

THAT THIRD NOTCH

A Buffy Fanfiction by AmandaK

Prologue

The Slayer needed a lesson in respect. The entire flight back to England, Nigel kept mulling over this single concept. That Summers girl was impossible. The way she stood up to the Council; how she had had the nerve to set Quentin Travers an ultimatum -- an *ultimatum*, for crying out loud! Nobody gave the head of the Watcher's Council an ultimatum, period.

Then there was the matter of the sword-throwing. The damn thing had nearly sliced his nose off. If he hadn't flinched -- Nigel shuddered at the memory. He doubted the Slayer would even have cared.

She was out of control. It was obvious in the way she worked. With her puny human friends helping her. Not to mention the damn vampire that was aiding her, even!

It was an outrage. How dare she dismiss so casually everything he held sacred? Ignore the ancient ways that had been established centuries ago and followed ever since? No, this was one Slayer the world would be better off without.

He glanced over at his female colleague beside him. She was asleep in her seat, her glasses having slid to the tip of her nose, and she snored lightly. He was very disappointed with her and how she had behaved around the vampire. "I have done my thesis on you," he mimicked in his mind, grimacing. Like she wanted to score points with the creature. Silly cow--

He inhaled sharply as the beginning of an idea sparked deep in his mind. He pulled out his notebook and started outlining the plan, jotting down phrases and ideas and necessities.

Part 1

The small panel at the bottom of the mirrored wall slid aside and a tray with two dome-covered plates was pushed into the cell. Spike hopped from his bunk and strode over to the tray. Hoping against hope that whoever their captors were had finally decided to show mercy, he lifted the silvery dome. He was once more disappointed.

"Hmm," Buffy muttered from her bunk as the aroma of the food started to permeate the air. "Smells good."

Spike scowled in her direction and grumbled something noncommittal. Easy for her to say.

Still, glaring down at the steaming platter, Spike had to agree with Buffy: the food looked and smelled appetizing. Tiny round Parisian potatoes were baked to a golden crisp and accompanied by fresh, green sprouts of broccoli. The slab of meat - tonight it was veal, from the scent - still sizzled from the grill. Yeah, he had no reason to complain about the food they got served in their prison. If he had been human.

With a frustrated scream, he kicked the tray, upturning the two plates so that potatoes and broccoli rolled everywhere across the immaculate floor.

"Hey!" Buffy protested. She grabbed his arm and pulled him back before he could kick the tray again. "That's my food too. I don't care what you do with yours, but I am hungry!"

"You don't think I am?" Spike whirled around, pulling himself free from her grip. His eyes flashed a dark, angry blue. "You still don't bloody get it, do you, Slayer?" he hissed, struggling to keep his demon contained. "How you ever survived this long is beyond me."

Buffy took an involuntary step back in face of the vampire's fury. "Get what?" she asked warily. "I do. Get it, I mean. Glory came back, kidnapped us, locked us in this cell, and is hoping we'll let it slip where the Key is. Which we won't. Right? We just have to hold out until she grows tired of this game and lets us go. What are you complaining about anyway? It's not like we're starvi-- Oh..." Her voice trailed off.

Spike watched as understanding dawned on her face. "Exactly," he spat. "While your arse's growing fat on the blueberry pancakes for breakfast, and the baked potatoes, and the bloody chocolate pudding desserts, I *am* starving here."

"I'm not getting fat," Buffy murmured a token protest although her heart wasn't in it. They stopped bickering several days ago, when they both realized they were stuck

together for who knows how long and had come to an uneasy truce. She tilted her head to study him.

Spike didn't like the way her eyes widened when she took a real good look at him. Although he couldn't see himself in the mirrored wall, he did have a pretty good idea what he looked like. It was six days since he last fed. It couldn't be pretty.

He had not lied to Giles and Buffy when he told them what happened to a vampire who didn't feed. He just hadn't told them the whole truth. The blood lust would drive him slowly insane. Mad enough to make Dru look like the epitome of mental health. Already distorted nightmares plagued his dreams. And Buffy's heartbeat had been growing steadily louder over the past few days. She was the single source of food within reach, and the call of her blood was getting stronger by the minute. Spike knew he would drive a stake through his heart before he hurt Buffy but if this situation lasted much longer, he might never have a choice. And the soddin' chip was not going to stop him. The blood lust would grow so strong that it would overrule the chip's neural pain.

He was torn from his inner musings when Buffy walked past him and began to kick the mirror with all her might. "Hey!" she yelled. "You! Glory! Get your godly butt down here. I wanna talk to you."

Spike quirked an eyebrow. "Slayer, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Getting their attention," Buffy said over her shoulder before striking the mirror with her tennis shoes again. Except for a couple of new scuffmarks where her rubber sole caught the shiny surface, nothing changed. Nobody came to see what the ruckus was about. "When somebody kidnaps a vampire, they should feed him properly."

Spike goggled at her back. "Careful, Summers," he said with an amused smirk. "A bloke might think you actually care."

She turned around and gave him a dirty look. "Don't flatter yourself," she said. "I just don't want you to consider me as a meal. Although Mr. Pointy would be happy to make your acquaintance."

Hurt flashed behind Spike's eyes before he managed to suppress it. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Slayer," he said, trying to sound offhanded. "I'd rather bloody starve before I drink your blood. I tasted Slayer before. It's not all it's made out to be." That was a lie but the cold way she mentioned her trusty stake irked him. Couldn't she at least pretend she cared?

He turned away from her to flop down on his bunk, and folded his hands behind his

head. What he wouldn't give for a fag. Unfortunately, he ran out of cigarettes three days ago. "Do you really think they give a damn?" he asked. "Whoever is behind this, doesn't give a bleedin' fig about the Key." The stark room rekindled unpleasant memories of his stay with the Initiative. "It's not that bitch Glory that got us. You and I, Slayer, are part of an experiment. Could be interesting research too, if you're into that sort of thing: starve the vampire; see how long he lasts. And when I can no longer resist the blood lust, the chip zaps me until my head explodes, or you'll drive a stake through my heart. Either way, it's the end of the Big Bad."

Her sharp intake of breath told him that she hadn't yet considered the theory he presented. He opened one eye and studied her in the mirror. She was standing near the wall, a thoughtful crinkle between her brows.

"You don't think that it's Glory," she repeated.

"No, luv, I don't," he said, closing his eyes again.

"Then who?"

Spike shrugged. "Could be anybody with a thing against vampires. Plenty of those around. Captain Cardboard's mates, or the Watcher's Council."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Buffy demanded. "If you had--" She started pacing. "We've been going about this the wrong way, waiting until they grow tired. While we should have been trying to get out of here."

"We did try that, hon. Besides, I didn't think it'd matter to you. After all, you win too. Just sit back, relax, keep Mr. Pointy ready, and I'll be out of your hair in a couple of days. Or," he said, while shifting back to a sitting position and turning to face her, "you could stake me right here and now and get it over with. That's probably what they're waiting for. You would be home with the Nibblem tonight." He sat motionless, watching Buffy, unsure what he wanted her reaction to be. If she did as he suggested, she would be safe. If she didn't... What would that tell him?

Shock washed over Buffy's face. "I couldn't do that," she breathed.

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Why not?" he asked, baiting her further. "You've told me you'd stake me so often, I lost count after the three hundred and forty-first time. Bollocks, Slayer, don't tell me that was all talk! It's not that hard. All it takes is a little stab in the right place and 'poof!', Spike's nothing but a soddin' big pile of dust."

Buffy shook her head. "I know. I don't want--" She flustered. "I need you. To keep Da--to

fight Glory," she amended.

"Right," Spike muttered. "And that's bloody all." He flung an arm over his face, hoping Buffy would take the hint and shut up. It always came down to the same thing. She needed him to do things for her, to baby-sit her mother and sister, to fight the hellgod. Bloody crumbs, was all it was.

Damn, Buffy thought while she watched Spike on his bunk. How could she have been so blind? Since their capture, Spike had grown thinner and thinner, his cheekbones even more prominent than usual. His shirt, once tight around his chest, hung loose now. And she had felt the bones beneath his skin when she grabbed his arm.

She had been so convinced that their kidnapping was Glory's doing that she never stopped to consider other possibilities. Since Spike mentioned it, she had to admit that their cell did resemble a lab room. Stark white walls, white tiles on the floor, and Buffy had no illusions about the mirrored wall. It had to be a one way window; somebody could be watching right this minute and they'd never know. But who? And why? She didn't think the government had set up shop in Sunnydale again. And the Watcher's Council? They were an annoying pain in her behind but she didn't think they'd risk their Slayer's life for this sort of test. After all, every day she spent in this prison cell, was a day that the hellmouth went unguarded. No, it wasn't the Council.

Almost a week had passed since that fateful patrol. Six days since she found herself locked up with Spike in a small cell with two cots along a wall, a stack of old magazines for entertainment, and a screened-off area that held a toilet and a small shower stall. It was a miracle he had not driven her insane yet.

A week ago, life on the hellmouth was progressing at its accustomed pace. After Willow teleported Glory to parts unknown Buffy continued to go out on patrol, slaying fledgling vampires or the occasional demon. Spike accompanied her most nights, whether she wanted him to or not. That particular night, cloudless and moonlit, they were engaged in their usual verbal sparring about who helped who, and why, and how. Spike got her so worked up that she ran off, failing to notice the dark shape until it was too late. They shot her with a tranquilizer dart and the world had gone black before she could even cry out. It wasn't until she woke up in this cell that she discovered they took Spike too.

How could she have failed to notice that, although she was well fed, Spike was forced to go hungry? What would it be like for him, Buffy wondered. It never occurred to her that vampires had an actual need for blood; she always assumed it was what they desired.

After all, they couldn't die from hunger. She really didn't want to have to stake him, for reasons she was not prepared to examine any further. Suffice to say she needed his help. There had to be another way to keep the blood lust at bay.

"Spike?" she called softly. "What's going to happen? With you, I mean. I... I need to know."

A muffled groan was her only reply. Spike remained motionless and Buffy was about to return to her own cot when he sat up. "You do have a stake on you, somewhere, don't you?" he asked. His tone was grave and Buffy swallowed the quick comeback that automatically formed on her lips.

"Yes," she admitted. "Never leave home without one."

Spike nodded thoughtfully. "Right, then. Promise me you'll use it, when the time comes."

Buffy blinked. "What--Oh. It's that bad?"

Spike gave another nod. "Yeah. The blood lust will drive me bonkers. I've seen it happen once or twice, and let me tell you, pet, it's not a pretty sight."

Part 2

Two more days and nights passed without a change in their situation. Buffy fiercely hoped that Giles had done the smart thing and sent Dawn and her mother to Los Angeles, to Angel. She and Spike had tried everything they could think of, but except for the small panel that was used to get them their food, they hadn't managed to find a way into their cell, let alone out.

Strange noises in the middle of the night woke Buffy from a restless slumber and she blinked the sleep from her eyes. She pinpointed the source of the sounds to be the dark corner behind Spike's bunk. His bed was empty. Buffy squinted to peer through the gloom until she discovered him hunched in the darkness.

"Spike?" She threw back the covers and pattered barefoot to him. "Are you all right?"

His head shot up. "Stay away from me," he snarled. His fangs glinted in the weak light of the nightlamp and Buffy recoiled in shock. She wondered if he realized he had vamped out. She stood back to study him while he rocked back and forth on his heels, moaning.

"Hungry," he grunted. "Smells so good. Want it!" His arm shot out to make a grab for her. The chip kicked in and he slammed his palm against his forehead. "Aargh!" Spike screamed in pain. "Bloody can't. Need to."

With a start Buffy realized that it had begun: Spike was in the grip of vampiric blood lust. The clipped half-sentences were about her -- for the first time in months she was in real danger from the vampire. Dragging her feet, Buffy returned to her bed and pulled the wooden stake from beneath her mattress. Thus armed, she approached the trembling vampire again.

"Spike, listen to me." She reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder. Spike flew up from his crouch, whirled around and before Buffy knew what happened he had her pinned down beneath him. His eyes flashed yellow and the demon smirked, baring the vampire's fangs. "So bloody hungry."

Okay, this was not going to be easy, Buffy thought. She tensed her muscles and flipped them over. The stake hovered over his heart, poised to plunge into chest.

"Spike! Listen to me!" she hissed, her face inches from his.

For a moment his eyes cleared and Spike looked out at her, his gaze depthless and full of pain and -- fear?

"Do it, Slayer," he pleaded. "Now. Please." His eyes shifted back to yellow again and he snarled like a mad dog. Cold shivers ran down Buffy's spine.

"Spike!" She raised her voice and smacked his face with an open hand. "I said, listen!" An idea had been gnawing at her consciousness ever since Spike reminded her how long it had been since he fed. And in the past few minutes, when she watched him suffer and struggle to keep her safe, willing even to sacrifice himself before harming her, Buffy made up her mind.

She slapped him a few more times until his eyes changed back to blue and the ridges faded, so she knew she was talking to Spike, not the demon. "Listen," Buffy repeated a third time. She was not sure how much time she would have. "You can control this."

Spike began to shake his head and opened his mouth.

"Shut up!" Buffy snapped. He stared up at her and she caught his gaze drifting from her face down to her neck where a vein pulsed in time with her heartbeat.

She shook her head and flipped her long hair over her shoulder, further baring her neck. "Spike, I don't want to have to kill you. I..." She hesitated. "You can drink from me."

His eyes widened in shock and snapped back up to meet her gaze. "No, Buffy--"

Again she silenced him. "You're still in charge, Spike," she continued. "You can stop before you drain me. Please. I..." Buffy hesitated. "I need you. Not for Glory or Dawn, but for me."

Her words shocked him so much that he grew still beneath her.

"You. Want me. To feed. On you," Spike repeated, the words coming out in staccato bursts.

"Yes," Buffy said, rolling off of him. "If your death makes them win, then that's how we beat them. We can win this, Spike."

He sat up and studied her for a moment. "What if I can't--"

She placed a finger against his lips. "Won't happen. Just concentrate. I trust you, Spike." Buffy squatted before him, tilting her head and brushing away the strands of hair that clung to her shoulder. "Do it. Before the blood lust consumes you."

Buffy closed her eyes and tried to subdue her fear. She couldn't let him see how

frightened she was. Although she told Spike she trusted him, she recalled that Angel had nearly killed her when she let him drink. And Angel possessed a soul, plus the poison had weakened him. Spike's demon was in a rage, craving for blood, demanding to be satisfied. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Before she could voice any second thoughts, however, Spike's demon surged forward once more and his teeth sank deep into her skin.

Spike drank greedily, swallowing big gulps of the thick, warm blood. He had forgotten how delicious fresh human blood tasted; it had been so long. His demon rejoiced, demanding more and more of the red, spicy liquid. Slayer blood raced through his veins, filling him, driving away the pain and gnawing hunger.

"Spike... you have to... stop." Buffy struggled weakly beneath him but her plea barely registered. The vampire was too busy sating his appetite.

More! his demon demanded, and Spike sucked mouthfuls of the red stuff from Buffy. He swallowed; blood trickled down his chin to drip on her collarbone. More! He never noticed her losing consciousness. He didn't react when the door flew open and crashed against the far wall with a loud 'bang!'; the sweet yet spicy taste in his mouth and the warm thickness on his tongue were his entire universe.

Strong hands grabbed Spike's arms and shoulders and dragged him away from Buffy. The moment his fangs tore free from her neck, realization sank in. Bloody hell! What had he done?

Crouched in a corner, Spike could only stare at Buffy's pale, limp body as capable hands lifted her on to a stretcher and took her away. The door closed behind them and Spike was left alone.

He had killed her. He had killed Buffy. The one woman he truly loved. "NOOO!" he screamed at the white ceiling and a string of curses left his lips. It didn't make him feel any better.

Hours passed while a single litany went on in Spike's head, like a broken record. Buffy. Was. Dead. Buffy. Was. Dead. And he was her killer.

How could he ever live with himself?

His gaze fell on the stake that had rolled beneath one of the bunks. Eyes narrowing, he reached for it. He had a choice; he didn't have to live with the knowledge that he killed his third Slayer. Buffy's Mr. Pointy would see to it. Spike found it grimly satisfactory. He had killed Buffy. Now her stake would dust him, even if he had drive it through his undead heart himself.

He turned the wooden object in his hand until the sharp end pointed at his chest.

Sudden pain hit him, lashed through his body, and he screamed. Then all went black.

The smell of grass.

It was the first thing Spike recognized as he struggled to regain consciousness. He opened one eye and squinted at the thin, green stalks that tickled his nose. For a long moment, he couldn't recall where he was, or what happened. Had he been drinking, and passed out in the graveyard near his crypt?

Then it hit, like a blow to the head. Buffy was gone. He killed her. And then he found the stake--

Spike moaned and dropped his head again. Bloody wanker. He could kill Buffy but was too much of a pansy to kill himself. They must have released him from the cell after they knocked him out. He recognized the nearest headstone and knew he was back in his home cemetery.

He didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. Buffy was gone.

The dirt beneath him was still warm; the sun couldn't be down for very long. Spike let out a soft snort and rolled himself up into a ball. He'd stay right here, and come tomorrow the sun would take care of his problems. All he needed to do was stay put.

"Spike?" A soft voice penetrated the sobs that wracked the vampire's body. "Spike?"

"Buffy?" Spike groaned beneath his breath. Now her ghost was haunting him. As if his conscience wasn't giving him enough trouble, reminding him every second of what he had done.

"G'way," he growled without raising his head or moving.

"Surprised much?" Buffy's voice said, laughter resounding in it. "It's not that easy to get rid of me. You should know; you failed plenty of times."

Spike began to growl a second time. The sound died on his lips when something soft and warm caressed his cheek.

"Look at me, Spike."

Could ghosts make physical contact? He again forced one eye open and saw Buffy's grinning face hover over him. She was pale, but her green eyes were dancing.

"Are you real?" he whispered, not believing what his eyes told him.

"Yup," Buffy said. "Real, alive, and ready to kick some demon butt. Sorry to ruin your one good day, Spike. You won't carve that third notch yet." She helped him to his feet and he cupped her face in his hands. He needed to touch her, to feel her warmth to ascertain she was real.

"What happened?"

"You were right; the Council kidnapped us. Or more exactly, a Watcher by the name of Nigel." Buffy shrugged. "I once threw a sword at him, and he got pissed. Wanted to teach me a lesson. Giles says that when Travers finally found out what he was up to, he had us rescued just in time." She chortled. "Giles had a hard time convincing them to let you go."

Spike released her face and turned away. His shoulder slumped. 'Just in time.' Sometimes Buffy had a real knack for understatement. "He shouldn't have," he said softly. "I almost bloody killed you. You trusted me, and I let you down."

"No," Buffy said. She took his arm and forced him back around so he faced her. "You didn't. The blood lust had grown too strong. I should have let you feed much sooner. I should have figured out what they were up to much sooner. Just," she winked before she let go of his elbow and started walking to the cemetery's exit, "remind me to feed you before I let you bite me again."

Spike blinked and his jaw dropped.

"You coming with?" Buffy called over her shoulder.

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