

BLOOM



HOLLY DENISE





IT WAS STRAIGHTFORWARD, AT LEAST. GO IN, SIZE UP THE SLAYER, identify her weaknesses, and get her into decent shape. Some quid for his pro quo. Make reparations, or what all, for the two slayers he'd snuffed by ensuring this new one became an unstoppable killing machine. A sorry proposition, sure, but it wasn't like he had a choice. The wankers had him by the shorthairs and he knew it. Worse, they knew he knew it.

But there was the prize to keep in mind. The prize was the only reason Spike was playing ball. That was another thing they knew. They held all the sodding cards.

Spike wasn't sure what he expected from this slayer, though. The watcher had described her as a handful. A few early victories had contributed to an inflated ego, which in turn had contributed to the belief that she was the one in charge of things and didn't need to listen when the Council told her to jump. There was a load of raw talent there, he'd been told, but it was uncultivated. More likely to get her killed before she could leave a meaningful mark, and she was already too good to just kill off and replace with another one.

Bunch of rubbish, if you asked Spike, but no one had. Wasn't that always the way?

The room the Council gits had shepherded him into was large, which was good. If the girl was nearly as scrappy as the watchers had indicated, he would need the space to properly assess her current fighting style and watch how she used her environment to her advantage. There was a scattering of weapons, some on tables, some mounted to one of the walls, and all the sort that were especially lethal to his brand of monster. This wasn't an accident, either, rather a message. Something along the lines of *behave or get beheaded*.

The wall across from the mounted weapons was rubber-padded, ripe for throwing girls into without breaking anything important. One wall wasn't a wall at all, but one of those funny mirrors with an observation room on the other side. The watchers wanted a front-row seat of the girl's progress—the better to ensure their gamble had paid off, that they weren't out of their heads having struck this deal with him. Against the last wall, the one attached to the only door, was a balance

beam, along with some weights and other equipment that might be sourced at any gym in the sodding country. It all looked very proper, very safe and sterile.

Everything, in other words, that being the Slayer was not. No wonder the girl was confused.

Spike had just started his second circuit of the space when the door creaked its warning that someone was about to come through it. He turned, curious in spite of himself, and watched as a small slip of a girl let herself into the room.

And for no reason whatsoever, at least none that he understood, his throat went tight. It wasn't that she was stunning—she was, but beautiful women weren't hard to come by when you lived a life like his—or that she was the Slayer. He'd seen his share of slayers, had claimed the lives of two, and both had been bloody powerhouses. There was no reason he could see that he should have any sort of reaction to this bird beyond simply acknowledging her existence, yet his body was not on the same page, and he didn't know why. That bothered him.

Then their eyes met and it was as though an electric jolt shot down his spine. That bothered him, too.

The Slayer—named *Buffy*, of all things ridiculous—gave him the sort of roaming appraisal that could make a bloke forget he was wearing anything but his own skin. “So,” she drawled at length. “You’re the vampire who’s supposed to teach me how to do my job.”

Her voice wasn't remarkable, yet he shivered just the same. Balls, what was wrong with him?

Thankfully, when he spoke, none of what was going on between his ears came through in his words. “So,” he replied in kind, “you’re the slayer who needs a vampire to show her how to do her job.”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I don’t need anything from you.”

“Sorry, pet, your owners disagree, and I work for them.”

He didn't know why he said it—only yes, he did. *God*, he did. It was to watch how the words hit her. Take in the flash of her green eyes, the flare of her nostrils, the lines of her mouth as she snapped her teeth at him like she was the vampire here. He breathed in the scent of her delicious, royal slayer blood as it pumped its fury through her veins, making her creamy skin flush a delicate red.

This girl had a temper and a fire to match. That was good. Tempers were things that could be harnessed, reshaped. It could also render her sloppy if she let it color her judgment too much—if she barreled into a fight blinded by anger or desperate to prove a point, all the cunning in the world couldn't save her.

Maybe that could be the first lesson.

"The Council does *not* own me," she said at last. "They do, however, own you. That's why you're here, right? Some big bad vampire fell into their net and now has to play ball by their rules or else?"

Spike grinned and clapped, swinging toward her with some of his old swagger. Even if he couldn't use it to full effect, didn't mean he couldn't give her a glimpse of what it would have been like had they ever crossed paths in the wild. "Oooh, nicely done, pet. Can tell you're gonna be a treat to break."

"Just try."

Still smirking, he lowered his hands and closed another space between them. "They tell you anything about me before they threw you into the lion's den?"

Buffy narrowed her eyes, some of that ironclad bravado slipping at last. Not a lot—probably not even enough for her to notice—but she wasn't the one who had been sent in here to size her up. She wasn't looking for things like shuffling feet, an action that betrayed she wasn't sure where to put her weight, or shifty eyes, which told him she didn't trust her surroundings. Then there was the way her fist tightened, softened, and retightened, as though she had to keep reminding herself to stay on guard. It was an odd reaction from a girl tossed in with a predator—even more so coming from a slayer. Made him think she might have had some familiarity with vampires in the past that had confused the poor thing's sensibilities.

"I know you've killed slayers," she said at last, and to her credit, her voice didn't so much as wobble. "That you seek them out, too, because you get some sort of sick thrill from fighting them."

"Sick, is it?"

"Yes."

"How you figure?"

She didn't answer, which was in itself an answer. It told him she didn't consider the *why* when sizing up her opponents, rather applied all her focus on the *what*. Not uncommon for anyone in her position, but still disappointing. Also gave him a decent place to start. The girl had an edge, and even if she was more guts than brains at the moment, Spike knew just from the way she assessed him that a powerful mind worked behind those green eyes. Get the brain in sync with the body, and she'd be the sort of threat that he'd never truly encountered. One that might actually succeed in ending his life rather than just giving him further bragging rights.

"Right, think we've wasted enough time on pleasantries," he said, and let his fangs descend. "Let's have a go. I'd like to see what we're working with. You have a stake with you?"

Buffy blinked at him. "What? No."

Of all the amateur... Spike sighed and straightened, the bones in his face shifting back. "Why the bloody hell not?"

"Because I was told that you're a vampire I can't kill just yet."

"So you came in here lookin' to learn a thing or two and you didn't even bother to bring the right weapon?" He rolled his eyes. "No sodding wonder they need my help."

"Hey!" But some red had crept into her cheeks. She was embarrassed, as she should be. "I didn't think it'd be good to bring with me. I'm supposed to be making nice with you."

"No, you're supposed to be learning with me. Go grab a stake, Slayer. We're doin' this properly."

"Okay, and then what?"

"And then?" Spike dragged his tongue over his teeth and grinned at her. "Then you're gonna try to kill me."



SHE WAS GOOD. Just not as good as she thought.

In many ways, she reminded him of the Slayer he'd hunted down in New York. The way she moved, how she seemed both entirely in the moment and twelve steps ahead, calculating responses based on what she thought was coming next. Buffy had a natural grace about her, too,

one he couldn't help but admire. When most people conjured up images of fighting, they focused on the brutality. The pain, the sweat, the blood, the thump of flesh striking flesh, grunts and cries and everything else that made up the soundtrack of a really good brawl. They rarely factored in things like choreography—how the tussles they admired in action flicks were carefully plotted, every move predetermined by professionals who spent a good amount of time making each second look natural rather than staged. For the most part, the girls who became the Slayer didn't hail from backgrounds where they had been trained how to hold themselves in the sort of fights that would eventually define them. And all the strength in the world wouldn't matter a lick if you didn't know how to leverage it—if you relied on nothing but that strength to see you through to the next day.

The way Buffy answered his blows was inexpert but intuitive. She wasn't someone who would need to be taught much, just sharpened and pointed in the right direction. Her instincts were beyond reproach—what she needed to do was learn to rely on them more, second-guess herself less. Trust that her body knew what it was doing. He wouldn't be surprised to learn she'd been a gymnast in her former life, if not some other sort of discipline that had imparted awareness of her own physicality. Most people didn't give their bodies all that much consideration unless something had gone wrong or they were staring into a mirror trying to find where the extra five pounds had landed. Buffy was aware; more than that, she knew her body itself was a weapon. That she wasn't the vehicle for death but death itself.

Spike would be hard-pressed to admit it, least of all to her, but he reckoned he could happily watch her for hours just like this. She was mesmerizing. Glorious. A bright burning sun that didn't know the strength of her own light.

Where she came up short was her confidence—her conviction. Far as Spike was concerned, there were two ways to wage a fight against a worthy opponent, and the best warriors embraced both concurrently. Buffy had the anticipation down. Aware of her surroundings almost to a fault, her eyes always in motion, always calculating, considering all possibilities before she made a single move and the possible consequences of every decision. It was good, kept her aware, but it also kept

her too much in her own sodding head. Instead of reacting naturally, she was analyzing, and analysis was where reflex went to die. It left her with too many openings, provided him too many opportunities to knock her off her feet.

Which he did. Again and again, and with increasing relish, for every time her delectable arse hit the floor, Buffy would flush crimson and glare stakes, but she'd keep her mouth shut because she was clever enough to understand her failure was her fault.

It wasn't until a light above the observation mirror flashed its warning red that he decided she'd had enough of the silent treatment.

Buffy was on the floor then, panting in such a way a man's eyes couldn't help but fall to her tits. Among other things he'd learned since getting started, Spike had discovered that the girl had nice tits. They were small but plump, a perfect sodding handful if he did say so himself, and about to burst out of the sports bra she'd stripped down to some thirty minutes prior. It took discipline but he managed to pull his gaze off her breasts as he approached, though not before admiring the way her nipples stood out against the cotton.

"By my count, that's twelve," Spike said, offering her his hand without thinking about it.

"Twelve what?"

"Times I've killed you since you walked into this room."

A shadow crossed her face, and she batted his hand away, rolling to her feet unaided. "Thanks for all the coaching. It made a big difference."

"Tonight wasn't about teachin' you, love. It was about learning what I'm working with."

Buffy tossed him another glare and stalked her way toward the end of the room that housed the balance beam and weights. He didn't register the intent until she'd pulled open a cupboard behind the largest weight machine and retrieved a towel. "And what did you learn?" she asked, dabbing at the sweat along her brow.

"Mostly that we'd better learn to love this room, as we'll be spending a load of time in here."

She bristled and put her back to him. Dangerous move, that. He



wondered if he ought to show her. "You're not as great as you think you are, you know."

"Funny. Was just thinkin' we proved the same about you."

Buffy whirled around before he could commit to sneaking up on her like a proper predator, her green eyes flashing with a delicious combination of anger and hurt. "Maybe, but of the two of us, my money's on me walking out of here alive."

"That a fact, pet?"

"Why the hell else are they doing this?"

"You think they aim to keep you alive?" Spike stared at her for a moment, trying to determine her sincerity. He hadn't known her but for a couple of hours or so, but from what he'd pieced together, she didn't think much of the Council, which probably accounted for the reason she'd been sent to the principal's office in the first place. Failure to fall in line, and all that. Under those terms, it was a mite surprising she thought the gits were sentimental about whether she lived or died.

He could keep his trap shut and let her suss out the unpleasant truth on her own, but Spike didn't care much for beating around the bush. The more she knew the better for her. He had no illusions about himself.

"Think that if you like, Slayer. Way I hear it, there's some big ugly on the horizon. Sort of thing these wankers can't fight themselves and wager they don't have time to train up the bird who'll be called once you snuff it." He took a step forward, enjoying, in spite of himself, that his words had chased the spite off her face. That she was actually listening. "Seems to me all they're doin' is keeping you nice and plump so you can die at the right time. Once the fight's over, they'll have themselves the cushion they need to get the next girl ready. You're a weapon, a tool. I'm the stone that's sharpening you. Once you've served your purpose..."

Buffy didn't say anything. Didn't blink or look away. Just kept her gaze on him as she worked her throat. And that was how he knew he'd hit a nerve, though the feeling it left him with wasn't what he expected. Almost like regret.

Which was bloody ridiculous. He had nothing to regret. Not his

fault the girl's path ended in a sure death sentence. He hadn't made the rules. None of this was by his design.

And he was too much of a monster to give a toss about any slayer.  
Especially one he'd been tasked to prepare for death.



THE SLAYER WAS nothing special and had done nothing but smart off at him during their first encounter. There was no reason for her to linger in his mind after, to interrupt otherwise unconnected streams of thought or invade perfectly good dreams that had nothing to do with her. She was a bitch, and a disposable one at that. Hence the entire reason he was here.

But bugger, he couldn't help himself. The look she'd given him, the wide-eyed vulnerability there at the end after he'd spelled out exactly what she meant to the wankers in charge, had infected him like a sodding virus. One that went all the way to the bone.

It didn't matter, though. So the girl had been confronted with some brutal truths about the world she lived in. Someone had to tell her, and who better than a sworn enemy? No sugar-coating, no soft landing. Just a dosage of hard, unforgiving reality. The reminder she needed that her life wasn't a fairy tale and never would be.

And it wasn't like Spike could afford to get distracted. He had Dru to think about. Even if he was certain she wasn't thinking about him.

"Lo there, Slayer," Spike said as she entered the training room for their second session. "Sleep well?"

"What do you care?"

"Just tryin' to make conversation."

"Well, don't bother. Let's just get this over with."

So that was what they did. At first, at least. Spike shrugging out of his duster and Buffy shaking out her shoulders before throwing herself into the fight. And again, she was glorious. Rough around the edges, wearing her heart on her sleeve despite herself, anticipating his movements but also second-guessing herself to the point where despite her best efforts, Spike threw her into the padded wall or onto the floor over and over again.

Though as they crept into the second hour, he found himself reconsidering. Buffy wasn't putting in her best efforts. The longer they kept at it, the more scattered and inconsistent her performance became. And the more his admiration for her melted into exasperation. It was like she'd given up—like she wasn't even trying anymore, and balls, if one little reality check was all it had taken to strip the wind from her sails, he wasn't sure how she'd lived this long to begin with.

"On your feet," he snapped, looming over her—Buffy on the floor, panting, glaring at him like she wanted his dust but not moving. Not doing rot to make that happen. No, she'd hit the floor again and bloody stayed there like she had an option. "You can wallow on your own bloody time."

"Thanks for the permission," she grunted before finally rolling over and pulling herself upright. "Anyone ever tell you that your people skills kinda suck?"

"Not people, pet."

"Believe me, I noticed." Buffy swung her arms and rolled her head, loose tendrils of gold spilling out of her ponytail.

"Suppose you have a point?"

"Suppose I'm trying to find one," she shot back, though not with nearly the heat or venom she'd wielded so effortlessly the other day. Like the moves themselves, Buffy's barbs had become lackluster. That shouldn't bother him—definitely shouldn't bother him more than her half-hearted performance—but it did.

Spike sighed and rolled his head back. "All right, let's hear it."

"Huh?"

"What's got your knickers in a twist? You're gonna be dead useless to me until you have it out, so bloody talk or next time I'll hit you with a mind to break something."

That seemed to do something—not what he wanted, mind, but something. At least the indifference in her eyes eased a touch. "I'm sorry, am I bringing down the mood? I'd hate to be an inconvenient human shield. How selfish of me."

Ah, so that was it. "Are you cross because I ran my mouth or because you hadn't sussed as much out for yourself beforehand?"

"I was told what I was doing was important."

“Sure it is. Survival of the world and the like. Billions of tasty morsels’ll owe you their existence, but they’ll never know it, and you’ll probably be too dead to accept their gratitude, anyhow.”

Buffy’s expression darkened, just like he’d hoped it would. “You’re great at this whole *cheering me up* thing.”

“You think I want to cheer you up? Platitudes might sing you to sleep at night, Slayer, but they won’t light a fire. That’s what we need. The fire.”

“I don’t care.”

“Doesn’t matter. Death’s coming either way. You wanna be the sort of person who just lets it happen or are you gonna give it a decent fight?”

“Why the hell do you care?” This she practically screamed, her eyes flashing with rage and pain and more besides. All things he felt deep no matter how hard he tried to outrun them. It was nice, in that moment, not being alone in the sensation, even if their pain was aimed in different directions. Isolation in anything could drive a man mad. “You’re just...how did you put it? Making sure I die at the right time. So why bother? Aren’t you evil?”

“What happened to the girl I met the other day? Thought you said you had my number.”

Buffy didn’t reply, just stood there like a firecracker, sizzling in place as the flame drew ever closer to the explosives. And the longer she just stood there, the more futile all this became, leaving him at a sodding loss. There wasn’t much he could do if the bitch refused to play along, and maybe he’d been more abrasive than he’d needed to be, but all he’d done was throw back the same attitude she’d been slinging. Neither of them in this place because they wanted to be, both full of bitter resentment about the hoops they were being asked to leap through.

Thing was, if Buffy didn’t let him teach her, if she remained closed off and uncooperative, then it truly was for nothing. He would have lost at losing, and Christ, he didn’t think he could bear that. Not after everything.

There was every chance she wouldn’t care, that she might not even

believe him. But it was the only play he had right now so he'd bloody well take it.

"There's this woman. Means a lot to me." He swallowed. "She's the one who made me. We were together for a long bloody time—up until last year, actually. She gets these visions, flashes and the like of what's coming. Sometimes what's already happened, too—hard to tell with her. Got one about the wanker who made *her*, a bloke called Angel, who got himself cursed a century back with a soul and abandoned the lot of us. She saw him without it again and got it in her head she was the one who was supposed to do it."

"Do it?" Buffy echoed hoarsely. The sound of her voice nearly made him start. He hadn't been sure she'd been listening until then.

"Make him lose it somehow. So he'd come back to us." Spike hesitated. "To *her*, more like. She always loved him the best." A familiar bright-hot flash of pure hatred sparked in his veins, warming him from the inside out. Filling him with that cancerous loathing that had gotten him evicted from Dru's bed well before she'd set off on her quest. It had been dressed up in riddles the way everything else was, talk of fairies and sunshine, and while he hadn't been able to decipher her meaning exactly, the gist had been bloody clear. That being she was done with him. She'd seen something, Angel most likely, to get her craving the old days without remembering what those days had actually been like. "She kicked me to the sodding curb when I told her I wasn't interested in playing with Angel again. Nothing I said or did could bring her back to me, but I stuck close. Just in case... Dru's out of her mind, see. Back before he grew himself a conscience, Angel tortured her into insanity. Made her mad for him. And she's always been waited on, Dru. Had people to serve her on hand and foot. Guess I wagered if I stuck close enough, she'd realize she was havin' to do all the rot that I did for her and that showing me the door had been a mistake."

Buffy crossed her arms, her brow knitted. At least she wasn't about to bloody explode anymore. "You really want *that* to be the reason someone is with you? That's..."

He knew what it was but he damn sure didn't need to hear her say

it. "Yeah, well, it's what I thought, so I stuck close to her as she stuck close to him, all the sodding while *he* was sticking close to you."

At that, the Slayer flinched and looked away, some red tingeing her cheeks. Spike didn't know all that had gone on between her and the wanker who had once been his mentor, the man he regarded as a combination of father and brother, even if the role Angel had most often filled had been tormenter. The most he'd been able to put together was there had been a flirtation—most likely the big lech sniffing around her knickers, as spoiling virgins had always been a favorite pastime, and Spike didn't see what difference a soul would make there—and the Council had swept in after receiving word from the girl's watcher. Separated the pair as quickly as they could and started micromanaging Buffy's entire existence, reevaluating other behaviors they had previously decided to tolerate, like her working with what they called *civilians*. Kids who had discovered the Slayer's true identity and decided that a life of monster hunting was preferable to pencils, books, or teachers' dirty looks.

"Got myself nice and sloshed one night," Spike went on, his voice lower now. "Had made my case to Dru, bloody begged her to take me back. Even swore I'd help her knock Angel's pesky soul loose if that's what it took. She wouldn't give me the time of day and I had to reckon it was really over. Was just heading out of Willy's when the watcher boys made their move. Grabbed me and told me I had to play nice, help them sort out their Slayer problem, or else."

"Problem," Buffy echoed without inflection. "I was their problem."

"That you were, Slayer. I'd wear that honor with pride. All the girls they've seen come and go, you're the first to ruffle their feathers in an age. Doin' all right, far as I'm concerned." He grinned when she glared, unable to help the way his skin prickled at being the focus of her scrutiny. It was a predator thing, yes, but something else too. Something both more and less dangerous, even if he had bugger-all idea how that worked. "Thing was they weren't keen on cashing in their favor immediately—wanted to wait, make a bargain that worked for them."

"Bargain?"

"Well, I told 'em to stuff it at first, didn't I? Not about to spend my time educating some bird how best to do me in. I'd rather be staked

than on anyone's leash." Spike paused, then deflated. "But those wankers... They have the ace. Said if I didn't fall in line like a good little bloodsucker, they'd come after Dru. Make sure she lived a long, miserable life by giving her a soul to match Angel's. Knowin' how that'd ruin her."

When he hazarded a glance at Buffy, he found her nose wrinkled, brow creased in confusion. "Ruin her? That seems...dramatic."

He bristled. "Because Angel seems like he's got it mastered, is that it?"

"I haven't talked to Angel in a long time," she replied tersely. "So I am not the person to ask. Just that when I did know him, he said it was hard but it's what made him want to work to be better. Sorry if I don't see the problem with your ex-girlfriend not mass murdering anyone because she got a soul."

"No, you wouldn't, would you?" Spike had to look away. It was his own sodding fault for having thought she might understand. For trying to reach her like he was something other than a monster in her eyes. And maybe he'd be better off just leaving it at that, but balls, he wasn't the sort of man who often chose to do what was best for him. "What do you know about Angel before he was turned? He ever tell you?"

"A party boy, is the image I got."

"More than that. Someone who fancied goin' after people in lower classes. Told me once his father had to keep hiring new servants because Angel couldn't keep his mitts to himself. Didn't matter what happened to the girls he sullied, of course. Wouldn't be his problem." He hesitated, then met her gaze again, bracing himself for the sort of apathy that used to drive him wild back before he'd had a spine and the means to do something about it. But it wasn't there. Instead, she looked taken aback and somewhat horrified. Like she'd heard him exactly as he'd meant to be heard and understood everything he wasn't saying. "That's right. Wasn't much of a man before he became a vampire. Not like my Dru. There was a reason he sought her out—a reason she appealed to him. After torturing her for months, slaughtering her family, using her in every way he could, he took her, this petal of a girl who had thoughts of becoming a sodding nun, and turned her into a monster. Someone who was driven bloody mad by

losing everything she loved. You give her a soul now after she's had a century of trying to live up to dear ol' daddy's image, make him proud of her the way her own father was before Angelus ripped out his spleen, and it's worse than dusting her, Slayer. She cares about people in ways your lover boy can't begin to fathom. Would rather see her dead than see her suffer that. So that's it. That's why I'm here. Why I'll do whatever your sodding Council tells me to keep her from that. Now, do you have any other questions, or can we get back to it?"

Silence fell between them—the sort that screamed. Buffy staring at him, and Spike staring right back. Daring her to move, to find some other way to get under his skin and make him want to tear her throat out, bugger what happened next.

Finally, Buffy inhaled and nodded, then firmed her stance in the manner he'd shown her, her shoulders squared and her eyes set. No more protests. No more barbs. Just a girl who was a warrior, looking to him for instruction.

"Okay," she said, her tone different now. Everything different. "Then let's go again."



IT WASN'T in his head. Things changed after Spike told Buffy about Dru. She showed up to their training sessions without attitude—at least toward him—and started actually taking his advice rather than ignoring him or answering with a raised middle finger. She even smiled a bit when she got into the groove with him, bobbing and weaving, taking her victories when she won them and listening when he had to explain why she hadn't.

Spike had to be careful, though, that she didn't get it in her head that fighting was a matter of memorizing moves or landing kicks. The day he told her that what separated living slayers from former slayers was the severity of their death wish hadn't been fun. Even with their improving rapport, he'd known Buffy would bristle, roll her eyes, say he didn't know what he was talking about. But then he'd asked her, really, how she featured doing what she was doing today every day for the rest of her life. If she'd ever be tired of dedicating herself to a thankless



world that depended on her for its continued survival but regarded her like disposable rubbish when the apocalypse wasn't imminent.

"Even those birds I did in—the question isn't how'd I win, but rather, why'd they lose," he'd said. "You catch them on a day where they feel closer to callin' it in than another, you might be the one who snatches the prize. Because you know what it's like, don't you? How every day you wake up, you have to choose to be the Slayer again."

Buffy had frowned at that. "I don't get to choose, though. I *was* Chosen."

"You're half-right. Might not have volunteered for the job, pet, but when you show up for work, you're still making the choice to fill the role you were given." He'd shrugged. "Could run from it. Seen a few girls try, and bless them, it never ends well. Council doesn't have much use for a human weapon that won't perform."

"But that's just it—how can you call it a choice under those circumstances?"

"Never said it was a good choice," Spike had replied, and grinned when she'd glared. "Choose to be their weapon or choose death. Any human'll tell you that you can't eat the same sodding thing for lunch every day without eventually swearing it off forever. Being the Slayer's the same—except there's only one way out, and it's permanent. You get tired of shoveling down the same old shite, some creature of the night slips in, and it's permanent lights out."

She'd been quiet for a moment, then swallowed and raised her gaze to his. "I don't want to die. I know... I know I don't get to live for me much, but the times I do... I just don't want to die."

"Then stay in the sodding moment. Don't assume you'll win every fight. Don't underestimate anyone, even the vampires who trip over their own fangs. You don't have to be better to kill a slayer—you just have to find them on a day they care less about making it to tomorrow."

And miraculously, she'd heard that. Hell, she'd done more than hear it. She'd put the lesson into action. Started meeting him with more unpredictability than before, which was saying a lot because she was already one of the best he'd ever encountered. All fluid motion and grace, incredibly quick on her feet and responsive to whatever he

threw at her. But the small bit she took to heart made her seem untouchable on certain days. Not quite enough that he thought he'd whipped her into shape by the Council's definition of the word but certainly getting closer.

He noticed something else too—the gits who parked their arses on the other side of the observation mirror stopped coming to every session. The glass was thick and shatter resistant, but not to the point where he couldn't hear hearts pounding or the low rumble of voices as the old sods made play-by-play commentary on Buffy's progress. He wasn't sure whether or not he should inquire about it. Leaving Buffy with a vampire unsupervised—one that was besting her most days out of the week—seemed careless, if not negligent. Or perhaps they were testing him, seeing if he'd succumb to the temptation of her royal blood without a guard standing by. And while Spike didn't go to lengths to give much thought to how the Council worked, he found the possibility that they were gambling with Buffy's life unsavory.

No, worse than that. A bleeding insult. And yeah, ha bloody ha, rich coming from the bloke who had done in two girls before her, but this was different. He knew Buffy, or was getting to know her, in ways he'd never known a slayer before—know her beyond the warrior she'd been selected to be and more for the woman she was. She'd lasted a long time on her own considering she guarded a hellmouth, something he personally chalked up to the support system she'd built for herself before the Wankers Council had ripped it away from her and decided to shorten the length of her leash. The slayers he'd faced before had been fairly by the book, even Nikki with her attitude. He hadn't been in her life but for a flash, and only at the end, but she'd done as countless Chosen Ones had done before her—stuck to the shadows, shunned relationships that might make her vulnerable. That Buffy had done the opposite, leaned into her earthly connections, might have not only kept her alive longer than normal, but also given her something else to live for. A life beyond the cause. A reason to keep fighting.

Only those friends were gone now, had been taken from her under the pretense of keeping them safe. More like keeping her controlled.

That was why she was here, after all, being taught how to survive

by a known killer of her kind. They were fine with her making alliances so long as those alliances weren't really hers.

And bugger, that smarted. Had him thinking all kinds of things a vampire never should, especially about the enemy. And he wasn't just talking about how it was becoming harder to ignore just how gorgeous she was, or the way she grinned when she thought she had the upper hand, the little quips that rapid-fired off her tongue, how she'd celebrate her wins and pout adorably when confronted with her faults. Or the fact that he knew she'd softened toward him after learning about Dru. The idea that anyone could care, let alone a slayer, was something he was still trying to wrap his lobes around. That *he* had made her care, too.

That he was starting to look forward to seeing her for reasons that had nothing to do with the fact that it was the only sodding thing the wankers ever let him out to do. More just to see her, look at her and know she was all right. She'd lived through another night, survived whatever her puppet masters had sent her out to do. The fact that she seemed to relax when their eyes met, like she'd worried the same.

It was small but there. And it was dangerous.

Also dangerous—how much of himself he was letting her see. He'd already slipped up once, quoted bloody Shakespeare at her without realizing it, which had led to a long discussion over the course of one training session over *Romeo and Juliet*. Buffy declared it was the most epic romance of all time, recalling how she'd been Juliet often in classroom read-alongs during junior high, always hoping to be paired with her Romeo at the time, some git by the name of Tyler.

And because he was an evil prick, he hadn't been able to resist the temptation to shatter bloody nostalgia.

"Romeo and Juliet are a bloody tragedy, Slayer. Not romance."

"Well, yeah." She'd rolled her eyes. "I know it's a tragedy. That doesn't make their story *not* romantic."

"Wanna tell me what's romantic about a bloke spying a girl and deciding he loves her before he even knows her bloody name? Much less before she's said a sodding word to him?" he'd shot back. "A bloke who was, up until that moment, bemoaning that he'd lost some other

bird. Then he gets a stiffy for Juliet and poor, sweet Rosaline is yesterday's news."

"Okay, now I know you're evil. You're seriously trying to argue that Romeo and Juliet weren't romantic?"

"Dunno about you, Slayer, but I don't find two children shagging and getting six people killed because of their sodding hormones all that romantic, myself." He'd paused. "Well, bloodshed can be romantic, I'll give you that."

"They weren't children!"

"Oh no? Juliet was thirteen. What would you call that?"

"I... But... She was not, says who?"

"Bloody Shakespeare, you nit. Didn't they teach you to read in school?"

"He did not! I would remember that!"

And that, apparently, was all it had taken for Spike's classical education to override his senses. Being right, in that moment, had been more important than being someone other than William. "She's not fourteen," he'd quoted at her. "I'll lay fourteen of my teeth, and yet, to my teen be it spoken, I have but four. She is not fourteen."

Buffy had stared at him, horrorstruck, which made the peek he'd granted of his past more than worth it. "That's from the play?"

"Act one, scene three. The nurse. Reckon she'd know, don't you?"

Buffy had gone quiet, her cheeks, so recently flushed from exertion, suddenly pale. And it hadn't taken much to put the pieces together. Angel was a subject they didn't discuss, a noted part of Buffy's past and one of the reasons the Council's handling of her had gone so bloody hands-on. Romeo and Juliet being about born rivals whose hormones got in the way of their better senses would appeal to anyone looking to draw parallels between themselves and literature's great lovers. He understood.

As though reading his thoughts, Buffy had sighed and rolled her head back. "I guess that cinches it."

"What?"

He hadn't expected her to answer, but she had, and with the sort of naked honesty that he'd always found courageous.

"Just how stupid I was with Angel."

She hadn't offered more than that, and he hadn't asked. It hadn't been necessary.

And as moments went, it hadn't been all that extraordinary—definitely nothing marking it as the obvious one for everything to come crashing down on him. Even now, Spike wasn't sure what exactly had been the back-breaking straw. The thing that catapulted his growing admiration into territory unbecoming a mortal enemy. Respecting slayers had never been an issue for him—fuck, it was how he'd stayed alive. Understanding exactly how very dead he could be, and how easily, if he made the wrong move. But the parts of Buffy he was seeing now had nothing to do with the Slayer, and everything to do with the woman herself. Someone who had flinched at the idea of cursing Drusilla. Someone who accepted her own failures with a reserved sort of dignity that both bolstered the parts of her that were strong while respecting the parts that were more vulnerable. More and more, it was becoming obvious why she had lived as long as she had, friends notwithstanding.

She had grit. She had heart. And he liked her. God help him, he *liked* her.

He was buggered.



LATER, in his Council-appointed quarters—the only place he saw outside the training room—Spike wanked to thoughts of her for the first time. Only as he watched semen spurt from the head of his cock, he realized that it hadn't been the first time at all. That every time he left Buffy, he took the energy she left him with. That whispers of her had flickered across his mind every night, making his dick stir. Making him hard. Making him wrap his hand around himself and squeeze and pull.

He'd been wanking over her every day since they'd met.

Christ, he was more than buggered.



AND NOW HE didn't know how to act around her.

She noticed right off, of course, because the Slayer was nothing if not perceptive. Bounced in all perkily the next day, wearing a sort of trousers style that weren't *trousers* at all, rather fabric plastered skintight tight to her legs, emphasizing every luxurious curve. If that weren't enough, she'd paired it with nothing but a sports bra that left sodding nothing to the imagination. Just a tantalizing view of her breasts, the swell of her nipples against the cotton. It wasn't anything new, either. She'd pranced into the room dressed like this before, and while he'd noticed—because he was a man and couldn't *not* notice a gorgeous girl wandering around in practically nothing—he'd been in a different frame of mind.

The thought of shagging the Slayer had been an abstract. One of those bucket list things. Something he'd fantasized about, sure, but never thought to make reality. That wasn't the way it was between vampires and slayers and never had been. And sure, he'd learned that Angel had been sniffing around her knickers, but that wasn't comparable, was it? The git had him a soul. Everything about Angel was already wrong.

Spike did his best to shove it back, ignore the urge to let his eyes roam when he knocked her on her arse. To lean into her when she pushed him against the walls, or moan at the feel of her when her body was pressed close. All that warmth, that radiance, shining through every flash of her eyes. Even when she lost her temper and snapped at him for being distracted—demanded to know where the bloody hell his head was at, because she was doing more teaching than he was.

And god help him if any of the watchers had noticed his distraction, but he thought he might be safe there. The room on the other side of the glass yielded no sounds of life—a boon for now, though he worried what that might mean for the future. If they were no longer concerned with watching day in and out, if they were leaving her unsupervised, how much longer would these sessions go on?

And what would happen once they stopped?



TIME DIDN'T MAKE it better. If anything, he felt himself getting worse.

Two weeks after his little revelation, there Buffy was, shoving him back, her expression twisted into a mask of pure frustration. "Seriously! What the hell is up with you lately?"

Spike fought valiantly not to stumble over his own feet and lost, ending up toppling onto his arse and staring at the ceiling, dragging in breaths as though they were going out of style. He couldn't blame her for being annoyed—he was annoyed with himself. His head hadn't been in the bloody game at all, and these sessions had started seeming a lot more like foreplay. All the while a little voice remained insistent at the back of his mind, reminding him exactly what the end goal was here. Get her thinking like a warrior, like a slayer, harden her to the point she wouldn't feel her fear when she raced into whatever was looming on the horizon. Fatten her up before the slaughter.

That was exactly what this was—what it had been from the beginning. Worse was he'd known it then, too. Told her as much. Bloody thrown it in her face.

God, he could kill her for doing this to him. For making him feel these things—these rotten, awful, unnatural things, cravings and desires and pure sodding want. Things he'd only ever felt for Dru, and didn't now, and god, how unnatural was that? What was worse, she hadn't the slightest idea. How could she when the thought was so fucking laughable? Instead, she showed up, her eyes sparking with all that wonderful, familiar challenge, a quip at the ready, and all he could do was try not to drool all over himself like an oversized buffoon.

And fail.

"Come on, Spike, what gives?" She had her hands planted on her hips, her face pulled into a scowl that shouldn't have his prick standing at attention, but it seemed there was nothing she could do that the damn thing *didn't* fancy. The harder she burned, the harder he yearned. It was maddening. "You've been off for weeks now."

Spike shoved himself back to his feet, trying and failing not to feel the burn of her glare. Christ, it was a physical thing, like everything else she did. "It's no concern of yours," he muttered. "Come at me again."

"I get to decide what concerns me and what doesn't."

“And I get to decide what I share and what I don’t. We’re not here about me, are we?”

“You’re being so weird.”

“Ever consider that maybe I’m a sodding vampire?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Believe me, I’ve noticed.”

“All right, so, you’re the Slayer. Do something about it.”

It would be better if she weren’t so bloody hot when she was brassed, if he could react in any other way at the sudden fury in her eyes, if his body would respond the way it bloody well should rather than feed him the sick impulses he was stuck with. But even when she broke, when she came at him with all that glorious slayer strength, he had to suppress a whimper. Being on the receiving end of her wrath was something else—the power behind her blows, the raw energy charging through her arms and legs, the subtle shifts he’d clocked since their first session in place, sharpening her from a deadly tool to an all-out weapon. And it’d be a bloody disservice to her, to what she’d done to improve upon what had already been near perfection, to not throw back with everything he had. To let her win on account of his distraction.

So Spike didn’t let her win. He shook his head, shoved his feelings back, and planted his feet firmly in the moment. And there, forced into focus, he started meeting her with fists and kicks at last, anticipating her moves and improvising when he was wrong. Trying to knock her off her feet, to throw her into walls, to flip her onto her back, to force her to reveal her vulnerabilities so he might exploit them. Get her neck under his mouth, her body under his hands, get her cowed so he could yell at her about how she hadn’t improved enough and take some of the infernal attention off himself.

And it was a near thing. By the skin of his fangs, even, but finally Spike managed a move she didn’t counter. Thrust her against the wall, forced her legs apart with his thigh, and pinned her hands beside her head, squeezing her wrist until she had no choice but to drop the stake. And then they were staring at one another, gasping in equal measure, and he was so hard it was a struggle to concentrate, pressed up against her the way he was, feeling her heat and her pulse and the thundering of her heart, the deep drags of air she sucked into her lungs



all the while looking at him as though waiting for the next move. He knew she had to feel his erection, didn't know if she'd piece everything together, was almost afraid to let go and give her the chance to try.

"You just gonna let me kill you?" he murmured, not sure what the hell he was doing.

"You haven't tried yet."

"Watch what you wish for." And because he was off his gourd, he pressed closer, snapped his teeth at her neck. "Here's the scenario, pet. Dangerous predator's got you pinned in. You're out of options and whether you live to see tomorrow depends on what you do next, so make it count. How do you push back? How do you survive?"

To make sure she understood the severity of the situation she'd landed herself in, he grazed his teeth along the column of her throat. Realized a second too late that in order to really sell the scenario, he ought to have switched to fangs, but then he was staring into her eyes again, bold, daring, watching her pupils grow wide as her breaths rocked harder. He wasn't sure if he was fooling her at all—he knew bloody well he wasn't fooling himself. Knew what would happen if she did what she ought, called him out on his missing marbles. The girl might have entertained thoughts of a vampire lover once but that had been different. The one in front of her didn't have the harness of a soul, and she'd know what that meant. She had to.

So he waited—whether for her to try to punch her way out of the corner he'd boxed her in or to regard him with disgust, it was all the same. The only thing that would have surprised him at that moment was, incidentally, the very thing he got.

When Spike breathed in, the air he took into his lungs was spiced with pure slayer arousal.

*God help me.*

He needed to back down. Back away. Put distance between them. Call off this sideshow disguised as a lesson. He needed to find the line he'd crossed and get back on the right side. But he didn't do any of those things. Instead, leaning forward so that his mouth was just a hair away from hers, he asked again, "How do you survive, Slayer?"

"Like this," she replied, and then, *Christ*, she was kissing him, or he was kissing her, and it didn't matter because they had both fallen

inside of it. Inside each other. Fighting, pushing, and pressing as they had been for days now—weeks—only with lips and tongue and teeth rather than fists and kicks. She was just as fierce, just as sharp, just as unwieldy and unpredictable, just as bloody passionate, and that last thing might be what killed him, but if it did, he'd enjoy every second of the death he had coming. It was all worth it—his complete loss of self, the insanity that was mooning over a slayer, the certainty that this wouldn't end well, *everything* was worth stealing a taste. Feeling her against him, hot and wet and human. Her hands on his face, traveling up his neck, then farther to break his hair gel so she could dig her fingers into his scalp. Grip him tight and hold him to her, all the while she thrust her hips, whimpered when he thrust back, wiggled against the erection he'd been so keen to hide from her just seconds ago. And he might be a slow learner, for when it occurred to him—this reality she was giving him with every move she made with her sinful body—Spike was certain he'd cream his bloody jeans.

The things he felt for her might be wrong, but they were also shared. Buffy wanted him. Hell, the way she was attacking his mouth, she might just bloody crave him. Snapping and tugging and pulling, as though desperate to punish him for making her feel whatever it was she felt, and that was something else he understood, by Christ, because it was sick. *He* was sick. Sick enough he'd rip her apart limb from bloody limb if he thought he'd get any relief, but he wouldn't, and he knew he wouldn't. He'd fallen for the wrong person before, and while that had been more than a century ago, he remembered that knowing he was about to shatter hadn't done rot to stop him from hitting the ground.

"Wait," Buffy moaned, her hands at his chest, pushing just enough that a sliver of space wedged between their mouths. Her eyes were dark and her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen and god, she looked amazing. Smelled even better. He wanted to devour her—fucking needed to, in that moment, the way he needed blood. "Wait," she said again, panting. "Are they watching?"

"Who?"

Buffy nodded at something behind him, and that small movement

thinned the lust enough that he understood. “Not there,” he said before scraping his teeth along her lips. “Just us here.”

“You’re sure?”

“Been a minute since they watched, actually. Dunno why.”

“Maybe they thought you’d kill me.”

“Maybe. You worried?”

“Not nearly as worried as I should be.” She pushed at his chest again, hard enough that he went stumbling back, arms pinwheeling as he struggled to keep upright. And the Slayer was on him, her expression hot and full of intent. She planted her hands on his chest and shoved, shoved, until his tailbone hit something less substantial than a wall—the bloody balance beam—stalled him enough so he could right himself, and then he had his arms full of her. Burning, wiggling slayer, attacking his mouth again, full of passion and fire, moaning and whimpering and his name riding off her tongue between stolen kisses, whispered like a prayer, and he didn’t care then. Didn’t care if the sodding watchers had set him up, if this was the last thing he did before becoming dust, something clicked in his head and everything else he’d been denying himself came tumbling out.

He didn’t just want to shag this girl. He wanted to love her.

Christ, he *did* love her. And it had been there all along—the hints left for him. Sunshine, Drusilla had said. Fairies and sunshine. She’d seen this, known it was coming. That there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it because Spike didn’t just *fall* in love. He bloody well crashed into it at top-speed, mindless of everything except that one destination.

Spike growled. Snarled. Rumbled his demon’s roar into her mouth, seized her by the hips and spun her around. Forget buggered. He might as well be dust. Lusting after the Slayer was one thing—loving her would be the end of him. If not by her watchers then certainly by Buffy herself, for she was too good for this. For him. Too good to want anything more than a taste of what it was like to be bad. And he could give her that—would give her anything, he realized, anything she wanted at all. His hands, his mouth, his cock, his whole self was hers to do with as she would. Fair’s fair. She didn’t own her body but she could have his.

Whatever she wanted.

"Hurry," she whispered, and he didn't have to ask. He could feel it, too. They were on borrowed time and had to make the most out of it. Spike tore at her sweats, breaking away from her mouth to drag his own down the line of her body, between her tits, straining against her tank top, and he wanted to nuzzle and bite, wanted to tease her nipples and lap up her sweat, but not now. Not when every second counted. He went lower, stripping fabric down her legs, moaning low in the back of his throat when he saw the drenched crotch of her knickers, scented the explosion of her arousal in the air that separated them. And Buffy was whispering still, urgent, but he wouldn't get another chance and wasn't about to waste it. He tongued her through the cotton of her panties, groaned when she whimpered, hands on her hips, fingers digging into firm, supple flesh. And even before he got to taste her properly, he knew she'd be the best thing he'd ever had in his mouth.

"Spike—"

"I know," he told her before fisting the material and ripping it away. "Just a moment."

"We don't—"

But he was already moving, positioning her on the balance beam and spreading her thighs apart to get a look at her pink, glistening cunt. Her neatly trimmed curls, her flesh slick with her excitement, with her wanting him, and no, they didn't have time, but no, he wasn't going to stop. Spike buried his face in her pussy and growled, the sound melting into a groan when she gasped, wove her fingers through his hair. He felt her shudder at the first swipe of his tongue, then the next, for he wasn't gentle. He was frantic. He took long, hard laps, desperate to get as much of her as he could in his mouth, in his throat, as well as all over his lips and chin, before finally swirling his tongue around her clit and feeling her electric jolt as though it was his own. The hard, panting gulps of air she tried to suck down, some sounding like his name, and then again when he slid two fingers into her, groaned at the way she clamped down around him, how she started, and he should have stopped there but he loved the way she reacted when he played with her clit so he did it again. A lick. Then a suck.

And she was bucking against his face with abandon and yes, yes, he could stay here forever but forever was something they didn't have, so he forced himself to his feet and started fumbling with his belt. Growling when she started pulling at his jeans, dragging kisses off his mouth all the while, frantic and desperate, and then she had her hand wrapped around his cock and was pulling, stroking, working bloody magic with her fingers and squeezing him so nice he might just spill onto her stomach but no, no, if they had just this, he would do it right.

"Turn around," he growled against her mouth. "Bend over, hands on the beam."

Buffy's eyes flashed in a way he'd come to associate with some of their more epic back-and-forths but she didn't protest—didn't even huff. Instead, perhaps for the first time, she did as she was told, kicking off her sweats the rest of the way. And there was the smooth line of her back, his hands cradling her peach of an arse, and time was still wasting away. Spike lined his cock at her entrance, sliding between her folds until the head was nice and wet, and then he was spearing inside her, watching his prick disappear into her body as her pussy clamped down and squeezed him so hard he could have shot off without ceremony. But he wanted the ceremony—wanted the death he was surrendering himself to have been earned for more than just a single thrust.

"Christ, you feel amazing," he breathed into the back of her neck before treating her to a nibble. "Hold on, baby."

He watched as she tightened her grip like a good girl, and that was as far as his control went before snapping. Buffy bent over, Buffy with her golden skin and her breaths and the thumps of her powerful, warrior's heart. His brain switched off and everything else switched on. The primal part of him that existed only to feel and fight and fuck, and god, if she didn't give him all three. If she didn't push that glorious backside of hers back every time he pulled his cock away to recapture him, swallow him back into her inferno of a body. Grunting and whimpering and spitting out sounds that might have been his name, the hard smack of wet flesh colliding filling the air above it. Spike's hands in constant motion, gripping her hips, then cupping her breasts, then scaling down her stomach, feeling the way she tensed under his touch, shivered, as he tried to reach all the parts of her he could with his

mouth. Nibbling along her neck, pressing kisses between her shoulder blades, capturing her earlobe between his teeth, her hair in his face, in his mouth, his wet cock pistoning into her clenching pussy, his balls slapping her with every drive, and he was a greedy bastard and desperate to feel her come around his prick. So he slipped his fingers over her clit, grinned when she gasped and bucked and tried to grind herself against his hand, and then started whispering low in her ear. Murmuring encouragement, telling her how beautiful she was, how hot she was, how much he'd wanted this—wanted *her*. How he'd dreamed of her cunt, her mouth, her eyes, how she haunted him and he carried her with him wherever he went. How amazing she felt, how hot and wet she was, what it did to his head, knowing she was soaked for him. How good she'd tasted. How he'd waste away wanting to taste her again, tongue her and lick her from the inside until she drenched his face. But most of all, right now, how much he wanted to feel her come, feel those muscles he knew she had strangling his cock until a lesser man would pray for dust.

And that was what did it, he thought. Or maybe it was the teeth he buried in her shoulder in concert with the fingers pressing down on her clit. Or the knowledge that they could be caught—that they were perhaps, even at that moment, being watched. All he knew was the next second, Buffy's pussy became a fucking vise, spasming and fisting and soaking him with her juices, and Spike growled around her flesh as his dick pulsed and he jetted his release into her trembling body. He kept pumping, kept moving, kept working inside of her until the last waves finally started to recede. Until the high he'd reached did what all highs must and began the hurried journey back to earth.

It was over now. It was all over. He was done for. Dru was, too, maybe, if they knew; but Buffy most of all. Buffy, who he was preparing to face her own death. That knowledge crashed onto him with its harsh, unforgiving edges. Its ugly truth.

What was worse, though, he wasn't sure he could say he regretted it. The only thing he regretted about Buffy was that it had taken this to know her.

Out there, together, they could have conquered the world.



SPIKE SHOULD HAVE SEEN this coming from the start. Standing there, in Travers's office, watching the old git gaze out the sunshine-filled window, the world took on a certain clarity. After all, what sort of megalomaniac would settle for pulling one set of strings when there was a handy way to manipulate all the puppets he had at his disposal? Travers might be sadistic, but he wasn't stupid, which was the truest tragedy of the piece. And Spike should have seen it. After all, he'd been taught by the best.

"You understand, then?" Travers said, not bothering to turn from the window. Not needing to. He had enough power that even the show about standing in the sunlight was just that—a show. They both knew Spike wouldn't try to rip the git's throat out. He had no cards to play, just complete and total capitulation to whatever was asked.

"Yeah," he replied thickly, holding back a growl. "I got it."

"And there won't be an issue?"

"Not afraid to die, mate. Never have been."

"Good. That's good."

"How's it I know you'll keep your end of the bargain, though?"

"Aside from my word? I suppose you don't. At any rate, it won't be of concern to you much longer." Travers did turn, then, but rather than meeting his eyes, strolled leisurely toward the grand desk. Spike might as well have been a hatrack for all the acknowledgment he received, even when being directly addressed.

The fact that he'd said nothing that wasn't bloody fact didn't help. No, as a true dead man, Spike wouldn't have much concern about anything. Whether Dru remained soulless and carefree, or Buffy healthy and alive—those would be the former worries and considerations of dust particles.

There was no point asking for reassurance, though. No point pressing an issue that was out of his hands, so Spike didn't bother. Didn't go looking for acknowledgment, either, rather just accepted that he had been informed and dismissed.

His role with the Council was coming to an end.

All he had to do was get Buffy to kill him.



IT WAS over the next few sessions with her that he'd started to piece the rest of it together, realized just how much of a tosser he'd been from the start. Not cottoning on that certain things—the decided lack of supervision, for example—had been by design. Everything had been by design, going all the way back to the offer they'd made to him in the first place. Why him? Why Spike? Seemed simple, really. Find a vampire who had claimed the lives of two slayers before her and was desperate enough to align himself with his enemy all for the sake of love. Dru might not be his anymore, but that didn't mean he'd let just anything happen to her. Didn't mean he wouldn't ask *how high* before jumping if staying on the ground meant putting her through the sort of pain that would drive her the rest of the way out of her mind. Hell, maybe the Council gits even dug deeper, learned the sort of man he'd been before he'd fallen under Drusilla's fang. Run the gamble that the romantic poet might still be alive under all the leather and attitude and maybe they could get that to work in their favor as well.

And how better to do that than choosing Buffy to be his playmate? A slayer who had been defiant in the face of authority, not to mention drawn to the dark side. It *had* been a choice, too. Buffy's own spotty history had led to an abnormality in the slayer line, given the Council their pick of not just one but two slayers to pit against whatever was on the horizon. The heir and the spare. But the spare wouldn't check all the neat little boxes, wouldn't fulfill all the duties that Buffy would. No, the Council needed someone who cared, who *would* sacrifice herself when the time came, who would view the lives of others as being more valuable than her own. Someone who would make the decisions others couldn't.

It had never been about teaching her to be good. She'd been good before. Brilliant, really. Any improvement in her performance had bugged all to do with what he'd taught her and more to do with her sharpening anticipation skills. Easy enough to suss out how to fight one bloke when you were pitted against them day in and out. No, the real test had been whether Buffy would be able to fulfill her duty when it meant sacrificing something more than her life. The wankers had



left them alone *hoping* the mice would play with the cat safely away, and they'd fallen into it.

Or he'd fallen into her. This being he'd helped create.

This woman he loved. This warrior who would have to end him.

She'd noticed something was off, too. Of course she had, though not at first. The first time they were face-to-face again after having rutted like animals was a quiet affair. Buffy all business, even a mite brusque like she'd been in those first days that felt much longer ago than they actually were. Going out of her way to avoid touching him, never mind looking at him, and speaking only when he forced the issue. And Christ, she'd unleashed on him. Packed every punch with more strength than even he'd known she'd wielded, all intense focus, all hardened soldier. For a minute, he'd thought maybe it would go all right after all—that perhaps she had regrets that he hadn't counted on, that while what had happened between them had been a revolution for him, for her, it had been an aberration. A blip of curiosity she hadn't been able to keep from sating but, now that it was done, was ready to leave in the past.

As much as that had hurt, Spike had reckoned it was better than the alternative. Killing someone you liked was a lot harder than killing a thing you tolerated.

Only it didn't stay that way. Eventually, she started talking again. Little things at first. Asking if he had any opinions on the type of stake she was using, if her grip was good or needed work, if he had thoughts on swords over axes for fighting certain types of demons, if the impact of her kick was any different now that she'd gotten a new pair of shoes—inane bunk he didn't do much to encourage and rot to entertain, which only seemed to make her more intent on rousing a response. Every time he didn't rise to the challenge, she channeled her indignation into the fight, until she was coming at him with the force and determination of a small army. Bloody well bowling him over to the point it was impossible to remain on his feet. Desperate to pick a fight, get a response, any acknowledgment she could scrape up, and Spike just as resolved to keep the gulf between them as wide as possible. Knowing it was for the better, that it was how she'd survive. Hating the pain on her face, the disappointment, knowing he was the cause.

Then finally, one day, she snapped. After having shoved him tumbling back on his arse, everything going on behind her eyes bloody well boiled over, and before he reckoned even she could help herself, the words, "So are we never going to talk about it?" tumbled off her lips in a rush, her voice tight with the sort of pain that should have been able to kill him but didn't, because this world showed no sodding mercy to creatures such as he.

And he couldn't cave. Couldn't give in. Couldn't fall to his knees in front of her, beg her understanding or her forgiveness. The most he could do was offer a detached, "What's there to talk about?"

Buffy's eyes flashed and her lower lip trembled. "You fucked me."

"Yeah, and? Wasn't your first time, was it?" Then something inside him twisted. "Christ, was it?"

"With a man, no. With a vampire, yes. You *fucked* me, Spike. You were inside of me. You said... The things you said... I thought..."

"Bugger what I said," he snapped, hating himself. "Man says what he has to, doesn't he? Whatever'll get the dizzy bint he's aiming to shag to part her dimpled knees. It was a good time, is all. Had fun, didn't you? Know I did."

"Fun?"

Spike nodded absently, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. "Always wondered what it'd be like, fucking a slayer. The way we dance, a fella can't help but think about it. And I'll tell you, Slayer, it was better than even I'd imagined. Those muscles of yours... Fuck, you made it hurt in all the right places." He paused and pretended to consider. "Could always have another go, if you like. Wouldn't mind another dip inside that magnificent cunt."

She moved so fast he couldn't clock her, but he didn't need to. He knew what was coming. Was glad for it—the crunch of knuckles against his nose, the sharp flash of pain, the absolute conviction that he deserved it. And even better, it gave him something to do other than look her in the eye. Soak in the blow his words had landed.

And it wasn't enough. He had to push. Had to poke. Had to do more than hurt her pride.

He had to make her hate him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he drawled with a laugh, studying the blood that

clung to his fingertips after he'd dabbed at his nose. "Did you think it meant something?"

"Shut up!"

"You fall for every line you hear, or should I feel special?" Spike drew in a fortifying breath, then forced himself to look up, meet her eyes. Take in the pain he was causing, feel the brunt of it. No less than he deserved. "That's precious, that is. Didn't realize I'd be givin' you more than one kinda lesson in here."

He started forward, not sure what he meant to do, as everything else had faded. He could take her by the arms, maybe give her a mocking sort of kiss—whatever was needed, whatever would ensure she aimed for the bloody heart when the time came.

Thankfully, he was spared having to come up with a plan; the next second, the air split with a burst of static, followed by the amplified voice of the only man Spike had ever met that he wagered he hated more than he hated Angelus.

"So sorry to interrupt," Travers said congenially. "We have a matter of some import to discuss."

Buffy blanched, tossed a look to Spike that was half-question, half-panic. *How long has he been listening?* that look demanded. He forced himself not to respond.

"As you know," Travers went on, "the Council arranged these sessions as a means of ensuring its weapon was properly sharpened so that at such time as we need to call on it, it would provide clean, concise cuts. No wavering, no hesitation. Reports of Miss Summers's improvements have us rather heartened. Before you part ways, we were hoping you might be good enough to provide us with a demonstration."

"What do you mean?" Buffy asked, studying the mirror. "A demonstration?"

"Of how much you have learned, yes."

She hesitated, then threw another look at Spike, this one full confusion. "Now?"

"No time like the present," Travers agreed. "Please, Miss Summers. Show us exactly how you would go about neutralizing a vampire as old and deadly as the one currently in the room with you."

Well, guess that was it then. Probably for the best—no sense dragging it out, and he did have the Slayer nice and riled. Likely wouldn't hesitate at all once she was given the order to finish him off properly. Spike rolled his head to pop out any kinks, then strode without a word to the place where he always stood at the beginning of their sessions. Didn't stop, didn't dare look at her until he had to. If he looked at her he might lose his nerve, might start thinking things he couldn't afford to think. Wishing for things that would never be.

But of course, she was Buffy, so she did nothing the easy way.

"Spike," she whispered furiously. "Spike, do you know what's going on?"

He met her gaze with forced impassivity. "It's a dance, love. It's all a dance."

"What's a dance?"

"This. What we're doing. What we've been doing since we got started, the pair of us." He gave her a smile, couldn't help it, then let his fangs descend. "Time to bloody tango."

He launched himself at her before she could respond, before she could think, and fell into the rhythm that had come to define his existence these last few weeks. And Christ, she was a vision. A goddess in human form—one that snarled and lunged and lashed out with fists and feet alike, one that pushed forward when another bloke would fall back, coming at him with a choreography of movement that tipped her over from defense to offense. No more of her pulling back to wait, to feel him out, react rather than act. His girl was always in motion, never staying in one place longer than a heartbeat. Doing what she could to keep a man on his toes while meeting him with enthusiastic jabs and kicks, her full body thrown into the fight in ways no slayer before her ever had considered. All those hard edges that had been there at the start smoothed out, her body an instrument of grace and death, singing its melody with each move she made, each breath she stole. With how the air filled with the scent of her sweat again, the cadence of her thumping heart, the swelling rush of blood and heat and more besides.

It was almost a shame he had to die, if only because he'd love to see what happened when that so-called apocalypse finally arrived. How

long the crisis would last before she neutralized it. She'd be a sight, that was for bloody sure.

She was a sight *now*. Bearing down upon him, twirling and ducking and parrying, manipulating her body and his in ways that had him leveraging his own strength against himself. And that was brilliant. He could dust knowing he'd given it a good fight, that it was a worthy end. That if he'd run across the Slayer in the wild and she'd met him like this, he'd leave this miserable earth with only one regret—that he hadn't gotten to know her more before she'd seized her victory. Because anyone who fought the way she did was someone worth having in his life.

And knowing he'd helped her become who she'd always been meant to be was an even sweeter prize. Some part of her would always be his. This version of the girl who had become who she was today because she'd known him, however briefly. That that knowledge was the kind that made death a little less frightening. Such to the point that when she dealt the final blow—the one that knocked him onto his back, her foot stomping down on his chest to keep him in place—he felt at peace. Ready.

Plus, he reasoned as he gazed up at her—flushed and pleasantly tousled, her skin bright with sweat, her chest heaving, and her eyes alive with the same excitement fighting him always seemed to inspire—at least he got to go out with a hell of a view.

“Well done,” came Travers's voice, larger than the man himself. “Now, Miss Summers, if you will please, complete the slay.”

Buffy didn't react at first, her gaze still on Spike, the rest of her still in the heat of battle. He saw, though, the moment the words landed. The light he'd been admiring winked out of existence, replaced by a furrowed brow and eyes wide with naiveté that made him love her even more. As though she were convinced she'd heard wrong. As though anything could be that simple.

“I'm sorry, what?” she asked, addressing the mirror.

“Complete the slay, Miss Summers.”

“I...” She blinked, shook her head, then glanced down at Spike, her eyes widening when they found his. As though she'd expected to see

someone else. Anyone else. "He's my... I thought you brought him here for me. To make me better."

"Yes, and it seems that effort has been a rousing success. You are a perfect force of destruction, Miss Summers, and a vampire slayer. As this vampire has outlived its usefulness, it's time to do to it what should be done to all of them."

His ears were full with the escalating thumps of her heart. Buffy worked her throat, careful not to betray anything. To keep her movements calm and measured as she dragged her eyes back to his, and Christ, he knew he ought to look away but he couldn't. None of this had gone the way he wanted, the way he'd planned, but he'd be damned if he left this earth with any other image imprinted on his brain. This thing, this one allowance, was his.

"It's all right," he told her when she didn't move. "Do it."

Understanding passed over her face. "And Dru?"

"Gotta just hope for the best, I'd wager, though they promised. Would tell you to look out for her for me, but she's likely to try to kill you if she sees you."

"Miss Summers," came Travers's clipped voice. "Do not dawdle. And do not pity it. Vampires are, at their root, monsters. It is your duty to slay monsters. Do your duty."

Buffy pressed her lips together just as the lower one began to tremble, her eyes growing heavy with tears that made his evil heart scream and sing in equal measure. But she nodded at last, reached into the waistband of her sweats to produce the stake she kept tucked there, then pulled her arm back, her fingers flexing, her muscles straining against her skin in sharp relief.

She was so glorious, his little warrior.

And she was unpredictable. What happened next came in a flurry of movement. Buffy launching herself into the kill, diving forward and twisting at the same time. Pitching the stake in a perfect bloody arc across the room with an assassin's precision, the thing whistling as it spiraled. And then there was an explosion of shattering glass, shards raining against the concrete floor, the piercing split of a cry and then the scent of blood. Hot human blood, flowing hard, flowing freely, and Spike was on his feet, Buffy's hand around his.

“What the bloody fuck did you just do?” he snapped.

“I slayed the monster,” Buffy replied, then pressed her lips against his. “Now, let’s get the fuck out of here.”



SHE HADN'T HAD A PLAN, she said. Not until that moment. The thought of escape had been there, front and bloody center since the day they'd snatched her away from her friends and her mum, but she hadn't known how or when, hadn't had any of it figured. Hadn't been prepared for him.

“I might have just made everything worse,” she said, letting the motel curtain fall back into place as she stepped away from the window. Everything from the Council to here had been a blur—mad and chaotic, and he was certain the only reason they'd made it as far as they had was the element of surprise and Buffy's own cunning. He didn't know yet whether she'd managed to kill Travers with that stake trick, thought maybe she hadn't. Killing him, after all, would have been a lot less distracting than wounding him. With no injured to tend to, the watchers that had pursued them might have been better prepared to keep them from hitting the exit.

“I'm serious, Spike.” Buffy sank onto the mattress beside him, close but not close enough to touch. “I don't know what's going to happen next. I wasn't thinking. I just... I couldn't let you die like that.”

He hesitated, then decided he didn't have anything to lose, and reached for her hand. “You just bugged up your life over a vampire.”

“Don't remind me.” She turned to look at him, her eyes worried and sad, but full of something else too. “They might go after Dru now. I'm sorry. I—”

“Then I reckon we handle that.”

“Handle?”

Spike nodded and squeezed her hand. She didn't pull away. “Think you owe me now, considering how thoroughly you've mucked up my plans. Was perfectly happy to die so long as it was you bestowing the honor.”

“You are so weird.”

"You don't know the half of it."

"I think I might." She paused. "The things you said today... They hurt."

His heart twisted. "I said them so you'd feel better about killing me."

"I actually put that much out on my own." A small smile tugged at her lips. "Still, you could've just told me what was going on. We could've figured it out."

"Seems like you did all right yourself."

"Spike—"

"What?"

"Just tell me the truth. What it was... What we did..." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "I might have just killed us so I'd know, really. Tell me that wasn't stupid."

"It was," he replied, again figuring he didn't have anything to lose. Or maybe it was everything. It was so hard to tell sometimes. "Bloody stupid to waste your life over me."

"It's not like it's really my life anyway."

"The bits of it that are yours, though." Spike shook his head. "The truth, Buffy, is that I was prepared for everything. Anything, I thought. Anything except you. I'm a git and a killer and so beneath you, it's a marvel you see me at all."

"Spike—"

"But that doesn't stop me from loving you. Wanting you. Wanting what I know we can't have."

Her eyes were on him again, and everything seemed so fragile. "Says who?"

"Dunno. Someone smarter than me."

"And if I said I'm feeling stuff too? That I think it's worth fighting for?"

"Then I can't promise I won't hurt you again, because I am an evil bastard, but I'm your evil bastard, and all I wanted was for you to live. Do wonders. Save the bloody world. I—"

And then it didn't matter—nothing mattered, for she was kissing him. Kissing him as only she ever had. And yeah, maybe they were bugged, the pair of them. Maybe this was the only peace they'd ever



know. Maybe the Council would chase them to the ends of the earth, pull out all the stops, rain down terror and souls and everything else. Maybe he'd taken a wrong move, and Buffy had made a bad decision. Maybe the poetry of his life was meant to end in a perfect tragedy. Maybe.

But right then, with Buffy in his mouth, on his lap, kissing him like he was something other than the monster he'd always been, Spike knew he would never regret it.

And he'd dedicate what was left of his life to making sure she never did, either.

