

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

A Buffy Fanfiction by AmandaK

"Dawn? Is that you?"

On the floor below her the front door slammed shut. Instead of a reply Buffy heard heavy footfalls stomping up the stairs. The door to Dawn's room opened with a crack that made her wince, there was the muffled thud of a bookbag hurled against the cabinet, and another bang when the door shut. She winced. "Must be a bad hair day," she muttered below her breath.

After adding the final touches to her slayer-costume --tanktop, jeans, hair pulled back in a ponytail-- Buffy turned off the light in the bathroom, padded over to Dawn's room and knocked.

"Dawnie? Something wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," her sister yelled through the closed door.

Buffy hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. Dawn sounded anything but fine; matter of fact, she sounded pretty upset. But Buffy knew that if she tried to push for the truth now, Dawn would clam up, and undoubtedly direct her anger at her sister. Better wait until she cooled down a bit, Buffy decided.

"Okay," she called back. "I'm gonna go patrolling now, all right? Spike should be ar-- is here," she amended. The clump-clump of heavy boots approached the front porch. "And I ordered pizza; it's in the kitchen."

She waited a few seconds, then heard Dawn reply.

"Fine. Bye."

Blinking her eyes at the closed door, Buffy turned and walked down the stairs. Had she been this much trouble when she was Dawn's age? It was hard to imagine, but, she reminded herself, her Mom had told plenty of stories of Buffy's pre-slayer antics, and she decided Dawn was merely being a teenager.

"Ello Slayer," Spike drawled a greeting when she reached the final step. "Where's the Nibblet?"

"Her majesty is upstairs."

Buffy's tone changed when she spoke her next words. "She's pretty wigged about something. She's not talking to me, though."

Spike gave her a thoughtful nod. "Well, don't worry your pretty head about the Lil'Bit. She's quite safe with me. Off you go."

"Thanks." Biting down on the final instructions and admonitions that she delivered every night, Buffy turned and hopped from the front porch.

She jogged along the darkened Sunnydale streets. First stop would be the Magic Shop to pick up Willow and Xander. The original Scoobies were going to accompany her patrol tonight, while Tara had a late night class, and Anya calculated the week's earnings.

Spike waited until he no longer could discern Buffy's heels clacking on the pavement, then climbed the stairs. Perhaps he could make things better with the Nibklet. For some reason far beyond his understanding --but it made him feel strangely warm inside-- Dawn often talked to him about the things that bothered her. It wouldn't be the first time a couple of well-considered words in the Slayer's ear made life easier for Dawn.

"Platelet?" He rapped his fingers against the door, then pushed it open a bit so he could look into the room. It was dark, illuminated only by the light of the stars coming in through the window. It didn't matter to Spike: with his vampiric eyesight, it was easy to make out Dawn's form rolled up into a ball on the bed.

He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms before his chest. "Want ta talk 'bout it?" he asked, keeping his tone deliberately light.

"No."

The body on the bed shifted and Dawn's pale face came into view. Something glistened on her cheeks and Spike had to bite down a growl. What would bring her to the point of tears? Or more importantly, who? If he found out who the git was he would -- do nothing, he thought glumly. With the chip, he was practically useless against humans.

"Right then," he said, making sure that none of his inner thoughts showed on his face. "Want to come down and keep a poor vamp comp'ny? I bloody well am not going to stay

up here in your girlish room full of fluffy things." He reached out and grabbed a pink ribbon from the chest beside the door, wrinkled his nose as if he had no clue what it was, and let it go so it fluttered to the floor.

Spike's little charade had the desired result, and a soft sound, something between a giggle and a sob, came from Dawn.

"Buffy mentioned pizza?"

"Bloody damn right!" Spike said. "First one down gets the biggest slice."

Dawn jumped from the bed and they struggled for the lead position at the top of the stairs.

Spike suppressed his competitive demonic nature long enough to let Dawn win the race to the kitchen. A few minutes later they sat munching the cooling pizza slices, Dawn holding the biggest one as promised.

"Spike?" she said around a mouthful of pizza, cheese, tomato and sauce.

"Yes, Pet?"

"Do you think I'm fat?"

Spike blinked, certain he had misunderstood the question.

"Uh... what?"

Dawn dropped the half-eaten slice back in the box and hopped from the kitchen stool. She pulled her shirt tight around her frame, sucked in her stomach and glanced down along her body. "Do you think I'm fat? And ugly?"

"What's with the bloody questions, Pet?" Spike asked. He swallowed down the last bite of his pizza and took a gulp from the mug of blood. Curious to know what brought this nonsense on, he realized it was a serious subject for Dawn as soon as he caught sight of the fresh glimmer in her eyes.

"They said that... I'm ugly, and that my ass is too fat, and that I'm too tall and--" Tears

began to fall and Dawn's voice broke.

"Who said that?" Spike cut in with an angry snarl. His eyes flashed yellow.

Dawn hiccuped, mingling wry laughter with sobs. "Celia, and Mindy and Lisa. You know, the cool girls."

"Ooh," Spike drawled. His days with Harmony turned out to be good for something, a part of his mind whispered, while the rest of him continued to address Dawn. "We're the cóóóól girls. And we always tell the truth." He pitched his voice high to mimic a shallow-minded female teenager.

Telling Spike hurt. The memory of the cruel words hurt. And before Dawn realized what was happening, Spike had grabbed her by the shoulders and propelled her into the hallway, pushing her ahead of him.

"Spike? What--" she squeaked, more startled than frightened.

He marched her in front of the mirror and turned her to face it.

"What do you see?" His voice was low in her ear.

"Me," she said. "And... not-you." For a long moment the eerie sensation of sensing Spike right behind her distracted Dawn; she felt his hands on her shoulders and heard his voice in her ear, while the mirror showed absolutely nothing but her own reflection.

"Well, yeh," Spike admitted. He gave her arms a little shake. "That too. But you're missing the point, luv. Look at yourself. You're bloody beautiful. You're perfect. Unlike Big Sis who could do with a few more pounds on her. Don't let anybody, especially the soddin' 'cool' bints tell you otherwise!"

Dawn took another, long look at herself in the mirror. It wasn't easy to dismiss the painful accusations of the popular girls of Sunnydale High, but Spike's angry compliments made her feel a bit better about herself. He always managed to do that.

She turned away from the mirror and faced him. He stood glowering at her, apparently not sure if she understood him. Dawn gave him a soft smile and he relaxed a bit.

"Spike?" she asked again.

He raised a scarred eyebrow.

"Do you think Buffy would let me take part in the Miss Sunnydale High beauty contest?"

"No." Buffy folded her arms across her chest and sculpted her face in what she hoped was her 'determined parent'-expression.

"Why not?" Dawn demanded, a hint of a whine in her voice. "You did, when you were in ninth grade!"

"Dawnie's got a point," Willow quipped. "And – and you still have to tell us what happened in the swimsuit competition."

Buffy cringed at the double assault and she mentally cursed Billy Ford for mentioning those days at Hemry High. It wasn't fair! She was the slayer, dammit, and her word should be taken as such.

"Afraid I'll do better than you did?" Dawn continued. "Spike says I'm beautiful--"

Buffy's head whipped around at the mention of the vampire's name and she cast him such an angry look that Dawn's voice trailed off, the rest of her sentence left unsaid.

Buffy forced herself to relax and softened her features before she turned back to her sister. The Hemry High pageant wasn't her fondest memory of the blissful pre-slayer days.

"Dawn, you are beautiful," she agreed. "And you don't have to prove that to anyone, least of all an undead vampire."

"All vampires are undead," Willow murmured. "It's their nature."

She was rewarded with one of the slayer's glares that were usually reserved for Spike, but Buffy didn't speak. A jerk of her head told Spike to follow her outside instead. With a shrug at the others he trailed after her onto the dark porch. There she spun around and staked him with her eyes.

"When I asked you to look after Dawn, I didn't mean you could put crazy notions in--"

"I didn't," Spike cut in. "She came up with it all by her snack-sized self. And it bloody kills me, but this once I agree with you. She doesn't have to prove anything to anyone." He paused, searching for his lighter in the pockets of his duster. "Buffy, she feels like the ugly duckling from that bloody fairytale. Please, give her a chance to discover she's really a swan."

Buffy cocked her head and contemplated him for a few long seconds. Spike pretended to ignore her and lit his cigarette. Buffy took a deep breath and blew a few strands of wayward hair from her face. She turned on her heels and stalked back into the kitchen.

"Okay," she announced. "Where's the form I need to sign?"

A grin broke on Dawn's face, making her eyes sparkle. "Cool!" Then the grin faded. "Oh, I forgot, I'm gonna need to go to the mall, like, now. I mean, we have to wear an evening gown and I need a new swimsuit."

Buffy stared at Dawn. Her sister's happy expression faltered. They both knew they really didn't have the money to spend on dresses or swimsuits.

A thought struck, and Buffy's mouth quirked. She turned to Willow.

"Will? Think you and Tara and Xander can handle patrol for this weekend? I'll even ask Spike to help."

Willow shrugged. "Sure. No biggie. But why?"

The tiny smile that played around Buffy's lips blossomed into a full white-teethed grin. "I think it's time that Dawn and I pay Dad a visit. Lay a little parental guilt on him."

Willow's eyes began to gleam mischievously. "Oh! That's good. That's very good. I mean, not the laying on guilt but... And oh, who is the best fashion consultant in Los Angeles?"

As one voice the two friends cried, "Cordelia!"

"Wow, Dawnie!" Buffy breathed.

They were in a small boutique on Rodeo Drive that Cordelia picked out. She had also chosen a dress from the many garments in the store and was helping Dawn try it on.

"What do you think?" Dawn asked, bobbing shyly on the tips of her toes.

"It's... it's..." Buffy's mouth opened and closed but no other sounds came out. The formal gown was a simple, black satin column that enveloped her sister's body from just below her collarbone all the way to her ankles. Its simplicity accentuated Dawn's natural beauty, and took nothing away from its wearer.

"Wow," Buffy said again.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" Cordelia chimed in, a self-satisfied look on her face. "A real Oscar de la Renta, too. It looks perfect on Dawn, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does." Buffy was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that her baby sister had somehow changed from a lanky teenager into this stunning creature, and she hadn't even noticed it happen.

Dawn gave a shy smile at the women's praise. "Can we take this?"

Buffy's brow furrowed. She reached for the small price tag dangling near Dawn's wrist and turned it over. She visibly blanched at the number. "Uhm... it's... it's..."

"Expensive, of course," Cordelia finished. "All truly worthy clothes are. But Buffy, look at her! She's gonna be the jury's favorite, without a doubt. Boy, am I glad I don't have to compete in the Sunnydale High pageant this year!"

Buffy looked from Cordelia to Dawn's hopeful eyes and shrugged. Her father's Gold card was burning a hole in her purse and he had told her to buy whatever they liked. "We'll take it," she told the sales woman, who had kept a respectful distance while Dawn showed the dress.

The woman smiled and nodded. "A very good choice. I'd advice some black sling sandals with this dress. Heels not too high. The shoe store a little further down the road, The Salon, will be to your liking, I think."

Cordelia added her agreement. "Yes. Shoes next." She clapped her hands. "Oh, this is fun. I'm so glad you asked me to help."

"You're welcome," Buffy murmured, her mind still reeling with the amount of money they were spending. And they had just started. Dawn would need to buy shoes to go

along with the dress, as well as a swimsuit. She had a growing suspicion the limit on Hank Summers' credit card might well be exhausted by the time they were finished.

Late Sunday evening the two sisters tumbled from the L.A.-bus, their arms full of shopping bags printed with fancy logos.

"Hi Xander!" Dawn cried when she spotted their friend leaning against his car.

He gave her a quick wave and walked over to the bus. The driver was unloading the girls' luggage. Xander idly decided he would never understand why women needed so much stuff when they were only gone for two nights. But Anya was the same, always packing two suitcases to his one overnight bag whenever they enjoyed a weekend getaway.

"Hey, Buffy, Dawn," he greeted them.

"Hi. Uhm," Buffy said, "can you get our bags? I seem to have my arms full."

Xander grinned. "I see our Cordy took good care of you. Don't worry, I got it." He lugged their bags to the car where they stuffed everything in the booth.

"You won't believe how pretty my dress is," Dawn gushed. "And the swimsuit is soo sexy!"

Xander glanced sideways to catch her eye. Buffy looked pained. She gave a barely perceptible shrug and he understood; with Cordelia's support her younger sibling had managed to overrule her. He couldn't help grin at her. Cordelia could be an immovable force, especially when it came to fashion.

"Maybe you could show us after I get you home," he suggested. "The gang should all be there by then."

"Oh, Buffy, can I?" Dawn asked. "I know it's a school night and all, but I really want to see what everyone thinks!"

Buffy hesitated. Xander regretted suggesting Dawn show off her purchases. She would have to get up early in the morning to go to school and the last thing Xander wanted was come between the sisters. It was hard enough for Buffy to play parent as it was.

"Okay," Buffy relented. "If you make it quick. And after that, bed, with no complaints."

Xander glanced in the rear view mirror to see Dawn roll her eyes in Buffy's direction before she agreed.

"Is Spike going to be there too?"

It was Xander's turn to look pained. "Yeah, I guess so," he admitted. "Spike patrolled with Willow and Tara tonight. That's why the Xandman got the job of picking you guys up." He smirked. "Can't say Deadboy junior liked the arrangement much."

It didn't take them long to reach Revello Drive. As Xander turned into the driveway, the front door opened and Spike stepped out, unlit cigarette lodged between his lips.

"Hey, Spike!" Dawn yelled, jumping out of the car before it had come to a full stop.

"'Ello Nibbles," Spike replied. "Slayer." He reached in his pocket for his lighter and flicked the tiny wheel so a flame lit up his face. After taking a deep drag, he blew out the smoke. "How was Poof City?"

Dawn giggled. "Great! Hey! Where are you going? You're not going home, are you? You can't go yet!"

"Woah," Spike held up his hands as if to defend himself against the cascade of words. "Why shouldn't I go? Patrol's done for today. Slayer doesn't like me hangin' around here all night. And it's way past bedtime for you, Lil'Bit."

Dawn smacked his arm. "I'm not a child, Spike. And you can't leave because I'm going to show everyone the things we bought for the pageant. The dress is so pretty." She giggled again and lowered her voice. "Dad nearly had a heart attack when he saw the price tag."

"Did he now? All right, then." Spike followed Dawn and Buffy back into the house, leaving Xander to deal with the bags.

While Buffy greeted Tara and Willow, and was updated on the latest body count on the vampire slaying front --they had dusted three vamps in the Sunset View cemetery last night, and two in Sunnydale Memorial Park tonight-- Dawn bounded up the stairs with her purchases. Spike withdrew into the shadows, still feeling somewhat out of place

among the friendly camaraderie of the Scoobies. He could never quite figure out when he was welcome and when he was not.

"Are you guys ready?" Dawn called from upstairs.

Buffy glanced around. Everyone nodded. "Yes, we are."

"Swimsuit first!" Dawn announced while hopping down the last steps.

Spike's eyeballs nearly tumbled from their sockets. He drew in a rather unnecessary but much needed breath and tried to calm his unbeating heart. Glancing around, he could see that the effect of Dawn's appearance was not lost on the two witches either. With unveiled admiration they stared at the Slayer's sister. Xander couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the vision that was Dawn. Good thing Anya wasn't here, Spike thought.

"Uh uh," he said, after several failed attempts to find his voice. If even Buffy's friends goggled at the slayer's baby sister like this... "No way. You are not wearing that in public. That's not a swimsuit, that's a... a..." He was at a loss for words again.

The costume was made of a shiny, navy blue material that clung to Dawn's skin. Red piping accentuated the edges. It was cut high, with the back left bare.

"Don't you like it?" Dawn asked. Her voice was suddenly small and uncertain.

"Dawnie, it is beautiful," Tara reassured her. "You look lovely. You'll have those judges wrapped around your little finger without even having to say a word in the interview."

"My point exactly," Spike muttered.

Willow and Tara led Dawn back upstairs, assuring her time and again that the suit was perfect and that the other contestants wouldn't stand a chance against her. The girl might look like a full-grown woman; deep down she was still a self-conscious teenager.

Buffy whirled around, eyes flashing. Spike cringed. Uh oh. Here it comes, he thought, and wondered what had caused her anger this time. Contrary to expectation, however, her hands stayed at her side. The assault was verbal.

"Great job, Spike," she hissed. "First you put her up to this pageant thing, and now you shoot her down. Getting your thrills torturing my little sister now?"

He gaped at her, shocked. "No!" he cried. "Never! And I didn't put her up to this thing." He paused, taking a moment to get control of the anger that welled up inside at her

unfair accusations. "Slayer, you can't seriously consider letting her wear that... thing... in public. In a bloody high school, no less, with an audience full of bleedin' hormone-crazed little teenaged boys! You're out of your mind." Absently he wondered about the sudden reappearance of his Victorian morals, ingrained in him since birth and suppressed during a hundred-plus years as a soulless demon.

"I hate to say this," Xander murmured, alerting them to the fact that they had an audience, "but Spike's got a point. Buffy--"

A peal of laughter interrupted him. "You're jealous! You're afraid that little Dawnie is growing up and won't have a crush on either of you any longer. Well, face it, boys," she waggled her finger in front of first one face, then the other, "my sister is going to take part in that pageant, and she is going to win. That suit is perfect. And it'll stay in place without the aid of hairspray, which--" She caught herself, snapped her mouth shut and blushed a little.

Spike noticed the blush and recalled that Red had said something about the Slayer and a swimsuit competition. He made a mental note to ask her about it at a more opportune time. It might make for wonderful mock-the-Slayer ammunition.

"Wait until you see her evening gown," Buffy said after a moment, changing the subject.

* * *

The rest of the week flew by, with Dawn growing more and more nervous by the hour. At last Friday, the day of the pageant, came around. The gang was going to gather in the Magic Shop, wait for Buffy and Spike to finish patrolling and then they would all go to the high school together.

"What time is it?" Dawn jumped from her seat to go to the bathroom for the umpteenth time in the last hour without waiting for a reply.

"Nerves," Willow smiled at Tara, who nodded.

The doorbell clanged and Spike dashed in, duster flapping behind him in his haste.

"Where's Buffy?" Willow asked.

"Home," Spike said. "Slayer needed a shower, she got all slimed up." He grinned. "Nib all ready?"

"She's in the bathr--" Tara started to reply when a piercing scream rendered the air.

Before anyone could react, Spike had raced across the store and threw the bathroom door open. He crouched into a fighting stance, then glanced around in confusion.

"Pet?" he said. "What's wrong?"

Willow cautiously made her way to the bathroom and peered over Spike's shoulder. Dawn was in front of the mirror, her eyes wide with horror and tears glimmering in them.

She pointed at her reflection. "Look at that. Look. At. That! I'm dead. I'm so dead. When Celia sees it... I might as well go bury myself right now."

Willow felt as confused as Spike looked. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, nothing that might have sent Dawn into such a state of despair.

"Dawnie? What's wrong?" she echoed Spike's question.

"Zit!" Dawn sobbed and hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, honey..." Willow pushed Spike aside and wrapped her arms around Dawn. She caught the vampire's gaze, thoroughly confused and worried, and with a slight nod of her head she told him she would take care of the situation.

With gentle pressure she eased Dawn out of the bathroom, and back into the store. Spike trailed after them. Tara ran to get a glass of water while Willow guided Dawn to sit at the table.

"Let me see," she asked gently.

Dawn shook her head.

"Please?"

Reluctantly, Dawn removed her hands.

Willow squinted, peering close at Dawn's face. She had to try really hard to detect a tiny spot of reddened skin on the teenager's chin.

She suppressed a smile as she straightened.

"See?" Dawn gulped and took a sip of the water that Tara had handed her. "It's humongous."

"Will somebody tell me what the bloody hell is wrong?" Spike growled. "So I can slay the soddin' pillocks?"

Willow bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Sorry, Spike," she said. "Slaying isn't going to help any. Dawn discovered the beginnings of a pimple."

"What?!" Spike exploded. His expression told Willow he thought he heard wrong.

"It is not 'beginning'!" Dawn wailed at the same moment. "It's big. It's horrible. It's a monster zit!"

"Well," Anya divulged as she approached, "I remember when I gave this man a serious case of the hives. He beat his wife all the time and she asked me to..." Her voice trailed off when several pairs of eyes glowered at her. "I'm just saying," she muttered, "I can probably still remember the spell."

"Could you?" Dawn asked, hopeful.

"Sure."

Willow exchanged a worried look with Tara.

"Uhm, Dawnie?" Tara said in that soft voice of hers. "I-I don't think that's a good idea. Using magic for self-interest could have a serious backlash."

"There's always consequences," chimed in Spike.

"Like what?" Dawn demanded. "What could be worse than this," she jabbed an angry finger at her chin, "tonight?"

Tara glanced up at Willow. A little help here, please, her look said.

"You might be covered in pimples for weeks, months even," Willow said. "That wouldn't be of the good."

"Or you could get boils," Anya quipped happily, "or sores. Or—"

"All right!" Dawn snapped. "I get the picture. Geez. Gross much?"

"Come on," Tara said, taking Dawn's hand. "Let's go to my room. I'm sure I can fix this with a little make up. Trust me, no one is going to see anything once I'm done with you."

"Oh yes," Willow beamed. "Tara's the best."

With Tara's help, another disaster of apocalyptic proportions was diverted and thirty minutes later the Scoobies were hovering around Dawn backstage at the school auditorium.

"Ladies, gentlemen, contestants." The stage manager clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "Five minutes to the start of the show. Please, take your seats. Only parents and contestants are allowed backstage at this time."

A flurry of activity broke out at his words. Girls were running back and forth among friends and family wishing them good luck; mothers were fretting about dresses and hair and shoes, making last-minute adjustments.

"We have to go," Willow told Dawn reluctantly.

"Oh no, you can't!" the teenager cried. "Buffy's not here yet. Where is she? She was going to bring my dress!"

"I'll go find her," Spike offered. Anything to escape this madhouse. He refused to stop and think about where he was and what he was doing. Spike, former Big Bad, was quivering with nerves over a teenage beauty pageant.

"No need," gasped the slayer while she skittered to a halt beside him. Dangling from her fingers was a blue nylon garment bag. Green ichor covered her face and clothes. "Sorry I'm late. Ran into a seven-foot beastie on my way here."

"Geez," Dawn's nose curled up, "could you look any grosser?" Her eyes widened with sudden shock. "Oh God! Buffy, you didn't get any of that stuff on my dress, did you? Because if you did, I swear--"

Buffy held up her hand to silence her sister. "Don't worry, I didn't."

"Excuse me," said the emcee, breaking in to their circle. "I'm gonna have to ask you all to go and join the audience. Only immediate family is allowed to help the contestants." He

cast Buffy a curious glance and a distasteful expression flitted across his face when he took in her appearance.

Spike rumbled angrily deep in his chest, until the man scurried off to remind others that they had to leave the backstage area.

"Dawnie, good luck." Tara and Willow hugged Dawn before they made their way past the curtain and into the auditorium.

"You sure you don't want me to do that spell?" Anya asked.

"Yeah, thanks," Dawn said.

"We'll be right outside, rooting for you." Xander gave a reluctant Anya a tug to follow him. "And no matter what, you're the prettiest girl of them all. Well, beside Anya, of course," he added when his girlfriend glared at him. "But she's not taking part in this, so--"

The curtain closed behind the pair, while Xander's voice tried to convince Anya she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Spike scuffed his toe at the floor. "Right, then, Nibblet, you show them what you're bloody made of."

"Green energy?" Dawn squeaked, eyes wide.

Spike chuckled. "You gotta admit, you're unique. Knock 'm dead, kitten." He squeezed her shoulders and followed the others.

"Let's get you ready." Buffy turned to Dawn with a smile when the curtain fell close once again.

Outside, the master of ceremonies greeted the audience and began explaining the rules of the pageant to the jury.

"Yes," Dawn gulped and followed Buffy to get dressed.

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