

Title: Never Alone Again

Author: Seductivembrace

Pairing, Characters: Spike/Buffy

Rating: NC-17

Summary: Third in the "Alone" series. Picks up where *Alone No More* left off. It's time for the showdown with the Order of Taraka.

Disclaimer: Joss said I could, so I am.

Chapter 1

Four months later...

Spike had had enough. He was tired and hungry. He'd been tracking the Slayer almost since they'd left Sunnydale together. Only the fact that she was able to travel by day *and* night prevented him from actually catching up to her. That, and the accusation he'd likely see in her eyes if he'd exerted his control over her - forcing her to his side so that they could settle this thing between them once and for all. He'd not wanted to give her any more ammunition to use against him.

Didn't want to have her watcher's words proven true.

The ramifications of his claim had likely been written in a hastily scribbled letter slipped into her bag by Giles before they'd departed. If he wasn't so intent on finding the Slayer, all while keeping an ever-vigilant eye out for any of the Order's assassins, he'd have traveled back to the Hellmouth just so he could tear out the man's heart, like the watcher had done his. He'd told the wanker she'd accepted him, so he should have left well enough alone and let the two of them work it out when the time was right.

But had he?

Hell no.

The whispered 'thank you' he'd heard from the man just mocked him.

Thank you, my arse!

More like a stake to his back....

What had possessed the man to tell Buffy about the claim he'd placed on her? He

knew the girl's temperament, even before having to deal with the Order. Was he trying to get them both killed? Now Spike had this added headache he didn't need. Like he didn't have enough to worry about. They'd been two against who knew how many – and now they weren't even a two. Just a one and a one with the latter trying desperately to look after the former, without much success.

Oh, Spike knew the Slayer would be mad, furiously so, when she eventually found out what he'd done. But that time had been a long way off. Say years, maybe. However long it took them to find the Order's stronghold. And, at the rate they were going?

Yeah, it was safe to say it would probably be a few years before he'd have to tell her.

He gnawed on his bottom lip, contemplating his current situation. He'd have to stop soon. Find a place to lay low for the day. Another beat-up motel, just like the dozens of others he'd occupied – with and without the Slayer by his side.

Spike was cutting it close when he finally stopped some thirty minutes later. The demon inside practically climbing the walls at the imminent sunrise, desperate to be away from its deadly rays. He fit the key into the lock and stepped inside, just as the sun appeared on the distant horizon. The door closed and locked, he dropped his bag on the carpeted floor and crossed quickly to the window to pull the curtains the last few inches shut, sealing the room in darkness.

Too restless to sleep, he stripped and made his way towards the shower, hoping the hot water would help him relax.

But he doubted it.

Ever since the Slayer had split, he'd been running on about three hours of sleep each day. Too worried to rest once the sun began its natural ascent into the sky. It was only towards dusk that he would fall into an exhausted slumber. Usually after a day spent watching bad daytime television, or a day spent pacing.

Sometimes, when he could concentrate – when he felt through the claim that the Slayer appeared to be sleeping – Spike would force himself to read through the books he still carried. It wasn't the same, however. Usually when they'd engaged in what she liked to call "research session" they would often bounce ideas off each other, hypothesizing as to the possible meaning of the text they happened to be reading. Now the endless quiet motel rooms just seemed to mock him.

After his shower, Spike settled on the bed and turned on the television. He

channel-surfed for a few hours, catching up on current events before the morning shows came on. Refusing to watch the hosts with their overly cheerful expressions and fake, plastic smiles, he set it to C-SPAN, hoping the monotonous tones of the country's leaders would lull him to a quick slumber. Anything to take his mind off the girl who'd slipped away one day while he'd been sleeping.

It didn't work at first.

He still remembered the fear he'd experienced when he'd woken and she'd not been snuggled in bed next to him. Felt her anguish pound into his consciousness as he'd shaken off the last remnants of sleep, knowing without even looking around the room that she'd been gone.

A cursory look about the interior had revealed her missing bag and a few of the more promising books that might indicate the Order's whereabouts. He remembered being half tempted to exert his will over her, all while cramming his meager belongings in his bag and racing out into the night after her.

He'd tracked her.

Relentlessly dogging her footsteps and forcing her onward.

If he was going to be miserable, then, by god, so was she!

An hour of listening to a boring committee of something or other question a witness of something or other and his eyelids started to droop. He must have reached the end of his reserves, because it wasn't long thereafter that Spike succumbed to his body's exhaustion and slept.

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Buffy was tired of running.

Not to mention lonely.

After having Spike as her constant companion for over a month, these last four without him had been rough. Why she'd taken this long to come to terms with things, she wasn't sure. The one thing she did know was that Spike hadn't once done any of the things to her that Giles had stated in his letter that he was now capable of doing.

Maybe she was testing him. Seeing if he actually *would* do it. And, somewhere, buried deep in her subconscious, she knew it to be true. But there was another

part, telling her that he *wouldn't* do it. That he'd never do any of the things that the power of his claim granted him.

A week ago, a month, the minute she'd snuck away while he slept – again, the exact moment of dawning reason eluded her. Her anger at his deception had burned itself out.

She was tired of running. Tired of waking alone. She'd isolated herself long enough. Had put herself, and him, in serious danger by her foolhardy actions.

The sun was high in the sky when Buffy used the secondary key to let herself into Spike's room, having backtracked to find him once assured his movements had been hampered by the sun. Sometimes it paid being the Slayer. Especially when the motel was run by a demon. The K'lalbur coexisted peacefully with humans and was only too happy to reunite her with her "wayward" vampire once the scar on her neck had been revealed.

Her duffle fell discarded from her fingertips and she gazed down upon the slumbering vampire lying on the bed. He'd not bothered with covers; his pale, nude body gleaming in the meager light.

She drew near and became worried when he didn't wake at her approach. Upon closer inspection, she could see that he'd lost weight – much like she had. The sharp angles of his face even more pronounced now. He was exhausted. Clearly so. Probably hungry too.

She'd done this to him. Forced him to this half existence of dogging her every footstep.

Guilt assaulted her. Caused her eyes to fill with tears at his condition.

She'd been wrong to leave him. To heed Giles' written warnings and completely disregard the time she and Spike had spent together. If she'd stayed away much longer, there would have been nothing left of her Spike to come back to. He would have wasted away to nothing.

Hurriedly, Buffy stripped out of her clothes and palmed the knife she kept hidden in her boot. After a shallow cut to her neck, she climbed on the bed and cuddled close to his side, not surprised in the least when his arms automatically wrapped around her back and pulled her closer. A hand at the back of his head directed him to the drops of blood oozing from where she'd nicked herself, and she expelled a hopeful breath when he lapped at the life-giving substance.

She felt his face shift mere seconds before his fangs pierced her flesh. Unlike the last few times, this bite happened to hurt, but she forced herself to remain unmoving in his arms while he fed from her. Ever the gentleman – though he'd refute the comparison if it were ever voiced aloud – he sucked lightly, oftentimes just allowing his mouth to fill with her blood before swallowing. Like he knew instinctively whom he held in his arms.

He finished far sooner than she would have liked, licking closed the fresh marks he'd made. His purr of satisfaction as he drifted deeper into sleep brought a smile to her lips, and she snuggled a bit closer and gave herself over as well.

For the first time in four months, Buffy slept without having to keep one eye opened and trained on the door.

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The growing pressure building at her apex woke her, and Buffy's eyes fluttered opened to reveal Spike situated between her legs, propped on his forearms. His hips moved in a slow dance above her, and she felt the hard length of his cock as it slid in and out of her. Her body arched up against him, trying to drive him deeper.

Her hands lifted to caress his ridged brow and whatever control he seemed to harbor while she'd wavered between sleep and waking snapped. Wrapping his hands around her shoulders to hold her in place, he buried his face in her neck and thrust into her for all he was worth.

Buffy's nails dug into the exposed flesh of his shoulder blades, her legs snaking around the backs of his thighs.

There was no way this wasn't going to be over fast. After four month's separation –

Her body exploded a second later, her mouth opened on a silent gasp, hips arching reflexively, enabling his cock to brush against her sweet spot over and over until she thought she'd black out from the pleasure. It didn't stop him, however. If anything, her orgasm just egged him on, drove him to pump harder, faster. Growling deep when her inner walls continued to squeeze him tight.

Buffy had no time to bask in the post-coital afterglow, for she could already feel her body drawing taut in anticipation of a second, more powerful climax. And she was grateful for the fangs that seemed to glide back and forth along the throbbing artery in her neck, knowing that when he struck, there'd be no way

he'd be able to hold off coming.

Neither would she.

Her fingers moved from his back to his head, twining through the longish curls to grip, tug, push, pull... force his sharpened canines to penetrate the smooth expanse of skin at her throat. Anything to get him to end the torture of being held poised on the edge.

He snarled in her ear, the perverse vamp more than likely pleased with the rough treatment she'd inflicted. Just when she thought she could take it no more, he struck. Latching onto her neck with a primal roar.

Buffy saw stars as pain and pleasure collided to produce one mother of an orgasm. She screamed her release, unmindful to the other guests of the motel. And really... demon motel - she was sure they were used to the noise. Besides, she was too busy caught up in the vampire above her.

Utterly spent, her arms and legs collapsed upon the mattress covers, while she struggled to bring her breathing under control. She felt Spike's weight for just a moment before he recovered enough to roll them, their bodies still intimately joined as he settled her on top of him.

Neither spoke in the aftermath of their reunion, unwilling to break the peaceful silence that permeated the room.

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Spike took note of the subtle changes in the Slayer's body. She was skinnier, like him. Losing weight she could ill afford to lose. Her hair had gotten a bit longer; it was dyed black again, the unnatural shade of red she'd worn before no more than random streaks about her head. He somewhat missed the red; although, the black was nice too.

His own hair was probably a lot worse off. He'd not done anything with it since the time she'd dyed it. And, he hadn't the time or the patience to invest in keeping the color she'd given him... or to see it cut. Maybe he could talk her into a repeat performance now that she was back.

Once he felt her breathing and heart rate return to normal, Spike sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He gained his feet, her body still held in his arms, although his lagging erection managed to slip free, causing them both to groan at the loss.

“Come on, luv, let’s get washed up. We’ve some talkin’ to do, yeah?”

Buffy nodded into his neck while he walked the few feet to the sparse bathroom. Again neither said anything, their movements practically mechanical as they washed each other off quickly and stepped from the shower.

By tacit agreement, they donned clothes, then settled into the two seats on either side of the small table.

Buffy startled him by going first; the last thing he’d expected was an apology.

“I’m the one that should be sayin’ ‘m sorry,” he told her. “Though...I am evil and it’s not in my nature.”

The smirk in his voice seemed hollow even to his own ears, but he did manage to get the Slayer to smile briefly.

“Yeah, well... I shouldn’t have let Giles’ letter get to me. We’d been doing fine on our own. And I’m sure there was a good reason... there was a good reason, right?”

“Yeah, pet.”

“See... I shoulda’ waited. Instead, I panicked and took off. I didn’t like to think... I just didn’t want...” Buffy was having a hard time putting into words what she was trying to say.

“C’mere, Buffy.”

The use of her real name threw her; Spike never used her name. It was always, “love,” or “kitten,” or “pet,” or her personal favorite, “Slayer.” Though the “Slayer” had been lacking since they’d been on the run – didn’t want the wrong people overhearing.

She got up, and placed her hand in his, allowing herself to be pulled down onto his lap. A feeling of rightness settled over her as he held her close. Something she’d been sorely lacking these last few months. It had been them against the world until her world had fallen apart, the contents of Giles’ letter urging her to be careful now that she was essentially Spike’s property.

And what was with the property?

Buffy felt Spike stiffen beneath her and she realized she'd voiced that thought out loud. Rather than cower, she challenged him. It was time for them to get this out in the open anyway.

"It is what I am now, isn't it?"

"'s not like that, pet," Spike tried to reason with her, his temper flaring in the face of her own.

"Oh, really? How is it not like that, Spike? Because from what Giles said, that's what it amounts to. You master. Me property."

"Yeah, well *technically*, yeah... I guess you might see it that way –"

"See!" she accused, jumping to her feet. "This is why – how *could* you?"

Spike's eyes flashed yellow and he stood as well. "I said 's not like that."

"Right... and I'm *so* going to take the word of an evil vampire."

"Watch it, Slayer," he growled.

"And that's exactly what I'm talking about." She ignored the inner voice that told her she was egging him on. She'd latched onto his aggressive behavior and was twisting it for her own purposes.

"Wot?!"

"You... with the intimidation tactics. Like I'm not your equal –"

"Trust me, pet... if you weren't my equal, I'd have you stripped from the waist down and bent over this table," he roared.

"And there we go again with the threatening. Exactly what Giles warned me about!" Her voice increased to match his in volume.

At the mention of the watcher's name, his face shifted; the ridges on his brow becoming more pronounced, the flecks of amber in his blue eyes completely eclipsing the softer shade. He stalked towards her, ready to turn her over his knee for making this more difficult than it had to be. As it was, it took all he had to restrain himself when her eyes narrowed as if waiting for him to dare try something.

"An' I told you that's not why I did it!" he yelled back.

"Oh yeah? So, you're telling me that you don't like the fact that you can pretty much make me do anything you want... any *time* you want." The loss of control that she would experience if that was to ever happen caused her voice to rise in hysteria. "Because the way I see it, you've got your third slayer bagged and tagged and at your whim."

"Bitch!" he growled, closing the distance between them.

"Tell me that's not the reason, Spike," she taunted, her own body dropping into a defensive position. Not that it would do her any good if he actually chose to exert that will over her.

"It's not!"

"Yeah... well then, what is the reason," she demanded hotly.

"I didn't want to be alone!" he roared.

When he realized what he'd just said aloud, his eyes widened comically, his face shifting back to his human mask. He, the Big Bad, had confessed to being lonely. And had claimed the Slayer in an effort to prevent her from leaving him.

Big Bad? Hardly. More like bloody wanker!

He spun away, wishing that it wasn't still daylight so that he could escape into the night and not have to see her horrified look. Or worse, her laughter.

Buffy couldn't have been more shocked if he'd told her he loved her. Not that she didn't have feelings for Spike, or him for her. But she didn't think either of them was at the stage of declaring their undying love.

Still...

For him to say that he'd not wanted to be alone, and had claimed her? Why not turn someone? He had the gift of immortality, unless he happened to be on the losing end of a slayer's stake. With blinding clarity, it came to her. He did care about her, and this was his way of showing it. He'd not done it to lord his status over her. He'd done it to make her his.

This time it was she that closed the distance, laying a reassuring hand upon his arm.

"I'm sorry, Spike," she told him sincerely.

"Not your fault."

Okay. Not a good sign with the stiffening and the abruptness. But at least he was still talking to her.

"Yes, it is. I should have listened to your side of the story, rather than running off. Look at you. You're practically wasting away."

"You didn't fare much better," he mumbled under his breath.

"Why didn't you tell me? That night..." she asked. "The claim... that's how you found me so easily in Sunnydale, right?"

"No place you can't go that I won't eventually find you, pet."

Oooh! Pet name. Pet names mean not quite as angry as before. Time for a little more groveling.

"I really am sorry, Spike. About everything. I should have trusted you. Heck... deep down, I probably did. *Do*. Otherwise, I would have found me a nice stake and broken this hold you seem to have over me."

"Yeah, well... I should have told you," he conceded, turning around to face her. "I just thought I had time, ya know? Told the watcher you'd accepted me. Weren't like I was gonna do anything to betray your trust."

"Wait! You spoke to Giles? About the claim?"

"Yeah... back when we were stayin' with your mum."

"He didn't tell me that in the letter! Oh, he is *so* dead when I get my hands on him!"

"Really? Can I watch?"

He smirked at her, and Buffy knew that they were going to be all right. That this thing between them would be worked out, and they'd be able to put it behind them.

"Maybe," she sassed.

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Chapter 2

It took them another month to gain the weight back that they'd both lost. They still moved around – it was easier and safer that way – but spent the majority of the time relaxing and reading through the books they'd acquired.

Piecing together locations alluded to amongst the voluminous texts, Spike had created a makeshift map. Buffy wasn't sure if it would work, but anything was better than what they had. Now if they could just find a starting point for the series of cryptic directions, they'd be one step closer to actually finding the Order's stronghold and eradicating their army of assassins.

Disgusted with the vagueness of the passage she was currently reading, she slammed the leather-bound volume closed and set it aside. Vagueness? Who was she kidding? Vagueness was a compliment to the author of the journal. The paragraph of text she'd been trying to decipher read like someone had had an attack of ADHD. The journal entry was a mixture of random thoughts that made absolutely no sense. No matter how many times she read it. Spike hadn't fared much better, having passed the journal to her about a half hour ago to see if she could make heads or tails of the thing.

Sighing, she leaned back in her chair, rubbing her weary eyes.

"Think it's time we took a break, luv."

"You know what I'd really love?"

"What's that, pet?"

She sat up, opening her eyes. "Dancing."

"Dancing?"

"Yes. Dancing. As in, you and me throwing on some clothes and going out to do some boogying."

"I don't boogie," he stated flatly.

Buffy stood up and affected an exaggerated hip swagger as she walked around the table to where Spike was sitting. She noticed his eyes flare and grinned

seductively.

"We don't have to boogie," she purred in his ear, settling in his lap and grinding herself into his erection. "Something to be said for a little slow dancing too." She rubbed her upper body against his, her hardened nipples digging into his chest. "Please...." she begged, adding a hip gyration for good measure.

Buffy squealed when he stood abruptly, easily bearing her weight in his arms.

"Spike...."

"Wot? My girl wants to go out. Gotta get cleaned up first, now don't we?" he reasoned, striding towards the bathroom.

'My girl wants...'

His words repeated themselves over and over in her mind as she stripped out of her t-shirt and panties and stepped underneath the warm spray. She told herself that it probably meant nothing, was just Spike playing along with her. Still didn't stop her from crooking her finger at him just before she reached up to grab the pipe of the showerhead.

It was a good long while before either got out of the shower.

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"Slayer, put that down and come to bed," Spike grumbled.

"Geez, grumpy much?" Buffy didn't bother to look up from the journal, something about the last passage she'd just read setting her on edge. Her eyes remained fixated on the text, willing it to spill its secret.

This is no game of which I speak. You would cringe at the horrors I've witnessed. Red rivers of blood pooling from the feet to Jachin and Boaz. Eternity will not see my relief, for I am in hell. Would that it were of my own making. If I could go back, Lose my ties with my calling. Live with my eyes blind, my ears deaf to the Secrets of the order. Heed well my warning. Only the foolish dare trespass beyond the borders. Would you not agree? There are some that will not listen. Heroes, thinking they might overcome. Everyone that enters the foot shall perish. Writhe beneath the sword of his champion. At the altar, your blood renews their strength. You were warned, were you not?

"Here I was, tryin' to enjoy a little post-coital snuggle before catchin' some kip, but someone scrambled out of bed like they couldn't be bothered. Slayer, I'm

hurt." Spike pulled a dramatic pose, bottom lip jutting out, his hands clutching over his chest in the vicinity of his unbeating heart.

"Oh, stop. You know you just want to use me as an electric blanket."

"Well, yeah..." He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Buffy couldn't help it, she laughed outright. But she compromised, taking the watcher's journal with her back to bed. After she'd settled in, her head resting on Spike's arm, she showed him the passage she was looking at.

"It just doesn't make sense. These people live for this shit. Hell, you've seen Giles... well, maybe you haven't... but I have. And I tell ya, they're all about duty this, obligation that... So why would this one... *one*, warn us away.... and *two*, want to forget his calling? It just doesn't add up. And what's with the darkened words? I know when this was written they were still using pen and quill, but this looks deliberate."

"Hey!" she gripped when Spike dislodged her as he sat up abruptly.

"Bloody hell, Slayer! You're a genius! Quick, grab me a piece of paper and a pen."

She frowned but did like he asked, rolling her eyes when he snatched the stuff out of her hands and started scribbling furiously. When he was finished, he had a column of all the words that were given emphasis, one right under the other.

"He couldn't make it easy, pet," he explained as he handed her the completed list. "If this book were ever to fall into the wrong hands, it would have sealed his death. Look at the words, do you see a pattern?"

Buffy stared at the list, again trying to make it give up its secrets.

"Concentrate on just the first letter," he urged.

"'Tyre will show the way'? What's that supposed to mean?"

"What it means, pet, is that you've found us our starting place."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Then I *am* good, aren't I?"

"A genius, just like I said."

"And being... a genius... deserves some type of reward, does it not?"

"Oh, most definitely!"

Spike tossed the journal onto the unused bed and snagged the paper out of her hands. He licked his lips, leaning her back against the pillows to give the Slayer her reward.

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Buffy shook the rain out of her dark hair after having let herself into their hotel room. She dropped her latest purchase on the table and slid out of her leather duster. The clerk at the book store had looked at her rather strangely for buying a book comprised of maps of the Middle East; she'd rolled her eyes, shown some attitude, and told the lady to bag it - and almost gotten kicked out of the store for her efforts. Damn people and their biases. Like she wouldn't be interested in buying something from her store just because she looked like she'd just stepped out of Goths-R-Us.

The sound of running water could be heard and she figured Spike must have woken up recently. She'd only been up for a few hours herself, wanting to make it to the store and back while there was still daylight. The crowded streets of New York City were a little more animated than she was used to, and she'd not wanted to have to worry about getting into a sticky situation and having notice drawn her way because she'd had to defend herself. Plus, there was the whole vengeful vampire equation she couldn't overlook.

A few minutes later, the water shut off. Spike emerged from the steaming bathroom, a towel wrapped around his lean hips. Before they'd arrived in the city, she'd helped dye his hair black again, matching hers except for the red streaks she now sported. Buffy hadn't trusted herself with cutting it, so she'd taken him to a demon barber - and yes, it had shocked her to realize that demons had them - and snickered while he'd sat in the parlor seat while the male beautician gushed over his curling locks. The stylist hadn't even raised an eyebrow over his client's lack of reflection, had just pointed to the sign that proclaimed, "No Eating the Help." When he had wanted to add on hair gel, she'd put her foot down, fingering the spiked curls and whispering to the disgruntled vamp that she liked it this way.

He'd given her his tongue-curling smirk and declined the gel.

Now as she looked at him, at the beads of water trailing down his chest and abs, she wanted to pounce on him and give him a reason to take another shower. He knew it too, the tease, if his shit-eating grin was any indication. Determined to ignore him and his mostly-naked parade about the room, she grabbed the map book out of the bag and settled into one of the chairs at the table to try and find Tyre.

She started with Israel, figuring that since the Order dated back to the time of King Solomon, it stood to reason that their stronghold would lie somewhere in that vicinity. An hour later, having expanded her search to include Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and parts of Egypt, Buffy was no closer to finding this Tyre. She was beginning to think it didn't exist.

"Come on, pet. Time to take a break. Besides, 'm feelin' a mite peckish."

"Huh?" She looked away from the book and up at him. "Yeah... Okay. I could go for something to eat as well."

On the seedy, cheaper side of the city, there was no small amount of available "prospects" for Spike to choose from. The smell of blood and a muffled scream slammed into his senses, and he darted into the darkened alley, leaving the Slayer standing on the curb. The glint of steel caught his eye, and he reached the perpetrator, his grip easily crushing the mugger's wrist and preventing him from finding his target once again. A second later and he'd snapped the man's neck, dragging him off the unconscious woman lying helplessly on the ground. Spike made quick work of his meal, licking clean the blood on the back of his hand where he'd used it to clean his lips. The carcass he dropped to the ground without another thought.

He made to pass the woman, leave her for someone else to find, but stopped. Rolling his eyes, disgusted with himself, he bent down and lifted her over his shoulder. The cut to her cheek was going to need stitches.

Buffy's eyes grew wide when she noticed Spike emerge from the darkened alley with a woman slung over his shoulder.

"Are you crazy?" she hissed.

"Yeah... proolly. But didn't think it was right, her bein' unconscious an' all. Bird's gonna need some sutures. We can leave her with someone inside and let them call the cops."

“Fine. Gimme a second.”

Buffy darted inside the nearest convenience store, shouting for someone to call an ambulance, that they’d found a woman being mugged. Only when she saw him pick up the phone did she step outside and wave Spike forward. They were going to drop the girl and run. There was no way they could hang around and be forced to answer questions.

The clerk stared wide-eyed as Spike stormed into the store and laid the girl on the floor.

“Quit yer gawkin’ and get some bloody towels, you git!”

The man, startled at first, quickly recovered, nodding emphatically as he raced to the door marked “Employees Only.” When he came back, Buffy and Spike were long gone.

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Both of their bellies now full, the pair wandered around the darkened city, neither wanting to return to their tiny hotel room just yet. Buffy was enjoying the sights and sounds of the nightlife that was New York. With Spike by her side, all gave them a wide berth.

The sound of techno music drew her attention, and when Buffy saw where it was originating from, she tugged on Spike’s hand to get him to follow.

“You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me, pet,” he complained, seeing her destination. “Don’t fancy myself sittin’ around a bunch of snot-nosed kids tryin’ to play at bein’ the Big Bad.”

“We’re not here for that. We’re here for *that*.” And she pointed to the cyber café logo. “Just please tell me you can work your way around a computer, because me? Not so much with the techno savvy.”

He sighed resignedly. “Come on, luv. Let’s get this over with...”

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“Well, now I know why I couldn’t find it on the map,” Buffy complained as she looked over Spike’s shoulder at the Google results. The Phoenician city of Tyre was now modern-day Sur, Lebanon. “We should have just come here first.”

Would have saved myself twenty bucks on that book I bought. Hey, think they'll take it back?"

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Her adrenaline was pumping; excitement at finally having a bead on the Order making it impossible for her to sleep on the Transatlantic flight from New York to Tel Aviv, by way of Rome. They'd taken an extended stay over in Italy, not wanting to arrive during daylight hours. The Olympic Airways flight that left at 7:00 p.m. perfect since it put them in at the Israeli city at three in the morning. Plenty of time for them to scout around, let Spike grab a bite to eat, and get them secluded in a room before the sun came up.

The pilot came over the loudspeaker announcing their imminent arrival, and Buffy nudged Spike awake. Though how he'd managed to sleep was a mystery to her.

Twenty minutes later, the wheels touched down on the tarmac. There was a mass exodus of groggy travelers that made their way off the Boeing 734 and into the air terminal. Spike kept a tight grip on her hand, something for which Buffy was grateful. Her adrenaline had suddenly worn out and jet lag had hit her body like a freight train. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for twenty-four hours, the constant time zone changes doing a number on her.

Spike had the foresight to leave the majority of their books stateside, bringing just the watcher's journal, the map he'd created, and two others he thought might prove useful, with him. The journal and map he carried on his person, tucked in an interior pocket of his coat. It made their trip through security go smoothly since all they carried in their cases were clothes.

Outside the terminal, he hailed a taxi and had the man take them to the nearest halfway decent hotel. After making sure the Slayer was set, he dipped out for a quick meal and a look around. The nightlife in the city was still teeming, if you knew where to look, and Spike followed the signs that led him to a demon bar. He needed to secure transportation for their trip north to Sur.

He let himself into the hotel room a few hours before dawn, having taken a circuitous route on his way back, a niggling feeling telling him that he was being followed. But, whenever he'd backtracked, no trace – scent or otherwise – could be found of someone shadowing him. He locked the door then quickly stripped out of his clothes and climbed in bed next to the Slayer. Minutes later, he fell asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Her growling tummy woke Buffy sometime after dawn. She rolled over, whispering to a half-asleep Spike that she was going to go out for a bit to grab some food. He mumbled something to her that sounded like “okay,” and she pulled out of his arms.

The city was already bustling with activity, and Buffy looked with wide-eyed amazement at the architecture of the various buildings lining the streets. To say that she was shocked was an understatement. She’d had so many preconceived notions of what Israel and Lebanon were like...she’d watched CNN, after all. And she realized that the news channels only showed the sensationalized parts of the country. Tel Aviv could have been any metropolitan area in the United States.

It was because of her distraction that she didn’t hear the person sneak up on her. She felt a second of blinding pain to the back of her head before her world went black.

~*~*~*~*~

Daniel stood hidden from view, not that anyone would have recognized him anyway. The shape-shifting demon employed his race’s means of defense to remain invisible to those that might be hunting him. It had been a long while since he’d allowed emotions to play a part in his life, but as he watched while the Slayer was loaded into the van, he couldn’t help but feel something... sympathy, maybe?

He’d seen who’d captured her. The half-breed, Drake, had been trying for years to become a member of the Order of Taraka. With the Slayer in his grasp and at his mercy, he just might get his chance.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter 3

Daniel watched as the Slayer was loaded into a nondescript white van. He waited until it had moved off before running after the vehicle and hopping lightly onto the back end. His body instantly changed to blend in with his new surroundings, his skin turning the same motley shade of white as the vehicle he was now clinging to.

The familiar landmarks were a blur as the van swerved in and out of traffic on its way out of town, causing him to frown. Out of town wasn't good. It made for a longer turnaround time. Not to mention the lack of witnesses. Although demon activity was rarely, if ever, noticed by the humans of the city. Daniel just prayed that Drake would want to draw out his torture session, thus providing him with the time to return with the vampire. After nearly five centuries of enforced servitude to the Order, and the last one spent looking over his shoulder, his freedom was finally within his grasp. He couldn't, *wouldn't*, let Drake win.

The van slowed and drew to a halt near the outskirts of Tel Aviv and Daniel leapt off the back of the van and raced to the wall of the building they'd stopped in front of, blending in with the structure so that he was all but invisible. He watched quietly as Drake got out of the driver's seat and walked around to the side door of the van just as it opened from the inside. His two lackeys got out, supporting the unconscious Slayer under either arm, and Daniel watched helplessly as they dragged her right past him and in through the front door.

When he was sure it was safe to move, Daniel hurried away from the door and started running back towards the busier section of town. Halfway there, he was able to hop on the back of another vehicle, thus hastening his return to the busier part of the city.

By the time he reached the vampire's room, a half hour had passed. It would take them at least that much time to get back – depending on how cooperative said vampire would be.

That gave Drake a whole hour with the Slayer. More than enough time to break her with his sadistic torture techniques.

Daniel squashed down his nervousness as he marched up to the door and rapped his knuckles against the wood. Before he could lean against the exterior wall and blend in with his surrounds, the door was opened and his neck was squeezed in the vice of the vampire's unbreakable grip.

~*~*~*~*~

"Knew I was bloody well bein' followed," Spike growled, his hand tightening about the demon's throat and hauling him inside the room. He shoved him up against the wall and the vampire's eyes bugged as the demon seemed to disappear right before him – only his grip about the demon's throat letting him know that he wasn't alone.

“I’m only gonna ask this once, mate. Who are you? And what the hell are you doin’ knockin’ on my door?”

“Slayer,” Daniel tried to hiss out around his constricted throat muscles.

Spike drew the demon away from the wall until they were almost nose-to-nose, growling, “What about the Slayer?”

“D-Drake... has... has her,” Daniel gasped out. “Must... must hurry...” His eyes started to roll up into the back of his head as his means of obtaining oxygen remained cut off. Not that he needed much, but the vampire had been choking him without relent for a while now.

“Oh no you don’t,” Spike snarled, shoving the demon onto the ground. He waited to see if he’d make a run for it, and was disappointed when the demon just lay there coughing as he tried to catch his breath. He wanted to hit something. Ever since he’d mentioned the Slayer, he’d had a vague feeling of discontent – that manifested into full-blown worry when he suddenly realized that he couldn’t sense her. “Who the bloody hell is Drake?”

“Please...I’ll tell you on the way. But the more we delay, the less likely she’ll be alive. Do... do you have a means of transportation to get around during daylight hours?”

Something in the demon’s tone struck a chord with Spike and he hurriedly grabbed the comforter off the bed. He just prayed his contact from last night had already secured the vehicle and the necessary supplies he’d asked for and it was waiting for him like he’d asked.

“Well, what are you waiting for... let’s go.” Spike bent down and hauled the demon to his feet. “This way. ‘m warnin’ you... if you try to run, you’ll be dead before you can go two feet.”

Daniel believed him.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy knew something was wrong the moment she came to. She could feel a cool breeze floating over her skin and she cracked one eye to glance around and received a punch to her face for her effort.

“Ahhh... she’s awake. Good. It’s no fun if they’re not awake for it,” the gruff voice announced.

Buffy heard the whirl and tried to lift her head to distinguish the sound. Her vision was blurry after the blow to her head, all she made out was a tattooed blur. She quickly found out, however, when the tip of the whip connected with her bare upper thigh, the force of the blow spinning her to the right. A second later, another hit landed; this time on the other one. She sucked in a breath and refused to utter a sound, no matter how much she was screaming inside her head.

After the sixth consecutive stroke, the front of her legs felt like they were on fire. She glared daggers at her tormentor and nearly buckled under the sting delivered expertly to each side of her face. Not an easy feat given that she hung suspended from the ceiling, her arms pressed close to the sides of her face. Her legs dangled about a foot off the ground and were manacled as well, the chains secured to a ring in the floor, preventing her from moving too far away from her vertical position.

Another blow landed, this time to her exposed midriff. She sucked in a breath and bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"Don't worry, Slayer. Another five minutes of this..." Drake punctuated his comment with four cracks of his whip in quick succession. "...and I'll hear you beg for me to stop."

"Fuck you," Buffy growled.

Another flick of his wrist and the tip landed across her lips.

"Watch yer mouth, little girl."

Buffy spat out blood, reeling from the pain of that last blow. It still didn't stop her from egging him on. "Kiss my ass."

Enraged by the girl's false bravado, he tore into her with his whip for a solid fifteen minutes, not relenting until the strain in his arm indicated that he'd been going at it for a while. When the haze of his anger wore off, she was hanging limply by her chains having passed out some time ago.

"Get the water. I'm not through with her yet."

Soundlessly, the two unobtrusive underlings did as he asked.

Buffy gasped as the cold water drenched her skin. The pain hit her the next instant, radiating along her exposed limbs and causing her to hiss in a breath; she

couldn't help the whimpered moan that escaped her slack lips as the agony of the numerous lash marks tore along her nerve endings.

The stench of her blood assaulted her nostrils and she glanced down at her body. Her underwear was hanging on by a thread. But, it was the destruction to the rest of her that made Buffy want to gag. Red lines marred every inch of her naked flesh, some gashes deeper than others – though all of them bled, running down her pale body until she was bathed in her own blood.

She forced herself to swallow around the nausea building in her throat at the sight of her mangled flesh and lifted her head to glare at the man.

“That the best you got?” she coughed out. “Hafta say... not impressed.”

“I'm just getting started, Slayer. Don't you worry.”

~*~*~*~*~

With Daniel sitting in white-knuckled fear next to him, Spike tore through the streets of Tel Aviv arriving in half the time it had taken Drake. The wheels of the blackened-out Land Rover screeched to a halt, and Spike took but a moment to grab the comforter, then he was out the car door like a shot and racing towards the entrance to the building.

He burst through the front door, his preternatural gaze taking in the scene before him in an instant; the half-breed poised to deliver the Slayer's deathblow, his sword poised in front of her heart, the two human lackeys standing stoically against a far wall, eyes downcast.

Spike's reacted as if on autopilot. One minute he was in the entryway, the next he'd slammed into the Slayer's would-be executioner. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of her broken body, and rage unlike anything he'd ever felt before stole through his body. Unmindful of anything around him, he attacked the half-breed without mercy, taking great delight in inflicting as much pain and agony as had been done to his girl. Tormenting him. Throwing him up against wall after wall, claws digging into his flesh at random, fangs delving into any exposed skin.

He didn't notice Daniel as he found the key to the shackles and released the Slayer's broken body into his waiting arms. How he soundless left the building praying softly that they still had enough time to save her. How, once outside, he gently settled her in the back seat of the Land Rover and placed a blanket he'd found folded up on the floor over her unconscious half-naked form.

No, Spike was in a blinding rage, with no end in sight.

“Vampire.”

The calming voice tugged at his senses, and Spike lifted his head to seek out the source. His amber gaze took in Daniel standing quietly by the door, waiting. He snarled at being interrupted.

“If we don’t leave now, your Slayer will die. There isn’t much time. Already we may be—”

Daniel watched as the vampire calmly-as-you-please snapped the half-breed’s neck and grabbed his quilt. The abrupt change in his demeanor started him so, that he was almost to the vehicle before Daniel thought to hurry after him.

Spike settled himself behind the wheel, started the engine, then glanced over at Daniel.

“Where...?” His voice trailed off. The smell of the Slayer’s blood was nearly overwhelming in its intensity. He could hear her wavering pulse, her shallow breaths – like she was hanging on to life by a thread.

“Back to the city. Hurry, but watch the bumps. I think one of her lungs may have been punctured. Remember the demon bar you went to?”

“Yeah...”

“Drive around back. I’ll see if Sheila is there. She’s... a healer...”

“What is it you’re not saying, mate?”

“She’s... well... she doesn’t like vampires. I’m going to have to take the Slayer inside. Convince her to help.”

The Land Rover ground to a halt, and Spike reached over and grabbed Daniel by the throat. “I don’t care what it takes, but you get the bird to fix my girl. Understand?”

“Y-Yes... I understand. But—”

“No buts. Whatever it takes.” Spike shoved the demon away and put the car in gear, his speed balanced between his desire to see them there with all possible haste and what he felt the Slayer’s body could handle.

~*~*~*~*~

“He said that?” Sheila asked, astonished, her eyes still roaming intently over the Slayer’s broken body.

“Yes.”

“And he’d willingly tie himself to her –”

“He already has. Haven’t you noticed his marks?”

Her hands stilled in their roving assessment of the girl’s body, an inch or so away from actually touching her skin. Sheila frowned, moving to the Slayer’s head to swipe at the blood on either side of her neck. When she came across the unfading bite marks, she recoiled slightly, shocked. She turned and gifted her friend with a slight smile.

“Daniel, I think we may finally see an end to the Order.”

Sheila flung back the hood of the cape revealing white-blond hair and piercing green eyes. They began to glow brightly, as did her hands, as she lowered them to the Slayer’s unconscious form. The light soon enveloped the Slayer’s body and the cuts and bruises began fading away as the magic of the healing demon went to work on her internal injuries.

When she was finished, Sheila removed her hands and resettled the hood of her cloak about her head.

“Take her back to the vampire.”

Daniel moved forward with the blanket in his hand, resettling the cloth about the Slayer’s nude body. The force of the healing demon’s magic had disintegrated the torn remains of her underwear, leaving her naked as the day she was born – which was a small component of Sheila’s magic. He picked the girl up and moved to the door.

“And Daniel? Not a word of this to either of them. They must be willing to risk it all. It’s the only way for them to defeat Sylam.”

“It will be as you say.”

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Chapter 4

Daniel was almost hesitant to walk outside to where the vampire sat impatiently inside his vehicle, the Slayer bundled up tight and held protectively in his arms. At one point, he'd been certain he was going to have his head bitten off for telling Spike that he would have to remain in the car when he went to seek out the healer. He barely repressed a shudder at the look he'd been given and mentally reminded himself to never get on the vampire's bad side.

Shifting the Slayer in his arms slightly, he edged open the door to the back seat and set her down carefully, mindful of her modesty. He was all set to fade back into the background and let the two finish their quest, but Spike's growled, "Get in," quickly negated that idea. Daniel didn't doubt the vampire would be out of the vehicle and after him like a shot, no matter that the sun had yet to dip behind the horizon. He'd shown that he had no qualms in traveling during daylight hours - which was probably why the two had been able to escape the Order's notice for so long.

But then, the sect wasn't looking for the pair to be traveling together. The pact they'd formed had gone a long way towards prolonging both of their lives.

And now with what Sheila had done...

Daniel slid warily into the front passenger seat, watching the vampire out of the corner of his eye as he hugged the car door without trying to appear obvious.

"You can relax. 'm not gonna eat ya."

There was enough menace in the vampire's voice that Daniel didn't entirely believe him. His hand stayed close to the door handle just in case, but he settled himself more comfortably in his seat - mindful not to piss off the vampire by ignoring his terse command.

Spike rolled his eyes at the demon's posture. He bit back another retort, determined to play nice. The sod had saved his girl, after all; the least he could do was be civil to him. Plus, he had a bunch of questions to which he needed answers. Earlier, as they'd raced to where the Slayer was being held prisoner, hasty introductions were performed. Daniel had then explained that he was a Q'lathnyack demon. That they'd been a peaceful species until they'd been dominated by the Order of Taraka and forced into becoming killers because of their unique ability to "disappear." The men had rebelled at first, until the Order had started murdering their women and children. Daniel had told of his harrowing escape, how he'd been living on the run for the last century. How he'd spent that time picking off the Order's assassins one by one - but to little effect.

A few minutes later, Spike had reached their hotel. He parked the car, then sat there for a moment, trying to figure out how he was going to get the Slayer inside.

"I'll bring her... just to the doorway," Daniel added when he sensed the vampire about to argue.

Spike didn't like it, but the demon was right. He grabbed his quilt and dashed out the door to race to the side entrance of the hotel. Once within the safety of the building, he turned and waited while Daniel followed at a more leisurely pace.

He had barely crossed the threshold before Spike was snatching the Slayer out of his hands and starting down the hallway towards their room. He wasn't paying the demon any mind, his concern only for the slip of a girl held protectively in his arms, but knew that he followed behind just the same.

As he reached their door, Spike did a bit of juggling to reach his key - there was no way in hell that he was relinquishing his Slayer any more today. Hell, from now on, if she wanted to go out, she was just going to have to wait for him. He didn't think he could live through another episode like today.

Daniel made himself busy looking over the books on the table while the vampire settled the recovering Slayer in bed. One eye remained on him as Spike removed the protective blanket, noted the slight stiffening upon realizing the girl's state of undress. But other than a slight indrawn breath, he made no move to attack, something for which Daniel was extremely grateful. Though vampires were generally a promiscuous lot, this one was rather protective of the diminutive human now resting beneath the covers.

He heard a slight rustling and looked up from the table to see Spike walking towards him. The look in his eyes - worry mixed with hope - heartened Daniel. Proved that he'd been right in the assessment he'd given to Sheila. He could feel his own hopes start to rise. This vampire, along with the claimed Slayer, might actually pull it off.

And Daniel would do whatever it took, provide whatever information he could, to help the pair in their quest.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike stripped off his clothes and climbed in the bed beside the Slayer. Daniel has left a bit ago after hours spent strategizing on how best to sneak into the Order's stronghold without discovery. He had shown the demon the map of the compound that they'd unearthed, and Daniel had pointed out several secret

passages – slave’s passages – that could prove useful in a pinch. He’d nodded and marked on the map, committing the places to memory.

Daniel had gone on to talk about Sylam, the head of the Order of Taraka, and his right-hand man, Desdem. He’d regaled Spike with tales of the pair’s cruelty, something that the vampire could appreciate... if the resulting actions weren’t centered their way.

But, all of that – the information about the two, the ins-and-outs of the stronghold – none of that seemed to matter. It was the demon’s ominous words that had him pulling the Slayer close and purring reassuringly in her ear as he allowed the warmth of her body to lull him into sleep.

“You must be prepared to give up everything to defeat him.”

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy felt the tip of the whip slice into her breast and cried out in pain. Unlike before, when her body swung about in the chains with the force of the blow, this time, *this* time she stood unmoving as she was struck again and again.

The sound of his name – Spike’s name – bubbled up in her throat, and she struggled to keep it locked inside. She couldn’t – *wouldn’t* – permit her tormentor to wrangle the vampire’s name from her lips. Better for her to die, thus enabling the vampire to at least slip back to his brethren and disappear.

She heard the hiss of the whip as he drew back his arm and prepared to strike; she knew his next target and lifted defiant eyes to the hulking man-demon looming before her, daring him to mar her lips for refusing to give up her accomplice’s name.

He didn’t stop with her mouth, flaying her alive, turning her pale skin into a sea of red lines. She prayed for oblivion, for mind-numbing unconsciousness. He knew it too. And laughed maniacally while continuing his assault on her body.

“Who will save you now, Slayer?”

~*~*~*~*~

“Slayer!”

Buffy jerked awake, opening her eyes and noting the concerned amber gaze of the vampire looming above her.

“Spike?” she tried to get out around her dry throat. She watched as his face shifted, the rippled brows retreating and his eyes fading back to a blue so deep it took her breath away. But it was the concern in their depths that caused her to crumple. To finally give in to the tears she’d refused to shed.

Spike rolled to his back, bringing the Slayer to his side, holding her close as she gave in to the evil that had been done to her. He soothed her as best he could, running his hands down her back, over her arms. Reassuring himself, and her, that no marks remained on her pale body. That what had been done to her had been completely eradicated – except for the memories that lingered to torment her mind.

She was blubbering now, indistinguishable words and phrases that made no sense as her hysteria built. Spike pulled her closer until she was all but lying on top of him. But it wasn’t enough; she continued to fidget above him.

As if her back was exposed to the whip and she was trying to escape it.

With sudden insight, he rolled her beneath him, whispering in the Slayer’s ear that he would protect her. That the whip would have to go through him to reach her now. The words eventually penetrated her brain and she stopped her hysteric babbling, though she still continued to cry.

Spike leaned up on one elbow and watched helplessly while she purged herself of her tears. It was worse than before. When – he hesitated to even think the name. She’d cried then too. Not like now, though. The wrong had been done to *her* this time, and while no mark was visible on her body, she’d been violated rather brutally and it was her mind that needed to heal now.

It was awhile before she stopped, slipping back into an uneasy sleep. Spike finally relaxed his tense body, allowing himself to lay flush on top of the Slayer. His face nuzzled in her neck and he tried to get comfortable. It was an awkward position, but when he’d tried earlier to shift his weight off her, she’d clung to his back until he’d stopped moving. Sighing, he closed his eyes and slept.

~*~*~*~*~

When he woke, Spike was on his back and the Slayer was tucked against his side. His senses told him that it was still dark, but dawn was edging closer. He would have liked to change their location, pick a different motel, but he didn’t want to have to wake the Slayer. Better for him to take the chance and allow her to fully recover where they were than move to a new place and have their stay prolonged even more.

Besides, if he knew Daniel, the demon would be lurking about until they'd left Tel Aviv behind. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if the demon followed them until they reached the Order stronghold.

Spike knew he should have gotten out of bed. Since being in the Slayer's company, his sleeping patterns had been drastically changed. If he didn't watch it, he'd be sleeping all night and then climbing the walls because he was stuck inside hiding from the sun all day. He started to do just that, but then Buffy moaned in her sleep and he pulled her even closer and closed his eyes once more.

This time, it was late afternoon when he roused himself. He'd managed to sleep the remainder of the night and most of the next day.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter 5

It took them a week. A week spent backtracking while slowly making their way towards the Order of Taraka. A week spent on constant alert – so much so, that both Buffy and Spike were snapping at each other in annoyance. Nerves drawn taut as they tried to remain one step ahead of the Order's assassins.

At times, Spike felt like someone was out there. Watching them. He figured it was Daniel. Hoped it was, at least. After the two had spent that day going over everything the demon remembered – every little secret passage, every booby trap, every manned outpost inside the stronghold – he'd disappeared without a trace. It was just this last night, as they'd begun the final leg of their journey that his senses lay quiet.

Their ghost had disappeared.

The full moon illuminated the arched stone entryway into the fortress. Like Daniel had said, no less than ten armed assassins guarded it. Not a difficult feat by any stretch of the imagination – *if* you didn't mind having your cover blown. No, the front entrance was definitely out. Instead, his gaze honed in on the side door some distance along the wall, closer to the "fingers" that comprised the reputed exact duplicate of King Solomon's temple.

The secret servant's entrance.

That would be where he and the Slayer would sneak inside.

He glanced down at the girl by his side, taking note of her determined expression. Her heart was beating away inside her chest, her body beginning to flood with adrenaline. Good. She'd need every bit of it and then some. They had a lot of ground to cover, and once inside, it wouldn't be long before they were discovered and set upon by any available body housed within. He just prayed they'd have the stamina to see that done and still have enough energy to take on Desdem and Sylam.

"You must be prepared to give up everything to defeat him."

The words taunted him still. Night after night this past week he'd woken, instantly alert and reaching for Buffy – if she wasn't already curled up close to his side. If she thought his behavior was strange, she didn't comment on it. When he became a bit possessive in his lovemaking, she'd just hold him even closer in the aftermath – reassuring him that she was still there.

They timed their entrance to coincide just an hour or so before the few guards that stood sentry in front of the servant's entrance were relieved. Exhaustion would have set in from having to stand so long. That, and their senses should be dulled enough that they wouldn't sense his and the Slayer's approach. It was the best plan of attack – the only thing that could have helped more would be the absence of the full moon.

At a signal from him, Buffy slipped from his side and made a circuitous route towards the door. Spike went in the opposite direction. The plan was to come at it from either end at the same time and prevent the guards from escaping or sounding a warning.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy reached the side of the wall without incident and slowly began making her way towards the door. She was exposed now, but hoped that the tired guards wouldn't have need to turn her way. If she could just remain quiet...

She paused suddenly, thinking that she sensed someone in front of her. She squinted her eyes to concentrate on the empty wall that lay between her and the guard. Though the full moon illuminated her way, she didn't have Spike's enhanced senses. Nothing *seemed* out of place, but her slayer senses were screaming all kinds of warnings at her. She waited another five minutes, but nothing jumped out at her. And though the tingles on the back of her neck were still present, she started forward once again.

After another handful of soundless steps that brought her closer to the entrance, she stopped again. Spike had almost reached the two guards from his side. He seemed to look straight at her and nod. Surely he knew that she wasn't close enough yet to —

She blinked in wide-eyed amazement, as if she couldn't actually believe what she was seeing. A set of arms seemed to reach out from the door, a knife held in one hand. As one closed around the guard's mouth, another well-placed jab of the knife slipped through the assassin's ribs and punctured his heart. At the same time, Spike attacked the other; some claws and fangs, and the second guard dropped soundlessly to the ground.

Buffy hurried forward, her mind still trying to wrap itself around what she'd just witnessed. Then a figure separated itself from the wall, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She *wasn't* going crazy!

"Say hello to Daniel, luv," Spike murmured once she'd drawn near.

She watched the man, head cocked to the side. She'd seen him before, but couldn't place where. At least she thought she had. Shaking the nagging thought off, she offered a tentative hello.

"What *are* you? I thought the building had grown arms there for a second."

Daniel chuckled.

"I'm a Q'lathnyack demon. It's our gift. Though, since the Order's persecution, it's more like a curse."

"Oh... it's uh... nice to meet you." She turned to Spike saying, "Spike, we gotta go."

"You comin' with us, mate?"

"No. From here, you are on your own. Just remember what I told you. Make the temple work for you. The assassins here will not lower themselves by taking the slave's paths. That will help you until you reach the entrance to Jachin and Boaz. Take the left entrance. The trials are harder, but fewer. Good luck to you both."

He was gone a second later. Slipping inside the building and immediately disappearing from sight.

Spike followed the demon inside. He could still feel him, but it was getting more and more faint as the seconds passed. Eyeing the door at the end of the chamber, Spike figured the demon must have been heading in that direction.

Turning away from the door, he reached down and grasped the Slayer's hand. "This way, luv."

~*~*~*~*~

Swords and other miscellaneous weapons in hand, Buffy and Spike slipped back into the servant's passageway as they snuck out of the weapon room. So far, their cover had yet to be blown. Something that made both eternally grateful. Surprisingly, the passageway was empty – it was as if the servants were privy to information the assassins weren't. Spike just prayed it was Daniel's doing, and not a trap getting ready to be sprung.

They finally reached the end of the long corridor and Spike stopped, signaling Buffy to do the same. He cocked his head to the side and listened intently, trying to determine if it was safe to exit. Nothing came back to him, so he placed his hand on the latch and inched the portal open. His head poked around the edge, and his eyes confirmed what his ears had determined – no one lurked about in the area.

He stepped from behind the door and gestured for the Slayer to follow. Daniel had said to take the left side, so that's where he headed.

There was no door at the entrance to the Boaz corridor, no lights either. Not so much a problem for him, but could prove difficult for the Slayer. He snagged her hand again and whispered for her to stay close then took a few tentative steps forward.

His sensitive ears picked up the near-soundless click, and he dropped to a crouch bringing the Slayer with him just seconds before the hiss of a giant blade cut through the air where their heads used to be.

"Nice reflexes there, Spike," Buffy managed to get out around her erratic breathing, eyeing the blade embedded in the far wall.

"You too, luv. Come on."

He helped her to her feet and started off again.

~*~*~*~*~

"Next time we're taking door number two," Buffy mumbled once they reached the far door. Both were a little worse for wear. Buffy had a few nicks and bruises where they'd been a bit slow in their reactions; Spike sported a few burn marks, the most notable one on his hand that he got when he'd had to shove it through a wall of fire to turn a crank and prevent another booby-trap from springing. "Here, lemme see."

"It's nothing, Slayer. Just a scratch."

"Scratch, my ass. Let me see."

She snatched his hand and held it up for her inspection. Her eyes took in every mark, and while nothing appeared to be life threatening, that he'd done it for her warmed a place inside her heart. A smile softened her expression as she gazed up at him. A second later, Spike snatched his hand back, and the moment was lost.

"Told ya it was just a scratch. Now, come on," he huffed. "And keep your voice down, don't know what's on the other..."

He pushed the door open, his voice trailed off, only to be replaced by a bellow of pain as a sword was run through his abdomen.

"You really didn't think it would be that easy, did you, *vampire?*" The demon twisted the sword causing another scream to tear from Spike's throat.

"Spike!"

Buffy launched herself at the demon, and winced in pain once she collided with it. She did manage to dislodge the sword from Spike's stomach and noticed him sink to the ground before she was backhanded by the behemoth and sent hurtling further into the chamber.

'Is seven feet a height requirement?' she thought, rubbing the back of her head as she regained her footing. The demon was huge, easily the tallest thing she'd ever encountered. She pulled her sword out and prepared to take on, whom she could only assume, was Desdem.

"Ah, so the Slayer wants to play too?" The demon chuckled as if amused by his question.

His eyes gleamed an unnatural shade of yellow when he charged.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy struggled to maintain her defensive stance as Desdem rained down blow after blow, the sound of steel on steel ringing throughout the room. *'Has it only been a few minutes?'* She was weakening. Fast. And she knew it. Though possessed with slayer strength, she seemed no match alone against the top assassin's right-hand man. She needed Spike. She couldn't take much more...

Her sword went clattering after a bone-numbing block and she closed her eyes, waiting for the final blow.

But it never came.

Spike had managed to stop the demon's downward thrust at the last moment, the clank of steel as the two swords clashed rang in her ears.

"Nobody messes with my girl, you overgrown git," he growled and went on the offense. This time it was Desdem in full retreat as Spike's rage fueled his attack.

Buffy scrambled to her feet and retrieved her sword. Then it was two on one, until finally, Spike pierced the demon's heart and Buffy finished with a swing to his head.

She risked a smile for the vampire standing beside her as she rested the tip of her sword against the ground.

"Wasn't so tough, was... he...?"

Her eyes grew wide and she stared up at Spike before they glanced down to see the sword protruding from the front of her chest. She looked back up and noticed the horror-stricken expression on Spike's face. Watched in a kind of slow-motion haze as he reached out to catch her when the sword was ripped from her body. She didn't feel the arms that caught her before she could crumble to the floor. Didn't hear the bellowed denial of the vampire when blood pooling from her mortal wound coated the front of his duster.

Using the last bit of strength she possessed, she raised her hand to his tear-streaked face.

"Sorry... S-Spike..."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter 6

The lack of the Slayer's heartbeat sounded deathly loud in the deserted chamber. He could hear Sylam circling him, chuckling in mirth at his pain. The sadistic bastard.

"Come now, vampire. What do you care if the Slayer dies? There'll be another to take her place. Any minute now, I'm guessing."

Spike ignored him, carefully laying Buffy's head on the ground, memorizing her features. His fingers brushed across her lips one last time before they closed around the hilt of his sword. As he stood, his grief-stricken expression was wiped from his face. In his mind's eye, Sylam had become like the slayers in his past.

And he was about to have one good day.

Spike rolled his neck and flexed his jaw, his sword twirled a few times in his hand as he moved away from Buffy towards the Order's ringleader.

"Sylam, I presume?" he asked, continuing to circle his opponent, looking for an opening.

Sylam smiled, giving the vampire a mock bow in acknowledgment. "I see my reputation precedes me. Tell me... who do I have to thank for that?"

"What does it matter? Another few minutes and you'll be dead, and the point'll be moot."

The two adversaries continued to circle one another, neither in any hurry to land the first blow. They were watching, however. Looking for any weaknesses, picking apart the other's moves.

"Cocky! I like that in an opponent. Another time, and you could have fit in here."

Spike struck without warning. Three quick sweeps of his sword, two of which Sylam managed to counter. The third drew blood - a thin line across the demon's chest - as it sliced through the shirt he wore. Spike withdrew as quickly as he'd attacked, once more circling around his adversary. Eyes on constant alert for another opening.

"Bit of a loner, myself. 'm not one to tow the company line, if you catch my meanin'." He smirked at the demon, flashing fangs that just itched to sink into the demon's neck.

"Insolence!" Sylam raged.

His smirk grew into a full-fledged smile. "Yeah..."

Then he attacked again.

~*~*~*~*~

Both were winded, but determined not to show it. They'd lost track of time, but it had been awhile. Their arms growing weaker at the constant swinging of their swords.

"You'll never defeat me," Sylam got out as he barely blocked another attack. "Better men than you have tried."

"I'm not a man. I'm a vampire," Spike replied, undeterred in his aim to see the demon dead.

"It's a prophecy, you know," Sylam went on like Spike had never spoken, winded now as he continued to find purchase with his sword. "Written in some codex long forgotten."

"Something about giving everything up..." Spike snorted, pausing momentarily in his attack. "Yeah, I know."

"So you see —"

"I *did* give up everything, you bastard," Spike growled, giving a vicious swipe of his sword, that, had it connected, would have severed the demon's head from his shoulders.

"You?" Sylam scoffed as jumped back out of the way. "What could you —" He watched the vampire's gaze narrow in anger and bit back a laugh. "Ahhh... the Slayer. Nice piece of —"

"Shut your gob!" Spike snarled. In a blinding rage, he charged Sylam.

Thrust.

Thrust.

Slash.

Each time, Sylam was there. As if he'd known beforehand the moves Spike had been about to make. On the last swipe, he made a big sweeping circle with his arms when their two swords collided, causing Spike to temporarily lose his

balance – if not the grip on his sword. Sylam took advantage and repaid the favor with the tip of his sword against the vampire’s middle. He laughed as his opponent jumped back out of reach.

“Tell me... demon to vampire...” Sylam taunted. “Didn’t you just love it when her heart stopped? All that blood... Mmmm... the smell. Makes you hard just thinking –”

“Fuck you!”

Spike’s sword swung out blindly in retaliation.

“That *is* your thing, isn’t it, Spike? The self-professed ‘*Slayer of Slayers*’?”

Sylam was openly taunting him now, allowing the vampire’s rage to take hold. Waiting until it consumed him, made him careless. Then he’d be there. A quick flick against the vampire’s neck and goodbye. It would be a shame, though. The vampire really did have potential – a natural killer. And obviously not lacking in the brains department since he’d managed to find their secret stronghold.

Pity.

~*~*~*~*~

‘You’re letting him get to you.’

‘Shut up. ‘m fighting here.’

‘No you’re not. You’re losing. He’s feeding on your rage. Waiting for you to make a mistake.’

‘He’s weakening.’

‘It’s a ploy.’

‘Is not.’

‘The Slayer would agree with me. He’s baiting you. And you’re letting him.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You need to put her from your mind. Concentrate on Sylam. He’s expecting you to fight fair. It’s time to stop.’

'What do you suggest?'

'I'm so glad you asked...'

~*~

"Not with her," Spike clarified.

He pulled his punches a bit, making it appear that his rush of anger was ebbing, that he was getting weaker. Some of his swings sailed wide of their target, missing the demon completely. Those were the most dangerous of all – missing outright, but making sure he was able to counter once he left himself wide open and vulnerable to attack.

"What's so special about her? Plenty more where she came from."

Spike growled and lunged again. Again he feigned his growing weakness. Causing Sylam to chuckle at his fumbling.

"Look at you. All worked up... and for what?"

He went on the attack, driving the vampire back, determined to see the end of this fight. Though, he had to give the vampire credit. Spike was outmatched and tiring fast, but still wouldn't give up.

'No matter. Another minute of this and he'll be nothing but dust.'

"She was my everything, you bastard. She was all I had left," Spike snarled.

As their swords came together again, Spike leaned in. He smiled suddenly, causing the other demon to stumble in confusion. Then Spike released one hand from his sword and punched Sylam in the face.

The force of the blow caused the demon to stumble back several paces, providing Spike with the opening he'd been waiting for. He was on him in an instant. Sword, claws, a headbutt or two – each tactic kept Sylam off his game until the other demon was lashing out at Spike in rage. Wasting *his* energy.

Spike was openly smiling now, thrilling to the dance as his opponent was swathed in his own blood. The scent egging his demon on to more destruction. More mayhem.

"What's the matter?" Spike taunted. "Gotta broken nose? Need to run home to your mum?" He twirled his sword with his wrist then swung it in a downward

arc towards Sylam. The demon somehow managed to block the move, but not the punch to his face or the kick to the back of his leg that sent him down on one knee.

“How?” Sylam managed to gasp out.

“You didn’t really think your little taunts were getting to me, did you?” They had been, but Sylam didn’t need to know that. “You must not’ve looked too deep in my past. Been a bloody vampire over a hundred years. Learned a thing or two about mind games. Angelus was a master at them.”

In the midst of his speech, Sylam had lost his sword – which suited Spike just fine. He tossed his own aside and went to work on the head assassin using just his fists and feet...and the occasional claw.

Minutes later, the nearly defeated Sylam was struggling to remain upright. One eye was completely sealed shut, the other not far behind. Cuts and bruises marred his face, and blood dribbled from a lip split several times over. He had one useless arm clutched tight to his side, protecting his cracked ribs.

Not that it mattered.

Spike went to work on the other side.

He took great delight in every grunt, every moan of pain that escaped the demon’s mouth. Images of his broken slayer were forefront in his mind, and he repaid every lash she’d received, every cut or bruise she’d suffered, in kind.

“No more,” Sylam gasped as he fell to the floor yet again.

Spike crouched over the fallen demon. “No more? No more?!?! So what? I’m just supposed to kill you? Put you out of your misery now?”

At the demon’s pitiful groan, Spike laughed. He grabbed the tattered remains of Sylam’s shirt and hauled his upper body up off the floor until they were nose-to-nose. “You chose to come after me, you git. Then you took away the one thing I had left in this world. So killing you anytime soon *ain’t* gonna happen.”

~*~*~*~*~

Spike pushed himself to his feet and stumbled away from all that remained of the Order’s top man. Angelus, the old Angelus, would have been proud of him. He’d played for hours alone inside the sacrificial chamber. According to Daniel,

only Sylam and Desdem had access to the place, thus enabling Spike to torture the demon at his leisure.

And had he.

The demon's screams had bounced off the stone walls while he'd had his fun. His railroad spike days were nothing compared to what had been done to Sylam. He'd lived in the moment, drawing out the demon's anguish until he'd died from the combination of endless pain and unrelenting torture he'd endured. When he'd drawn his last breath, Spike had reclaimed his sword and hacked Sylam into unrecognizable pieces. Daniel hadn't said how to ensure the demon's death, but a million tiny pieces ought to have done the trick.

Now, weary beyond belief, and with no one to bear witness, he allowed the anguish of the Slayer's death to take hold.

Spike dropped to his knees beside her and pulled her body onto his lap, finally letting loose with the tears he'd wanted to shed. He couldn't put into words what her death meant to him. From mortal enemies to reluctant allies. Then lovers, and he'd like to think, even friends – they'd experienced it all. Now he was back to being alone, and he'd never had a chance to say –

His body rocked back and forth as he cried.

How had she managed to come to mean so much to him in so short a time? What was it about her – a bloody slayer, no less – that had made him purr in contentment when she was near? Made him modify his natural instinct to kill any and all that crossed his path when he fed to where he was searching out the lowlifes, the criminals, the dregs of society, just because it helped ease her conscience?

He knew the answer, but shied away from it. It wasn't right. Wasn't natural.

'So you claimed her why again? Face it, William, you'll always be love's bitch.'

Spike stared down at the Slayer and could no longer hide the truth from himself. Sometime in the last few months he'd fallen in love with the girl. It wasn't something that he'd planned, or wanted. He couldn't even say when it happened, but he did know that his attitude had softened the moment she'd given him Dru's ashes. And if they'd never been thrust together like they had, he wouldn't have been able to bring himself to kill her.

She'd earned his undying gratitude with her selfless act.

So lost in his grief, he didn't register Daniel's presence until the demon spoke.

"It's time to leave. Bring Buffy and come on."

The heartless attitude of the demon had Spike's head snapping up and a growl emanating from his throat.

"Spike! We've got to —" The loud rumbling as the floor began to shake cut off Daniel's voice for a moment. "Look... I don't have time to explain things right now. This place is about to come crashing in around our ears. Now, bring Buffy and follow me."

Spike glanced around and watched as decorations scattered about the room began to vibrate and tumble to the ground. He stood, sweeping the Slayer's lifeless body up into his arms and followed Daniel back the way he'd come.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter 7

With the Slayer held in his arms, Spike moved off after Daniel. His pace was slow, unhurried, as if it didn't matter to him that mini-explosions were occurring all around. What did it really matter if he escaped anyway? The Slayer was dead, her lifeless body draped over his arms, her arms and legs dangling uselessly as he walked onward.

Daniel glanced back over his shoulder at the morose vampire. He'd like to tell him that the Slayer wasn't really dead. That she *couldn't* really die anymore – all thanks to Sheila. But first he had to get them to safety. The timed charges he and his other imprisoned brethren had set were going off, working at the support structures of the Order's stronghold. They needed to get out of there... and fast!

"Come on!"

The vampire continued his ambling gait, oblivious to him, and everything else going on.

"Dammit, Spike! She's not dead. But if you keep this up, you *will* be. Now let's go."

Unfortunately, an explosion sounded, and none of Daniel's yelled explanation was heard by the vampire. Disgusted, he stalked back towards Spike, wasting precious time to explain things to him.

“Spike. Look at me. Buffy. Is. Not. Dead. Her body is in stasis. She can’t—”

Spike’s head jerked up. Anger. Hope. Fear. It was all there in his eyes for Daniel to see.

“Now... before you rip my head off... I couldn’t tell you. Hell, would you just come on before this building caves in on us? I promise, I’ll explain what I can... only... once we’re on the outside. Now, come *on!*”

Daniel turned on his heel and took off running. He hazarded a glance of his shoulder and was pleased to see the vampire right behind him. They raced through the servant’s passageway as the deafening explosions got louder and louder. Some of the walls were starting to buckle and chunks of stone fell to the ground in front of them. The pair easily vaulted the rubble blocking their escape route. Cries of panic were coming from up ahead, the servants desperate to escape before they were buried alive. Daniel and Spike quickly gained on the group and wormed their way through the throng until Daniel found the secret passage he was looking for.

He pushed a hidden lever and gestured for Spike to precede him through the entrance, then followed behind. He didn’t bother resealing the door, the others milling behind him in a panic could follow if they wanted. The short passage led to sleeping quarters once assigned to the male Q’lathnyack demons. The two raced down the length of the chamber and out through another door into a main lobby.

The ceiling was starting to cave, but neither paid it any mind as they bolted across the room towards the door that would lead them to safety.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy’s eyes snapped open. Disoriented, she tried to figure out where she was. Her whole body hurt, and the constant jarring wasn’t helping matters. She moaned in pain and felt herself start to free-fall as whatever had been holding her loosened its grip. But the sensation was gone a second later, her body cradled protectively once more.

Still drained, she relaxed against the hard wall of the person carrying her, her cheek lying flush against some soft, unrecognizable material. She inhaled deeply before sleep pulled her back towards its restorative slumber, oddly comforted by the faint trace of cigarette smoke that teased her nostrils. As her body relaxed once more, her mind conjured up an image of her protector.

“Spike.”

~*~*~*~*~

Spike's grip on the Slayer tightened when he heard his name whispered from her lips. Knowing that he had to be hurting her, he forced himself to relax his stranglehold as he hurried across the room and escaped outside. The cool night air washed over his senses, the distant screams of others still clambering to get out of the crumbling building floated on the slight breeze; he glanced up and down the Order's crumbling stronghold to see others fleeing to safety.

"This way," Daniel urged, guiding them around the structure's perimeter towards three trucks and a fairly large group gathering near them.

Spike paused upon spying the other demons, but Daniel's assurance that they were friends got him moving once again. He felt their eyes on him and watched warily as they shifted their gaze between him and the Slayer – his body instinctively tensed in preparation.

"Everyone, this is Spike...and the Slayer."

The demons began quietly murmuring amongst themselves, and Spike picked up faint traces of, "It's him," and, "He's the one."

A stray arrow came out of nowhere and imbedded itself in the hood of one of the vehicles, effectively silencing the group. Spike ducked, shielding Buffy as he went. The males of the bunch separated to race after the sniper. The woman and children – that Spike just now noticed – plastered themselves against the surface of the trucks and instantly "disappeared."

'That's just bloody *great!*'

Another arrow whizzed through the air, aimed towards Spike since he was the only visible target remaining. He dodged it and raced around to the other side of the vehicle, using it as a shield.

Spike hated the uncertainty of kneeling there behind the truck, allowing others to see to the threat to both him and the Slayer, but there was no way he was going to leave her right now to take care of the matter himself. The minutes seemed to tick by interminably before he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He rose up until the top of his head peeked over the front hood and breathed a sigh of relief at the Q'lathnyacks return.

"It's alright," Daniel called out to everyone as he neared, and one by one, the women and children separated themselves from the trucks and became visible once more.

"Are you alright?" Daniel asked as he stopped before Spike.

"Yeah... friends of yours?" he asked, referring to the dead assassins that had been targeting them.

Daniel snorted.

"Not anymore. Come on. Let's get you inside the truck before the sun rises and turns you into a crispy critter. There's blankets and pillows inside for the Slayer."

"About that..."

"Later."

Spike's eyes narrowed menacingly, but he held back a growl and got in the truck. There'd be plenty of time to get the answers he wanted. And he *would* get them too, even if he had to sit on Daniel to make the demon talk.

"Come on, luv. Let's get you settled, yeah?" he murmured to the sleeping girl in his arms.

He walked around to the back of the truck and jumped up into the bed. Others were already huddled in clusters inside, but Spike could see that a place had been made for him. With his body slightly hunched over so that his head didn't scrape against the canvas top, he gingerly stepped over bodies and made his way towards the pallet that had been created for them.

Spike set the Slayer down on the piled blankets, his senses in tune to pick up her slightest whimper of pain. He grabbed one of the folded blankets next to him and covered her from neck to feet, so that only her head was visible. Then, paying the others no mind, he stretched out behind her and drew her back into his arms. She didn't let out so much as a peep, just slept on, oblivious to those that stared.

Sleep for Spike was another matter entirely. He didn't completely trust the demons sandwiched in the back of the truck with him and the Slayer, even though the majority of them were women and children. He tuned his mind out to their soft, hesitant smiles, his defenses on high alert in case they should try and catch him off guard.

~*~*~*~*~

They traveled the length of the daylight hours, and though Spike could feel the pull of sleep, his exhausted body lulled by the ambling rhythm of the truck, he

dared not rest. The last time he'd not remained vigilant, the Slayer had been badly hurt; he'd not have a repeat occurrence if it was in his power to do so.

Not when he'd just been given the gift of her return.

His stoic expression remained in place despite his exhaustion, and he was grateful that the group kept to themselves. There was a brief altercation when one of the demons near him shifted too close and he growled reflexively, fangs bared. Surprisingly, they took his manner in stride; the female had offered a smile in apology and shifted further away, giving him the space he felt he needed.

The vehicles finally rolled to a stop sometime after dusk. The women and children, their faces worn and tired throughout the seemingly endless journey, came alive as they rose to climb out of the bed of the truck.

Spike sat up and gathered the Slayer close. At the edge of the truck, he paused to glance at the surrounding scenery. They'd been steadily climbing the last hour and he took in the sloping hills they'd traveled over to reach the small mountain range. A few campfires were being lit by some of the male Q'lathnyacks and Spike noticed the caves that the women were leading the children towards.

He hopped off the back of the truck and was relieved when he saw a familiar face approaching. Though not one of the Q'lathnyacks had bothered him, he was still on edge.

"What's this?" he asked as Daniel drew near.

"Home. We Q'lathnyacks were a simply species before being enslaved by the Order. We've lived in these mountains for eons. You and the Slayer will be safe here. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Safe? Sure, I took out that bastard Sylam, but there are others..."

"It's being taken care of."

Spike nodded. After what their race had endured, he didn't doubt the males would be out seeking a bit of retribution.

"Come on. I'll show you where you can sleep."

Daniel led Spike through the labyrinth of passageways tucked inside the mountain and he had to wonder at the other demon's uncanny sense of direction. Hell, the only way he'd be able to get out of there was with the aid of

his preternatural senses – and even *that* wasn't a given to his success. The convoluted tunnels were a natural defense in their own right, and caused Spike to wonder how they'd been caught in the first place. He asked as much of the demon.

"Just unlucky, I guess." His tone of voice made it clear that the subject was a touchy matter, and Spike let it drop.

"Here," Daniel pointed, gesturing to an arched doorway. A bolt of cloth had been hastily strung to provide them some privacy. Daniel lifted the curtain and waved them in. Inside, he noticed that one of his people had brought in a pallet and placed it against the far wall like he'd requested. "If you need anything else, let me know."

Daniel moved to leave the two alone, but Spike stopped his hasty exit.

"Oh no you don't. You're gonna tell me what the hell just went on back there," he growled at the departing demon. He still held the Slayer in his arms, but it would be a simple matter of setting her down and going after Daniel if the demon tried to leave. Spike thought he'd damn well been patient enough. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now. "And don't even think about disappearin', because right about now I'll grab the nearest brat 'n –"

Daniel turned around and looked incredulous at the vampire. He knew it was a bluff; deep down in his heart, he knew. But, taking in Spike's demeanor you'd never be able to tell.

"You don't have to threaten –"

Spike cut him off.

"I'll do whatever it takes to get some answers."

Daniel sighed and walked further into the room and sat on the floor since the place had yet to be supplied with any other furniture. His actions seemed to set the vampire at ease, and he laid the Slayer down on the pallet and sat down next to her.

"It was Sheila's doing," he began, eyes fixed on the wall and not on Spike.

"The healer?"

"She's no ordinary healer. You have to understand she's... A vampire killed her parents. One of the Order's assassins. See... Sylam had learned of a special

healer. One that could heal mortal wounds. But not only that. She had a special gift. A gift that he'd do anything to possess. Immortality." He whispered the last.

His eyes closed in memory of that fateful day. Of the girl that had drawn his blood as she'd fought to break free of his grip and return to her parents. "I couldn't save her parents and neither could she. They were already dead, but she didn't know that at the time. I managed to spirit her away and keep her hidden from the Order. She was only five, Spike. A five-year-old girl that knew nothing of the evils of men or demons, forced, like me, to live in exile."

Daniel opened his eyes and turned his head to look at the vampire.

"I knew she was capable of healing your Slayer, but I wasn't sure if she would do it. She's grown into a mature young woman, but the hate is still there. I was counting on her hate for Sylam to override her repugnance at helping a vampire."

"It worked," the soft, melodic voice sounded from the doorway.

Spike was off his butt and crouched protectively in front of the Slayer before Daniel could gain his feet and gasp out Sheila's name. He growled as the witch started into the room, fearful that she'd come to undo the magic that had been done to the slayer.

"Sheila! What are you doing here? How —"

"Do you honestly think I didn't know of your home, Daniel? All those secret trips you made up here?"

Daniel flushed slightly at her censure.

"I was going to come get you once I had everyone settled."

"I got tired of waiting. Besides, I wanted to meet the vampire that freed me from my self-imposed prison." She turned away from the Q'lathnyack demon to look down at the vampire guarding the sleeping girl.

"You told me, and I saw the marks firsthand, but I wouldn't have believed it without seeing for myself," she commented to Daniel, her narrowed gaze never leaving the dark-haired vampire. "You can stop, you know. I'm not going to hurt her. And I can't take back what I've done, even if I wanted to, so you've nothing to fear there."

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't believe you," Spike snarked back, staring hard at the cloaked figure standing beside the Q'lathnyack demon.

"It's true," Daniel added. "It's why –"

"It's why I healed her. If you thought her death would release you from your claim, you're wrong. You're stuck with her now," she sneered. "Forever."

If the witch thought that was going to upset him, she was in for a long wait. A smile came unbidden to his lips, causing her to frown, but he'd already turned away from the two and gazed down at the slumbering Slayer so didn't see.

"He loves her," Daniel murmured to the astonished girl at his side.

"Love? What kind of vampire is he?" she asked, confusion evident on her features.

"I don't know, Sheila. But, it was how he was finally able to bring down the Order. Now come. Let's leave these two alone and let me introduce you to the others."

They quickly departed, pulling the curtain in front of the entrance as they walked out.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike reached out his hand, allowing his fingers to ghost over Buffy's face. His anxiety as to the Slayer's fate eased and he could feel his body start to shut down – recognizing the haven for what it was. After the past week of being on edge, the anguish that had been Buffy's death, and the energy-draining battle with Sylam afterwards, only to be followed up by spending the entire day on constant alert as he watched over her, Spike was ready to sink to the pallet beside the Slayer and sleep for a solid forty-eight hours. He told himself he couldn't, though. That he needed to stay awake and keep an eye on her.

But that didn't mean he couldn't hold her while he did that.

He shrugged out of his duster and lay down behind her so that his back was against the wall. Careful, so as not to wake her, he pulled her back against his chest allowing her head to rest upon his arm. Her breathy sigh warmed someplace inside him he'd thought had withered and died with the death of his sire. She seemed to melt into him, like she knew exactly who held her. He nuzzled her hair and bestowed a kiss to her neck, causing her to moan slightly in her sleep. And he stopped, lest he wake her.

Daniel hadn't said how long she'd need to regain her strength, and he didn't want to rush her recovery. They had all the time in the world, now. He rested his head on the pillow and kept his eyes trained on the door, determined to look after her until she'd woken.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy's hunger pulled her from a deep slumber. That, and a desperate need to relieve herself. Laying there, her eyes still closed, she had to smile at the vampire behind her. Both of his arms were wrapped around her, and for added measure, he'd thrown one of his legs over hers. There was no way she was getting up without waking him.

Well, she thought that, until she turned in his arms and he didn't flinch. She knew he wasn't faking either. His body was deathly still, a state only achieved when he was in deep slumber. Any other time and his restless energy would give him away.

She brushed her lips against his, and frowned when he didn't move. He must be really tired if he hadn't even stirred. The demands of her bladder made themselves known again; she really had to go. Reluctantly, she pulled away and got to her feet. She could hear the sounds of activity coming from the other side of the curtain. Her inbred warning system lay quiet. Whatever was on the other side wasn't a danger to her, or Spike. That, plus the fact that Spike had fallen asleep in their presence, persuaded her to step outside their room.

Men, women, and children were rushing around in what appeared to be some type of cave. Lighted torches were placed about the open area providing much-needed light. No one seemed to pay her any mind as she ventured further from Spike. Yet she'd taken only a handful of steps when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She jerked around, her body in attack mode, and gasped when she saw the familiar face of the Q'lathnyack demon.

"Daniel! You scared me half to death!"

"Uh, sorry." He looked a bit sheepish, and she smiled to soften her outburst. "Was there something you needed?"

Her stomach chose that moment to make her hunger known.

"Hungry?" he asked. "You have been out of it for quite some time."

"Some food would be nice, but a bathroom would be better. Though, by the looks of things, I'm going to be squatting in some corner, huh?"

Daniel grinned. "We're not as archaic as we seem. Our people have been—"

"Daniel? Bathroom. Now."

Daniel stopped one of the women as she made to pass. "Mela, can you show Buffy to the women's rooms."

"Certainly. If you'll follow me?"

The secluded room she was led to wasn't the Ritz by any stretch of the imagination, but it wasn't a hole in the ground either. Grateful, she hurried away from the demon and took care of her needs. When she reemerged a few minutes later, the woman was still there.

"Would you like a bath as well?"

"A bath? You're kidding right? I'd kill for a bath right now!"

The woman backed up a few spaces, an expression of horror on her face.

"No, no, no!" Buffy rushed to assure her. "It's a... I wouldn't really... I'm just surprised you have a means..." She could see the confusion on her face, and Buffy grumbled to herself, "Way to stick your foot into your mouth, Buffy."

The woman giggled and Buffy smiled.

"A bath would be perfect. You wouldn't, by chance, have a change of clothes, would you?"

"I think I could find something, yes."

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy spent the next thirty minutes in the hot water springs hidden deeper within the room. The water had taken a minute to get used to, but the heat felt good on her aching body. As she'd soaked, her mind had gone over everything that had happened at the Order's stronghold. She remembered being run through with the sword, and had felt herself going cold as her life had slowly slipped away. She remembered looking up into Spike's eyes, seeing the disbelief and anguish in them as he'd caught her.

The next thing she'd remembered was waking up in his arms earlier.

She'd looked down at her chest and there'd been no evidence of a wound. It was like it had never happened.

When Mela came back with a change of clothes and a towel, Buffy forced herself to get out of the water. She dried off quickly and pulled on the borrowed clothes. Her stomach made its need for food known a moment later, growling loud enough that everyone within the cave probably heard it. She draped her towel over a rock and walked out of the women's room.

People were still busy milling around, trying to bring order to the place. Though the cave was obviously inhabited, given its condition, it had been awhile since anyone had lived there. The men were carting out broken and irreparable items; the women were busy cleaning and... Buffy breathed in deeply... cooking. Her mouth started to water at the scent and she hurried in the direction she thought it was coming from.

In another room, several pitted fires were covered with assorted meats. Her eyes glazed over at all the food in front of her.

"Here. Have a piece of fruit," Daniel offered as he walked up beside her. "Should tide you over until some of the other stuff's finished cooking. Where's Spike?"

Buffy took the fruit out of his hand and seemed to devour it in a few bites. She was still hungry, but the juicy treat had taken the edge off her hunger. "Still sleeping... what happened?" she asked around a mouthful of food.

"He didn't tell you?"

"No." She swallowed the last bite down. "He must be really tired. Did he... did he kill him? Sylam?"

"Yeah. Then I, along with a few others, set charges to the building and reduced it to a pile of rubble. The Order's been decimated. Thanks to you two."

"Well, I didn't do much. If I remember right, I was skewered with a sword. So, why is it that I'm not dead?"

"That would be my doing."

Buffy turned around to see a woman walking towards them. She was about ten years her senior and stood a head taller, but the woman's unlined face wasn't what gave her away. It was her eyes. The unnatural green shade couldn't hide the pain and suffering she'd endured.

"I know you," Buffy replied.

"I'm surprised you remember," Sheila commented. "You were in a lot of pain and barely alive when you were brought to me."

"You're the one that fixed me. After... after the..."

"The whip? Yes. That was me. But fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, I don't just heal people."

"Sheila's not just a healer, Buffy. She gifts them with immortality when she fixes them," Daniel explained.

"So what? I'm like, never going to die?"

"Never going to get old. Never going to die. Though your body feels like hell when someone tries. But each time it gets better. The healing comes faster," Sheila confirmed.

"It was how Spike was able to defeat Sylam," Daniel told her. "He had to believe you'd died in order to defeat him."

"He did?"

"She didn't know?" Sheila asked Daniel.

"Know?" Buffy asked. "Know what? Obviously I didn't if I'm asking." Her gaze flicked from one to the other, waiting for an answer.

"He tried to protect her," Sheila murmured.

"I told you this already, Sheila," Daniel commented wryly.

"Would someone mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Spike could only defeat Sylam if he gave up everything to obtain his goal. *You* were his everything, Slayer. When you... died... Buffy, you were the last tangible thing he had on this earth. After Spike finally killed him and walked back to you? He was broken. He knelt down by your side and pulled you into his lap. He was going to just stay there and let the walls come down on him as he wallowed in his grief."

Buffy couldn't listen to any more. Her eyes were swimming with unshed tears and she turned and raced back to the room she and Spike shared.

He loved her. Her stubborn, brash, evil, and thoroughly sexy vampire *loved* her. She wasn't sure about their plans for the future - where they'd go, what they'd do. All she did know was that she wasn't letting him out of her sight.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Epilogue

Spike knew before he even opened his eyes that someone was staring at him. Could actually *feel* the person's intense gaze boring into his face. And he knew instinctively that it was the Slayer. Especially given that he knew she wasn't lying down in front of him, his arms not holding her close to his chest. Then there was the fact that if anyone else had slipped around the curtain and into the room, he would have been awake in an instant. No matter *how* exhausted he might have been.

His eyes opened, his blue gaze taking in her fixed stare. She was thinking hard, her intense expression something he'd witnessed often enough these past weeks.

Now that they'd accomplished what they set out to do, he was worried that she was thinking about going home. To Sunnydale. Forgetting him and their developing relationship.

He didn't know what he'd do if she tried to walk away. He'd like to think that she'd choose to stay with him. Especially after all they'd been through.

But as she sat there unmoving, lost in her own thoughts, the more concerned he became.

His nervousness manifested itself into anger, until he was practically seething as he waited for her to finally notice him watching her. He could feel himself about to erupt, tear into her for wanting to go her separate way - not that she'd even *remotely* voiced that that was what she wanted. His own mind had taken his worst-case scenario, his worst fear, and magnified it to the nth degree.

Spike was all set to sit up and tear into her when she seemed to come to some sort of decision. He watched as she blinked repeatedly for a moment, as if unaware that she'd zoned out. Her gaze shifted slightly, and then she was looking down at him - *really* looking.

And what he saw reflected in her eyes?

Well, let's just say that he was familiar with the look. Knew for a certainty that if he could see his reflection, his own eyes would be mirroring the same emotion.

She loved him.

His slayer loved him, and she didn't seem like she was opposed to the idea. In fact, if the smile she was now gifting him with was any indication, she seemed rather happy about it.

His own lips quirked upward of their own accord, and a second later, he let out an oomph as she launched herself at him. She was laughing and crying and he held her through it all, marveling that the Slayer wasn't averse to having him in her life.

A few minutes later she wound down and pushed against his shoulders so that she could sit up.

"We're a pair, aren't we?" She gave him a half-smile, sniffing loudly while wiping a stray tear from her cheek.

"That we are, luv. That we are."

~*~*~*~*~

"So... where to, pet?" Spike asked some time later. He wasn't sure how long they sat there in comfortable silence as the Slayer nestled against his side.

"I don't know. You seem to be the expert. Anyplace that sticks out in your mind?"

"Not really. We can stay here for a bit if you want. Daniel seems like a nice enough bloke, even with his bad habit of fadin' into the background."

"Yeah..."

Spike couldn't help hearing the wistful note in her voice. It killed him to say it, but the words were out of his mouth before he could take them back. "We... we could go back... to Sunnydale if you want."

"Maybe someday... but..."

"But what, luv?"

Buffy leaned down and pressed a light kiss to Spike's lips.

"I kinda like this. Just you and me. And if we go back, I know I'm gonna get sucked into slaying and stuff. And I'll have to listen to Giles whine, and my mom giving me 'the talk'."

Spike shuddered. He was leery of the Slayer's mum. Axe to the head notwithstanding, she was a formidable woman in her own right.

"That's not what's botherin' you though, is it?"

"I just..."

"Just what, pet. Come on now, out with it."

"I can't die, Spike. What would happen if the Council found out? They'd..." She shook her head, denying her need to see her mother again, her friends. "As much as I might *want* to... I *can't* go back."

Spike pulled the Slayer down to lie next to him.

"Never happen, pet," he told her as he held her close. "Won't let anyone take you from me. You see what we did to the Order. Wankers would meet the same fate if they so much as tried."

Buffy smiled at the conviction in his voice. He almost made her believe.

But she had no illusions as to the evil nature of the Council. If they could subject their slayers to the Cruciamentum, a task only a handful of slayers had survived, there was nothing to prevent them from taking advantage of having an immortal slayer in their possession. And she shuddered to think what they might do to her, do to Spike in order to get to her.

"Let's stay here for a while," Buffy told him, her hand lifting to caress his cheek.

"If that's what you really want to do. But you shouldn't stay away from your mum, just because you're worried about what might happen."

"I'm not."

Spike quirked his brow.

"Really... well, maybe just a little. But I did mean what I said though. Just you and me... it's kinda nice. Maybe in a little while, once news of the Order's demise dies down and our trail runs cold."

"Alright, pet."

Spike pressed a kiss to the Slayer's upturned nose then reluctantly climbed to his feet.

"Now, show me where the shower is," he commanded as he reached his hand out to help the Slayer to her feet.

Buffy blushed, imagining all kinds of fun they could have, but grabbed his hand anyway.