rolled his eyes. “Come on, Angelus, have you ever, seriously, lived in the same bedroom with a lover for as much as a month?”

I hadn’t. Two hundred years of existence, and Darla was the closest to that I’d ever come. And we’d always enjoyed the heated dynamic back and forth of break-up, make-up, pretty constantly. I don’t remember us ever spending more than a week in the same bed before something split us up again, amicable or otherwise. I’d always thought it had to do with circumstances – arguments or danger or some actual physical reason why I couldn’t be with someone. It had never occurred to me before that I just... wasn’t cut out for it.

Two hundred years and never living with someone in any serious way. Never really shared a bed. Two hundred years was a long time to never get around to doing something. Put that way, it did sound like it had more to do with me than it had to do with circumstances.

“You don’t want what she wants,” The Immortal said. “Besides, she’s not your type.”

“You don’t know what my type is!”

The Immortal grinned. “She’s a general, Angelus, not a little girl. She doesn’t need you to play the leader role. Darla was strong, but she was a follower. Same with Dru. You’re a big-shot here in LA, you’d be nothing but a footman with the slayers. I wouldn’t have thought you wanted to play soldier.”

“It’s not about that,” I said. “I love her.”

“So do I,” the Immortal said. “Doesn’t mean I’m gonna spend my life with her.” Then he grunted. “Or her life.”

I looked up at him. “You really don’t even know what I mean, do you.”

The Immortal laughed. “I know it better than you do,” he said. “You never understood about love, Angelus. Love’s not some kind of extra piece. Love isn’t elusive, it doesn’t hide behind chimneys and come out to attack people like a vampire. It’s not a thing that happens to you, or some condition that afflicts you like a disease. It’s certainly not a gift bestowed upon you by destiny, or a feeling you claim to once and then have forever. It’s a thing you do. To love is an act. It’s mixed up with hormones and sexuality and yeah, sometimes it doesn’t come easy. But check out the millennia of happily arranged marriages out there. You can decide to love someone, and then just do it.” He took up his shot and swallowed it without wincing. “It’s the not loving. That’s the hard part.” He waved at the bartender, and she refilled his shot.
“You never understood me, Giovanni,” I said. “If that’s even your name.”

“It’s not. Angelus. If that’s even yours.”

I looked up at him. “Liam,” I said quietly.

He regarded me for a long moment. “Jay,” he finally said. Then he followed up with, “I think.”

Immense time was bottled up behind those two little words. How old was the Immortal at this stage? The addendum touched me. “Angel,” I said instead.

“Jack Harkness,” he said. “That’s how Buffy knows me.”

I shook my head. “You know, you’re always just going to be the Immortal to me.”

He laughed. “You never really cared much for names, anyway. Mostly just wanted to get on with it.”

I looked into my drink. “A lot has changed since back then. I’ve changed.”

“ Heard you had an addition,” he said.

I thought at first he meant Connor, and then realized it had been a long time since I’d seen him. He meant the soul. “Yeah. I’m... I guess I should say I’m sorry for anything... I may have done to hurt you...” I seemed to remember the two of us torturing each other in just about every way possible. “But I’m not the same as I was then, and...”

“I am,” he said with a smirk. “I’m still just the same as I ever was,” he said. “Just as soulful, just as immortal, just as good and just as evil as ever. Just as unkillable. As always. Never dying.”

He was not being very subtle. I looked over at him. Memories of what it was like when I used to know him came into my head. I had killed this man at least a dozen times. I’d snapped his neck, I’d broken his spine, and I had drained him dry... again and again and again.... I was salivating even as I thought about it.

I became acutely aware of the scent of him. Dampered with whiskey, strong and fragrant, the guy’s blood had always been very delicately flavored, as if he was seasoned by the scent of the most expensive ambergris. I’d never run into anyone who tasted quite like the Immortal.... I turned away quickly. It was evil. I knew it was evil. I was the one who had implemented the blood checks at Wolfram and Hart; no human blood, that was what I’d decreed. Not even the semi-safe form of donated blood, or the voluntary victims of the suck-houses, because it was just too easy to make a mistake, and vampires were hard to control on human blood. We could jones for it pretty bad if we got into the habit again. It was too easy to be evil when hot with human blood. I knew this. I knew it so well....

“I got nowhere to go tonight,” the Immortal said to me with a grin. “Did you wanna...?”

“Oh, god, yes,” I said.

***

I was trembling when we started, and I think I lost control before it ended. It didn’t matter to him. He fell before me willfully, and smiled whenever I came to murder him. I even broke his neck once, just because I could, and he didn’t mind. The crunch made me cry out in an awe of relief.
The killing was so, so easy. He never even fought back.

Not that he didn’t take his own. Blood and bodies and evil made neutral if not good, his scent and his taste as seductive as the night itself.

It didn’t make me “perfectly happy,” because I knew it was still technically evil, even if it had no repercussions. But my god, it was such a relief to just let go. For one night, with the Immortal as my victim, I could be Angelus again, safely and without pain. I positively cackled with it.

I think I ended the night in tears. I was pretty high on his blood by that time. The man I’d killed, whose blood I had drained over and over, lay with me on my bed and gently stroked my hair. He whispered to me in the darkness with a voice like blue velvet, and told me that it was all right. He was alive and well, and he forgave me for everything. There was no sin, no transgression, no past, and no future. There was no more time.

I was so drunk on his blood that I barely even cared who he was anymore. I knew he didn’t care about my transgressions. He wasn’t god. He could not grant me absolution, he could not make me good, he could not cleanse me of my sins. And he did it anyway, because he didn’t care. Good. Evil. Living. Dead. Someone held me and told me everything was all right. And for that moment, I believed him. “I want to love,” I whispered.

“Then do it,” he said. “It’s an act. Not a trophy. Who could you love?”

Cordelia was gone. Darla was dust. Buffy was out of my reach. Everyone else was.... Well, there was Nina. We’d barely even kissed, but....

I didn’t answer him. I just sank my teeth in just one... more... time....
Resurrected

Chapter Summary

Spike

Chapter Notes

Takes place just after The Girl In Question

Spike

I don’t know what I expected when I saw her. Well, I expected her to hit me or something, really. Or maybe shock. Or... I’d envisioned standing cool and nonchalant, and falling to kneel at her feet, both. I expected her to yell at me, or start to grin, or to stare at me in bewilderment. She did none of that. It was as if she was expecting me, like she’d come to wait for me at the airport or something. She pushed past Angel, put her warm hand on my cheek, and stared at me, her jade eyes shining. Then she fell. She fell against me and held me, and my arms went around her, and... damn it.

I should have gone to her before.

All the things that didn’t feel right, all the things that weren’t really me... they were me. The moment I touched her, the moment we were together again, this weird reconstituted skin-sack with my demon tainted soul in it, it was my body. I was me and I was complete, because there was my slayer, and my soul knew her. And she knew me... and I was real.

Time went away. I was just basking in the miracle that was the slayer and me together again. The feel of her warm body against me. The taste of her soul beside mine. The sound of her heart. The rhythm of her breath. Her strength. Her scent.

Her hair smelled charred and smoky, as if it had been burned, and there was a bandage against my cheek as I held her, my lips beside her throat. The red of a mild burn peeked from the edge of it. She held me tightly, and I held her back loosely, but I had no intention of letting her go.

Finally Buffy drew in a deep, deep breath, and let it out as she relaxed. A moment later she pulled away and looked up at me. Her hands still held my arms.“Your coat smells different,” she said.

Not what I expected her to say, but there was so much attached to it anyway. “‘S just a replica,” I said. At her frown I said, “The original got burned up a bit. With a few other things.” I reached up and touched the burn mark on her neck. “And this?”
“Just... a signal flare,” she said. “Someone was telling me something.” She touched my cheek again, and then frowned. She touched my eyebrow, the scar there. “This looks different.”

I felt almost sick. “How?”

“I don’t know. The angle or something’s off.”

Of course she noticed. I hadn’t. It was only what I remembered it being, after all. “‘S just a replica,” I said again.

She nodded, as if she completely understood. “You missed your appointment,” she said quietly “You shouldn’t have listened to Andrew.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by an appointment, but the Andrew thing was all too obvious. “I’m sorry.”

She only nodded again. “You have a place?”

“Yeah. A little... little basement flat a couple blocks–”

“Take me there.”

I took her.

***

We didn’t say much on the trip over. I kept expecting her to demand I tell her when I came back to life, or why I didn’t contact her, or something, but she said nothing. She just kept holding my hand, touching it gently now and again as if it were braille, and she was trying to read it.

My spartan basement flat had never looked so pathetic. I wished I’d bothered to posh it up. I wished I’d put mock Persian carpets on the floor, and decked the place out with candles, or lace, or something. But I hadn’t had a woman around to spruce the place up for. Drusilla had always liked lace, Darla velvet, Harmony satin. The Persian rugs and chairs and stuff had been to fluff up my crypt for when Dawn stayed over, and she and Buffy had similar tastes, so that had worked out great once Buffy had started coming over regular. I never felt it worthwhile to make a place look nice for myself.

I wished I’d known she was coming. I’d have made it homely. Instead it was a black and white bachelor’s den with only blood and beer in the fridge and a bloody video game still glaring out of the TV I’d left on. “It’s not the, uh, most posh of digs,” I confessed. I hurriedly stabbed the TV off. “But it’s got running water, and all. Bit of a step up from a crypt. And, uh, there’s a Korean market on the corner. Open all night. Sells some goose piss they call beer, but it’ll do at five in the morning when, you know, there’s not much. Oh, it’s got heating, too. I should... should, uh... but then you never complained about the other basement, and it never... I mean...” As I babbled, I scooped up some empty beer cans and dropped them in the sink for lack of a better place, and when I turned back to Buffy she was smiling at me, amused. Silently she walked up to me and took my hand, then without preamble led me across the room to my tiny bed.

Damn Lindsey and his You’re not gonna be sharing it with anybody any time soon. I should have gotten another bed.

I turned on the bedside lamp. It was pretty dark, with just the little light by the door and the bedside lamp on, but we’d always been good in the dark. Buffy reached up and pushed my coat off
my shoulders. The new leather fell to the tile floor with a *thwap*. “Buffy, I–”

And she was lifting my shirt over my head, and I let her, like a child. There was no passion to this, which surprised me, but I yielded without question. Then, quietly, she examined my body, as if inspecting it for injury. “Your other scars,” she said. She touched my left breast. “Not there.”

They weren’t. Just like my coat, most of the scars and marks of my life had burned away with my old body. I still had the pock-mark from where Riley had staked me with a plastic stake, and some of the marks Angelus had left on my back from when I was a fledge, but most of the faint scars which didn’t have a heavy memory attached, they hadn’t been resurrected along with me. She looked up, double checking the mark I’d gotten from my first slayer. The one which, apparently, had been reconstructed at the wrong angle. The others were probably subtly different, too.

“I still have a few.”

Her warm fingers on my chest left little streaks behind them, as if she were painting me with chemicals. My skin tingled. “Your scratches,” she said. “They’re gone.”

The ones on my chest, the scratches I’d inflicted as I tried to pull my soul out of my breast in my madness, I’d never memorized them. Buffy, I realized, had. Every one of them had been important to her. They were either badges of my courage or marks of her guilt; she’d never illuminated to me what she thought of them, but I did remember her running her fingers over them the last night we were together. She’d run her fingers over all my scars, stared into my eyes, fondled even my fingertips. Had she been memorizing me? I knew I’d been trying to memorize her....

“No everything... came through the same way, I confessed.

She nodded, as if that didn’t entirely surprise her. She ran her hands down my arms – soft fire – and lifted one of my hands. “That really happened,” she said, touching the new scars on my wrists from Dana’s attack.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Angel actually... kinda... ugh.” I hated to say the words *saved me*, but she heard them anyway.

“You mean he’s growing up?” she asked with a smile. “Who’d have thunk it?”

I chuckled. “Well,” I said. “He left us to it.”

She looked up at me, as if she’d only just remembered he’d been there at all. “Yeah, he did. Let’s go to bed.”

That was blunt. There was still no passion in this, but she was completely in earnest. I really should have bothered to get a new bed, dammit! But I... hadn’t had a reason. “It’s kind of narrow.”

“We’ve shared narrower.”

We had. I stepped away from her and turned down the covers, and Buffy curled up beside me before I’d even sat down properly.

And she clutched at me. She buried her head in my chest, and her arms went around me, and after a few moments of tension, she let out a sigh that sounded as if she’d been holding it back for a sodding year. An *oh thank god I’m home* kind of sigh. An *everything’s got to be okay now* kind of sigh.

It cut me like a blade, like everything Buffy did always could. “Buffy... I....”
And I realized that the fact that I didn’t know what to say didn’t matter. Buffy was already asleep beside me. I tilted my head down and breathed in the scent of her hair. Burned, burned within the last day, the pixie-cut was to cover it up. It smelled of Andrew, and Xander, and Dawn, and Giles. And the Immortal. Buffy was steeped in the Immortal. He was all over her – I do mean all over.

I didn’t even mind. She’d clearly been through hell in the last... god knew how long. There were bags under her eyes from lack of sleep, and these burns – what the hell had she meant by a signal flare? – and the Immortal could play some hideous tricks on the unwary, I knew. How long had she been tangled up with him?

What the hell was she doing here with me?

They were all questions which could wait. I had my sweet slayer in my arms, pressed up close beside me in this soft, narrow little space which was suddenly ours, and dammit, I didn’t care what else was going on. I had this, this moment, this space, this woman, for as long as it lasted. I was bloody well going to savor the taste of every passing second.

I relaxed my tense body and watched my slayer sleep in my arms.

***

“So, they are reunited,” said the voice. “Is this what is destined?”

“Destiny’s a cock up,” said another. “This wasn’t what was meant to happen.”

“What’s it even matter?” said someone lighter and kinder. “Look at them. They’re happy!”

“But at what price?” That voice held darkness. “What of the shanshu? The world shook, the eyes bled, innocents died.”

I cringed.

“When destiny is thrown into question, how does it play out? The paths are marked. Someone must walk them.”

“Why? What happens if we don’t?”

“Chaos. More death. The circle is unbroken.”

“But love. Life. Choice.”

“The circle is unbroken.”

The weight of the voices was making me feel sick. I opened my eyes to warm and sweet perfection and Buffy gazing at my face, and the sickness faded entirely. But I wasn’t altogether sure I wasn’t still dreaming. I’d seen Buffy in my dreams, was gifted with her visage, felt her in my arms, gone to bed beside her and woken up still held by her, over and over and over from the moment I had been made solid again. I hadn’t been able to sleep as a ghost, and I still cherished the feel of it, the memories and dreams the body could conjure as it had to rest.

We were kissing before I was awake enough to even knew my own name. It was peaceful and languid and right, and it made my blood sing and my body tingle, and my soul resonated with her like violin strings. She tasted like salt and sunlight and home and the Immortal – and I pulled away,
mind and memory snapping out of its dreamlike stupor. “Sorry,” I said, even though I really wasn’t sure which of us had kissed whom. I apologized anyway. Really, I had no idea what her relationship was with the Immortal. (They’ve been snuggling...!)(That doesn’t smell like just snuggling....)

“Spike,” Buffy whispered, and she kissed me more warmly, her arms holding tight around me. “I do, you know.” She found my hand and laced her fingers through it. She held our joined hands between us and squeezed me tightly. “I do.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to dismiss it, but I still couldn’t really believe it. It was one of the hundred lame reasons I hadn’t contacted her, none of which stood well on their own, but when they piled atop each other.... “And the Immortal?”

Buffy actually laughed. “Don’t worry about Jack.”

“I... can kinda smell him on you, Buffy.” I didn’t point out how much. She and he had clearly been either sexual or... or... well, I wanted to come up with some option that also made sense, but there was no option for the scent that permeated certain parts of her anatomy besides sexual. And after all, it was the Immortal. I knew better.

“I didn’t have time to shower,” she said, sounding a little annoyed. “It doesn’t matter, it’s over.”

“Buffy—”

“It’s complicated, Spike. And it wasn’t ever... anything... ugh!” She looked at the ceiling. I knew that look. It was the one she sometimes got when I’d asked her what we were, way back when we were first not-really-together. She wasn’t kidding about it being complicated. Whatever it was she had with the Immortal was complex and confusing and probably hot (I knew the Immortal of old) and she didn’t want it to be serious, but it sure as hell wasn’t casual, either. Which... didn’t reassure me in the slightest. “I wish you hadn’t listened to Andrew. He doesn’t know anything, and he’s got a crush on Jack, that’s all. He didn’t want to break me and Jack up. If you’d listened to me instead of him, I could have brought you to Dawn and Giles.”

I shook my head. “Dawn doesn’t like me much anymore, Buffy,” I said. “And I doubt Rupert will be thrilled to discover that even the hellmouth can’t stomach me, and vomited me back up. He’d probably try to murder me again.”

Buffy froze, and then stared at me. “Is that what you think?”

I knew she loved them. Of course she thought they’d be all right with this. I figured it more likely there’d be a big old row if she told them I was back in the world. I shook my head. “It’s all right.”

But she was still staring at me. “Spike, didn’t you get my letter?”

“You sent a letter?”

She sat up and looked down at me. “With the box.”

“Which box?” I only knew one important box I’d gotten this last year, and she couldn’t mean that one.

She frowned. “Dawn and I each sent a letter, you didn’t get them?”

I shook my head, completely bewildered. “When was this?”
She stared. Very, very slowly she asked, “Spike? Why do you think you’re alive?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s complicated. That amulet captured my soul or something, and...” I spilled out the whole sordid, disgusting tale, how W&H had planted that thing on Angel, how I’d somehow gotten tangled up in the plan made for him, and how Lindsey and Eve had arranged for me to come back for their own agenda against Angel and the Senior Partners, and less than halfway through Buffy was staring at me as if I’d grown a third head.

“Wait,” she said. “So... wait. You were a ghost for how long?”

“Almost six months,” I said. “Bloody pain, too.”

“Six months? What the fuck.” I was surprised. Buffy used to keep her swearing to an absolute minimum, in a way I always found rather endearingly innocent. “That could have totally burned out – oh, god!” She rubbed her face, and looked white. “We nearly got a no. God, we did everything right, and we nearly got a no answer.”

It was my turn to be confused. “Buffy, what are you on about?”

“You weren’t told not to contact me,” she said instead. “How did you know not to contact me?”

“I...” the answer was too complicated. It wasn’t one answer. It was a whole school of little answers, nibbling like a shoal of mackerel, and yeah, any given one of them could have been fished up and dismissed by itself, but when you put them all together... blaze of glory; William the Destroyer; Angel’s kiss; a world of slayers; Rupert the watcher; Dawn’s clear dislike; the Scoobies’ general scorn; six months without a body; a coat that wasn’t mine; a body that wasn’t mine; what I’d done with Harmony when that body had fresh seized me; a confused prophecy; someone else’s destiny; Fred and Wes and what was going down here in LA; and Angel, again, Angel seeming to need me. And the damn soul telling me that was important. “I’m sorry,” was all I could say.

She only looked at me.

“I know you’re probably brassed off ‘bout it, but I... it... I...” I really couldn’t find the answer to that with her here, in my bed, still in my arms. Why the hell couldn’t I call Buffy? Why? It didn’t even make sense to me. “I just couldn’t,” I finished, and it seemed totally lame to me even as I said it. I expected her to throw that in my face. Instead she looked really sympathetic and reached out to touch my cheek.

“I know.”

“No, I’m sorry, pet. I... I should have, I realize that now. But I couldn’t, I... every time I tried I... there....”

“Was always one more reason not to,” she said.

“I’m sorry—”

“And you’d get distracted,” she said. “Or confused. Or the number didn’t work, or... god, with six months as a ghost, I’ll bet Angel just didn’t help. And you thought I didn’t love you, and I’ll bet you still felt guilty and thought I was better off without you. And you thought the Scoobies all hated you, and you thought you were better off here where at least you were useful, weren’t being rejected....”

She was filling in my mad-libs pretty well on her own. “Something like that.”
“God, that’s annoying. Couldn’t just know what the hell’s going on, no, got to jump through a thousand psychological hoops for time to go the right way. God, no wonder Jack hates time-travel, this sucks!”

“Time travel?”

“Yeah!” Buffy snapped. “Time-travel, spirit quests, multi-dimensional astral spellwork, and what the fuck, the whole thing could have fallen apart because some evil bitch has it out for Angel?”

“Um...”

Buffy was really getting revved up now. “I go through hell, I consider destroying the planet, I kill Jack god knows how many times, Dawn, Giles, Willow, hell, even Xander nearly got killed for this, and now I find that some unknown bitch called Lindsey decided to steal the box and the credit, and she nearly got you killed! What the fuck!”

“Lindsey’s a bloke,” I said.

“I don’t care if Lindsey is a guy, a girl, a demon, or a one-eyed-Episcopalian kangaroo!” she ranted. It was really cute, she was in full-on Buffy rant. I hadn’t seen that since she was still in college, unless she was drunk. “What the fuck is he doing leaving you as a fucking ghost for that long! It could have eaten your soul up, do you have any idea how hard it was to get that fucking thing? And yeah, let’s light Buffy up like a tiki-torch, but you know, I’m from Wolfram and Hart, so the whole damn world belongs to me, and let’s steal everyone else’s hard work, and he makes it all about Angel? Again, all about fucking Angel? What the fuck–!”

She was too damn cute. I couldn’t take it anymore. I kissed her. She stopped her rant and grabbed my shoulder hard – almost too hard. “Sorry,” I said when the kiss broke.

Buffy grabbed me and kissed me back hard enough she bruised me. “If you ever apologize for kissing me again, I’m going to hit you.”

“So... bonus,” I said.

Her furious scowl broke into a grin and she kissed me again. “You,” she kissed me, “were not,” she kissed me again, “brought back,” she kissed me some more, “to piss off Angel,” she kissed me a few more times, “or to mess,” she kissed me deeply, “with his,” she kissed me hard, “fucking,” she kissed me harder, “destiny!” She pushed me onto my back, and frankly the words she said after that kinda blurred.

I understood enough. I understood that her body was above me and she was hard and soft and warm and alive. I understood that her shirt was not as strong as she was, and her coordination wasn’t perfect, and that she had burns everywhere, so I had to be gentle, though she didn’t seem particularly concerned. There was something about the Immortal and the amulet being displaced out of time, but about that time she’d taken off my trousers, and I was really concentrating more on that than the story as she tried to explain that she’d gotten her burns from some echo of my soul and that same damn amulet.

I understood that Buffy had gone on some kind of spirit-quest to retrieve my soul – or part of my soul was it? – and that she’d had to battle in an arena that sounded like some bizarre high-school version of Angel’s precious Powers That Be, but that part of the story involved her becoming completely naked, and even though I was trying to concentrate it was very distracting.
I then gathered that the amulet had then been taken back through time to bugger me properly, but apart from gathering that the Immortal was a time-traveler (didn’t surprise me much. He’d always seemed a little out of place) I barely understood a word of that, because she had straddled me by that time, and I was trying like hell not to put my hands on her burns as I rubbed her all over.

Then, while Buffy’s mouth was on my throat and we were moving to the rhythm of her heart she whispered to me how Drusilla, “Wait, Dru? Oh! God never mind...!” had found some of my blood in Africa, “That was... oh, there. There. Don’t stop, pet,” and something about Xander and Willow and Fred, “Fred? Oh, god, Buffy... Buffy!” and the box of flash... I didn’t even care by then.

There was something about how the box had to go back in time, but by that time things had gotten so heated even Buffy wasn’t telling the story anymore, just saying, *I missed you, I missed you*, over and over, and I let her take out all her missing me as hard and as desperately as she wanted before I took her up, laid her back, and let her know how very, very much I had missed her.

I’d missed her like rain in the summer, like silence in the city, like solace in pain. I’d missed her like I missed sleeping, missed her like my heartbeat, missed her like the taste of blood at midnight. I’d missed her like a lock misses its key, like Adam missed his rib, like the earth misses the moonlight at the new moon. I’d missed her like Spike missing Buffy, and really, there was nothing I could think of that was more eloquent than that.

I’d always been a crappy poet.

The sun was firmly in the afternoon part of the sky when we lay beside each other in my now broken bed, and Buffy ran her fingers up and down my torso, memorizing my new lack-of-scars, and I asked her to go over it all again.

Even after I understood the story she told, I still wasn’t sure I believed it.

Buffy was incredulous over my incredulity. “Come on, Spike. What makes more sense? That some guy you’d never met and had never heard of decided to piss off Angel and the Senior Partners by resurrecting you? Or that your friends decided the world was a better place with you in it?”

I didn’t know how to say that I didn’t think I had any friends. “Well...” I swallowed. “Lindsey... he was part of this destiny of Angel’s and all.”

“Lindsey. Some random guy who wasn’t a sorcerer, wasn’t a witch, and wasn’t involved with you at all? *He* was gonna bring you back to life. Some out-of-work lawyer Angel once knew was going to go to all that work for a vampire he’d never even met? Come on. You of all people know, there are easier ways to piss off Angel!” She chuckled. “Honestly. How could you even buy that for a second?”

It didn’t make much sense, now that she’d mentioned it. But it had seemed to make sense to Angel... of course, Angel hadn’t been making much sense lately, either.

“So... let me get this straight again,” I said. “You... and Fred. And Willow, and Xander, and Drusilla. And Giles, and Dawn, and... the Immortal?” I looked at her. “All of you. You’re the ones who brought me back.”

“Yeah. Hell, even Angel played his part, even if we didn’t really ask him. We needed his bloodline to catalyze your soul, make it... you know. Active.”

I was frankly flabbergasted. I didn’t say anything for a long time. Finally Buffy seemed to notice,
and she looked up. “Hey,” she said, expecting some kind of answer.

I couldn’t really speak. People’s faces were flipping through my head, moments with people I’d been trying not to think about. Listening to British punk rock with Giles in his flat, just after I’d been chipped. Watching American football with Xander, the two of us good-naturedly insulting each other. Willow comforting me, and vice-versa, when she’d felt unbiteable, and I couldn’t bite. Fred telling me I was a champion, and to never say anything different. Dawn sobbing in my arms over Buffy, telling me I was the only one who really cared about her. Drusilla, a hundred years of her, in her softer and least distant moments. The Immortal, that night he’d told me to take Drusilla’s betrayal back from him. And Buffy... Buffy’s face when she told me, finally told me....

“Believe it, already. You weren’t brought back through someone else’s hatred.” Then she said the worst thing she could possibly have said, given how I was already feeling. “Face it, Spike. You actually are loved.”

Damn bloody soul!

She was kissing my tears away a moment later, and stroking my hair, and I was so damned ashamed I buried my head in her shoulder, and she just let me.

I hadn’t cried. I hadn’t let myself cry, not over Fred, not over Buffy, not even over my own miserable lot. This had been one of the worst years of my life, and I’d always been a weeper, and I hadn’t cried. There’d been no physical manifestation for it when I was a ghost, and apart from the plane trip back when I’d woken up with the tears in my eyes (which, to be honest, might have been the booze and the altitude) I hadn’t let myself feel any of it.

Maybe Buffy was right and I’d only been half a soul. Maybe the amulet had been draining me, driving me crazy before I got my box of flash. Maybe the body hadn’t been really mine at first, and the tears couldn’t come. Maybe I’d learned – as I had long ago – not to dare show any weakness around Angel. There was a whole slew of maybes about it, but the truth was I hadn’t let myself cry.

There was no holding it back now. Not now, not with this knowledge that I’d been reborn from love instead of hate. My fractured soul had been dredged up from the fire, my body had been shocked together through my blood, my self had been forced into a new existence. I’d been brought back to my own miserable unlife through magic, misfortune, and mayhem, but it wasn’t until that moment – sobbing like an idiot in the arms of the woman I loved – that I, Spike, William the Bloody, had actually been resurrected.
McTarman's

Chapter Summary

Jack

Chapter Notes

Takes place after The Girl In Question

Jack

I didn’t want to disturb them, but Buffy didn’t have her passport, and I didn’t know what she was going to want to do. Angel gave me Spike’s cell-phone number – still incredulous at how well Spike handled the newfangled things – so I called. I was not surprised when I got his voice mail. “Hey, it’s Jack. The Immortal. Angel has magnanimously given you the day off. I’ll bet you’re already using it. If you and Buffy manage to come up for air at any point, I’d be keen to get a drink. Give me a venue and a time, I’ll see you there.”

An hour or so later I received a text message. “McTarman’s Pub. 9ish.”

At McTarman’s pub, about nineish, I walked in and found William – no, Spike, now – sitting with Buffy at a table in the corner with a couple of beers. They were leaning toward each other and... possibly whispering, but it looked like fond murmurs to me. Their hands were sort of tangled haphazardly together, and Buffy looked – for fuck’s sake, Buffy looked nervous and deep and as if she’d grown about seven extra layers of Buffyness which I hadn’t a prayer of understanding. The Buffy I knew was still there – the marks of grief do not fade even when the cause of that grief has been resurrected – but with that vampire beside her, she was lots more than what she had been.

It was strange and wonderful to see. The Buffy I knew was complete within herself, competent, clever, decisive, adorable, tough as nails, and I never would have thought she was missing anything. She needed no one and nothing and even her affection was just gravy.

Something had changed. I hadn’t even heard her voice yet, and I could see she was just... more. She looked both younger and older – younger in that the world-weariness had melted from her face, and older in the wisdom and kindness she now had. It was like that look certain people get after they become parents, that wise completion, with the knowledge of what you are; a mom, a dad, more than just yourself. Spike made her more, I could see it. She hadn’t needed him to be complete; she’d needed him to be more than herself. And she was already more, I could almost taste it in the way they sat. She didn’t make me feel paternal at all, suddenly. Which... was kinda awesome, in its way, but also made me sad.

I really wasn’t getting in between that. I’d been chasing hopes of possibilities and... nope. Buffy,
certainly. Spike… probably, if I played it right. Both? Not anymore.

Oh, well. Angel hadn’t been a loss. I’d had a great night. He was much less into the whole torture thing, a development I approved of. But he already never wanted to see me again. I could tell. He felt terribly guilty even over something consensual, which I couldn’t quite grasp. The soul had changed how he felt, not what he was, and he seemed to think it should have changed what he was. It seemed as if Angel felt being good was something inherent, and one shouldn’t ever want something “bad” if one was “good.” Wanting me was very, very, very bad. He got to be bad for a night, and that was nice… but it wasn’t “good.”

I thought it was insane, but then I was neither bad nor good, and I tried to never think about it.

“Hi, there,” I said, pulling up a chair.

“Jack!” Buffy positively beamed at me. “It all worked. Obviously.”

“Yeah, I caught that.” I smiled at Spike. “Nice to see you, William.”

Spike looked down at the table, and yeah, he was shy. William, shy, was probably the cutest thing I’d seen in… well, a long time. “Lo, then. I think I owe you a thanks.”

“Thank Buffy, I did it for her.”

William looked up at me, and—damn, those blue eyes were deep now. Angel’s eyes had deepened, too. Buffy had a point about that soul she’d gone on about, but what that point was, or what exactly it meant, I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Vampires were always the products of their creators—the human host and the vampire sire. The two beings influenced and affected the vampire so that a vampire in essence had two parents—their sire and their old human self. It occurred to me that bringing back the human soul made the vampire more than the child of themselves and their sire, but different from what they had been when they were human. Another layer… but another layer of what, I wasn’t quite sure.

I guess it didn’t matter. It was something Angel and Spike had to figure out, not me, thank god. My soul was stuck here, and I’d never have to worry about where it might go in any afterlife.

“Why?” William asked.

I couldn’t help but smile at the earnestness in his tone. “What wouldn’t you do for her, William? Go through hell and back?”

His hand clutched at hers a little more tightly. His left hand, her right, their strength together.

“Hello, right here,” Buffy said, but she sounded happy. “Yeah, it was lots of trouble, Spike. But it’s all done now.” She took a sip of her beer. I’d never known Buffy to drink beer before… of course this didn’t seem like the kind of venue to serve cocktails. There was a stage set up, though it was empty now. The ambiance was playing some kind of Celtic punk. Scottish… no Irish, that was the Pogues.

Spike’s face was softer than it had been when I’d known him, the sharp edges of his anger blunted. I was gonna like William like this! It looked like he’d polished up all the fun bits of his personality and married them quite neatly to all the devoted, snuggly bits. And I’d bet the brave bits, too. If the sycophantish minion had been burned away through the years, and the selfishness had been muted by this soul phenomenon, Spike was probably one of the best people on the planet at the moment.

But then… I’d kind of guessed that by how Buffy felt about him. I couldn’t have handed her off
to anyone less.

“So, the plan,” Buffy said. “We’re gonna have to go back to Rome. Dawn’s school’s there, and you probably have some scheme or two on the back burner, don’t you Jack?”

“A couple,” I lied. I was just living. I had no plans. Rome was just a home base, a comfort zone, like Cardiff or a couple other cities around the world, and Cardiff was currently occupied by my past self, so Rome it was. But it was better that Buffy didn’t know that. I’d been well on my way to wanting to stay with her. It was a good thing I’d had this year to distance myself from her, and I was so glad I’d supplied her with a more-than-suitable replacement partner.

I only ever broke people when I stayed with them.

“So, Rome. Can we, ah... get back the way we came? Because I don’t have a plane ticket or anything.” She was being coy about my wrist strap, for which I was grateful. “I can just have Dawn mail me my passport or something, but we’d have to come up with some alternative for Spike.”

“Wolfram and Hart got me a passport,” Spike said.

“Oh, but the sun,” Buffy realized. “Angel used to go on about how there was no way to protect yourself in a plane—”

“Not gonna be a problem,” Spike said. Buffy didn’t catch it. I did.

“Okay. But should we even use a plane, or is your method better, Jack?”

“Well, it’s complicated,” I said. “We probably should hang out here a few more days. There’s someone I might like to reconnect with.” Hell, if I couldn’t land Spike, and Angel was all guilt-ridden, it might be nice to hear Lorne sing again... I’d kind of liked Lorne.

“Well, I don’t know,” Buffy said. “Wolfram and Hart. But you must have some things you’d need to clear up, right Spike? And... we should probably do something about that Lindsey, and maybe talk to Angel about it.”

“Let Angel think it was Lindsey,” Spike said quietly.

“What?”

He looked at Buffy. “Angel’s not ever going to accept that you, or you,” he looked at me, “or Fred or anyone else wanted me back in this world. Let him think it was all about him.”

“Why?”

“Because you used him,” Spike said, rather pointedly, to both of us. “And that’s not very nice.” He shook his head. “Lindsey was right about one thing. Bringing me back buggered up Angel’s destiny, and now I’m all tangled in his prophecy.”

“I had every right to bring you back,” Buffy snapped. “I had as much right – more right – than Willow did when she did me, and easily as much right as whatever it was that brought back Angel. And neither Lindsey nor Angel nor the fucking Powers That Be can tell me otherwise!”

“I thought they did tell you otherwise.”

“Yeah, and I shoved it down their throats!” Buffy snapped. “They’re the ones who let the First Evil out, and if they don’t want another souly vampire champion about, they shouldn’t have
picked Angel as the first one!” She let go Spike’s hand and leaned back in her chair, disgruntled. “I’m half tempted to talk Willow into besouling every damn vamp on the planet. Let them sort it out, dammit.”

“Am I the only one who thinks she’s cute when she’s angry?” I asked William.

“Oh, no, she’s stunning gorgeous,” William said.

Buffy tilted her head to the ceiling, unable to stay mad while she was blushing.

“Don’t bugger up Angel’s dream of you, Buffy,” Spike said. “Let him keep that someday. Don’t vacuum up his crumbs.”

“I don’t think it’s right letting Lindsey get away with murder,” Buffy snapped. “Almost actual murder,” she added.

“Okay, who’s this Lindsey?”

Buffy quickly recapped what had happened here from Spike’s perspective. The idea that someone would have just fucked with the mail hadn’t even occurred to me, which... was really lax of me now that I thought about it. But with the way everything had played out in Rome, it had been pretty clear that everything was already laid out. I’d thought I’d just had to walk it. It had been close, this, closed time-loop or not. In some ways they were the easiest, when you weren’t actually changing history, you were just part of it. In some ways... time was a mysterious bitch, and didn’t always dance to the tune you thought she should. Drusilla had understood that. It was probably why she’d insisted William free me, back in 1894. Everything fit together. Everything, including this.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about having a place in time again.

“Six months?” I asked William. “Yeah, that amulet could have really eaten up your soul again.”

“Yeah. I did get that,” he said. “I felt weird to start with, sort of... thin. I thought it was the ghostiness of me. Then felt a bit better for a while, was picking up coffee cups and stuff, but then by the end there... everything was warped. Even the most painful aspects of my life just didn’t really feel like they belonged to me. Even the best.” He quietly took up Buffy’s hand again, and she let him. “I could talk about what hurt, and it didn’t hurt. I could think about what I loved, and....”

“And it didn’t feel like love,” Buffy said. “Without the letter, there had to be some reason he couldn’t contact me. Must have felt like hell. But he says he’s better now.”

“Now I am,” Spike said.

“He’s even writing poetry again,” Buffy said with a smirk.

“Hey! That was private!”

“And cute,” Buffy said. “He’s actually not bad at all, Jack. He just... doesn’t have any faith in it.”

Now it was Spike’s turn to look at the ceiling in embarrassment.

They were so damn cute, I suppressed a groan. Damn monogamy taboos! “I’m gonna get a beer.”
“Oh, you sit, I’ll get it,” Buffy said, dropping Spike’s hand. “This place will serve a pretty girl faster than either of you.”

“Don’t be so sure!” Spike called. “The ones with the sharpest elbows get the grease around here.”

“Good thing I’m stronger than either of you,” Buffy said, and plunged into the throng around the bar.

Leaving me alone with William. “She looks happy,” I told him.

“We’re still getting to know each other again,” he said. “There’s time, and... and things happened. You happened,” he added.

“Don’t be jealous of me,” I said. “Really, just don’t. We’ve gone down this road, you and me, and god, you were dead, Spike.”

“It’s not that I feel she was cheating on me.”

“Gotten over that?” I asked. I doubted it.

“No, I’m... pretty straight in that regard. But I don’t feel like I have any rights to her. More than that, though, she’s... different. Being with you was good for her.”

“That’s how I try to leave my lovers.”

“Leave?”

Ah. “Yes,” I said. “Leave. You haven’t brought this up with her?”

He shook his head, and I knew he hadn’t dared to.

“We’re mostly friends, Spike,” I said. “I just like to have sex with most of my friends.”

“Most people don’t jump through hellgates and die a lot for just their friends.”

“You would,” I said. “Depending on the friend. You’d have done it for Angel, or Dru, even way back when.”

“Angel was my sire. Dru was my love.”

“And they were your friends,” I said. “Look, she and I met, we were both grieving someone hard. There’s fuck all I can do for me.” I looked over at Buffy, still trying to get attention at the bar. “There was something I could do for her.”

“You did a lot for her,” Spike said. “She’s had some sexual hang-ups, about what was normal and what was right and all. I think you opened her eyes a bit.”

“Yeah, why the hell did you two never have a safeword?” I asked. “Buffy said she’d never even heard of them when we started sleeping together, which... given what she said she’d already done in the bedroom...”

“I’d heard of ‘em,” Spike said. “It just hadn’t occurred to me. Come on, molly, I was a vampire, not a dom. Some things seemed normal to me that...” He looked into his beer. “A soul changes you a bit. We... we should have had one.”
“Yeah. When I explained the concept to Buffy she almost started to cry. She said something about... how that would simple things up a lot.”

“Yeah. It would have.”

“She picked Shower Curtain, of all things,” I said. “I said it might make things awkward if we ever had sex in the shower. She said we were never, ever, going to have sex in a bathroom, and that sorted that.”

Spike closed his eyes, and it suddenly occurred to me that this was probably something between him and Buffy, something I hadn’t picked up on when she’d picked out her safe-word. Well, damn, I’d put my foot in it now, hadn’t I. “What’d you pick?” I asked, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Platypus? Mustard?”

“Doilies,” he said. “We actually picked it out on the way over. Reference to the first time I tried to kill her, actually.”

I laughed. “You two. It must have been epic.”

He nodded.

“So why aren’t you going with her?”

His head snapped to me. “How’d you know that?”

“I know your face, William. You’ve got some great scars and your eyes are older. But I still know that face.” He looked down at his drink. “She still doesn’t know. When are you going to tell her?”

“As soon as I can figure out some way of saying it that doesn’t sound like I’m abandoning her.”

“Well. What’s your reasoning? And by the way, if you say it’s for her own good, I’m going to hit you, first.”

Spike laughed. “No. She’d probably do better with me by her side.”

“So what’s the problem?” He didn’t answer, and instead just looked insanely uncomfortable. And I knew that insane discomfort from before. This was the look he got on his face whenever his love for Drusilla and his devotion to Angelus clashed. I felt for the guy. “You know... you don’t have to give up on your love for Buffy just because Angel wants you to stay.”

“He doesn’t.” Spike said. “If asked, he’d probably tell me to get the hell out, and he doesn’t want me here at all.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“He wouldn’t mean it.”

“Spike.”

“He was my grand sire, Jack. I’m all he’s got left.”

“Angel is handling things just fine.”

Spike looked me over. “You’ve got a love bite on your neck,” he said flatly.
My hand went automatically to my throat before I realized it couldn’t possibly be true. I’d confirmed anyway. “He’s taking the day off. Just like you.”

“Still a little iffy.”

“No. It was very decided.”

Spike laughed. “Human blood’s a bit of a high, molly. Eh, I don’t know, a night cutting loose was probably good for him. But that’s the thing. This CEO livin’ it up thing? Not his style. He always saw himself as the maverick, and ah... what you pulled in Rome? Not gonna help his precious ego.”

“I think Angel’s precious ego deserves to be caught and shot,” I said, “and this is from a guy who climbed out of his bed this morning. Or... afternoon,” I amended.

“That’s what I mean,” Spike said. “The guy can’t hold anything. Did you know he had a kid?”

“He couldn’t even hold that. It bit him in the ass. Over and over again it bit him in the ass. And yeah, he kinda deserves it, but... I mean, he’s breaking down. I don’t know what’s best for him, and I don’t know what’s about to go down... but something’s going down. There’s something he’s not telling me, and I already know he’s gonna need me for it.”

I regarded him. “God. He really trained you tight, didn’t he.”

Spike looked really annoyed now. I knew under any other circumstances he’d deny it.

“It doesn’t mean you have to give up Buffy.”

“I’m not giving up Buffy,” Spike said. “God help me, I am never giving up Buffy. I just... she doesn’t need me right now.”

“She does,” I said.

“Not at her side to keep her from being killed,” Spike said. “I’m afraid... I’m afraid that’s where Angel is. And between you and Rome and Buffy... if this doesn’t throw him over the edge....” He swallowed. “He lost a girl. Cordelia. He lost Fred. He lost his son. Now he’s lost Buffy, I just... I don’t want to take something else from him when he doesn’t have anything to replace it.”

“It’s not your job to take care of him.”

“Then whose?” Spike asked. “No, I can’t do it forever, but... when I thought Lindsey’d brought me back to put one over on Angel? That was one thing. Now it’s something else. When I got brought back solid, people died. There was a shake up of destiny, and some folks went crazy for a bit. There was at least one death I know of. And before, that was on Lindsey, but now...?”

“It’s still on Lindsey,” I said. “You don’t know what would have happened if he’d let you be brought back before your soul was going wobbly. Maybe destiny wouldn’t have been so unsettled. Maybe things could have shaken back into place before anyone got hurt, maybe—”

“There’s all kinds of maybes,” Spike said. “But the end is, I’m tangled in the threads now. Just for now... I feel like I gotta see it through.”

“And you really think Buffy will accept that?”
“Sure I will.”

I turned to find Buffy over my shoulder. She set a beer on the table in front of me and sat back down. “You overheard...?”

Spike smiled at me. “Knew there was a chance she might. Slayers have better hearing than normal people, molly. They hear soft noises almost as good as a vampire, and they pick sounds out of a crowd lots better.” He took Buffy’s hand. “I’m sorry, pet. I should have said.”

“You hadn’t had a chance yet,” she said.

“You mad?”

“I’m pissed off as fuck,” Buffy said lightly. “And I still kinda feel for him too, you idiot. If you think he’s that close to the edge...”

“I do.”

She nodded. “You get one hundred and forty-seven days to sort him out,” she said, a weirdly specific number that confused me. “After that, I’m coming to get you, and I’ll break Angel’s face if he tries to stop you.”

“Deal,” Spike said.

Buffy sighed and looked to me. “I guess that means it’s just you and me heading back to Rome?”

I looked at the two of them. “Give yourselves another day or so,” I said. “You don’t want to say goodbye, yet.”

Buffy caught the sadness in my tone. “Jack...”

I pushed my beer aside and stood up. I bent to kiss her. “Two days from now. Outside Wolfram and Hart. Nine o’clock.” I said.

“Okay, but—”

She stopped as I also bent to kiss Spike. “Love well,” I whispered to him.

I was about to leave when Spike grabbed my arm. “You stay, mate,” he said. He dragged me back down to the table – vampire strength – and sat me down. “Sit! It’s poetry night.”

“What?”

“Thursdays. Poetry slam, ten to four AM. Turns the pub into technically a private venue, so they can stay open later, but I don’t care why they do it. It can be a hell of a show.”

“Please stay, Jack,” Buffy said.

“I thought the two of you might want to be alone,” I said pointedly.

“We do. But... you know. There are things that happen that aren’t... I mean we could still... without....”

God, Buffy never got to the fucking point when it came to sex. “Not up for a threesome then,” I said bluntly.
Buffy blushed, and Spike burst out laughing. “Not tonight, mate,” he said. “But never’s a long time, and I had friends I never guessed at. Like to get to know the Immortal again, now that I’ve been told he’s not evil.”

“I’m not good, either,” I said.

“Me neither,” Spike said.

“Hey, don’t I get to be naughty?” Buffy asked.

“Here’s to the grey-hats, then,” Spike said, as a guy in a biker jacket and a bandana staggered slightly drunkenly on stage and declared the poetry slam open. Nervous looking bikers pulled out thumb-stained reams of verse. We clinked beer bottles, and I sat back and admired what I had done. Spike and Buffy, together. Happy.

I’d fixed Buffy’s grief. I couldn’t do jack for my own, but at least Buffy was better now. It had hurt like hell to do. It was gonna keep hurting like hell to watch. And it was completely worth it.
“You what?”

“Um. Yeah. Um. Volunteered.”

“For a suicide mission!” I snapped.

“I don’t think it’s that, really.” Spike looked sad and confused over Skype. I wanted to shake him. “Angel has this plan. It’ll break Wolfram and Hart, it’ll break the Senior Partners, it might just break this apocalypse we’ve been in.”

“Oh, the war to end all wars?” I was furious. “I said I would give you time to get Angel out of his funk, not give him carte-blanc to start a freaking war!”

“Well...” Spike looked really, really uncomfortable.

“At least tell me you tried to talk him out of this fool scheme?”

Spike said nothing.

“Let me guess. You were the first one to raise your stupid hand.”

He didn’t even try to deny it. “I’m sorry, Buffy.”

“You didn’t even give it a second thought, did you.”

“We didn’t really have time,” Spike said. “Angel gave us less than five minutes to decide, and...”

“Ugh! When I next see you guys I’m going to hit Angel, and you, and maybe lock you both in a cage together until I calm down!”

“Buffy.”
“Oh, hey. There could still be oil involved.”

“Buffy!”

“What?”

He looked shy. “Are you going to come, or not?”

“Of course I’m going to come!” I snarled. “You’ve just provided the answer to like... ten
different cryptic Slayer dreams that have been floating around our ranks for weeks, not to mention
the one that woke me up screaming last night.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do it, you moron.”

“Um... these dreams,” he asked. “Do we live?”

“I don’t fucking know, do I?” As always when I swore, Spike cringed. He hadn’t gotten used to
the fact that I’d stopped trying to control my language, or that I spoke about the slayers as an actual
army now, with an “us” instead of a “me”, or the new way I looked at him – as if he were
something precious that was about to be taken away. And it looked as if he might be taken away
now. “And it just had to be tonight?” I asked. “You know that thing is finally about to pay out over
here.”

“You think he’ll go for it?”

“He didn’t do it, I did,” I said. “I think he might. But anyway, that was supposed to be my night,
setting this up for Jack. Now I have to go call in the entire bloody army and try to mobilize them to
LA? Do you know what a bitch that’s going to be?”

“I can do that,” Dawn said from over my shoulder.

“Huh?”

“Hey, niblet,” Spike said.

“Hi, Spike,” Dawn said, beaming down at his image from over my shoulder. “I can start to
mobilize the slayers. I’ll call Willow and she can start the move from South America, and I think
Xander and Giles are back in Scotland now. They can handle moving the academy.”

“Are the girls from the academy ready?” I asked. The academy was mostly made up of the
younger slayers, fourteen to seventeen, still fresh to their powers.

“You were,” Spike pointed out.

“So was I,” Dawn reminded me, annoying me no end. I’d wanted to keep her away from the
slaying stuff, but it had hit her just as hard as it had me, and just as young. Too late now, I
supposed. “Look, I can do paperwork, you take care of Jack.”

“You think...?”

“Yes!” Spike and Dawn said to me as one. “Besides,” Dawn added. “Maybe you can get Jack to
join in the fight.”

“No,” I said. “Jack doesn’t do that sort of thing.”
“Shame,” Spike said. “We could use a bit of immortality. I don’t know what the Senior Partners are going to throw at us.”

“Me either.” I touched Dawn’s shoulder. “Okay. You get on the cell phone, talk to Andrew and Giles and everyone. Give me a minute here.”

“Okay. Spike? I’ll call you once we start getting mobilized,” Dawn called over her shoulder. Then she left, giving me and Spike some privacy.

“Okay,” I said. “Can you just take it as read that part of me is still screaming at you this whole time?”

“So noted,” Spike said.

“Good.” I crept in close to the laptop. “Now I’m really scared!” I confessed.

“Aw. Shh, pet, it’ll be all right. I’m not that easy to kill. I’ve died twice, remember?”

“I don’t count when you were turned, or when you got your soul,” I said. “Not really. Just the time I had to jump through hoops like a performing seal to drag you back from next to nothing!”

“Buffy, I’ll be all right,” he said. “Really.” His finger reached out and gently touched the screen. It went out of vision on my end, but the sentiment was heartfelt. “Don’t be scared, love. We’ll get it sorted.”

“Why’d you have to jump like a puppy to his side just because he said snap?”

He hesitated. “Because he stood back, pet,” he said. “He saw you and me together, and he just walked away. I know what that feels like, and it’s hell. I owe him this one.”

“Oh? You owe him your life, not to mention the risk of, like, the whole of LA, on his damn sayso?”

“I owe him one more time as the big bad,” he said. “One more time when he gets to give the orders.”

I got it. I wasn’t happy, but I got it. I hated every single word that was coming out of Spike’s mouth. But I got it. “Don’t let him give you any jewelry,” I insisted. “Nothing. No bracelets, no crystals, no one-ring of power. Nothing. You promise me?”

“I promise, pet.”

I looked down. “Would you do something for me?”

“What?”

“Tell me one of your poems.”

“Buffy, I don’t hate you that much,” he said with a grin.

“But I liked the other ones you showed me.”

“I was incredibly drunk.”

“You hadn’t had any alcohol, you just had me.”
“Incredibly drunk,” he repeated.

I chuckled. “If you’ll tell me a poem, I’ll do that thing with my tongue next time I see you.”

He promptly did that thing with his tongue, where he held it behind his teeth and looked as if I’d turned into a double-chocolate sundae with sprinkles and an extra cherry. “Um. I’m at the office.”

“So?”

“I don’t have anything ready.”

My grin spread wider. “Bonus.”

He rolled his eyes. “Agh!” He leaned back. “As you wish, pet. Give us a minute.”

I waited, biting my lip in anticipation. I loved when he did this. I knew it made him self-conscious, which actually made me love it even more. “All right, love,” he said after a minute, and his voice had changed, and I knew I had him. I subtly touched Record on the laptop.

The world is ending again.

Break from the gate with the new black attack,
thear down the wall, watch it fall,
the color of vengeance, the killers of us all.
Don’t back down.
We reach across seas, down on our knees,
come for me, bend for me, beg of you please.
Broken hearts bleeding, lost children pleading,
the weight of the world and the madness receding
the taste of hot promises broke in your mouth,
shattered eggs, shards of glass, don’t say I love you.
Don’t even mean it.
When all falls the brawl is the clarion call.
It’s all we got left now. Fist, fervor, and fang,
the metallic tang of the blood on your tongue.
The child has sung.
The end is gone, we’ve been here before
invited in death through the open front door
take my hand, make a stand, we can do it together.
We’ll stand or we’ll fall, we can do it forever.
Take turns, turn again, one or the other,
the hero has only the moment to sing.
The world is ending. Eh, so what else is new?

I was gazing at him in utter fondness, like I usually did when he whipped that shit out. “Got it,” I said.

He looked horrified. “You were recording that?”

“Yah-huh.”

“Ugh!” he shifted position in his chair and glared at me. “I am going to tear your head off, reach down your throat, pull out your heart, rip off the aorta, and knot them into a sodding bow tie!”
Only then did I stop the recording. “Got that too.”

“I really, really hate you!”

“Back at you.” I smiled.

He sighed. “I really don’t like that stuff. It’s nothing, it’s just my head opened up. There’s no meter, the rhyme schemes are simplistic, it’s bloody well a step away from plain prose.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said softly.

If he could blush, he would have been. “You’re biased.”

“Well, then, prove me wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Angel gave you the day off, right?”

“Yes, we get 24 hours before we close the lid on this insanity.”

“It’s Thursday night over there, right? McTarman’s has its poetry slam.” I was coaxing. I had little hopes of succeeding, but I put the coax into my voice anyway. I’d spent that whole night two weeks before trying to get Spike to go up on stage, and he hadn’t. His stuff was easily as good as the crap most of those bikers and goth-punks or whatever had been spouting up on that stage. It had seemed a really accepting crowd, but Spike hadn’t dared, not even with me and Jack begging him. At one point Jack even got down on his knees before Spike – it was humorous and intentionally melodramatic, but I’d appreciated the image. Even then Spike hadn’t done it, even though by that time we were all pretty drunk.

We got drunker afterwards, and eventually staggered back to Spike’s apartment, and... well, things had happened. Probably not as much as Jack would have liked, but some things happened, anyway. It was nice... and strange. And kind of sad.

Jack had gone off the next day, and Spike and I had only another 24 hours to get to know each other again before I felt I had to get back to Dawn, and Spike felt he couldn’t push Angel’s generosity any further.

I hadn’t seen Angel again. I’d thought about it, but decided against it. Spike told me some things about Angel that led me to believe he’d be better off if I stayed out of sight. There was something about Cordelia that Spike hadn’t really understood, and apparently Angel actually had a girlfriend (!!!) and also he was perfectly capable of screwing a fuck-ton of other people just fine without going all Angelus, so... yeah, probably better off with me out of the picture. At least that dumb celibacy thing was done. (And why the hell couldn’t he have just learned to control his dumb happy around me, if he was able to fuck everyone else in the fucking world? How come I had to stay the pristine near-virgin if I was gonna be around him? Just sayin’.)

“I’m not going up on stage.”

I glared at Spike. “What if you never get another chance? I think it’s good. Jack thought it was good.”

“Buffy...”

“Just pull out your really old stuff,” I said. “Then if they hate it, you’ll know you’ve already
improved, and you can wow them next time with something fresh and sexy.”

“You’re the only fresh and sexy I’m into.”

“Come on, Spike. You should take a chance. I thought you were brave.”

“You’re pushing it, slayer.”

“I love you, you idiot,” I said. “I want you to feel that. They’re gonna love you there. They already look at you, they know you come by for poetry slam, they must have some idea why.”

He was looking away, the lower part of his face half hidden by his hand, all adorably nervous. “Okay.” he said. He was shaking. The man could face evil hellgods and hordes of militant vampires and demon trials and torture, but dare him to step on stage with his poetry in his hands and he was terrified. “Okay. But they don’t get any of yours. Those are just for you.”

“I wouldn’t have expected anything else.”

Spike grinned at me. “What time’s the eye-candy gonna get there?”

I looked at my watch. “Oh, damn! He’s probably already at the restaurant. I gotta go, Spike!” I glared at him and pointed at the screen. “No dying before I see you again!”

“I swear, slayer. And back at you!”

“I love you.”

“I know. Love you, pet.”

I closed the laptop on his lovely face, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time I saw it. I was always careful to make my last words to him I love you. He kept saying he knew, but I still wasn’t sure he believed it. All I could do was keep saying it. I’d planted and nurtured that briar of insecurity in him, and I was just gonna have to deal with the thorns now. I’d made my bed... ah well.

It was another bed I had to deal with tonight. I’d picked up one of the scooters Jack was so fond of, so I made it to the restaurant only a little late. My date was already there, at the table I’d reserved near the fountain, nervously sipping on a glass of red wine. I checked my cell-phone. I had a text from Jack. Running late. You sure you want me to come?

YES! I texted back. And HURRY!

I glanced in the mirror by the door and tried to look professional, straightening my skirt and tightening my hair. I was a little young for this role, but hell, I could fake it. I came up to the table and held my hand out to the... admittedly really cute guy in the business suit I saw there. “Hi, I’m Buffy Summers, your event coordinator?”

“Ianto Jones,” he said, with an accent I couldn’t place. It wasn’t London, despite where I’d found him. Something Irish maybe? Not quite. Ah, well, didn’t matter. The name seemed to be pronounced “Yan-tow” but I wasn’t one to judge weird names. I’m Buffy, for chrissake, and I’m dating a Spike. “I’m glad to finally meet you. I, um... will say I was surprised when I got your call.”

“Really? Well, I hope everything came through well. Plane tickets, accommodations, and such?”

“Yeah, everything came through great.” Ianto said. “It was just... it was a little strange to hear I’d won an all expenses paid trip to Italy in the first place. I... didn’t realize I’d entered a contest.”
“Oh, you signed up in a grocery store,” I said. “Probably forgot. We get a lot of that when we contact our winners. You... didn’t bring a guest?”

“No. There was a girl I’d thought about bringing but... Lisa and I aren’t quite at Italian get-away stage yet.”

“I thought you’d said you were thinking about bringing your sister?”

“Her kids got the flu. I thought about staying home, but in the end, I figured... I’d never seen Rome.”

This was working out better than I’d hoped! “Your tour guide will be here in a few minutes, he’s running late.”

“That’ll be nice, to have someone who speaks the language. I don’t speak Italian, I’ve been a little at sea since I arrived this afternoon. That Andrew fellow who took me to the hotel? He didn’t know Italian either.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Also he... kept getting really tongue tied even in English.”

Given how cute Ianto was, and knowing what Andrew knew about what he and Jack had been to each other, I wasn’t surprised that Andrew had fallen all over himself. “Yeah, well, Andrew’s... a little new to the job of tour liaison. Now, about the tour. What sorts of things are you interested in seeing?”

“Well, I don’t know. I was hoping you could tell me. Apart from the whole Coliseum, ancient churches, Roman arches thing, I know nothing about this city.”

“Are you more interested in the ancient structures, or in modern life, clubs and cuisine and stuff?”

“Both. Neither. I really just wanted a bit of adventure, you know?”

“Well, I’m quite sure we can supply that,” I said. There was Jack, through the window, pulling up outside the restaurant on his own scooter. “If you’ll hold on a second. I think our tour guide has just arrived.”

“No trouble.” Ianto sat back and took up his wine again.

I jumped back through the restaurant and caught Jack before he came through the foyer. “Buffy, what the hell is so important that it takes a formalized invitation with underlines and asterisks god damned exclamation points?”

“I wanted a date,” I said.

Jack looked at me with a bit of a smirk. “Unless you and Spike have gotten over that monogamy quirk and feel like giving me a bit of perfect happiness—”

“We haven’t, and we don’t, and you can stop trying to play me,” I said, though it was more amused than annoyed. “But I reserved us a table. You should look in there near the fountain.”

He started to go in. I stopped him. “I said look. Not enter.”

He stopped, and he looked, and his expression went from exasperated to dead shocked. He
looked as if I’d just shot him. The blood drained from his face, and he froze. “Buffy…”

“Giles found him,” I said quietly. “The Watchers had a pretty extensive database, even though your Torchwood had tried to erase him from the system. He’s new to Torchwood apparently. He’s not classified alien clearance or anything, he’s in–”

“Filing,” Jack said. “He started in filing.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Jack looked like he might cry. Then his face closed down and he glared at me. “That was cruel, bitch,” he snapped. He whirled and started for the door.

“What?”

“That was fucking inhuman. You know I can’t talk to him, I’d rather you shot me in the head. That would heal over faster.”

“Jack!”

“Just get the fuck away from me! And don’t play games with me anymore. I’m not your toy.”

“Jack! It’s not like that!”

He paused, trembling. “Look,” he said, his voice like a blade. “I know you think you meant well. But I can’t. Fucking. Talk to him. That’s not how time-travel works. All you’ve done is torment me with a guy who can’t know me yet! Don’t you get that? I thought this whole closed-loop if we hear no thing made sense to you! You’re such a fucking child.”

“You’re the one acting like a child!” I snapped. “Strangely enough, I did think about how he doesn’t know you yet, and about how you’re staying away from him because of it, and about why the fuck you’re hanging around here in 2004 instead of any other time period in the world where there isn’t a Ianto Jones in it. You’re here because you do want to be with him. You feel better here and now in a time where he exists, even if you can’t be with him. Am I right?”

“So you rub my nose in it like a bad puppy?” Jack snapped. “Yeah, I’m weak. I felt bettersort of close to him. He’s dead, Buffy. This isn’t like Spike, I can’t bring him back. Yeah, the world seems like a richer place with a Ianto Jones in it somewhere. But it’s not mine. It’s not my place, it’s not my Ianto. And I can’t have him, not even for a moment.” He was fighting tears, and I wanted to grab him and hold him, but that was what this night was for.

“Sure you can.”

“Buffy, if I go to him now, everything I did have with him… will have with him… all of that will be in jeopardy. I’m not going to kill the him in the future so that I can steal him in the past. That’s not how this works.”

“I know that,” I said. I pulled out the bone. “I had Willow and Andrew make this for me. Willow told us the spell, Andrew implemented it because he was here and kinda knew how it worked. He said his friend Jonathan used to do this all the time. It’s a glamor. It’ll change your face, so you can… have one last day.” Jack was staring at me, his blue eyes ancient, like stars. “I mean, I know it won’t be the same, ‘cause he doesn’t know you. And I know… I know it’ll probably hurt like hell. And I know you would never have done this for yourself, because it’s… unethical time-agent crap that I don’t really understand. But this wasn’t something you did. Ianto happened to win an all expenses paid trip to Rome. You happen to be an expatriate who speaks his language, and he needs
a tour guide. There’s no reason you can’t just... have one more day.”

He was tempted, I could tell. He swallowed. “What’s the face?” he finally asked.

“I figured you’d rather be a man. It would have to be either Andrew, Xander, or Giles, and given the choices...”

“Ripper,” Jack said.

“Yeah, I figured,” I said. “All I’d have to do is activate it, and you’ll have twelve hours to be... someone else. Someone who can...” I gestured helplessly at the gorgeous young man in the restaurant. He was enjoying an appetizer now, thanking the waitress for bringing it with helpless hand gestures. Jack fell into an unconscious smile looking at him.

“Should I activate the spell?” I asked.

“Twelve hours?” he asked. He looked me over. “You know, he’d find you more attractive at this stage in his life.”

“I’m not staying,” I said. “I have to get the slayers together, and get them to LA.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Angel decided to start a war. Like an idiot.”

“With who?”

“Wolfram and Hart,” he said. “I guess he got sick of being their whipping boy.”

Jack looked up at the ceiling with a groan. “I’ll have to tell Ilona to take the day off. Just get her out of the building until whatever this is shakes down.”

“That’s a good idea. Don’t tell her why, though.”

He nodded, as if that was obvious. “God, that Angelus,” he said, shaking his head. “You know, I told him to act. This wasn’t what I meant.”

“I don’t think we had anything to do with this,” I said. “I think this is what Spike was talking about when he said Angel was starting to go off the rails. Anyway, there’s gonna be hell to pay, and... guess whose job it is to pay it!”

“You don’t have to,” Jack said. “You could just walk away and let Angel deal with his own mess.”

“And how many people would pay for it then?” I asked. “It may not be your calling anymore, but it’s mine, Jack. This is the world. You brought Spike back for me, and that was... awesome. But everyone is someone’s Spike. Everyone is someone’s Ianto. Every single person is the world to someone else... even if only themselves. All those lives need to be saved.” I reached up and touched Jack’s cheek. “Even yours.”

He looked from me, over to Ianto. “And that’s what this is, is it? Saving my life?”

I shrugged. “It was a thank you,” I said. “I love you, Jack, you’re one of my best friends. Would you just take the damn night already?”

Jack chuckled, and then sniffed, and then swallowed. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”
I held out the carved bone, tapped it a few times, muttered a word in Latin that Willow swore I was now pronouncing correctly, and then blew across it into Jack’s face. As if I was blowing dust at him, his face morphed and shifted until he looked the spitting image of Giles, though his expressions were all wrong. He certainly didn’t look like Jack, though, which was kind of the point.

“You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Jack said.

I showed him to the table. “Ianto Jones? Meet your personal tour guide for the day, this is... um... Ripper Barrow, he’s lived here a lot of years. He can show you all you’d need to know.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Jones.”

“Oh, call me Ianto.” They were shaking hands as I slid surreptitiously away. I really couldn’t leave all the preparations for an apocalypse entirely to Dawn. Besides, I was pretty sure the two of them could handle this without me. “I’m pleased to meet you Mr... Ripper? Barrow?”

“Barrow,” Jack said, sliding into the seat beside Ianto. “Just call me Barrow. It’s nice to see you, Ianto. I’ve... been looking forward to this meeting very much.”
The man in the handcuffs woke up and looked somewhat chagrined. The fact that I had his gun trained on him didn’t worry him much, but then, I hadn’t thought that it would. “Damn,” he said. “I fell asleep.” He looked more annoyed with himself than anything else.

“Yeah. You did,” I said. I really didn’t know how to use this gun, but I felt a little better with it anyway. “Now you want to tell me what the hell Torchwood is pulling?”

“This has nothing to do with Torchwood,” he said, yanking on the handcuffs. They were his. Like the gun, I’d pulled them from his coat, which he’d hung on the back of a chair. I’d only gotten one arm cuffed to the bedstead, and I was far enough away from him that he couldn’t lunge at me or anything.


I’d thought it was a little strange that this guy had been so generous with his time and his knowledge, even if the event coordinator from this so-called contest was paying for his time.

‘Barrow’ and I had had a wonderful day. He’d shown me around Rome, introduced me to nifty corners and carts, got me into the back rooms and basements of certain ancient structures, took me out to dinner in a really nice place; we went clubbing after. I’d gotten drunk enough that I’d forgotten the name of my hotel, and he’d said we could just hang out at his place. He’d warned me he’d probably be gone when I woke up, but had said I could hang out until morning, when I could call Ms. Summers and find my hotel again.

I’d passed out on his bed, and woke up early to find that he’d joined me. He was on the other side of the king-sized bed, not so close that I felt weirded out or anything – and I hadn’t been that drunk; I’d have remembered anything creepy. He was still in the clothes he’d been in the night
before. Everything seemed normal. Except that the man lying in that bed was not the man I’d spent
the previous afternoon and evening with.

Which would have been strange enough, even if I hadn’t recognized him. “You’re Captain Jack
Harkness. You run Torchwood Three, and there are more files on you than I can even count.” I was
pretty sure he was unkillable, and I wasn’t sure Torchwood itself hadn’t done that to him
intentionally.

“You’ve read up on me?” he asked. “Already?”

“I keep an eye on Torchwood Three. Torchwood Three’s in Cardiff. I have family in Cardiff.
Oh, wait, you know that, don’t you. Got me to talk to you all night. You had a brilliant cover story
yourself, Captain. Moved to Rome after your boyfriend died in the line of duty, and you were
trying to get away from the stress. You had me going. I felt sorry for you. Quite adept at lying,
aren’t you.”

“You’re one to talk,” Harkness said. He sat up more fully and looked at me. “Ianto, there’s more
going on here than you know.”

“Oh, I know,” I said. “You know how I know? I called work. You’re still on assignment in
Cardiff. I actually spoke to Captain Harkness for a second – just a typical check in from
Torchwood One. So what the fuck are you doing here?” I demanded. “Is the one in Cardiff a
replicant?”

“No.”

“Are you an alien? You were wearing a hologram or something last night. Or is this the
hologram?”

“No.”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I said, my fear getting the better of me. “What the fuck do you want with
me?”

“Nothing,” Harkness said. “Nothing, really, I... I was just showing you around Rome, I swear.”

“Got me into your home, into your bed!” Yeah, I knew about Jack Harkness. He was legendary
in Torchwood. “Was I used for some Torchwood mission? Am I the host for some alien egg now?
Is this a set-up for me to be slowly absorbed into another dimension? Did you just rape me and
retcon it away or something?”

“Hey!”

“What the fuck did you want with me!”

“I just... I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

“Why? And why the fuck is there a Jack Harkness still in Cardiff? What, you cross your own
timeline or something?”

“Um...”

Oh. I lowered the gun. This was still creepy, but less alien-bad-juju. “All right,” I said. “So you
are Jack Harkness. From the past or the future?” He knew too much. “The future. Right. And I...
I was brought here. To meet with you. With you with a different face.”
“Ianto, you don’t want to think about this too much.”

I’d already thought about it too much. Torchwood, timelines, strange faces, and the story he’d told me last night of his dead lover. “Then why’d you get in bed with me?” I asked. “Why’d you let the hologram lapse? If it was so damned important, why’d you fall asleep?”

“Because I don’t sleep anymore,” he said.

“You did. You were. You were so far gone I was able to handcuff you, obviously.”

“I know,” he said.

“Why?”

He looked at a loss for a moment, and then sighed. “You help me sleep, Ianto,” he said, with the air of a confession. “You always have.”

Oh, shit. Coc y gath, bloody hell, what the...? I took a deep breath. “How much of what you said last night was true?” I asked quietly.

He stared at me for a long time, and finally shook his head. “None of it was a lie.”

Of course it wasn’t.

I think I’d known what he was getting at the whole night. I think it was why I’d agreed to come home with him, even though I’d never done anything like that before. It was in the way he spoke to me, the way I relaxed around him as if we’d known each other for years. It was in the way he looked at me, how he’d touch my shoulder just... casually. (Not so casually.) It was in the way my heart pounded when he spoke about this man he’d lost, how I’d felt jealous of the guy, even with all the grief, even with all the pain, even though I wasn’t like that.

“It was me, wasn’t it,” I said. “The man who died. That man, who died in the line of duty. It was Torchwood, wasn’t it. Duty to Torchwood. The man who died. It was me.”

Jack looked down, and he didn’t even have to say it.

“And now that I know that, I’m going to have to forget this, aren’t I.”

“Yeah.”

“Policy.”

“Fuck policy,” Jack said, and I looked over at him. That was nice of him to say. “Nothing to do with policy. It’s just that your knowing might shatter the space-time continuum. Oh, and... break my timeline. Maybe erase your existence. It’s... lots of bad juju,” he said, as if he were speaking my thoughts. Hell, he probably knew how I thought.

“Yeah, right. Temporal paradoxes. I’m still trying to get clearance for those,” I said.

“You will,” he said.

Yeah. I would. He knew. I probably should have still been suspicious, but the truth is, I wasn’t. I trusted the man. I knew I shouldn’t trust the man... but I did. With a sigh I got up out of the chair and unlocked the handcuffs. He lowered his hand slowly, and I sat on the bed beside him, staring into the nothingness that was my future. “How long have I got?”
“I shouldn’t tell you this.”

“Come on, Jack, you’re gonna erase all this. Tell me straight.”

“About five years,” he confessed.

Five years. I wouldn’t even be out of my twenties. I’d known that was a risk in Torchwood, but it wasn’t like I was a field agent or anything! There were Torchwood File Clerks who lived to collect their pensions, lots of them! I should run. I knew that. I should shoot Jack in the head, run away, quit my job, do anything, anything other than continue on this doomed path! Fuck, I was crying. “I don’t think I want to die,” I said.

Jack sat up and put his arm around me from behind, his head on my shoulder, his hand on my arm. It felt easy. Familiar, even – which I suppose it was for him, if he was telling the truth. “I don’t want you to, either.”

“Is it for something at least?” I asked. “Do I save someone?”

“It was a bad day,” was all he said. “A lot of people died.”

That was a no, then. I knew I should be a man and hold this crap in, like my Dad always told me, but I had emotions, dammit, and I didn’t want to die. I sobbed.

“Oh, god, Ianto,” Jack whispered, and I could hear the pain in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “I know... I know people die every day, I shouldn’t... god!” I sniffed. “Just would have been nice if I could have saved the planet or something. Been useful for once.”

“Oh, you did,” Jack said. “You saved the planet a lot. You saved me, you saved other agents, you changed the world. You saved little kids and... and people who had been hurt, and... and me.” He stopped and swallowed. “You saved me a lot. Just... just not that day.”

Well. That was a bit better, then. His arm felt good around me. I was falling apart, he was holding me together. I closed my eyes and tried to understand it. I couldn’t. But it felt good. “I’m not gay, you know.”

I didn’t know why I said that. Maybe it was something in the way his strength felt around me, made me need to assert that.

He chuckled in my ear, and I think my heart skipped a beat. “I know that.”

“How did we...? How did I ever let...?”

He hesitated. “Do you want me to tell you?”

I turned to him, looked into his ancient blue eyes, trying to understand. “Yes.”

“You decided you needed to,” he said. “So you seduced me. Then you realized you wanted to, and you let me seduce you.”

“Needed to?” I asked. “Why?”

“I’m not going to tell you everything, Ianto. I’m not that cruel.”

Oh. Nothing good, then. “But then I wanted to?”
Jack looked sad. “Yes.”

It sounded strange. “What, I had a taste, and then couldn’t get enough?” I said. I was joking, but he said nothing. I guess that’s what it was. What was it, then? I’d never wanted a man before in my life! How could something just change? How could one person (admittedly one gorgeous, glamorous, strange and seductive person) have such a drastic effect on what I wanted? Could he really have thrown my entire sense of self into chaos?

Fuck, yeah, he probably could.

“I wanted to?” I asked again.

He only nodded.

I was scared, and confused, and shocked, and maybe even still a little hung over, and he smelled like expensive cologne (he’d told me the night before he never wore any – he naturally smelled like that) and his eyes were like staring into the sea, deep and ancient and unknowable, and his strength felt good on my shoulder, and his mouth was red and wet and tempting and I could hear his breathing and I’d listened to his voice rumbling in my ear just a moment ago and my heart was beating fast, and my hands were trembling, and I felt this weight, this pressure in my chest, and my arms felt empty and he was looking at me with such love in his face, and damn, but he was gorgeous, he looked like a film star, and I heard myself saying, “I want to.”

I was terrified the moment I heard myself say it. A shudder ran through me, and I couldn’t stop shaking. My eyes flicked up to him, and... and he was trembling, too. “Are you sure?”

“No,” I said. He didn’t move. I closed my eyes for a moment, thinking about it, drinking in his scent (god, it was like a drug!) and I changed my mind. I was on vacation, dammit, and I’d just been given a death sentence. I could choose life. I could choose this. “Yes,” I said. “I’m sure,” and because I was sure I reached up and I kissed him, and he groaned as he kissed me back.

I thought it would be some monumental difference, kissing a man. That there’d be some little tick in the back of my head that said, no. But no. It was a kiss. I wanted to say just a kiss, but it wasn’t just a kiss. There was no fundamental difference between kissing Jack and kissing a woman, except skill. Because Jack fucking knew how to kiss. It was a hot, strong, passionate kiss, and he tasted like he smelled, damn it, sweet and fragrant and holy fuck, he knew how to kiss me. I’d never been kissed like that, not so completely, his hand around my head, I could feel him through my body, it was like someone had turned a loudspeaker on in every part of me saying WANT!!!

I wanted so badly I melted, I turned off, and he pressed me down against the pillows, and I could feel his weight on me, and damn, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I liked it. He pulled away and looked down on me with those ancient blue eyes, and I gasped up at him, still trembling, but god, I didn’t want him to stop. “More?” he asked, checking.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

Was I sure? “God, yes.”

He kissed me again, and our bodies were entangling, and I could feel him, and I knew he could feel me. There was one thing about being with another man, there was no question that I was turning him on. He was very tender, and as I started to unbutton his shirt – I had to see that chest – he stopped and gasped.
I explored him for a while, and he me. I was tentative, but sure. “I... I don’t know the logistics of... anything,” I said.

“It’s not hard,” he whispered to me. “Well, it is,” he amended. “But it’s not–”

And I chuckled, and he smiled, and then he looked as if I’d stabbed him. “Oh, god!” he whispered. He buried his head in my throat and held me for a long moment. “This is what our first time should have been.”

Should have? “What was it, then?”

He looked down at me. “Harder. Rougher.” He looked sad. “Hollow.”

This was anything but hollow. It felt gentle as a cloud. “It got better, then?”

He smiled softly. “It changed my world.” He kissed me. “You changed my world. You changed me.” He kissed me again. “Opened me up.” He kissed me again. “Worked your way inside all that darkness.” He kissed me again. “Softened me. Reached me. Tamed me.” He kissed me again and again and again. “Your innocence, and your strength, and your hunger...” He kissed me over and over until I was surprised I was still solid. I felt like a puddle beneath him.

“Did I love you?” I asked.

He stopped and looked down at me, and he didn’t answer. He couldn’t, I realized. Even if I’d said it, he couldn’t know what was true. But in my heart I already knew. Looking into his eyes, I knew it. “I loved you,” I said, sure of it. “I could love you. Oh, I am going to love you.”

I lost myself to the words. I was utterly lost in them, like I was in his eyes. I was going to give myself to this man. Now, yes, and later as well. I could tell, it was in me to love him, I was already shaping myself to love him. I was so hungry to love him suddenly, I grabbed him and kissed him almost carnivorously, and he returned in kind. And there, there it was, that was what won him, I knew it, the abandon. When I let all the training of a lifetime fall away, Don’t want, don’t reach, don’t feel, don’t let anyone know. That was what he loved in me. What was underneath it all, the armor, the business suit, the manners, the blank mask I wore day after day. He loved the dark in me, the animal in me, the things I thought no one could ever love. Ianto unleashed.

It was gonna be a hell of a ride.

***

I was still scared. I wasn’t going to pretend I wasn’t. Five years....

I didn’t know how it was going to happen. I didn’t know what it was going to cost me. But in those ensuing years I would save the world, fall in love, have some grand adventures and, if the day in Jack’s bed had been any indication, have some absolute world-shattering sex.

Jack fell asleep again eventually. He had held nothing back. He told me things... things I don’t think he’d ever told me before, things it wasn’t safe for me to know. He told me about his old life, before he’d become immortal, before he’d become a time agent, before he’d become a man. Stories from his childhood, games he used to play with his brother, how he’d laughingly lost his virginity when he was a teenager, his deadly first long-term lover, the things he and I used to (would eventually) do. He told me who Buffy was, and how he’d had her for a time, helping each other out of their grief, and why I was here – what Buffy had been trying to do for him.
And then he told me... he wouldn’t make me. If I chose to run from my destiny, he wouldn’t try to stop me. Yes, it was dangerous. Yes, timelines could shatter. But yes, I probably could escape it. He kissed me and kissed me and told me he wouldn’t make me. He would not be the shadow man. He would not be the priest to my lamb.

And then he went to sleep. He said it had been nearly two years (for him) since he’d slept. Nearly two years since I had died. For him. Two years... and he still held on to me.

I opened my Rome Trip diary and wrote up the day. I wrote down everything, every nuance of feeling, everything I remembered him saying, everything I could think of, I wrote it down. I wrote down how I was scared, and how I didn’t really know what the future would bring.

And then I wrote down that I already knew I was going to love him. That what I’d felt was worth feeling again. That even if my death didn’t save the world, my life did a few times, yeah? And that was worth it, right?

Then I wrote down how I was looking forward to it. I left the book on his bedside table, and swallowed the pills before I left.

Twenty minutes later I walked a little dazed into a café. “I... I think I may have gotten sunstroke,” I told the guy at the counter. “I have a hotel...?” Right. I had a hotel. I’d been at the hotel, now I remembered. I’d been out with that tour guide, Barrow. Had a great tour, and we hit some clubs. Right. I was still a bit hung over. I’d spent the day with him, hitting a few more ancient temples – they were all a blur in my mind now, but I knew it had been fun. Actually... oh, I remembered. All I’d have to do is call the tour liaison, Andrew. I had his phone number here somewhere, didn’t I? Right, here, I had his card. I blinked at my cell-phone. It was Friday already? Damn! This trip had gone by so fast! Well, vacations always do.

I felt a little wistful as I pulled out the number and tried to focus enough to dial. I felt... lonely. Which was strange, since really, what did I have to feel lonely about? I wished I’d had someone with me on this journey I’d taken. Someone to love.

Love? That was an odd thought. I was young, there was no need to rush things! Except... maybe I should... speed some things up. Maybe I should commit to someone. Maybe I was wrong, and Lisa and I were Italian Getaway material after all. Why else should I feel so lonely, if it wasn’t over her? Why else should I feel as if I was missing someone...

When I got back to London I’d ask Lisa on another date. Maybe a camping trip or something, Brittany had some good spots to camp. Yeah. Definitely time to seize the day. Live for now. What was I so scared of loving for? Loving didn’t have to be like my dad, constantly demanding. It could be something... peaceful. A grace. And it didn’t have to depend on looks or anything so superficial as...

The phone stopped ringing, and a flustered sounding Andrew picked up. “What?” He sounded really flustered. “The flights to LA are all settled, what more do you want?”

“LA? I just need to get back to Heathrow, I–”

“Oh! Right! Mr. Jones. Do you need any assistance with your luggage?”

“Yeah, if you could get me a taxi to the hotel so I could pack?” I asked. “I’m still a little bit hung over. And I have a long way to go.”
Chapter End Notes

Ianto’s Welsh swear of Coc y gath, translates literally as “The cat’s willy” and is an expression of dismay.
Mortal

Chapter Summary

Jack

Chapter Notes

Takes place during Not Fade Away

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack

I woke up alone in my bed. Ianto was gone.

Ianto...

I still smelled of him. I could still feel his sweat on me, taste his essence in my mouth. I remembered curling up beside him as he stroked my hair (why was he comforting me? He was the one who knew he was slated to die...) And I remembered how he would whisper the time away, and even though he didn’t know how to do that yet, the time went away anyway. It was just him, and me, and the soft bed we were on, and I’d fallen asleep again.

Sleep. The gift of one night of sleep.... God. I owed Buffy big time.

I was both relieved and grieved that Ianto was gone. The question was, what had he done? Had he taken the pills, or just run? Would I ever know? Would it even matter?

I rolled over to see if his scent was still on the pillow, and spied the book on my bedside table, beside the bottle of retcon. I reached over and opened it.

Trip diary. Ianto had this quirk, the hand-written diary. It had saved our asses a few times. I opened it and read; Ianto, headed to Rome with his all-expenses-paid contest winnings, Andrew relaying him to his hotel, meeting Buffy event coordinator, his night with tour-guide Barrow, catching up on the journal while he waited out the last of the hangover, and then the journal abruptly cut off.

The next entry was on a completely fresh page, and started with how my face had changed while he was working on the journal, and everything he had thought and felt and experienced afterwards.
Everything. All the fear and the doubt and the wonder and the bewilderment and the awe and the pleasure and the beginning stirrings of a love he was already certain of. I trembled as I turned page after page – how he was writing this in case, for any reason, he needed to remember. Because he was going to take the pills.

I swallowed. Ianto had chosen death. He had chosen Torchwood, and me, and the certainty of death. I read on.

He got philosophical toward the end. He had had a glimpse into a larger universe, a continuity of things beyond himself, and death... death was just a part of it. He was mortal. He’d always known it. He was looking forward to the life I’d sketched for him. To the love he’d feel for me. To the lives he’d save. To the death I’d promised. He was still scared... but he wasn’t going to second guess his life. He was looking forward to it.

I lay back on the pillows, feeling rested (rested! It had been years since I’d felt rested) and content, and sad, but full of awe at Ianto’s choice. I gazed at the sunlight painted on the wall through the leaves of the trees. The sun was setting. It had been over twenty-four hours since Buffy had handed me to Ianto. That meant Angel had started his damn fool war, and any minute now Buffy, Spike, the slayers, and all of Angel’s team would be heading out to fight Wolfram and Hart...

Damn. That was gonna be one hell of a fight. Ugly, probably. I’d called Ilona the night before while I was out with Ianto and told her to take an unscheduled vacation. She’d gone off to visit her mother – my ex-wife and I were cordial, but it always startled me how often my lovers went off me as they started to age, and I didn’t. I’d had two who had stuck with me through to their old age, but one of them wasn’t even that old when she’d died (in her sixties) and the other... well, he’d been an odd one, to start with, and I’d started out looking younger than him. Otherwise, we’d have some lovely years together, and then something – my work, my personality, sometimes overtly the fact that I made people feel old – something would break us up. Ilona’s mother and I had stayed together seven years before it just stopped working. It had been nice while it lasted.

It was always nice while it lasted.

Buffy and I had been nice. Five and a half months of nice. Ianto... I closed my eyes. He’d died too damn young. They all died too damn young.

Buffy was too damn young.

I was up and dressing before I’d even decided anything. If I’d thought about it, I’d have told myself it wasn’t anything I had to do, and I was sick to the teeth of the hard choices, it wasn’t my war; not my apocalypse, not my fight, not my problem.

And I was checking my gun and making sure I had weevil repellent and I slipped Ianto’s notebook into my pocket before I headed out of my rented casa and back to San Nicola in Carcere. Because really, if Ianto could dive head first into the unknown, choose death over life if it meant love over fear... what the fuck was I doing sitting on my ass? There were people out there I cared about, people who deserved a chance, and they were about to dive head first into danger. One extra gun at their back wasn’t too much to ask. What did I have to lose?

Lots. Spike and Buffy. Angel. Lorne. Ripper and Xander and that witch I’d never really met who wisely wasn’t sure she trusted me. Kids, all of them. People I loved. If I didn’t jump into the fray, if I just left them to die in my place... hell. It would be Stephen all over again.

I slid more guns, several reloads, and a few pieces of potentially useful alien tech onto my person
before I filed Ianto’s notebook away. (Well... okay. Put it under the pillow of my camp bed. Because that was where Ianto belonged. In my bed.)

And then I pressed the button on my wrist strap and shunted myself half-way across the planet.

The wrist strap was slightly psychic, which was what enabled me to show up anywhere I could think of. Which meant if I let my mind wander, or I wasn’t particularly clear on where I was going, I could end up in some pretty strange places.

In this instance, not being quite clear meant that I had some vague image in my head of LA, Angelus, Wolfram and Hart, a battle, and the future, and the practical upshot of all those thoughts culminated in the wrist strap dropping me right smack in front of the one person who personified all of that for me.

Lorne screamed like a little girl as I appeared in front of him out of thin air, his screech reaching heights that made the dogs bark in the apartments around us.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Lorne! It’s okay, calm down!” I couldn’t calm him properly because I was still recovering from the journey. I coughed and cringed as the teleport function made my body fizz.

Lorne looked anything but calm. “Damn you, Jack!” he said. “What the hell are you doing here?” Then he blinked. “No, seriously, what the hell?” He looked me up and down. “Were you shunted through some kind of... portal or something? I thought you were just an open minded world-traveler who had a taste for green.”

Lorne only remembered what he had learned of me without the songs. He didn’t know I was immortal, Angel’s associate, or how I knew Spike or Buffy. I’d kept all conversation away from that once he’d shaken himself out of his retcon and we enjoyed the rest of our night. I hadn’t actually had a chance to reconnect with him while I was in LA before, which was a shame. I was really glad to see him. But he didn’t know half of who I was just now.

“I’m one of Buffy’s friends. Angel’s friends,” I said. “I heard you were having an apocalypse.”

Lorne scoffed. “Right. Then what the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to join the fight.”

Lorne looked disgusted. “Don’t.” He sounded as if the world had just turned from cotton candy to lead in his stomach. “Just don’t. Angel’s insane.” He sighed and shook his head. “It’s not worth your life. Just... get out of LA, Jack. Get out, and don’t look back. That’s what I’m doing.”

“I’ll be fine, Lorne.”

“No,” Lorne snapped. “You won’t. No one human is going to survive that fight. Wesley... Gunn... I already know.” He looked down. “Lindsey...” He retched softly. “I’m getting out. I’m getting you out too, Jack, you’re not a demon. You’re not a god or a slayer or a vampire, you’re good with a gun and you like to hear a good song. Let’s get out of here.”

The retcon had worked wonders on him. He didn’t remember me singing that night, or anything he had learned from it. All he remembered was that we’d had a great evening, I’d listened to him sing, and rubbed his green shoulders, and I’d fondled his horns, and he knew I could dance, and... nothing else. None of the past, none of the future, none of the destiny and the lives at stake. He only knew the surface.
“I’m gonna stay, Lorne,” I said. “They need me.”

“No!” Lorne said. “I heard it! I heard it in Spike’s poem, in Angel’s shouting, no one who isn’t more than human is going to survive that! Don’t you get it? He’s off his rocker. And you don’t deserve to die for that, it’s just time to go, time to—” He retched again.

“Lorne, what’s the matter, man?”

He looked grave. “I just killed Lindsey,” he said, sounding more miserable than anything else. “Angel told me to. Ugh, I hate killing, I used to have to slaughter the cows for my father, in Pylea. It was just like this. Slaughtering the bloody cows. Ugh.”

From what I knew of Pylea, cows meant human slaves. Lorne was probably the gentlest soul I’d ever met. That was what his childhood had been? “Oh, god, Lorne.” This time when he sagged I caught him, and put my arms around him, and held him while he composed himself. “It’s done now. You didn’t have to listen to Angel.”

“I owed Angel one more,” Lorne said, a sentiment I knew Angel tended to inspire in people. “Besides, it was Lindsey. He wasn’t so innocent as he pretended. I... I’ve heard him sing. Something about killing Spike, or... or letting him die or something, I don’t know. It gave me a headache. Just like Spike always gave me a headache.”

“It’s the retcon,” I said.

“The what?”

He didn’t remember. What the fuck, there was no real reason to hide it anymore. “At first I was afraid. I was petrified,” I sang in a low voice. We both loved Gloria Gaynor. “Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side...”

Lorne stared at me as his own powers overcame the retcon, opening up what he needed to know about me, my past, my future, our past, what he’d learned about my mission regarding Spike, all of it came back to him. He winced a few times, and then the headache or whatever cleared.

“And so you’re back. From outer space. I just walked in to find you here with that sad look upon your face...”

“You rascal.” Lorne broke into my song, sounding legitimately angry. He sagged. “Damn. I was hoping you’d leave with me.”

I frowned at him. “You’re really leaving?”

“I’m no warrior,” he muttered. “I left Pylea to get away from that crap, the killing and the blood and the mayhem. Angel may want to leap into the slaughter, once more unto the breach and all, but Kenneth Branagh isn’t in this movie, sugar. I was just looking for some kind of friendly rom-com. I’m done with the epic FX battles, and the gritty noir drama, I’m just done.”

There was a dark and unfriendly noise coming from somewhere over the buildings. Lorne looked behind him. “Damn. I’d been hoping to get out before this all went down. It took Lindsey longer to clean up his demons, and me to... end....” He looked sick again. “I gotta go.” He hunched his brown trench coat around his shoulders and started off quickly down the street.

God, I couldn’t just leave him. “You got anywhere to go?”

“I was going to take my car. I have some savings, but the demonic aura just cut out the engine a
couple blocks back.” He gestured behind him with his chin. “I don’t have time to dilly-dally, Mister Never-Ending, I have my own story to try and tell...” He looked behind him. “If I can get out in time.”

Another demonic screech echoed over the buildings. It was close enough to a song that I knew Lorne heard something terrible in it. He gulped, and took off at a run. “If you wanted to join a battle, sweet cakes,” he said over his shoulder, “now’s your chance!”

I looked toward the battle, looked toward Lorne, and made a decision I knew I’d never regret. “Lorne, wait a sec!” I darted after him and grabbed him by the arms. “Wait, just hang on to me.”

“What?”

“Hang on to me!”

He looked at me through his red eyes for a moment, questioning, and then I felt his hand tighten on my arm. He trusted me. I touched the wrist strap and we found ourselves no longer in a dark and baleful LA night, but in a sunny Italian courtyard. My casa, in Rome.

We grunted and groaned our recovery, and Lorne gasped. “What the hell was that?”

“Travel without a capsule,” I said. “We suffer effects of the teleport for a moment. Just shake it off.”

Lorne followed my lead, shaking the cold and the ache and the stiffness from his body.

“Here,” I said a minute later, and I dug out my keycard. “The casa is paid up for the year. I’ll come back when I can.”

Lorne stared at me. “Jack... you....” He looked up. It was a nice place I’d rented. “Here?” He looked around at my courtyard. “Where is here?”

“Rome,” I said. “You’ll be safe here.”

“Rome...” Lorne mused. “Hm. I was thinking Paris, maybe, but... hm. I could set up in Rome. Caritas was Latin you know, for peace. I could get a few gigs going. You know, this would be a fine place for a garden party, Jack.”

I nearly laughed. That was it. That was the answer. Someone who wasn’t a hero type. Someone who got them, understood the impulse, understood the bloodlust and the horror but didn’t judge about it. Someone who knew what we were... but wasn’t one of us.

I suddenly found myself feeling like I was Lorne, because I suddenly had a vision of the future, as if he’d sung it for me. I didn’t know if it was true, but I wanted it to be. Not forever, but a few years, just some time, a brief, mortal affair. I’d go off heroing and come back to find Lorne schmoozing with some Italian singer in this very courtyard. And he’d pour me a drink and we’d hang out in the hot tub, and he’d tell me about his own hero-work – how many people he’d kept from going crazy that day, with good times and music. All I needed to feel alive was a little circle of peace.

Maybe... maybe he could sing me to sleep.

Without preamble I kissed him goodbye, softly, seriously. “You just stay safe, Lorne,” I said. “Promise me. I’ll come back when this is over.”
He gazed at me. “You sure about that?”

I smiled at him, the full Jack, white teeth, dimples and all. (Yes. I do know what I can do.) “So long as I know how to love, I know I’ll stay alive,” I crooned at him softly.

His face softened. “Yeah, you’ll be okay,” he whispered.

“I will survive,” I said, touching my wrist strap again. “Hey, hey.”

This time I made it closer to the battle. I retched and grunted and groaned out the discomfort of the teleport. By the time I shook it off, I’d had time to assess my surroundings.

I stood on a rooftop, looking down on a tableau that filled me with something... elation? What the hell was I doing feeling joy at the thought of an apocalypse? But there was Spike, with Buffy by his side, him vamped out and whirling, a dervish in black leather, and Buffy carving a swath of death around her with a red axe that seemed to cut through demons like they were soft butter. They fought really well together, their strength a perfect circle, their styles a seamless dance. There was Angel, a sword in his hand, battling a freaking dragon for god’s sake (such a drama queen!) A blue streaked creature stood guard over the fallen body of a dark-skinned man – probably one of Angel’s team, and probably very dead, if Lorne’s prediction was true – shooting blue lightning bolts and breaking limbs. That was probably the god-creature that possessed what was left of the Fred I’d heard so much about, Spike’s friend. Over on the roof opposite me I saw a red-haired woman – the witch Willow? – surrounded by slayers on guard, chanting something – casting a spell maybe? I did not see Ripper, or Xander, or Dawn or Andrew, and I was glad of it. I hoped Buffy had been smart enough to leave them out of it.

No one fully human would survive this. I figured that didn’t include the witch – she looked to be out of the fray, anyway, whatever her spell was. Probably trying to close that opening rift behind the demons that my wrist-strap was beeping about. The one Wolfram and Hart had probably opened, the one all the demons were pouring out of.

An entire army of slayers was closing on the battle, and it did not look hopeless from where I was standing. Spike, Buffy, Angel, the witch, the slayers. Even Lorne had done his small part before he stepped away. They were all mortal. Every single one of them could die. And to take out the evil doer, to try and make the world better, they’d come to fight, and possibly face that death. They’d chosen to embrace life, and the death that attended it.

Like Ianto.

No one knew it, but before I met Buffy, and I had been the walking dead. I’d been alive, but I hadn’t been living. But Buffy, her sorrow, her anger, her grief, these all been part of life. Her life, her will, her strength. Her fierce love. They’d revitalized me. Like the Doctor, wandering the universe, but needed his companions. The universe was empty without someone to show it to. I eternal, I was never dying, but I wasn’t alive without someone to love – in whatever way you wanted to define it. We’d all resurrected Spike (and damn hard work it was, too.) But none of them would ever realize, it was Buffy who had resurrected me.

Well. Time to die once again for the girl. I owed her.

I looked down. No fire escape, and recovery time for my teleportation was longer than it would be to recover from a fast death. I shrugged. That was one quick way to join in. When I came back to life, I’d be within shouting distance of Spike, if not blue-thunder down there, close enough to figure out where I was needed in the battle. I took one final deep breath before I jumped, jumped into battle, into danger, into death... and into life.
Chapter End Notes

Song, if you hadn't guessed, is I Will Survive, by Gloria Gaynor.

Thank you so much to everyone who stuck with this wandering epic for all these months. I hadn't expected this story to get quite as huge and encompassing as it did. This story I intentionally left open ended, so that suggestions and influences from those around me could help to form it, and some truly beautiful and startling chapters were the result. Misperceptions, Flavors of Death, Different Kinds of Pain, The Box and many other chapters draw heavily from others' input and I haven't a prayer of remembering them all, though I will throw nods to Onar, bewildered, myrabeth, ZabJade, Gaia-VoidMother and the inestimable Kathleen. Thanks so much for taking chances on a crossover, and a semi-unSpuffy one at that. It's been a real trip!

Sigyn.

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