

ADULT CONTENT WARNING!

This story is rated ADULT and contains material that is not suitable for younger readers. Reader discretion advised.

The Prophecy Of Two By AmandaK

Prologue

Poof! The vampire exploded in a satisfactory cloud of dust. Spike straightened and wiped the particles from his fingers.

"And that's three," he said with a smirk before turning around to see how Buffy was doing. The slayer was clambering back to her feet, streaks of dust on her clothes. He held out a hand to help her up. She ignored it and pulled herself upright with the support of a headstone. Spike shrugged. "Suit yourself," he muttered below his breath.

He lifted his face and sniffed. The smell of ozone had grown heavier during the encounter with the fledgling vampires, and it wouldn't be much longer before the storm broke.

"Are we done, here, Slayer?" he asked. "I don't wanna get drenched. Bad for the leather, you know."

Buffy snorted. "Yeah, we're done. That was the last of them. You know, for a creature so desperate to help and score points, you need to work on your timing! Like getting here before I—"

"Bugger-it!" he cut her off. "In case you hadn't noticed, I was a bit occupied fending off three vampires bustin' their guts to stake me!"

"Whatever," Buffy snapped back.

Overhead, unnoticed, invisible clouds drew ever closer. The stars faded from view and thunder rumbled in the distance. Spike tasted the air again. This storm was going to be bad. Very bad.

"You better make sure to get your pretty arse home fast, too," he said. His voice lost its saucy tone. "This is one thunderstorm you don't want to get caught in."

"Why, Spike?" Buffy taunted. "Think this slayer can't handle a bit of rain?"

Spike growled beneath his breath. "Damn, woman. It's not the rain that you should worry about," he explained in a patient tone. "You're not lightning proof, you know. Doesn't come with the slayer-package. And this graveyard is full of trees."

Buffy followed the wide sweep of his arm with her eyes, and nodded once. "You could have a point," she admitted before she turned on her heels and stalked away.

He began to follow her until she said over her shoulder, "Go home, Spike. I'm not in the mood for your nonsense tonight."

Like he didn't know. Bickering had become a second nature to both of them, and truth be told, he enjoyed their sparring, be it with words or physically. But tonight Buffy had been especially nasty. Must be that time of the month, Spike decided and veered off to head in the other direction and his crypt.

That's when the lights went out.

The stars had faded long ago. A roiling cloud swallowed the half-moon. And when the few electrical lights that illuminated the graveyard failed too, the night turned pitch black. It didn't bother Spike much. He vamped out, his preternatural vision good enough to make out the shapes of the trees and markers and not run into any of them headfirst.

Slayers, on the other hand, did not come equipped with night vision. A thud and a muffled curse, somewhere in the general direction behind Spike, alerted the vampire to this fact. He smirked as he imagined the slayer fumbling in the darkness. However, the grin quickly faded at the next thought: any vampires still lurking after their patrol might pick this moment, when she was most vulnerable, to attack.

He swung around and jogged back to Buffy, leather duster flapping behind.

"Need a hand?" he asked when he reached her. Now that she was safe, he allowed himself to smile again while he watched her try to find her way through the inky night. Left hand held out, she set her feet cautiously one in front of the other.

"No!" Buffy pivoted at the sound of his voice and tripped over a vase of wilted flowers that someone had placed upon the grave a long time ago.

Spike sprang forward; his vampiric speed enabled him to reach her in time and steady her before she crashed into the headstone. He chuckled. "Looks to me like you do." He wrapped his fingers around her elbow and began to steer her away from the trees and the row of graves, back onto the path. Much to his surprise, she didn't pull free or shove him off. She didn't even protest. The abrupt blackout must have thrown her more than he had imagined.

Encouraged by the lack of negative response and secure in the knowledge that Buffy was depending on him until some sort of light source became available, Spike couldn't resist the opportunity to slip an arm around her waist. She stiffened a bit beneath his touch but otherwise gave no indication of her feelings. Her body was warm and supple beneath his cool fingers, the heat of living flesh seeping through the thin cloth of her shirt. And she smelled so bloody good! The faint scent of vanilla and soap was tinged with fresh, clean sweat and something musky and familiar.

A soft chuckle formed deep in the back of Spike's throat. Buffy could deny it all she wanted, yet here was the evidence: slaying was as titillating to her as violence was to him. He knew better than to mention it to her; it was enough to know her secret. He drew her a bit closer, inhaling deeply, locking the sweet smell that was Buffy into his memory for later perusal in his dreams.

His hand developed a mind of its own, emboldened by the lack of rebuff, and slowly wandered up her side until it reached the gentle curve of her breast. Buffy made a small noise in her throat. Spike couldn't believe that this was real, that he wasn't hallucinating, but his body had no such qualms. His pulse quickened, blood roared in his ears, and his breathing grew ragged. Or so it would have, if he had been alive. As it was, in the darkness, nobody would ever know how good she made him feel.

The sudden tensing of her muscles beneath his palm gave him a millisecond of warning before-

"Oww!" Spike stumbled back from the sheer force of the blow against his ribs.

"Spike, you're a pig," Buffy told him, glaring in his general direction. "Did you really think that—"

Lightning streaked across the sky, followed straightaway by a thunderclap so powerful that Spike's teeth rattled in his mouth. Buffy flung an arm over her eyes and Spike blinked several times to clear away the black spots, which had appeared in the center of his vision. Before he could see clearly again, lightning flared once more, the bolt hitting the ground between them. Buffy screamed. Spike sailed backwards, thrown off his feet by the sheer force of the current.

"Buffy!" he shouted, in the instant before his head connected with a tilted tombstone and he blacked out.

Chapter 1

The scent of grass and dirt in her nostrils grew stronger as Buffy woke. She cautiously opened an eye to find herself face to face with a dead tree trunk. Something pricked in her side and she shifted. Sharp pain caused her to let a soft moan escape. She slipped a hand beneath her body and discovered a rock sticking up through the dirt.

"Ow, what happened?" she murmured to nobody in particular. Her head felt as if it would fall off, and she supported it with her hands while she slowly sat up. The last thing she remembered was fighting with Spike. And then lightning struck.

The thunderstorm!

She looked around, surprised she could see fairly well again. The storm must have blown away while she was unconscious, she decided, and she squinted up at the moon that stood bright in a clear sky.

A few feet away, near the other end of the clearing, she discovered a slumped form clad in black leather. Spike lay motionless. Part of her whispered she should go and see if he was all right, but another, more vocal part, decided that since he wasn't dust, he would survive. Besides, he deserved whatever pain he got. Bloody pig.

She shook her head at the use of the Spikeism. Still, that's what he was, she decided. Pretending to help her find her way out of the dark cemetery, only to try and come on to her. What was he thinking? That she'd be so afraid of the dark that she'd gladly jump into the arms of the Big Bad? She should have hit him harder.

Her body still remembered where his cool fingers had touched her, so gently, and her spine tingled. Buffy pushed the memory away. Spike was of the bad, and that was that. Time to go home.

She picked herself up and took a good look around, trying to get her bearings. Her brow furrowed. What happened to the graveyard? Where were the tombstones and the crypts, and the sidewalks? The grassy clearing was surrounded by trees and low, dense brush. Buffy groaned. Where was she? And how did she get here? Her surroundings were unfamiliar, not in the least resembling a Sunnydale graveyard. She heaved a sigh. Someone must have transported her to this forest, her and Spike, after the lightning strike knocked them out. Buffy decided she better try and figure out the way home; she doubted clicking her heels three times would do the trick. With a last glance in Spike's direction, she set off through the undergrowth.

oOo

She didn't get very far.

After a few minutes of trampling through scrubs and scrambling over dead trees, something fell on her. Buffy let out a startled yelp and struggled to free herself from what felt like a net. Dark figures sprang from the shadows and tackled her. Even as she hit the ground, she lashed out with arms and legs at her assailants. With grim satisfaction she felt her right foot connect with someone's midriff, and her victim let out a pained 'oomph'.

The net hindered her, however, and try as she might, she couldn't tear it to pieces. It appeared to be slayer-proof.

And that made no sense. Unless they knew who she was. Which begged the question: why hadn't they taken her while she was unconscious? Buffy growled in frustration and kicked out again. Now was definitely not the time to solve riddles.

Soon, she found herself on her back with two men pinning down her arms and legs while a third was glaring at her. The fourth man huddled in a ball, still trying to get his breath back after the kick to his stomach.

They hoisted her to her feet and quickly tied her arms behind her back. Only then did they peel off the net. Buffy glared at them but they glared right back.

"The master will be pleased," one of the men said to the others.

"Better he take her than your wife," another replied. The first speaker grunted an affirmative.

Now that she took the time to get a better look at her assailants, she saw they were human - or at least they looked human. Looks could be deceiving, so she had learned.

They were four well-built men, albeit a bit short, with dark beards covering their chins and cheeks. Their hair was cropped close to the skull, and they dressed in similar, oft-mended cotton trousers and a black shirt, tied around the waist with a piece of coarse rope. They looked like medieval farmers stepped out of a historical movie, and nothing like they belonged in the twenty-first century version of the United States. Buffy groaned inwardly.

As soon as they moved away from her, she started twisting her hands, hoping to somehow break the cords.

"Stop that," the leader of the band spat and slapped her.

"Ow!" Buffy yelled, more of surprise than pain. The sting followed a moment later and she narrowed her eyes at the man.

"You'll pay for that," she hissed, too angry to care. She had had enough. A long night of slayage, the blackout, Spike's outrageous behavior, and the people in this dimension thought they could treat her like garbage? If only she could get free.

"I said, stop it!" he repeated, backhanding her again. This time the pain was immediate, and Buffy tasted blood where her lip had split. Maybe, she decided, she should pretend to comply and wait for a better moment.

She hung her head and stood motionless, peeking out through the hair that fell across her face.

"That's better," the man muttered. He nodded at his companions and one of the others approached her. Buffy tensed, ready to kick out and defend herself. Before she realized what was happening, he had scooped her up in surprisingly strong arms and flung her across his shoulder.

Again, Buffy let out an offended yelp. She struggled while she hung upside down his back, and the man smacked her behind. Hard.

"Hey!" she shouted, only to receive another smack.

"Be still," he growled. "Or I might drop you. You don't want that."

Buffy was forced to agree that falling down from his shoulder would be bad; the way her hands were tied she would be unable to break her fall. She stopped wriggling. Inside, however, she was roiling with indignity.

In a single file, the men moved out, surprisingly quiet in the dense undergrowth. Despite her anger, Buffy began to make mental notes, seizing up her enemies and searching for weaknesses.

oOo

Spike woke to muted cries and the sounds of a scuffle. His head was pounding like he had the mother of all hangovers. He brought up his fingers to touch the spot where it had connected with the corner of the gravestone, and they came away sticky. Blood. He was friggin' bleeding! Soddin' headstone!

His head swiveled, in search of the offending stone, finding none at all. And he didn't recognize any of the trees that should be so familiar to him. What the—

It was then that he remembered the lightning flares that came with the thunderstorm. And he remembered the slayer.

Buffy! Where was she?

He scanned his surroundings, and saw nobody. However, to his left the undergrowth had been disturbed, twigs bent and broken, as if something big, like a person, had passed that way.

"Hey!"

His ears picked up a shout in the distance. Spike recognized Buffy's voice at once and he sprang to his feet, ignoring the throb in his skull. He remembered the noises that he woke up to. Was she in

trouble?

He made a cautious way in the direction of the voice; Buffy's trail was easy to follow.

The scene that met his incredulous eyes when he caught up with her nearly made him laugh out loud. The slayer was trussed up like a goose and slung across a man's shoulder! He'd never dreamed he would live to see the day she was taken down a peg or two. He made a mental note to buy her captors a beer and ask them how exactly they had defeated the slayer.

As soon as he tasted the scent of her blood on the cool night air though, all thoughts of beer faded, along with urge to laugh. The bastards had hurt her! Instantly, displeasure replaced amusement.

"Where d'you tossers think you're going?" he snarled, emerging from the undergrowth directly in front of the small party.

The point man gave a start at the sudden appearance of the vampire, then glowered at Spike.

"What's it to ya? And who are you?"

Fuck, they were human. Spike fervently hoped he would be able to scare them enough so it wouldn't come to slugging it out. He wouldn't last long with the splitting headaches the chip would give him when he laid a hand on these fellows. And Buffy wasn't going to be of much help, with her hands tied.

"My name," he said, "is Spike." He drew out the words for effect while he shifted into his vampire visage.

The men paled and suddenly the night was rife with fear. Their eyes grew round while they lowered their heads in deference.

"M-Master," they stammered as one. "We didn't know— Is... She belongs to you?"

Spike blinked in surprise when they didn't bolt, screaming their ruddy human heads off. They recognized him for a vampire, and didn't run? He wondered what that meant. And—

"Belongs to me?" he repeated.

"Hell no!" Buffy shouted from the broad shoulder.

Spike surveyed the tableau for a long moment. Amusement sparkled deep within his yellow eyes before he suppressed it quickly. These blokes had a healthy respect for the likes of him and he would prefer to keep it that way.

"Yes," he growled. "The bint's mine." Buffy made a gagging noise but everyone ignored her. "Now," Spike continued, "where were you going?"

"T-Town, Master," the first man said. "We were going to take her to Master Rurik. But that was before we knew that—"

"Ah. Right, then," Spike cut him off, as if the name meant anything to him.

This Rurik had to be another vampire. A powerful one, if he used humans instead of minions to do his dirty work and catch his meals. Spike made it his business to always know what other vampires were around; it was how he managed to survive for so long. Time for a visit. "Take me to Rurik."

"Of course, Master," the gang's leader said. "Right away." He nodded at the man beside him, who began to jog in the direction of the town to announce the arrival of another master vampire.

"Lead the way," Spike ordered with a flourish of his leather coat. They started walking again.

"Spike!" Buffy hissed from her perch. Her voice sounded a bit strangled and even in the dark, Spike noticed that her face was flushed. With anger, probably, but also with the blood that pooled together in her head. After a moment's contemplation while ignoring her deadly glare, Spike took pity on the captured slayer.

"Put 'er down," he ordered. "Bloody woman can walk for 'erself."

oOo

Buffy was seething. Spike was having far too much fun about the fix she was in; she could tell from the smug glint in his eyes every time he looked at her. At the very least he could have told those idiots to untie her hands. Instead, she was stumbling along trying to keep up, with her hands tied behind her back, and accompanied by an amused vampire and three humans.

That was what worried her the most. They were human. She should not have been outmatched. Even with surprise on their side, she should have been able to fight them off. Instead, they overpowered her and would have taken her straight to this master of theirs, if Spike hadn't interfered.

She clamped her jaw at the thought. Rescued by Spike, of all people. Or all vampires.

How dare he? Claim her like she was his leather coat? She was the slayer, dammit! Oh, just wait until she could get the rope off her wrists!

Pig. Pervert.

Buffy kept quiet about the piece of her mind that she was preparing for Spike; she knew better than to give it to him right now. But as soon as they were alone, she swore to herself, she would let him have it.

Sick, miserable vampire. Killer. Monster. Evil, disgusting thing.

She was compiling a list of names in her head, and she was going to use them all. Too bad she had lost her stakes when the lightning struck, or she'd have given him one of those too — gladly.

Thoroughly caught up in her reverie, Buffy wasn't paying much attention to where they were going. She tripped over a half-buried root, and would have hit the forest ground face-first if Spike hadn't caught her arm in time to steady her.

"Careful, pet," he whispered below his breath so that only she could hear him. "Wouldn't want you to get 'urt any more than you are."

She blinked. So he had noticed the split lip, and the bruise she could feel forming on her jaw.

It shouldn't have bruised. They were only slaps, caresses compared to the hard hits she had received from some of her opponents. Her slayer healing skills should have seen to her health.

She inhaled sharply when an unwelcome thought struck. What if she had lost her slayer powers? It would explain how a couple of lowlife humans from another world managed to subdue a slayer. A ball of fear formed deep in her belly. She relied on her strength so much; it kept her safe and out of too much trouble. It was always there and she had come to think of it as a natural ability instead of a preternatural talent that normal people didn't have.

She stole a glance at Spike, suddenly glad he was with her. He was annoying as hell but he wouldn't let anything happen to her. Would he? Sure, he'd tried to kill her countless times, but not lately. So... Buffy began to pay attention to the conversation Spike was having with the leader of the small band.

"Tell me, then," Spike said, "this master of yours, how long has 'e lived in your village?"

"Forever," the man answered without hesitation. "Master Rurik was here before I was born. And he will be here long after I die. He keeps the village safe of demons."

His companion nodded in agreement while the man closest to Buffy murmured, "But at what price?"

Nobody heard him except Buffy and she peeked sideways to study his face. He was young, not much older than she was, and there was a sadness in his eyes that gave her a start. She filed the

information away for later use. If he were doubtful about the arrangements Rurik made with the villagers, he might turn out to be an ally when she was in need of a friend.

She directed her thoughts to try and figure out what this price could be that they paid. Considering that her captors recognized Spike's demon for what it was, combined with Rurik's long life span, chances were he was also a vampire. And assuming that he was, it wasn't difficult to know the price: human blood. It also fit with the first words she had heard upon her capture. She shuddered. If not for Spike, they'd have taken her straight to the master to be his midnight snack.

"You know, Master Spike," the leader was saying, "the master would offer you a fair price for your villain. He is always interested in pretty females."

Villain? Buffy furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Yeah, she's pretty, isn't she," Spike allowed. He offered Buffy a smile that she would have called tender if she hadn't known better. She glared at him in response and he chuckled.

"But headstrong," he added as an afterthought. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I should 'ave a word with Master Rurik."

Buffy's eyes widened; she couldn't stop the small squeak of protest that escaped from her lips. Spike winked at her over his shoulder and she quickly realized he was merely yanking her chain. Damn that vampire!

She suddenly regretted all the times she had done the same to him. He was now in a position to take revenge on her, and apparently fully intent to make the best of the opportunity. Buffy resigned herself to some difficult hours ahead. Once they found their way home, she would put Spike back in his place. If she didn't stake him first.

With that delicious thought firmly in her mind, she concentrated on setting one foot in front of the other without tripping herself up again.

Chapter 2

"Master Rurik will see you now," a short, skinny maid said while she curtsied before Spike.

"About bloody time," he mumbled. Rurik had kept him waiting for at least an hour and Spike's patience was wearing thin. Although he couldn't complain about the way he was treated.

As soon as he and Buffy arrived at Rurik's manor, a manservant had taken him to a comfortable room. A fire roared in the hearth, doing its best to dispel the dampness and give the place a hospitable feel. And even before Spike had had the chance to settle himself in one of the comfortable armchairs, another servant appeared with a goblet of blood. It had been fresh, and

human, too. Spike had agonized for a long moment about drinking it, concerned that the chip might not let him and afraid what Buffy would say when she found out. The hunger gnawing at his insides had made him change his mind. He told himself that whoever the blood came from had shed it already so he wasn't going to hurt anyone. Besides, there was no telling when he would have his next chance to feed and he had a growing suspicion he was going to need all his wits about him. Thus assured, Spike had downed the cup and settled in to wait.

He fretted about Buffy. While he was escorted to the waiting room, Buffy had been led away with assurances that she was going to be fine. Spike wasn't so certain. How fine could a slayer be in a vampire's household? However, when he tried to voice a protest and keep her with him, the servants looked put out. And Buffy hissed at him that she could take care of herself, thank you very much.

Irritated, he had allowed them lead her away.

Shaking off his worries, he got to his feet, ran a hand through his hair, and followed the maid across the hallway to another room, inwardly preparing himself for whatever he was going to find.

"Welcome, Master Spike, to my humble abode," a deep voice spoke while the maidservant closed the door behind him. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I take it you have been well-cared for?"

Spike followed the voice to its source and found a dark-haired, deeply ridged vampire with pale yellow eyes approaching him, a hand held out in greeting. The stranger oozed strength and power and Spike knew he had to be old. Very old, to grow this strong. He accepted the proffered hand in a human-like gesture of civility.

"You 'ave quite a setup here, mate," Spike acknowledged with a wave of his hand to take in the room, and the entire mansion. It was a far cry from his dreary crypt. Marble floors and columns. Rosewood paneling, crystal chandeliers holding flickering candles. Upholstered, leather chairs and delicate furniture. And outside the chamber, a wide staircase led up from the immense entry hall to more floors.

"I can't complain," Rurik conceded with a quirk of his mouth.

"So, you're Rurik?" Spike continued bluntly. "Can't say I ever heard of you." From the moment Buffy's captors mentioned the name, he had been racking his brain for more information, coming up blank every time.

The master chuckled. "I have never heard of you either. I must say, it's quite an unusual name: Spike," he continued. "You must have come a long way."

"Oh yes, bloody long," Spike agreed.

"Hungry?" Rurik asked. He indicated a dark corner and when Spike squinted he could make out a shackled woman suspended from a hook in the ceiling. She was naked and hung motionless, with her head lolled forward, dark curls hiding her face. Several bitemarks punctured her marble skin.

"Nah." Spike shook his head. Despite the goblet he drank earlier, the faint scent of spilled blood wafting from the victim threatened to bring out his demon. However, if he tried to feed on her, the chip would zap him. Worse, that would allow Rurik to see his weakness. Spike didn't trust the other vampire any further than he could see him. "Thank you for the offer, though. I fed on my way in."

"Ah, yes, of course," Rurik said. "Your pretty villein." He chortled, causing a shiver to run along Spike's spine. He did not like the sound of that laugh. "I have been told she's quite willful. Well, Spike, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance. It will be morning soon, so don't let me keep you any longer. I will have one of my servants escort you to your quarters. Tomorrow night we shall talk more. You will, of course, join me in a celebration of the beauty of unlife? It will be a good opportunity to meet the others."

Spike nodded. "Of course." Whatever Rurik was jabbering about, a party would offer a chance to find out more about the powerful vampire, his allies, and his world.

Rurik pulled a cord and somewhere deep in the house's innards a bell tolled. A moment later the door opened and the skinny maid reappeared. At a gesture from Rurik she scurried back out of the room; Spike followed her.

She led the vampire up the staircase and down a carpeted hallway until she stopped in front of double doors with polished doorknobs. "These are your quarters, Master Spike," she said. "I think you will find them quite satisfactory. Please, don't hesitate to let us know if you need anything." She turned to leave but Spike grasped her wrist.

"The woman who came with me?" he asked, game face surging forward.

The maid squeaked. "She's... she's inside," she stammered. "Waiting for you. We took good care of her. She's been bathed and fed and clothed."

Spike blinked. Bathed and fed? The woman made it sound like Buffy was a beloved and pampered pet. Which, come to think of it, was probably what her supposed position was in this universe. He grinned inwardly. He bet the slayer liked it real well.

His ridges faded and he let go of the woman's arm. "Thank you," he said. "And good night."

"Good night, Master." She scampered off while Spike opened the door to step inside.

"Slayer?"

Several thick candles chased away the darkness and cast the room in a soft glow. A large, four-poster bed took up most of the space. In the corner to Spike's left was a small sitting area with a low coffee table and two easy chairs. Along the walls stood several closets and a dresser. On the right, a door led to what he presumed was a bathroom.

"Buffy?" Spike called out a little louder this time.

He concentrated and discovered the faint rustle of breathing and the soft thump-thump of a relaxed heartbeat in the vicinity of the four-poster. He approached the bed and smiled; Buffy was fast asleep on top of the downy comforter.

Spike sauntered across the room. He peeked out through the heavy drapes that covered the windows and caught the sky glowing pink on the horizon. The sun was going to rise soon. After making sure the drapes were drawn tight, he propped up one of the chairs against the double doors. Just a precaution, he told himself. Nobody would come in without him waking.

He kicked off his heavy boots and strolled back to the bed. For a long moment he stood gazing down at Buffy as she slept peacefully. The light of the candles bathed her in a soft yellow, and her features were relaxed. Damn, she was beautiful. His gaze drifted from her face along her body. She was dressed in a thin shift of pale, cream-colored silk, and it didn't do much to hide her soft curves. Spike gulped and growled deep in his throat, willing away the unbidden response of his body at the sight. Even though there was no way in hell Buffy was hiding a stake anywhere within that silky little number, he was going to do the gentlemanly thing and not take advantage of her. Attractive as the thought might be.

Sleeping, however, was another matter. He'd be damned if he spent the day curled up in a chair. The bed was big enough. Gently, careful not to wake her, he scooped Buffy up and flung back the comforter. After he replaced her on the mattress, he covered her with the blanket. Buffy mumbled something in her sleep and rolled over onto her side.

Spike shed his duster and shirt, and made himself comfortable on the bed beside her. He was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

oOo

Unwillingly, Buffy let go of a pleasant dream when she discovered that her cheek rested on something cold and hard. A small frown appeared as she sleepily contemplated the contrast between the hard pillow and the soft mattress she lay on.

A faint, familiar scent reached her nostrils. Tobacco smoke, mixed with old leather. Spike!

Her eyes flew open and she shot up from the bed. A strangled gasp escaped her throat when she found that she had snuggled up against the vampire in her sleep, resting her head on his chest.

And what was Spike doing in her bed in the first place?

The memories came flooding back: the argument in the graveyard, the thunderstorm, the woods, her capture.

Buffy recalled her embarrassment when servants took her to a bathroom and filled a bath with steaming buckets of water. Thank heaven for small favors, they had left her alone to enjoy it. But when she was done, her dirty clothes were gone, and instead she had found a thin, shapeless gown. When confronted with the choice of wearing the shift or going around naked, she had pulled the dress over her head. It had a wide, low neckline, although not indecently low. And the hem reached halfway down her shins, so it would have to do.

Upon reentering the room, she had found a covered tray with a delicious smell wafting up from beneath the dome. In response to the scent, her stomach growled; she had not eaten anything since hours before her patrol, and Buffy had devoured the food with relish. Then she had tried to leave the room, to find a stern guard outside the door and windows that had been nailed shut. Although she had clawed and scraped at the nails until her fingers were bloody, she had failed to dislodge them. The failure added to her suspicion that her slayer-strength was missing. She hadn't dared try and take on the guard, for fear that her suspicions were right. So, instead, she had decided to wait for Spike, and must have fallen asleep on the bed.

The vampire opened one eye and smirked up at her. "Morning, Slayer. Sleep well?"

Grateful that she had woken before Spike so she wouldn't have to explain how she ended up on his chest, Buffy gave him a dirty look and hopped down from the bed. She began a thorough search of the room.

"Did you find out where we are?" she asked Spike while opening up a closet and peering inside. "Did you meet this master Ruski, or whatever his name is?"

"Rurik," Spike corrected. "Yes, I met him. Don't know where we are, but it definitely isn't good ol' Sunnydale. And before you ask, yes, Rurik's a vampire. A bloody powerful one too. Very old."

"I can fix that," Buffy murmured. She slammed the door of the cabinet and wrenched open a drawer. It was empty, and she flung aside another closet door. "Damn it!"

"What are you doing, Slayer?" Spike asked. He remained seated on the bed and watched her antics with an amused smile.

"Looking for my clothes," Buffy snarled over her shoulder. "So I can get dressed, dust this Rurak and go home."

Spike chortled. "Hell, Slayer, whyever would you want those old things back? I like this dress a lot better. Did you know it gets all transparent when you walk in front of a candle?"

Buffy whirled around, eyes flashing while a blush crept up her cheeks. "Wha—No! You're such a pig, Spike!"

He laughed harder.

Stomping through the room, skirt billowing behind her, Buffy blew out the candles and cast the room in darkness. She immediately regretted it, as the gloom made it nearly impossible to see where she was going. And how was she ever going to find her clothes when she couldn't see?

"Embarrassed, Slayer?" Spike's soft voice drifted from the bed. "You 'ave nothing to be ashamed of, Buffy."

The sound of her name, spoken softly in that British accent of his caused butterflies to dance in her stomach. Her heart rate sped up, and for a brief moment Buffy allowed herself to believe that Spike had actually said something nice to her. Then a memory invaded her happy moment. Harsh words, spoken in that same accent. "Things not as high, not as firm."

"Shut up, Spike." Buffy bit her lip and pushed back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. Those words had cut her deeply, especially because the wounds of Riley's leaving her had been so fresh at the time. She'd be damned if she let that peroxide pest make fun of her again.

She fumbled her way around the room until her hands came in contact with the material of the heavy drapes that covered the windows. Without thinking, she pulled the curtains. A bright beam of sunlight illuminated the room and fell across the bed.

"Bloody hell, Slayer!" Spike yelled as he threw himself out of the sun's path, off the bed into the safe shadows behind the four-poster. "What are you trying to do here? Bleedin' roast me?"

"Wouldn't be such a bad idea," Buffy muttered below her breath. However, igniting Spike had not been her intention and she adjusted the drapes until only a small ray of light peeked in from the side.

"Bloody hell," Spike repeated while he climbed back to his feet.

oOo

A knock on the door interrupted any further conversation. Buffy cast a glance at Spike. He shrugged and she began to pull aside the heavy chair that blocked the door. Spike frowned as he watched her efforts. Something wasn't quite right.

The knock was repeated. "Master Spike?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and Spike threw her a cocky grin. "Yeah?"

The door opened and a boy, perhaps thirteen years of age, stuck his head inside. "Master Rurik sends me. The master thought you might like to have some clothes for the party. He also sends a pretty dress for your villein. Oh, and I brought her some food."

"Well, then, what are you waiting for?" Spike said after a moment when the kid showed no further indication of entering.

The boy blushed. He opened the door wider and rolled in a small cart with a tray full of cakes and pastries. He walked back out of the room to return a moment later and handed Spike a pile of clothes. "These are for you and the girl," the boy explained. "Master Rurik said to tell you that the party starts in one hour. He will introduce you to the other masters."

Buffy inhaled sharply but Spike held his features in check. It wasn't unexpected. Master vampires that threw parties usually invited other master vampires.

At a dismissive nod from Spike the boy left.

Buffy scoffed. "What's wrong with these people? I do have a name. I'm not 'her' or 'the girl', and I'm most definitely not 'your villain'. What's this villain-crap anyway?"

"Villein," Spike corrected absently. "Means I'm your lord."

She gave a snort while watching Spike shift through the clothes.

"Fuck," he muttered when he found a pair of dark blue, velvet breeches. "I'm gonna look like a bloody ponce."

Buffy giggled.

Spike growled at her and flung her a red garment. "I think that's yours, luv."

She held it up and grimaced.

Spike caught her smirk and it was his turn to chortle. The gown was another thin, silky dress like

the one Buffy wore at the moment. He had to hand it to the people in this dimension: they knew how to clothe their womenfolk. The ruby silk was going to bring out her blond hair and green eyes to their best. Buffy would be breathtaking in it. And he could only imagine how the soft material would cling to her flesh, hiding yet revealing.

"Aren't you going to put it on?" Spike asked, another grin playing around his lips. He couldn't wait.

Buffy looked at him pointedly and Spike raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Some privacy too much to ask?"

Spike shook his head. "Uhn huh. You got it backwards, Slayer. In case you missed the memo, these are my bloody quarters, and you share them. You can get changed right 'ere, or go to that bathroom over there. I'm not moving an inch." To emphasize his words, he folded his arms in front of his chest.

Buffy's eyes flashed, and if looks could stake, Spike would have been dust. As it was, he won the staring match when she wheeled around and stalked into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her for good measure. Spike winced, fully expecting the door to fly off its hinges. It merely shut with a loud bang.

A renewed frown creased his forehead. Something was definitely off with the slayer.

Spike used Buffy's absence to change into the clothes Rurik provided him. Good thing he didn't reflect in the mirror, the vampire thought glumly when he gazed down his body. He really looked like a bloody poof! Snug velvet breeches covered his legs, a white, lacy shirt with frills along the collar and cuffs his upper body. As a finishing touch, he had been given a long, blue velvet coat with green embroidery, which matched the pants.

He forgot his misery the moment he lay eyes on Buffy. If he had been breathing, his breath would have caught in his throat. As it was, he inhaled a sharp, unnecessary hiss. She was even more stunning in the sheer silk than he had imagined. "Slayer, after you've dusted Rurik, think we could ask 'im if we can take that dress home? You look bloody appetizing."

The moment the words left his lips, Spike frowned. That was the exact effect the shift was supposed to have. After all, Buffy was designated his always-within-reach-snack. Spike's good mood evaporated as he wondered what sort of parties Rurik gave.

The dress was the color of freshly spilled blood. It was cut low, so her throat was bare, the skin soft cream against the glaring red of the silk. Buffy's pulse point was clearly visible to a vampiric eye. That could be a problem, Spike realized. No bite marks. How would any vampire in his right mind believe he fed on the girl if she showed no puncture wounds?

"Here," he said after digging through the pockets of the duster he had dumped on the bed. He handed Buffy a blue-and-green scarf. "Tie that around your neck."

Buffy looked at him, a question in her eyes. "You have no fashion sense, you know that?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "To hide the lack of bite marks," he explained. "I'm supposed to feed on you. It'll raise doubts when all they see is some old scars."

She took the length of fabric, scrutinized it, then narrowed her eyes. "I have one just like this. And what are you doing with scarves in your pocket anyway?"

Spike wracked his brain for a quick way out. "It's Harm's," he said. "She likes to play games."

Buffy snorted but continued to tie the scarf around her neck. "You have any stakes?"

Spike shook his head, glad with the change of subject. "Nope. Used the last one back in Sunnydale."

"Drat!" Buffy muttered. She shrugged. "Well, guess I have to improvise. Let's go, see what's what and dust this Ricky and his friends so we can find a way home." She turned and began to walk to the door.

"Slayer, wait," Spike told her. He strode up and stopped inches from her. "Hit me."

"What?" Buffy's eyes grew round.

"Hit me," he repeated. "Give it to me good, Buffy."

Buffy shook her head. "Now you're getting off on me hitting you?"

Spike sighed. Of all the times to grow qualms about hitting a defenseless vampire! Without warning he brought out his game face and lunged at her, inwardly preparing for the chip's bite.

Buffy reacted instinctively, as he had known she would. Her left arm shot up to block him, while her right fist swung wide to connect with his nose.

"Bloody hell!" Spike shouted the instant she touched him. Why did she always go for the nose? It took him another second to realize he didn't hurt — much. Definitely not as much as he should. He grabbed her arm and swung her around, pressing her back against his chest while he caught her other arm, holding her tight. Buffy struggled against his grip but he held her without much effort.

"Let go of me," she sobbed with frustration.

He relaxed his hold somewhat, remembering she needed to breathe, and dipped his head so his mouth was level with her ear. "When were you going to tell me?" he asked in a low whisper.

She slumped in his embrace. "What?" she said just as softly. "That my strength is gone? That I am not the slayer anymore? I was hoping: never."

He let her go, suddenly too aware of her warm body pressed against his. "This is important, Buffy," he reminded her. It changed their plans drastically. If Buffy no longer possessed slayer strength, he couldn't count on her to fight. Instead, it would be up to him to keep her out of the masters' fangs.

"I know," she said, her head forward. "I hoped—"

Spike held up his hand to silence her. His enhanced hearing had picked up footsteps down the hallway, approaching their quarters. "We'll talk about this later. For now, just follow my lead." He took her arm and proceeded to guide her out of the room.

Chapter 3

If the situation hadn't been so grim, Buffy would have poked fun at Spike, she thought as she walked beside him down the stairs and through the main hall, following the servant that had come for them. She knew how much he hated the way he looked in the borrowed clothes. She peered sideways out of the corner of her eye. Actually, she amended, maybe she wouldn't have. He looked pretty good. The blue suited him, better than the black that made him look so... evil. Her lips curled slightly at the thought; she knew the black was designed to make him appear sinister.

Truth be told, she was glad Spike was here. Although once her mortal enemy, Buffy was ninety-nine percent convinced that he would help her get out of this situation. It was the single percent of lingering doubt that had kept her from telling him she'd lost her powers. That, and the weird notion that as long as she didn't say it out loud, it wasn't true.

She snuck another glance sideways when the servant opened the double doors. Spike took her hand, giving it an encouraging squeeze before he strode ahead of her into the room. Buffy followed, and froze on the threshold. Her eyes popped at the spectacle; instinct told her to jump into a defensive stance. It took every smidgen of willpower to keep a meek appearance as she took in the room.

Six, no, make that seven vampires were seated in a circle. They were all in game face, sharp-ridged and yellow-eyed. However, that wasn't what really shook her. At every vampire's right side, perched on a low stool at their feet, sat a human, dressed in the same style of robe as she was

wearing. Five were women, and two were young men. They were around her age: late teens, early twenties. What the— She searched out Spike's gaze and was shocked to find he had also shifted into his demon visage. Doubt gnawed at her heart. What if she had misjudged him? It would be so easy for Spike get rid of her, especially since she was no longer the slayer. He could have her killed and live happily ever after in this vampire-invested reality. Literally forever.

As if he sensed her unease, Spike winked at her, with his back to the room. The golden-eyed wink looked so out of place that she almost burst into nervous giggles, yet she instantly felt better. She had trusted him with her mother's and sister's safety, she had no choice but to trust him with hers also. If he had planned on selling her out, he would have done so by now. Wouldn't he?

"Ah, there you are." A dark-haired vamp waved at Spike.

"Rurik," Spike muttered from the corner of his mouth. Buffy took another good look at the vampire.

"This," Rurik told the circle of vampires, "is Spike, who is visiting us from faraway lands. That's Codrin, Doru, Vaclar. The pretty lady over there is Rusalka." His voice droned on, introducing the others, gesturing at them one after the other.

Buffy paid him no mind; the humans, their eyes glassy and unfocused, and their skins a ghastly white, caught her attention. It didn't take a genius to put one and one together and come up with two. These people were the vampires' — what was the word they used? Right, villeins. Possessions, well cared-for private minibars to be drunk from at will. But why did they let them? Why weren't they battling for their lives? At the very least they would die fighting, instead of being taken like lambs to the slaughter.

"Summers!" Spike's quiet hiss drew her from her thoughts and she realized he had called her name repeatedly. He pointed to the stool next to the empty seat that completed the circle. "Sit."

While Buffy settled herself, Spike sat down in the chair beside her. He leaned forward and, in a whisper so low she had to strain her hearing to make out the words, whispered in her ear: "Looks like you're beneath me now, eh, Slayer?" She could hear the amusement in his voice and she heaved a sigh. She supposed she had that coming.

Animated talk ensued around them, the nearest vampires asking Spike where he came from, what he had seen on his travels and how long he would stay. Buffy remained quiet, the wheels in her head whirring over what she heard and saw, and how they could use it to their advantage. Damn, if she still had her slayer strength, she and Spike could have wiped out the entire room and finished this farce once and for all. As it was—

Cold fingers curled around her chin and lifted her head. She realized the vampires had been talking

about her.

"How long has she been with you?" Rusalka, the vampiress at Spike's right and directly next to Buffy, asked. She tilted Buffy's face this way and that, studying the slayer's features with her yellow eyes. "She still has such a rosy-cheeked complexion."

Buffy quivered with anger and disgust at the feeling of the undead hand on her skin. If not for Spike's reassuring touch on her back, she would have flinched. As it was, she merely gritted her teeth and swore to douse the vampiress with holy water before she staked the bitch.

Spike was spared having to come up with a reply when Rurik snapped his fingers, demanding everyone's attention. "Gentlemen, milady," he nodded at Rusalka, "welcome. As you may know -or not-" he winked at Spike, "a new slayer has risen."

Buffy stiffened, prepared to spring into action at a moment's notice, preternatural strength be damned.

"The old one passed a week ago. I would like a moment's silence in her memory."

She blinked, confused.

A second later Rurik continued with a low chuckle. "Now that we have paid our respects, it's time I present you with the new slayer. Lady and gentlemen, can I have your undivided attention..." He paused for dramatic effect. Buffy glanced around and noticed that every yellow eye was focused on the door at the far end of the room. At a gesture of Rurik, a servant opened the door and—

Buffy jumped to her feet. Spike clamped his hand on her shoulder, fingers digging painfully into her flesh as he forced her back onto the taboret.

"Easy, Slayer," he muttered in her ear.

Aghast, Buffy goggled at the scene that unfolded. A girl, fifteen if she was a day, her long, copper-colored hair hanging loose to her waist, shuffled in. She wore the same blood-red gown as the other humans except hers was embroidered with white patterns along the sleeves and neckline. And she was shackled. Heavy manacles tied her wrists to her sides and clung around her ankles, rattling as she entered. The chain that connected the cuffs around her ankles was not quite a foot long, so she walked in a hobbling gait. She held up her head proudly, however, her eyes flashing.

"As you can see," Rurik continued while Buffy's gaze was glued to the girl, "she's quite young. If we treat her well, she'll last a decade at least and we won't have to worry about a thing."

"Not if I can help it," Buffy muttered through clenched jaws, and Spike tightened his hold on her.

"Now, before we start the celebrations -and my friends, refreshments of several flavors are waiting for you in the other room- it's time to pay homage to our demons for allowing us to live forever, and express our gratitude that we are able to do so in this world, where we're safe. Please, a small ceremonial sip is in order."

As one, the humans tilted their heads a bit; the women pushed their long locks aside. Buffy gulped when she realized what Rurik referred to.

"Buffy..." Spike growled, a pained note in his voice.

Her head whipped around and she caught his gaze. Despite the yellow eyes that looked out from beneath his ridges, she thought she detected a forlorn helplessness in the vampire. She studied his face for a moment, ignoring the murmurs of delight and sucking sounds around them. He was stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place: if he didn't drink from her, they would seem suspect. And if he did, the chip would fire up, which was going to look just as suspicious.

"Do it," Buffy mumbled before brushing the scarf aside and cocking her head in imitation of the others. Maybe the chip wouldn't activate if she gave him permission. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the pain as Spike lowered his mouth to her neck.

Her eyes flew open again when all she felt was a little prick and then something cold and wet that dripped onto her collarbone. Spike released her a few seconds later and she stared at him. He didn't meet her eyes.

It wasn't until she caught a drop of blood welling from his lower lip that she realized what he had done. He pierced her skin, enough to make a visible mark, then bit himself to provide the bloody streaks needed to make the ruse believable.

Buffy felt a wave of warm gratitude, respect and even affection wash over her. She placed a hand on his knee and squeezed softly. "Thank you," she murmured. Spike lifted his head to meet her gaze, relief turning his eyes blue for an instant.

oOo

Spike trembled as he licked the blood from his lips. Pulling back from Buffy without feeding on her, was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life, or unlife. The scent of her blood, the beat of her heart, he wanted her so badly that it hurt physically. But this wasn't how he imagined he'd taste from her, not like this, not here. Maybe, some day, when she was truly his, he—

Their host clapped his hands, dragging Spike roughly from the wishful path his thoughts had been taking. "Time to celebrate!" Rurik cried and rose to his feet to proceed to the other room. He pulled the shackled slayer along and the other vampires got up to follow them.

Spike exchanged a look with Buffy, eternally grateful that she seemed to understand why he had needed to pierce her skin. "We better follow them, pet," he whispered and she nodded. "Mingle, and try to find out as much as you can about these wankers. Be careful," he added a warning.

When he entered the other room, he inhaled sharply in surprise, not out of necessity. The redheaded slayer had been secured to a ring in the wall, and forced to watch the scenario that played out before her. Waist-high tables had been placed haphazardly across the elegantly decorated chamber, unclad men and women of various ages and races strapped on top. In the corner, a live pig was thrashing to free itself from its bonds, squealing in panic.

Spike almost laughed at the irony. Pig's blood. At least he'd be able to feed without getting into trouble. Although he would want to make sure none of the other vamps saw him. It was embarrassing, especially in light of the other treats Rurik made available. This world was a vampire's wet dream.

His gaze fell on Buffy as she slowly made her way through the room toward the young slayer, peering unobtrusively out of the corner of her eye at the chains, and all blissful thoughts fled from Spike's mind. If he forgot himself, if only for a moment, Buffy would pay the price. And when a year ago he would have cheered at her death, the situation had changed. Now, he wanted nothing more than to get her home in one piece, and preferably shag her until she screamed his name in ecstasy.

Spike knew he stood a far better chance of accomplishing the first than the second.

"Master Spike, permit me to ask you..." A stocky vampire drew his attention away from the slayer-sans-strength. Razvon, he recalled the vamp's name was. Spike judged this one to have not more than half a century over him, which made them contemporaries, and he resigned himself to making small talk. Perhaps Razvon would let slip something useful. Spike tried to keep an eye on Buffy as the crowd shifted across the room but he lost sight of her when she sat down in a corner with one of the male villeins.

After long, agonizing hours of chatting and trivial conversation, Spike gratefully found himself alone. Hungry for blood, he sidled toward the pig. The creature had exhausted itself and lay on its side, panting short gasps. "Buffy, Buffy, what have you done to me?" Spike chuckled with grim humor at himself. Here he was, the Big Bad, preparing to drink animal blood while several tasty humans were strung up for the picking. He shook his head in dismay. How low would he go before he hit rock bottom?

The sow shifted weakly and Spike stared down at it. A bleedin' live pig. He had never drunk from a live pig before; he always bought or stole the blood from the butcher's or the slaughterhouse when he couldn't get it from the hospital. How the bloody hell did one drink from a pig?

"I see you have a taste for pork," Rurik said with a grin, appearing beside Spike.

"Well, yeah, mate," Spike agreed, desperately searching for an explanation. "Where I come from, they're a rare treat. Plenty of humans to devour, you know, but no pigs. I thought I'd give it a try, now that I 'ave the chance." Warily, he eyed the squealing beast.

"No idea how, huh," Rurik chortled. He grabbed the sow's snout and pulled it back until the animal lay still, incapable of further movement. "See?" he pointed. "There's the vein. All hot and ready for you. Go on. I'll hold its head."

Spike hesitated a moment longer. The bloodlust decided for him and he flung himself at the hapless animal. He drank several deep gulps, wincing at the taste -worse than what he got from the butcher's; he'd never complain about cold pig's blood again- then straightened and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"And?" Rurik asked, an amused smile exposing his fangs.

"Very nice," Spike lied. "Listen, mate, you don't thin—"

A commotion near the other end of the room interrupted him.

"Let me go," a woman's voice yelled, followed by a vampire's growl.

Spike recognized Buffy's voice. He was convinced that his heart stopped before he reminded himself it hadn't been beating in the first place. Ignoring Rurik, he raced to the small crowd that had formed. What he saw when he pushed through would have stopped his heart for certain.

Doru, a large, bulky vampire a couple of centuries older than Spike, held Buffy in a viselike grip. Unable to free herself with nothing but her puny human strength at her disposal, Buffy struggled in vain to get away from him. The vampire's fangs glinted in the candlelight when he lowered his face to Buffy's bare neck.

Spike roared deep in his throat and pounced. He grabbed Doru's arm, wrenched him away from Buffy and propelled him fang first into the crowd of spectators.

Buffy sagged and he crouched beside her. "You okay, luv?"

She nodded, breathlessly.

Spike pushed himself back to his feet and whirled around to face Doru. "What the fuck do you think you were doing?" Murder flashed behind his yellow eyes and if he had had a stake at his disposal, the other vampire would have been turned to ashes.

"Hey, calm down," Doru said, raising his hands, palms outward. "I didn't mean— All I wanted was a little taste. To see if females from elsewhere really do taste different."

Spike took a deep breath to calm himself. From the corner of his eye he caught Rurik watching Buffy with a thoughtful crease in his brow. 'Careful, Spike,' he told himself. 'Don't blow it now.'

"Bollocks!" he said out loud. "I don't know how you do things over 'ere, but where I come from we ask before sinking our fangs into someone else's woman."

"So do we, Spike," Rurik said before Doru could reply. "I wouldn't want you to think we are uncivilized louts. Doru, please apologize to master Spike."

Doru murmured something that could be interpreted as an apology, and Spike decided to accept it as such. He was still fuming inwardly. Nobody took a bite out of his Buffy except—

He reigned in his thoughts.

Nobody took a bite out of Buffy, period.

She stood behind him as he turned around, trembling and looking shocked and frightened. Enough was enough, Spike decided. The charade had taken a lot out of them both and it was time to withdraw while they were ahead.

"Master Rurik, I thank you for your hospitality," he said formally, looking up at his host. "But I think it's time that I withdraw to my quarters."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, he once more took hold of Buffy's elbow and began to steer her from the room.

Chapter 4

During the walk back to their rooms, Buffy kept replaying the hellish sight of the chained slayer and the hapless human victims before her mind's eye. The moment the door closed behind them, she began, "Spike, we have to do som—"

She never saw it coming.

Without warning, Spike's fist swooped down to her face and connected with her jaw. The sheer force of the blow threw her backwards where she landed, fortunately, on the bed. Tears of pain sprang to her eyes and she blinked to clear her vision.

Spike was on her in the next instant, wrapping his arms around her. Buffy struggled against him, frightened, angry, shocked, hurt, prey to a vortex of emotions. She slapped at his shoulders, kicked

at his shins but her efforts had little or no effect. He kept hugging her to him, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like, "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry."

Tears streamed down Buffy's face, as much from the agony of betrayal as the pain in her jaw. She managed to get a leg up and kned him in the groin. Spike let go with a strangled "Ungh," and she jumped off the bed, fleeing into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her. Not that it would help her much if he decided to come after her: the door lacked both bolt and lock.

She splashed some cold water from the pitcher onto her face before glancing in the mirror. Already, a dark bruise was forming beneath her eye. And this time, it would take a while to heal. No supernatural healing powers for Buffy in this particular dimension. She gently prodded at the edges of the bruise, wincing at the pain.

"Buffy?" Spike knocked on the door.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled, fresh tears burning behind her eyelids. She couldn't believe that the one person she trusted in this world had turned on her.

"Buffy, luv, please listen to me," Spike pleaded. She turned away from the mirror, surprised at the desperation in his voice, and at the fact that he had not tried to open the door.

"What?" she called back. "What could you possibly have to say that I want to hear?"

"Buffy, I didn't mean to hit you. Well, I did, but not that hard. I mean... I wanted... I needed..."

Growing impatient with the vampire's uncharacteristic stutters, she flung the door open. Spike sat on his knees, tears on his face. "If you didn't mean to hit me, then how did I get this?" she spat and jabbed a finger at the bruise.

He didn't look at her. "The chip didn't activate."

"Wha—" Buffy's knees gave way and she collapsed onto the floor beside Spike. Hurt physically and mentally, she never stopped to consider that he should be in as much agony as she was.

"No 'zap', no bleedin' migraine," Spike continued. "Buffy, I can hurt people in this world." His eyes widened when he realized what she could think he said. "Not that I will... I didn't mean... I had to test it. I did want to hurt you, needed to want to hurt you. And I bloody forgot about you not being the slayer here, so I... Hell, Buffy, I'm sorry."

Buffy was still reeling from the news that Spike's chip was no longer active. Whereas her powers had dwindled to nothing, Spike had returned to full vampire mode. How did that happen? What higher power was playing games with them?

"Buffy?" Spike whispered and she raised her head to look at him. His eyes were full of shame and grief. "When we get back to Sunnyhell, you can kick my arse any way you like," he offered.

Buffy allowed herself a small chuckle. He looked like a little boy guilty at snatching the last cookie from the jar. "I was going to do that anyway," she replied softly, with a shy smile. She was happy to see some of the sorrow leave Spike's gaze.

Then, before she knew what she was about to do, let alone before she could stop herself, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his.

Spike recoiled as if bitten, and right away Buffy regretted her impulsive deed. Then his mouth met hers once more, his cool lips gentle yet demanding. When his tongue licked at her lower lip, Buffy opened her mouth to allow him access. A distant part of her mind screamed that this was wrong, a thoughtless act triggered by the tension of the night. However, the bigger part of her thought, 'Screw it,' and decided to enjoy this moment of blissful forgetfulness.

She lost herself in the kiss, not pulling back until she had to choose between breathing and fainting from lack of oxygen. Spike cupped her face in his hands, an incredulous look on his features. He inadvertently brushed his thumb over the bruise and Buffy winced. At once, Spike let go of her face and the happy grin faded.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Buffy wasn't sure if he meant about kissing her, or hitting her. She hoped it was the latter.

"Let me see that," he continued. He helped her to her feet and took her back to the bed where he sat her down before he disappeared into the bathroom. He returned a few moments later with a cool, wet washcloth that he placed gently against her cheek. He still looked guilty as hell, and Buffy felt she had to say something.

"It's not so bad," she said while she took the cloth from him. "I've done much more damage to you in the past."

His mouth quirked for a moment, then he sobered. "I'd never hurt you," he said with a grave expression. "Not anymore. Not since I realized I'm—Not anymore," he finished, turning away.

Buffy wondered what he had been planning to say and filed the thought away for later pursuit. A yawn forced her lips apart and it occurred to her that she was tired. It was a few hours still sunrise yet, but it had been a night full of weirdness. Having to keep up appearances had taken its toll and she felt exhausted.

Spike caught her yawn. "You should get some sleep," he said. "We'll talk later."

"Yes," Buffy nodded while suppressing another yawn. She scooted back further onto the bed and folded herself beneath the covers.

Spike blew out the candles, casting the room in darkness, and lowered himself into one of the chairs. Buffy could hear the stuffing sigh as the upholstery settled beneath his weight.

"Spike?"

"Yes, pet?"

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get some shuteye," he replied, shifting to find a more comfortable position.

"Spike? Why don't you come here? It's a big bed."

oOo

Several hours later, Buffy woke to find herself once more nestled against Spike's hard body. Her cheek rested on his shoulder and one of his arms was slung protectively around her waist. She sighed; she really had to stop doing this. It was, after all, a big bed. Keyword being 'big', not 'bed'. Then again, she thought as she rolled away, Spike's presence did make her feel quite safe and protected. In some really bizarre, alternate-universe kind of way.

Quietly she made her way off the bed. She checked the heavy curtains and once she had assured herself that Spike wouldn't accidentally combust, she tiptoed from the room. With the sun high in the sky, the world was safe from vampires. For a few hours at least, anyway. Time to do some reconnaissance.

On her way down the stairs and out of the door, Buffy encountered no one. The house was silent; the human servants having adopted their master's sleep cycle.

She circled the building. It was a big mansion, made of large, square stone blocks, dark and forbidding in color and texture. One of the servants had said it was centuries old, older even than Rurik's rule. She took that to mean he had stolen it from its rightful human owner, eons ago.

Buffy enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her face and kicked off the satin slippers that had come with the gown so she could feel the grass tickle her toes. She sighed, wistfully. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine that all was well with the world. That she was on the lawn of the house on Revello Drive, that Dawn would come home from school any moment and that any vampire she encountered was quickly dusted with the aid of Mr. Pointy.

Her eyes snapped open again when her ears caught soft murmurs. Someone was speaking in a secretive whisper. Her curiosity piqued, she pinpointed the source of the voice to be around the corner of the house and tiptoed in the direction of the muffled tones. Using some thick shrubbery for cover she inched to the corner and peeked around.

A man squatted on his knees, his head bent close to a grid set in the wall at ground level. He seemed familiar and after a few moments of scouring her brain Buffy recognized him. He was one of the men that captured her, the one who had muttered unhappily about the price Rurik demanded for his 'protection'.

"Eilidh, I will get you out," she overheard him whisper as she sidled closer.

"Please, Aidan, don't do anything stupid," a young, female voice answered.

"Hello there," Buffy said to announce her presence.

Aidan sprang to his feet; he spun around and a dagger appeared in his hands, ready to strike. His eyes were wide, however, and the look on his face was full of fear.

Buffy indicated the dagger. "If I were a vamp, that thing wouldn't do you much good," she observed.

"True," he agreed without lowering the poised weapon. "Then again, you wouldn't have come this far." He nodded in the direction of the sun, which bounced off the walls of the house and heated the ground at their feet.

"Who're you talking to?" Buffy asked. She glanced at the opening in the wall and noticed a young face pressed against the iron bars, curious to see what was happening. Buffy gasped.

"You're the slayer!" she exclaimed.

The girl squinted against the bright light. "And you came with that new vampire." She directed her gaze at Aidan. "Didn't you tell me you caught her running away from him, the other night?"

"Yes," Aidan nodded. He toyed with the dagger as he directed more suspicious looks at Buffy.

"So, why aren't you dead?" Eilidh asked bluntly. "Escape carries an immediate death-by-draining penalty."

Buffy shrugged, not sure how much she could trust them. "Spike's... different," she admitted.

They stared at her, suspicious and wary.

Oh hell, she thought. She decided to throw caution in the wind. "I'm Buffy." She knelt and held out her hand for the other slayer to take. "I'm a slayer too, where I come from."

"What?!" Aidan cried, dropping the dagger in surprise. "Impossible! Why aren't you shackled?" His eyes narrowed. "Why is your master letting you walk around, alone? Does he even know?"

"Well," Buffy said and paused. She was sure that Spike wouldn't be too pleased when he found out she wandered off by herself, if not quite for the reasons Aidan thought. "Let's just say that Spike and I have an agreement. He won't kill me, and I don't dust him. Besides, he's not my master."

Without warning, the young slayer in the cell squeezed down on Buffy's hand with all her might. "Ow!" Buffy yelled, trying to pull back and failing. She could hear bones grind together. "What the hell did you do that for?" She shook her hand when Eilidh let go, trying to will the pain away.

"You lie," the girl said coldly. "You're not a slayer."

"Am too," Buffy muttered. "Back in Sunnydale."

She glared at the other girl for a moment, and then decided she didn't really blame her. She would have done the same thing, responded with the same incredulity, had their positions been reversed. She took a deep breath and tried to explain. "I know it sounds crazy, but Spike and I are not from your world. We are from — another dimension, I guess. At home, I am the slayer. When I came here, I found my strength had gone."

As she spoke, Eilidh's eyes widened and the blood drew from her face. "The Repentant Vampire and the Powerless Slayer," she whispered.

Buffy blinked. "The what?"

Aidan observed her with the same mixture of curiosity and respect as Eilidh did. "The Prophecy," he said, his voice as low as the slayer's. His eyes glimmered with a cautious hope.

Buffy's head whipped from one to the other and back in confusion.

"Take her to see Varden," Eilidh told Aidan. "He'll know what to do."

"Who's Varden?" Buffy asked.

"My watcher," the girl replied. "You do know what a watcher is, don't you?"

"Oh yes," Buffy agreed. She suddenly experienced a strong longing to see Giles rub his glasses once more.

Spike woke from a frightening nightmare, although the dream had started pleasantly enough. In it, he had been kissing Buffy, and she responded with enthusiasm. Then he had sunk his teeth into her skin and drained her until she was empty. Just as he released her body to fall in a shapeless heap on the floor, he woke.

Momentary relief that it had been a bad dream flooded through him. Then Spike discovered that he was alone in the room and the relief was quickly replaced with concern. "Buffy?" he called, having decided that calling her 'Slayer' in this world wasn't advisable. For all he knew, they'd shackle her up right along with the other slayer if they found out.

He touched the bed beside him and found it cold. Wherever she was, she had been gone a while. He hopped from the bed, glared down at his poofy clothes, and padded to the bathroom. "Buffy? Pet?" He didn't need to light a candle and see to know she was gone. He would have sensed her heartbeat if she were anywhere near.

"Fuck," he swore, horrible visions flashing through his mind. Buffy, in the arms of Rurik, the master's teeth buried in her neck. Buffy, tied down naked on a table as an appetizer. Buffy, shackled and displayed like last night's slayer had been.

He searched the room and found his jeans, shirt and duster in a closet. His boots stood at the bottom. Someone had cleaned them but Spike didn't take the time to appreciate that fact. He quickly shed the velvet and heaved a sigh of pleasure when the leather coat rested on his shoulders once more. At least he felt like himself again, and could go in search of Buffy. Who knew what sort of trouble she'd gotten herself in, her without her slayer powers and all.

When the door swung open behind him, Spike did an about-face, leather duster hitting his shins as he raised his fists to defend himself. He relaxed when he noticed it was Buffy, still wearing the deep red gown, who entered. On her heels was a mousy, nervous-looking man with glasses. He reminded Spike of someone. One of the blokes that they had met in the forest when they first arrived followed the pair.

"Bloody hell, woman!" Spike exploded as soon as the door closed, ignoring the humans. "What were you thinking? Do you have a death wish? Going running around with all these blood suckers nearby and you as defenseless as a soddin' babe!"

Both men with her blanched at the outburst and made themselves small against the wall. Buffy, on the other hand, stood her ground. "Worried, much?" she asked with a grin. "I can take care of myself, you know. Besides, all the blood breaths were fast asleep while the sun was up. Lazy bums." She winked and Spike sucked in his lower lip.

"Who are they?" he asked with a nod at the men. They smelled of fear and anxiety.

"This is Aidan." Buffy pointed at the young man from the forest. "Eilidh's brother. Eilidh is the slayer we saw last night. They're holding her in a cell in the basement. And this is Varden, Eilidh's watcher."

Spike mentally slapped his forehead. Of course! That's why the guy appeared familiar. He reminded him of Rupert. Absently, Spike wondered if there was a universal blueprint for watchers that applied in every reality.

"Why are they here?" he said. "Can they help us get home?"

"I think so," Buffy said. She gestured at the watcher. "I'll let Varden explain."

"You, and Miss Buffy," the watcher said, nervously licking his lips while he never let his eyes drift away from Spike, "were f-foretold... in the Prophecy."

Of course. There would be a prophecy. He should have known. Spike snorted and caught Buffy's glare. He bit down on the smart remarks that formed unbidden on his lips and held his peace.

"The Prophecy is very old," Varden continued. "Translated, it says that there shall come a time when the people will stand up in despair. As one slayer falls, another rises. There shall be two. A vampire repentant and a slayer without power will help free the land of the demons' scourge. I think that means you and Miss Buffy. T-that you were send here to help us."

Spike gave another snort. "Repentant, my undead arse. You got me confused with Peaches," he told Buffy. "As soon as I get the soddin' chip out, I'll—"

Buffy quirked an eyebrow and gestured at the bruise coloring her cheek. "No chip, remember?"

"Bloody hell," Spike muttered below his breath. He had forgotten that the chip no longer worked. He turned his back and strode to the far end of the room, taking deep, unneeded breaths. Repentant, eh? He knew that translation couldn't be correct. Unlike his brooding grand-sire, whose soul made him feel sorry for every sin he ever committed, Spike didn't regret a single thing. If not for the chip— Well, if nothing else, he should be honest to himself. Without Buffy, he'd have been bathing in blood as soon as he discovered the chip was broke. However, Spike decided, he better keep those thoughts to himself and play along. Stay on the slayer's good side. He didn't want to destroy the tentative bond that was slowly forming between them.

"So, what do we do?" Spike asked, turning around to study the threesome near the door.

"We do what we came here to do," Buffy said.

"And that would be?"

"What we always do." She grinned. "Dust the bad guys, help the innocents, save the world. You know."

Spike rolled his eyes. "And how," he wanted to know, "do you propose we do that? In case you had forgotten, there's a house full of master vampires behind that door. And you're powerless."

Aidan cleared his throat. "That's where I come in," he squeaked. He swallowed and continued in a stronger voice. "I gathered a group of men who agree those demons terrorized us for far too long. The bastards took our families, our fathers, our sisters, our wives. We want to try and change things. We were planning to strike tomorrow morning, but now..." His voice trailed off.

"The plan remains the same," Buffy decided. "We attack tomorrow morning, after dawn, when everyone's asleep. First thing we have to do is release Eilidh. We need her help. When we're done, Varden will help us get home."

The watcher nodded. "There's a potion," he said. "The recipe's in one of the ancient scrolls that were hidden. I'll fix it tonight."

They spent another hour going over the plan and discussing any eventualities. Finally, Spike was satisfied that they had a chance to pull it off and stood up. "You should go now," he told Varden and Aidan. "The pillocks are going to wake up soon and I don't want them to find you here. The more we blend in, the better."

Varden and Aidan nodded their agreement and got up to leave. Buffy grasped Aidan's sleeve, stopping him.

"It will work," she told him while Spike watched with growing impatience. His ears strained to pick up any sounds that indicated the approach of a vampire or servant.

"We'll get your sister to safety, I promise," Buffy continued.

Aidan met the young woman's eyes for a moment, then swallowed and nodded. "We will," he agreed, his voice filled with tears.

Chapter 5

"So, what are we going to do tonight?" Buffy asked after the door closed behind the two men. She felt much better now that they had allies, a plan, and a way to get home. She turned to meet Spike's gaze.

"We," Spike said, stressing the pronoun, "are going to do nothing. You stay here and do whatever it

is you bloody women do when you're alone. I am going to go downstairs and make merry with Rurik and his mates. I don't want them to get suspicious."

"What?" Buffy frowned. "If you think I am going to let you go and feed on those poor people, you have another think coming."

"Buf—"

"These people suffer enough from the likes of you. And don't you dare bring up the damn chip—"

"Buffy—"

"—we both know that it's bro—"

"Will you shut up?" Spike roared. "What the fuck does it take for you to believe in me? I drank from a fucking squealing pig last night! And I was quite certain at that time that the chip was dead."

Buffy gaped. How Spike had fed was a question that weighed heavily on her mind but she had refused to dwell on it too much because those thoughts led her in directions she didn't want to go. She also shrunk away from asking him, afraid that ignorant bliss would be preferable over harsh truth. That he admitted to drinking pig's blood while he could have fed on a human, shook her and touched her deeply. She studied him with a thoughtful expression.

"Yeah, go ahead," Spike growled. "I know what you think: the Big Bad has turned into the Poofster. Worse. At least Peaches has a soddin' soul to blame. What have I got? I've got—"

"My respect," Buffy interrupted quietly. She reached up to touch his cheek with a light hand. Spike's jaw dropped and she smiled at his flabbergasted expression. "You do," she assured him. "You've come a long way. I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps vampires can be good, even without a soul."

"Somebody, please stake me now," Spike said with a roll of his eyes. "The slayer just called me 'good'. I'm in hell."

Buffy laughed. She pushed him in the direction of the door and slapped his behind playfully. "Go, you silly vamp. Before they wonder what takes you so long."

Spike started and gave her a dirty look over his shoulder. "One day, Slayer, I'll make you pay for that," he threatened.

oOo

For Spike, the night seemed to last forever. He was waiting for the moment that he could take his leave and return to his room without raising suspicion. Nobody asked about Buffy's absence; his little display of temper the previous night had taught them he was very possessive of her. None of the vampires were interested in antagonizing the foreigner any further, although they did cast him some strange looks. He hoped he appeared exotic enough to keep them from wondering too much.

It was difficult to resist the various snacks that were on offer. The air was heavy with the scent of fresh, warm human blood. For Spike, it was torture. For the first time in over a year he could drink without repercussions and the temptation was almost impossible to withstand. He kept thinking about Buffy, about how she told him she respected him. It was her love he was aiming for and Spike knew that, if he ever wanted to have a chance, he would need to keep that respect. And that meant no feeding off humans.

Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, Rurik lost interest in hearing further tales about Spike's travels. Spikes beat a hasty retreat before anyone else could demand his attention and ask endless questions. He was going to get in trouble if they kept it up; he had told so many lies and half-truths that his head was spinning and he had trouble remembering what he told whom.

When he reached his chambers, he extended his senses, fully expecting Buffy to be fast asleep. Instead, he discovered that her heart raced. Her breathing was quick and heavy and Spike picked up noises that sounded like a struggle.

He flung the door open, prepared to confront any vampire he found. What he saw made him stop dead in the doorway.

Buffy was shadowboxing. She had shed the red robe and donned the shirt and pants that he had worn the night before. The pant legs were a little long on her and she had rolled them up to mid-calf. She had tied the shirttails around her waist, leaving her stomach bare. A sheen of sweat covered her tanned skin and shadows danced across her body as she moved. She was so absorbed with her training that she didn't hear Spike come in.

He closed the door quietly and leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest. He thoroughly enjoyed the display of sensual power he was witnessing. Although lacking her slayer strength, she remained graceful. Once again Spike decided that he had been right: when she fought, it was like a dance.

With a final blow and a kick to her invisible opponent's gut, Buffy's fight was over. She straightened, running a hand through her hair, which was tied back loosely in a ponytail. She heaved a deep breath and blew a few wayward wisps from her face.

Spike brought his hands together in an admiring applause. "Very good, Slayer," he said,

approaching her. Buffy spun on her heels and relaxed when she recognized him. "Is he dead?" Spike continued, motioning at the air she had been kicking. "Or just unconscious?"

A light blush crept onto Buffy's face. "I was bored," she said in an attempt to explain. "I imagined a punching bag. It wasn't hard," she grinned. "I gave it your face."

Spike rolled his eyes and made a mock-hurt grimace in her direction.

"I see you also decided to change your image," he commented.

"I couldn't find my clothes, I didn't want to ask where they were. And I'll be damned if I wear that ridiculous thing any longer than I have to."

"Well, Slayer." Spike lowered his voice as he stepped right in front of her, staring down at her face, "Those nancy-boy clothes look much better on you than they did on me."

He suddenly became acutely aware of her nearness, of the rhythm of her heart, of the heat that washed from her trained body. Her mouth dropped a little, and her tongue darted out to wet her lips. Spike stared at those lips, mesmerized. Then, before he knew what he was doing, he lowered his head and captured that half-opened mouth.

Much to his surprise, Buffy didn't stiffen or draw back. Instead, her tongue flicked out again, pushed against his lips, demanded access. Spike humored her, gently nipping her lower lip.

He wrapped his hands around her bare waist, her skin hot beneath his cool fingers, and drew her closer, pressing her against him, and himself against her. A familiar scent hit him and it took him an instant to recognize it: arousal. He smiled against her mouth.

"Cor, Buffy," he murmured when he released her briefly so she could gulp some air.

"Spike," she whispered in a soft gasp.

The sound of his name on her lips sent shivers running down his spine. For once her tone held no disdain or scorn or exasperation. It was full of warmth and gentleness and want.

Sudden fear struck him. This was what he had been dreaming of for ages. Was it really what she wanted?

As if in reply to his sudden doubt, Buffy's hands slipped inside the waistband of his jeans, pulled up his shirt, her nails grazing across his skin. He let go of her long enough that she could drag the shirt over his head, then his arms snaked back around her waist, pulling her close again. She pressed her hips to his, grinding against him, and Spike groaned.

"You better be prepared to finish this, Slayer," he grunted in her ear.

"Shut up, Spike," Buffy growled back. Her voice echoed his desire.

Spike needed no further encouragement. He tugged the shirttails loose and slid the garment from her shoulders. Sparing a grateful thought for whoever took her clothes, he realized there was no bra in the way and he drew back a little, looking down, marveling at her pert breasts for long moments. They rose and fell with her breath, quick and shallow.

"Spike?" Buffy's voice sounded small and he caught the uncertain look in her eyes when his gaze met hers. Uh oh. That wouldn't do.

"You're magnificent," he assured her, mentally berating himself for the nasty remarks he once made and wishing he could take them back. "I was just admiring the view." The uncertainty faded and a delightful blush showed on her cheeks. He chuckled, his lips reverberating against her skin as he closed his mouth around one nipple, sucking it to hardness.

One hand cupped her other breast, molding it, his thumb rolling over its rosy peak, while his free hand wandered down her naked back and slipped inside the velvet pants, digging into her flesh as he pulled her closer.

Buffy's hands trailed a path of their own across his back, down, up, and along his arms, causing delicious tingles to run all over his body. His jeans were growing painfully tight and Spike knew he had to take care of that problem soon or run the risk of bursting the fly.

He needn't have worried; Buffy's hands were there before his, fumbling for an agonizing moment with the belt buckle before she jerked open the fly and eased the tension on the jeans.

He stepped back to tug the velvet pants across her hips and down her legs until she could shake them off her ankles. She stood before him as nude as the day she was born. His eyes roved over her body, absorbing every curve and gentle swell, his mind struggling to believe what he was seeing. The real Buffy was more beautiful than in his wildest dreams.

With a predatory snarl, he scooped her up in his arms and took her to the four-poster, where he placed her upon the comforter. Her eyes, slightly glazed and burning feverishly, gazed up at him.

"Buffy, do you really want this?" He could not believe that his traitorous mouth would say those words, yet he couldn't continue without the reassurance.

Buffy nodded without a word. Spike quickly kicked off his boots and shed his jeans before climbing up beside her. He crouched between her legs, again scouring her body with his eyes. Her lips were red and slightly swollen from their passionate kisses. Her breasts firm and round, with hardened

nipples that jutted up in their centers. And lower, her warm core beckoned, moisture glistening on soft curls.

Spike growled, deep in his throat, sounding less like a human and more like the demon he was. He leaned forward, licking and nipping a trail from her soft lips down her collarbone and onto her breasts where he took the right nipple between his blunt teeth, pulling gently. Buffy quivered beneath him, soft, unintelligible sounds wringing from her throat. Her scent was overwhelming. Spike's right hand grazed along her thigh, traveling up the inside of her leg until his fingers brushed against her curls. Buffy arched up into his hand, moaning, her entire body language a plea for more. He slipped a finger inside her tight opening, followed by another, moving in and out in an increasing rhythm until he felt her muscles begin to clench around his digits.

He pulled out, and Buffy uttered a mewl of disappointment. The whimper quickly changed to soft grunts of pleasure when he positioned himself at her opening and pushed slowly but insistently, giving her time to adjust, until he was hidden inside her almost to the hilt. He nearly came then and there, his demon threatening to surge forward at the feel of the silken warmth around his cool, hard shaft. It took every ounce of self-control Spike possessed to keep himself in check.

He pulled out almost completely, then pushed back in, repeating the movement in an ever-increasing rhythm as their passions rose. Finally, he could hold out no longer and buried himself deep inside her, howling as he went over the edge. Buffy's voice joined him as she followed, cresting the wave and plunging into the abyss. At last, spent, Spike slumped forward, panting for breath he didn't need, but powerless to stop gasping.

Chapter 6

Something tickled her ear, her eyelids, then her nose. Reluctantly, Buffy swam up from the darkness of sleep and opened her eyes. Spike gazed down on her, his face mere inches away, looking pleased as punch.

He brushed aside the strand of hair with which he'd teased her awake. "Morning, luv," he said. "Ready to kick some vampire butt?"

It took Buffy a moment to discover she was naked under the sheets, and tightly wrapped in Spike's embrace. It took her another second to remember. "Did we really... you know?" she asked, a bit incredulous.

"Shag?" Spike offered. "Yes, luv, several times." Abruptly the happy smile faded and a worried crinkle replaced it. "Do you regret it?"

"A little," Buffy admitted, and Spike's features hardened. He stiffened as he prepared to roll away. Buffy slung an arm around his neck and held him close. "I regret that we didn't do it before."

He goggled at her for a long minute. Then his chiseled features softened when the euphoric grin reappeared. Buffy smiled as she watched the emotions play across his face. The grin made him look boyish and harmless and - and alive.

Yes, definitely alive, she decided.

"Want to do it again," Spike mumbled, his head lowering to nuzzle on her neck.

"Yes," Buffy sighed. "Me too." She pushed him away with great reluctance. "But not right now, dead boy. Like you said, we have some demons to kill. And dusting to do."

Spike dropped onto his back with a groan. "All work and no play," he complained. "Hell, Buffy, you need something to spice up your life."

"If you keep that attitude up," Buffy threatened while she looked around for her clothes, "I'm gonna start with dusting you."

"All right, all right, Slayer." Spike sat back up and reached for his jeans. "Keep your pants on."

Buffy giggled, still searching for said garment. Spike winked at her.

A few minutes later they were dressed and ready for action. Just in time too as there was a timid knock on the door and Varden slipped in. The small watcher managed to look pale and frightened and determined all at once. "I- I- I brought you something," he stammered. From a sack that hung from his shoulder he pulled several thick, sharp stakes and handed them to Buffy and Spike. "Aidan and his men are waiting outside the mansion."

"Right, then," Spike said, stuffing several of the stakes in the pockets of his duster and the waistband of his jeans. "Let's go. Lead the way."

They followed Varden's scurry down the main stairs and then along a flight of back stairs until they reached the dark, dank basement of Rurik's mansion. "This way," Varden whispered. He pointed to a heavy door.

Spike slid the bar aside and one by one they slipped in.

Eilidh was waiting for them. "Come on, hurry," she urged them, frantic now that the end of her trial was in sight.

"Where's the key?" Buffy asked.

Deep silence followed.

Varden exchanged a glance with Eilidh, who in turn exchanged a look with Buffy.

"Bloody hell!" Spike exploded, immediately lowering his voice at the angry glare Buffy cast him. "Nobody thought to get the key? Where the fuck is the damn thing?"

Varden lowered his gaze and tears welled in Eilidh's eyes. "I thought you knew," the watcher said. "The chains are magically wrought. There is no key."

"Get out of my way," Spike growled, pushing Varden and Buffy aside. He grabbed the chain that ran from Eilidh's wrists to a ring in the wall and strained to wrench it loose. When the ring didn't give, he set a boot-clad foot against the wall and pulled again, grunting with effort.

Buffy watched for a few moments, feeling as helpless as Spike was furious. She should have thought to ask about the key. It was her fault. And in a few minutes Aidan and his men would attack. Without the slayer's help, they were doomed.

"Slayer, do something," Spike hissed when all his efforts to dislodge the ring failed.

"Do what?" Eilidh asked. "Don't you think I tried everything?"

"Not you, silly bint," Spike spat. "Her!" He grabbed Buffy's arm and roughly pulled her forward. His fingers bruised her flesh but she barely felt it. She recognized his anger for the sheer frustration that it was. She felt the same way.

Not sure what she could do where Spike's vampiric strength failed, she reached up and wrapped her hand around the cuff that circled Eilidh's wrist. A soft click followed. Eilidh's eyes popped when she pulled away her hand.

"I'm free," she whispered.

"What?" Spike asked, peering over Buffy's shoulder.

"The Prophecy," Varden muttered. "I was wondering why the Prophecy would mention a slayer with no powers. Now it becomes all clear. Her purpose isn't to fight but to set free."

Buffy still stared from the cuff in her hand to Eilidh's free arm. "I didn't do anything," she mumbled breathlessly.

"Well, then, Slayer, do some more nothing." Spike poked her arm. "We're running out of time."

Startled from her disbelief, Buffy quickly released the other three cuffs.

A wide smile broke on Eilidh's face while she rubbed her wrists. "Let's go."

oOo

"Well, that was easy," Buffy said. She slapped the dust from her hands. An instant ago, she had staked the third vampire they encountered as they made their way through the guest rooms.

It was too easy, Spike didn't say. In his long experience, neither life nor unlife ever was that easy.

"How many more are there?" Eilidh asked as she followed Buffy and Spike out of the room. Varden kept a nervous watch in the hallway.

"Four, right?" Buffy said.

Spike shook his head. "At least another seven," he informed them. "Plus minions." Buffy raised an eyebrow in surprise and he continued, "More arrived last night."

"You didn't tell me," Buffy protested

Spike winked at her. "We didn't exactly waste much time on talk, now did we, luv?" He was satisfied to see a light blush creep up from Buffy's shirt collar.

Varden let out a frightened squeak, cutting off any further ribbing Spike might have wanted to engage in.

"Well, well," Rurik's deep voice said. The threesome spun around. The vampire master and two of his cohorts walked up behind them.

'Damn it,' Spike thought. He should have sensed the other vampires' approach. He was slipping.

"If it isn't our very own Judas. And the slayer too." Rurik ignored Buffy and the watcher. He kept his yellow gaze trained on Spike and Eilidh. A hateful smile turned up his lips so his fangs were visible

Spike heard Buffy mutter beneath her breath. "What does he think I am? A bloody piece of furniture? I'll teach you, mister."

Spike didn't get the chance to savor her use of his favorite curse word. Buffy's right foot flew up

and hit Rurik in the stomach. With the element of surprise on her side, she got a good kick in, causing the master vampire to stumble back a few paces. He roared in fury.

It was as if he had given the signal for complete mayhem. Left and right down the hallway, doors opened and sleepy, half-dressed vampires stumbled out, some of them followed by their dazed-looking villeins. Spike reached for his stakes while huddling into a defensive crouch. From the corner of his eye he caught Eilidh doing the same thing.

Then Buffy charged Rurik.

"Buffy, no!" Spike yelled, terror heightening his voice. Bloody hell, didn't the bint remember she was powerless?

Buffy didn't listen. And before Spike could race to help her, another vampire tackled him and he hit the floor, hard.

Fists flew; legs kicked. Spike got a couple of good hits in. A distant part of him noted that, although the vampires were strong, they had also grown lazy from lack of combat practice. He easily knocked his attackers to the ground and with great satisfaction plunged a stake into first one chest, then another.

From downstairs sounds of a struggle -breaking furniture, shouts, grunts of pain- rose up the stairwell. Aidan and his men had arrived and they were taking on the misguided servants and villeins on the first floor. To his left, Spike observed Eilidh stake one of the new arrivals; she ground her heel into the dust for good measure. He grinned at her and gave her a thumbs up. She was good, albeit a bit rough on the edges. Proper training would take care of that; she was going to be as graceful a warrior as Buffy was.

Buffy! He searched the melee for the slayer and froze when he saw her. She lay still in a crumpled heap among the wreckage, her eyes closed and her face white. Spike felt as if the ground gave way under his feet.

"Buffy!" He stumbled his way over to her, mindlessly pushing aside one of the villeins that tried to block his way. He dropped to his knees beside her body and cradled it. Her head lolled back. A small amount of blood dripped from a gash at her temple.

"Nonono!" Spike kept muttering. He desperately searched for a pulse.

A relieved sob wrung from his throat when he found it, weak but steady. "C'mon luv, let's get you to safety."

As he pushed back to his feet with Buffy's body in his arms, a stake swished past his ear to clatter

harmlessly to the ground. Dust rained down on the vampire and the unconscious woman. Spike's head whipped around. Eilidh stood grinning at him, another stake in hand.

"The bitch was about to dust you," she informed Spike calmly.

Spike shivered. In his anxiety to see that Buffy was all right, he had lost sight of his own safety. "Thanks," he said from the depth of his undead heart. With the memories of last night fresh in his mind, he would have died a happy man; however, he'd rather enjoy the slayer's company a little while longer.

"Eilidh? Varden?" Aidan bounded up the stairs and when he saw his sister, he raced over to her to pull her into a tight hug. "You're safe!"

"Is it over?" Eilidh asked. Her voice was muffled against her brother's chest. "Did you get them all?"

Aidan nodded, pulling back and beaming down at his sister. "Yes, we got them. A few human wounded but no casualties. Up here?"

"All dust." Eilidh gestured at several puddles of black ashes. "We did it."

"We sure did."

Spike stood, watching brother and slayer hug again, then group-hug her watcher. He couldn't stop the smile that broke at their obvious cheer. It faded quickly, though, when he looked down on the pale face of the body in his arms.

"How is she?" Varden asked, suddenly worried.

"Unconscious," Spike said but as the words left his mouth, Buffy stirred and moaned.

"Buffy? Wake up, ducks," Spike whispered into her ear. Her eyes fluttered open and slowly settled on his face.

"Spike?"

"Right here, baby. The Big Bad's got you, you're safe now."

Buffy's mouth quirked. "I want to go home."

"So do I, luv. So do I."

Epilogue

Gradually, Buffy grew aware of the scent of grass and dirt in her nostrils. She cautiously opened an eye and found herself face to face with a crooked tombstone. Something stabbed her side and she shifted. The white shard of an old urn stuck up through the grass; so that's what had pricked her stomach.

"Ow, what truck ran over me?" she murmured. Her head felt as if it would fall off, and she held it between her hands as she slowly sat up. The last thing she remembered was fighting with Spike. And then lightning struck.

She peered around in the darkness, barely making out the shapes of the gravestones in the dim light of the street lamps. The lights must have come back on while she was unconscious, Buffy thought, squinting. Then she caught a glimpse of platinum-blond hair. Spike.

On hands and knees she crawled through the grass and over the graves to squat beside the unconscious vampire. A small trickle of blood ran from a deep gash on the back of his head, where he had hit it against the corner of the headstone.

"Spike?" Buffy asked, lifting him and resting his head on her thighs. "Please, wake up, Spike."

Suddenly her eyes grew round. What the hell was she doing? She scooted backward with a horrified gasp, not caring that Spike's head thudded onto the grass as she let go of his shoulders. He wasn't dust, so he would be okay. A shudder ran along her spine at the thought of him waking up to find her cradling his head in her lap. She wasn't really concerned about Spike, was she? A tiny voice in the back of her mind answered that she was supposed to be. Yeah, right, as if she should care about her mortal enemy. Buffy shut the voice down. If he weren't chipped, one of them would have died a long time ago. Hopefully him.

Spike stirred and moaned before his eyelids flitted open. He blinked several times, then his gaze settled on Buffy. "Slayer? Are we..." He didn't finish. A confused frown appeared on his forehead and for a second his eyes grew glassy, as if he were trying to remember something that was beyond his grasp.

"No, Spike," Buffy replied. She had no idea what he wanted to ask. "We," she put particular stress on the word, "aren't anything. We never will be. There is no 'we', Spike."

Hurt flashed behind his eyes and Buffy felt a stab of guilt. Somehow, those words didn't feel right. Like she was supposed to say something else. She opened her mouth again, when thick raindrops began to spat from the sky, startling her with their cold wetness. Within seconds, a downpour had started, drenching them through the bone and all words fled from her mind.

"Bloody hell," Spike grouched and pulled the leather duster closer around his body.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Get going, Spike," she said, failing to keep the scorn out of her voice. He cared more about that damn coat than anything else. "Before you ruin the leather."

He gave her a long look, and again she experienced a strange contraction within the pit of her stomach. Before she could examine the sensation further, Spike disappeared among the trees. Buffy shrugged off the thoughts and turned on her heels to trudge off in the other direction. All she wanted was to go home and get out of the cold rain.

It wasn't until much later, after a hot shower, that she sat in front of the mirror and examined her face. How did she manage to get that bruise on her left jaw? And the gash on her temple, already half-healed? Try as she might, she couldn't remember being struck in either place in the scuffle with the fledglings.

Oh well, she thought with a shrug while heading to her bed, she probably hit her head against a grave marker when she was thrown off her feet during the thunderstorm. The injuries would be gone by morning.

She turned off the light and climbed beneath the covers.

Just another day on the Hellmouth.

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